

Incomplete Definite Descriptions

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The treatment of definite descriptions in [1] is built around two fundamental themes of situation semantics—the context sensitivity of utterances and the partial nature of the information they encode. In emphasizing these themes, Barwise and Perry aim to replace a semantic paradigm in which a description ‘the F ’ is used to talk about a unique F -er **in reality as a whole** with one in which it is used to talk about a unique F -er **in some contextually determined situation**, or part of reality. This shift has important consequences for the analysis of so-called “incomplete definite descriptions”, like ‘the table’, ‘the cook’, and ‘the murderer’. Since the descriptive operands in these examples are satisfied by many objects, they do not determine referents for the descriptions when evaluated in the whole of reality. Nevertheless, these descriptions are often used in simple examples of the form (1) to make true statements.

(1) The F is G .

Whereas this is often seen as a serious problem for traditional analyses, it is just the sort of case for which situation semantics was designed. According to Barwise and Perry, what is required by the description in an utterance of an example of this sort is not that there be a unique F -er in the whole world, but only that there be a unique F -er in the relevant contextually determined situation.

This idea is presented in a framework in which the meaning of a sentence is taken to be a relation between contexts and interpretations. Intuitively, a context is a potential situation in which the sentence is uttered by someone, to someone else, using words in some specific way. The interpretation of the sentence in the context is the type of situation that the utterance claims to be instantiated in reality.

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