ABSTRACT

Descriptions, i.e., phrases such as "a/the man", "a/the table", "the present Queen of England" etc. are one of the most important issues in contemporary analytical philosophy of language. Two main approaches to descriptions include the quantificational and the referential account. The first one claims that descriptions belong to the group of quantificational expressions, that is, the expressions such as "every table", "most men", "some monarchs". The second one says that descriptions - at least in some uses - have a referring function.

My dissertation provides a critical and in-depth analysis of the two aforementioned approaches in the semantics of descriptions. I have focused on the question how various theories which represent these approaches describe basic semantic properties (such as logical form and truth-conditions) of selected types of sentences, more specifically, of subject-predicate sentences, ascriptions of attitudes and statements of existence or non-existence. In the context of these considerations, I have also dealt with the problem of empty descriptions.

The quantificational theories - which are discussed in Part I of the dissertation - include original Russellian account (Chapter 2), Neale's account (Chapter 3) and the ontologically neutral version of the quantificational theory (Chapter 4). I argue that the classical account which employs the standard language of first-order logic does not deliver a natural interpretation of subject-predicate sentences and is deeply problematic in the case of ascriptions about the so-called "non-doxastic" attitudes and in the case of complex existential sentences. The improved version of the theory - which uses the language with restricted quantification - copes better with the first two of the aforementioned types of sentences, but is still problematic as far as complex existential sentences and fictitious discourses are concerned. In response to this problem, I propose a version of the quantificational theory developed in the system of existentially neutral quantifiers. On this approach, a sentence of the form "The F is G" is equivalent to the statement that there is (but not necessarily exists) exactly one object being F and it is G.

The second part of my dissertation (Part II) is devoted to the referential theories of descriptions. These theories - set in a formal framework - apply the language of the so-called "free" logics, that is, the logics which (possibly) contain empty singular terms. Chapter 5 discusses the theories which assume that the descriptive content of a description determines its referent. In Chapter 6, I present a theory which states that descriptions are ambiguous and in the case of the referential use, the referent of a description is determined by the descriptive content together with some causal links to the description use. As I argue, the ambiguity view provides a more plausible account of incomplete definite descriptions than the quantificational theories. However, this view is problematic in itself in the light of various linguistic data. In the final Chapter 7, I present and discuss the results of my experimental study on descriptions, which indicate that the descriptive content is not the solely important factor for the referential properties of descriptions in the case of the referential and the attributive use as well. Then I outline a theory of reference based on some ideas presented by Lewis, according to which, different pragmatic factors - in addition to the descriptive content - may be important for establishing reference; nonetheless, this account does not introduce semantic ambiguity. The idea is that a description of the form "the F" refers to an object which has the property F and is the most salient object at the conversational stage of using "the F". As I attempt to show, this kind of approach may offer an explanation of the problem of misdescription and capture the intuitions of ordinary users of language reported in the experimental study. Basically, the considerations of Chapter 7 provide a plan of a future research program - a theory of descriptions based on the notion of salience needs further developments and elaboration of a suitable formal setting.