

## Descriptions and Situations

François Recanati

► **To cite this version:**

François Recanati. Descriptions and Situations. Anne Bezuidenhout Marga Reimer. Descriptions and Beyond: An Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays on Definite and Indefinite Descriptions and other Related Phenomena, Oxford University Press, 2002. <ijn\_00000294>

**HAL Id: ijn\_00000294**

**[https://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/ijn\\_00000294](https://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/ijn_00000294)**

Submitted on 8 Nov 2002

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## Descriptions and Situations

François Recanati

Institut Jean-Nicod (CNRS)

1 bis, avenue de Lowendal, 75007 Paris, France

recanati@ehess.fr

To be published in:

A. Bezuidenhout and M. Reimer (eds.)

*Descriptions and Beyond*

Oxford University Press

### I. Referentiality and incompleteness

Genuine singular terms, such as proper names or (presumably) demonstrative pronouns, are referential; by which I mean that their conventional use is to refer. For every such term  $\tau$  there is a linguistic convention in virtue of which, whenever  $\tau$  is used, there must be a unique object  $x$  such that the speaker uses  $\tau$  to refer to  $x$ . The modal 'must' here indicates that the condition is a felicity condition: a condition which must be satisfied for the use of the expression to be felicitous. Note that, in stating the convention, I have taken the notion of 'reference' as primitive. The notion of reference at stake here is the pragmatic notion: speaker's reference, as it is sometimes called. To refer in that sense (the pragmatic sense) is, very roughly, to draw the hearer's attention upon some object

for the purpose of predicating something of that object, and to do so in the overt manner characteristic of human communication.

The linguistic convention governing the use of a referential term does not merely specify that there must be a unique object referred to by the speaker (pragmatic condition); it also specifies that the object in question must possess whatever properties the referential expression encodes as part of its linguistic meaning (descriptive condition). For example the referent of 'I' must be the speaker; the referent of 'she' must be a female person; etc. In the case of proper names, I have argued that the relevant descriptive condition is metalinguistic: it involves the property of being called by that name (in the contextually relevant community).<sup>i</sup> But the proper treatment of names is a controverted matter which I will keep away from in this paper.

Various distinctions can be made with respect to the descriptive condition encoded by a referential term. In the case of 'I' the descriptive condition happens to be uniquely identifying (insofar as an utterance typically has a unique utterer); but the descriptive condition associated with the third person pronoun 'she' is satisfied by every female person, hence it is far from uniquely identifying. Another interesting difference between the descriptive conditions respectively associated with 'I' and 'she' is this. In the case of 'I' the descriptive condition is token-reflexive. The referent is the utterer of *this token*. In the case of 'she' the condition is not token-reflexive: it is the general condition that the referent be a female person.<sup>ii</sup> Note that, contrary to what the 'I'/she' contrast suggests, the descriptive condition may be token-reflexive without being uniquely identifying. In the plural, the first person pronoun ('we') arguably refers to a group which must *contain the speaker among its members*. That descriptive condition is token-reflexive — the speaker is the person who utters the relevant token of 'we' — but it is no more uniquely-identifying than the descriptive condition associated with 'she'. There is an indefinite number of groups containing the speaker among their members.

Whether or not the associated descriptive condition is uniquely identifying, a referential expression denotes, or semantically refers to, a single object in a given context. The denotation or semantic referent is *that object which, in the context at hand, satisfies the complex pragmatic-cum-descriptive condition*. For example the referent of a use of 'she' is that female person whom the speaker refers to in uttering that word. If no object, or more than one object, satisfies the complex pragmatic-cum-descriptive condition, the expression fails to denote anything and carries no semantic value, in that context.

From what I have said it follows that the semantic referent is parasitic on the speaker's referent, in the sense that the expression does not refer unless the speaker herself refers to some object. Still we make room for a distinction between speaker's reference and semantic reference. *The semantic referent must satisfy the descriptive condition associated with the expression by the rules of the language*. If the speaker's referent does not satisfy the descriptive condition, it will not acquire the status of semantic referent. That is not to say that *something else* will be the semantic referent, in such circumstances. That is ruled out in virtue of the pragmatic condition. In a context in which the speaker mistakenly says 'she' while pointing to a man, the speaker's referent (the man pointed to) does not acquire the status of semantic referent, but even if there is a unique female around, she does not become the semantic referent either. Something cannot become the semantic referent unless it satisfies the pragmatic condition, that is, unless it is also the speaker's referent.

Two further properties of referential terms must be mentioned, one semantic and the other epistemic. First, referential terms are 'directly referential'. The semantic referent is the referential term's semantic value — what it contributes to the truth-conditions of the utterance in which it occurs. The complex pragmatic-cum-descriptive condition associated with the referential term is not itself among the truth-conditions of

the utterance, but among its felicity conditions: it constrains the *context* in which the expression can felicitously occur. A referential expression is felicitously used only if there is one and only one object  $x$  such that (i)  $x$  is  $F$  (descriptive condition) and (ii)  $x$  is referred to by the speaker (pragmatic condition). Only in a context meeting those conditions will the referential expression contribute something to the content of the utterance in which it occurs. What it contributes, as we have seen, is its semantic referent: the object which contextually satisfies the complex pragmatic-cum-descriptive condition. Hence the content of an utterance  $G(\tau)$  in which  $\tau$  is a referential term is a singular proposition; a proposition true iff the semantic referent of  $\tau$  satisfies  $G()$ , and false otherwise.

Second property: Since the content of a referential utterance  $G(\tau)$  is singular, to understand the utterance — to grasp its content — one must entertain a *de re* thought involving the referent of  $\tau$ . A thought to the effect that *whatever contextually satisfies the complex condition is  $G$*  will not do: for the content of such a thought is irreducibly general. Proper understanding requires being *en rapport* with the object, being acquainted with it so as to be able to entertain *de re* thoughts about it. This means that the interpreter must possess a dossier of information concerning the object, a dossier which the use of the referential term will evoke and activate, thus making 're-identification' possible. Re-identification occurs, Strawson tells us, 'if and only if the singular term used establishes for the hearer an identity, and the right identity, between the thought of *what-is-being-spoken-of-by-the-speaker* and the thought of some object *already within the reach of the hearer's own knowledge, experience, or perception*, some object, that is, which the hearer could, in one way or another, pick out or identify for himself, from his own resources' (Strawson 1961: 63).

Let us now turn to definite descriptions. They can be treated as referential terms, as Strawson proposed (Strawson 1950, 1952). On that treatment, the linguistic material

following the definite article (e.g. the phrase 'man with a brown hat' in the definite description 'the man with a brown hat') encodes the descriptive condition which the referent has to satisfy; but there is no implication that one and only one object satisfies that condition. Uniqueness implication there is, but it pertains to the pragmatic condition: what is implied by the use of the definite article is that *there is a unique object such that the speaker is referring to that object*. The descriptive condition encoded by the nominal expression following the definite article is meant to help the hearer identify the relevant object. The object in question — the speaker's referent — becomes the description's semantic referent (or *denotatum*, as I will henceforth call it) just in case it actually satisfies the descriptive condition.

There are two basic arguments in support of a Strawsonian, referentialist account of definite descriptions: the similarity-with-pronouns argument, and the incompleteness argument.

The *similarity-with-pronouns argument* goes like this. Third-person pronouns, when deictically used, are commonly treated as referential terms. The speaker, looking at a woman, says 'She is vulgar', thereby referring to the woman. The direction of the speaker's gaze and the descriptive condition associated with the pronoun 'she' enable the hearer to figure out that the speaker is referring to that woman whom he also can perceive. All that is straightforward. Now exactly the same story can be told if the speaker, instead of using the third person pronoun, uses a definite description and says: 'The woman is vulgar'. As Stephen Schiffer puts it, 'the two cases have exact psychological parity' (Schiffer 1997: 263).

An opponent of the referential account can argue that 'the woman' is a special case, namely, an *incomplete* definite description — a type of description which, precisely because it is incomplete, requires completion by means of an act of demonstrative reference. In such cases, the descriptive condition is not uniquely

identifying and we need to rely on the context to fix the *denotatum*. In normal cases, however, the descriptive condition is identifying by itself and we don't have to rely on pragmatic factors. There, for the anti-referentialist, lies the difference between descriptions and pronouns: it is in the nature of the (demonstrative) pronoun 'she' that we need an act of reference on the speaker part to fix the *denotatum*. Not so with definite descriptions, except in the special cases in which they are 'incomplete'. Insofar as they are special, such cases should be left aside in theorizing about descriptions.

There are two distinguishable elements in this anti-referentialist response to the similarity-with-pronouns argument. First, there is the implicit observation that only certain uses of definite descriptions are intuitively 'referential' (i.e. involve an act of reference on the speaker's part and an act of re-identification on the hearer's part). I will deal with that observation below. It raises a serious problem for the referentialist, though perhaps not an insuperable one. The other aspect of the anti-referentialist reply is the idea that incomplete definite descriptions are too 'special' to be considered in theorizing about descriptions. That part of the anti-referentialist reply is clearly not acceptable. There is nothing abnormal about incomplete descriptions; indeed most descriptions are incomplete. Just as the descriptive condition associated with a referential term may or may not be uniquely identifying (recall the difference between 'I' and 'she'), the descriptive condition associated with a definite description may or may not be uniquely identifying. It would be question-begging to argue that incomplete descriptions (i.e. those descriptions whose descriptive condition is not uniquely-identifying) are somehow deviant, and that only complete descriptions matter to semantic theory.

The main argument in favour of a referential treatment of (certain uses of) definite descriptions is precisely the availability of an account of incomplete definite descriptions within that framework (Kripke 1977, Wettstein 1981). That is the

*incompleteness argument*. If definite descriptions are referential, it does not matter that sometimes the descriptive condition per se is not uniquely-identifying; for we can rely on the speaker's act of reference to provide a unique candidate for the status of semantic referent. To say that a description is referential is to say that its denotation is fixed by the pragmatic-cum- descriptive condition, rather than by the descriptive condition alone. On the other hand, if we do *not* treat the description as referential, we are left in a quandary. An incomplete description is such that the descriptive condition, by itself, is not uniquely identifying. How, then, can its denotation be determined? That is the problem which incomplete descriptions raise for nonreferentialist accounts. Various solutions to this problem will be discussed below (section 2).

Before evaluating these two arguments in favour of the referential analysis, let us briefly consider the main argument *against* it — an argument I've already alluded to. We may call it the 'lack-of-generality argument':

*(Lack-of-generality argument)*

The referential analysis imposes an act of reference to the *denotatum* on the speaker's part, and a correlative act of re-identification of the *denotatum* on the hearer's part. Yet there are many cases in which a description is used but no such acts take place (nor are required). As Donnellan pointed out, descriptions may be used *attributively*, in such a way that a general rather than a singular proposition is expressed. Such nonreferential uses of definite descriptions are clear counterexamples to the referential analysis.

Is this argument compelling? That is unclear. After all, pronouns themselves have distinct uses: they can be used referentially (deictically), but they also have bound uses and anaphoric uses. Why not, then, accept for descriptions what we accept for pronouns, namely, that they have a deictic use, distinct from their other uses? If we are



prepared to endorse an ambiguity thesis regarding pronouns, we should be prepared to endorse it also regarding descriptions. Note that Strawson himself acknowledged the existence of nonreferential uses of descriptions (as in 'The whale is a mammal'); but he did not feel compelled to give up the referential treatment, because he questioned the need for a genuinely unified semantic analysis.

Still, I think it should be conceded to the anti-referentialist that a unified analysis of descriptions is preferable, *ceteris paribus*, to a non-unified analysis. The same thing holds for pronouns, of course. On the other hand, the referentialist should be granted his first point: An analysis which does justice to the striking similarities between pronouns and descriptions is preferable, *ceteris paribus*, to an analysis which treats them as illusory.<sup>iii</sup> The problem is that these two desiderata may (and actually do) enter into conflict. Many philosophers hold that a unified, nonreferential analysis of descriptions is available, typically an analysis along Russellian lines completed by Gricean considerations. In virtue of the first desideratum, such an analysis should be preferred to the sort of view defended by either Strawson or Donnellan. But it does not satisfy the second desideratum: the referentiality of descriptions is treated as a pragmatic illusion, while the referentiality of pronouns is treated as a genuine semantic fact. As Schiffer pointed out, this difference of treatment is worrisome, given the similarity between the cases.

Let us now evaluate the two referentialist arguments. I have just said that I grant the referentialist his first point: deictic pronouns and referential descriptions should be treated more or less on a par. This argument cuts both ways, however. The analogy between pronouns and descriptions can be interpreted as supporting a descriptive treatment of pronouns, as much as a referential treatment of descriptions. For example, we might equate the pronoun 'she' with an incomplete description such as: 'the female',

and analyse that description within the unified, Russellian-cum-Gricean framework (or whichever unified framework is used for the analysis of definite descriptions).

This immediately leads us back to the main argument in favour of a referential analysis of descriptions: the argument from incompleteness. How are we to treat an incomplete description such as 'the female' if we do not accept the referential analysis? Everything turns out to hinge upon that argument. If we analyse the argument, however, we see that it involves two distinct claims, one of which can be disputed:

*First claim:*

Incompleteness raises a deep problem for descriptive (nonreferential) approaches.

*Second claim:*

The problem of incompleteness does not arise in a referentialist framework.

The first claim seems to me undoubtedly true, but I reject the second one as false. The problem of incompleteness still arises within a referentialist framework (Neale 1990: 98-100). It follows that we cannot legitimately use the incompleteness problem as an argument in favour of the referential analysis.

There are two reasons why the problem of incompleteness still arises in a referentialist framework. First, among incomplete definite descriptions, some are clearly attributive, as when the speaker discovers Smith's horribly mutilated body and exclaims: 'The murderer is insane!' Faced with this apparent counterexample to the referentialist approach, Wettstein maintains that, in this as in the other cases, the incomplete description is completed by an act of demonstrative reference (to the corpse). That is an interesting claim yet, appearances notwithstanding, it is irrelevant to the issue at stake. Even if Wettstein is right and an incomplete description is always completed through an act of demonstrative reference, that need not be an act of

reference to *the description's referent*. In the murderer example, the speaker refers to *Smith's mutilated body*. What makes that occurrence of the description attributive is precisely the fact that the speaker does not refer to but merely describes the *denotatum*. The fact that the speaker refers to *something else* is irrelevant. (The sort of position which Wettstein's observation actually supports I call 'quasi-referentialism'. According to quasi-referentialism, what enables us to complete a definite description is an act of demonstrative reference, though not necessarily an act of reference to the *denotatum*. A particular version of quasi-referentialism, namely situational referentialism, will be discussed in section 3.)

The second reason why referentialism does not solve the incompleteness problem is that, as we all know, the phenomenon of incompleteness concerns not only descriptions, but also quantifiers. When I say 'Everybody failed', the quantifier is obviously incomplete. (I do not mean that everybody in the world failed.) The referentialist view does not apply in a case like this. The quantifier must be completed, and that may involve reference to e.g. a particular group of students, such that the speaker means that everybody *in that group* failed; but the speaker does not refer to the actual persons who failed.

I conclude that the two arguments in favour of referentialism — the similarity-with-pronouns argument and the incompleteness argument — actually fail to support that position. What we need is something which referentialism does not provide, namely, an account meeting the following three desiderata: (i) the account must be semantically unified, (ii) it must capture the striking similarities between pronouns and descriptions, and (iii) it must solve the incompleteness problem. In this paper I am mainly concerned with (iii), but I will keep an eye on (i) and (ii).

## II. Incompleteness and indeterminacy

If we give up the referentialist analysis, how can we account for description incompleteness? In a referentialist framework uniqueness pertains to the act of reference performed by the speaker. The semantic referent is not the unique *F* simpliciter, but the unique *F* referred to by the speaker. In a non-referentialist framework, we must say that *the descriptive condition F, by itself, determines the semantic referent*. The semantic referent will be the unique satisfier of that condition, as in Frege's theory. The problem is that, whenever the description is incomplete, there is no unique satisfier (by definition). Three main solutions to this problem have been put forward in the literature:

- (i) We can bite the bullet and treat all incomplete descriptions as defective (nondenoting).
- (ii) We can treat incomplete descriptions as elliptical for the appropriately completed descriptions. For example, 'the table' will be understood as: *the table of the living-room, the table which Aunt Martha gave us, or possibly the table there*.
- (iii) We can insist that the descriptive condition associated with incomplete definite descriptions *is* uniquely-identifying. I said above that it is non-uniquely-identifying 'by definition'. Still it can be argued that it *becomes* uniquely-identifying *if we appropriately restrict the domain of discourse*. What is true by definition is only this: the descriptive condition associated with incomplete definite descriptions is non-uniquely-identifying *in the total world*. But it may well be uniquely-identifying in a partial situation.

If we choose the first option, we face a problem: we must account for the clear intuition that utterances such as 'The table is covered with books' can be *true*. The

problem can be put in general terms. By treating incomplete descriptions as non-denoting, we introduce a gap between the deliverances of semantic theory and ordinary truth-conditional intuitions; a gap which it is then incumbent upon pragmatic theory to reduce. In previous writings I argued that the gap in question should be kept as narrow as possible. That means that, other things being equal, we should prefer semantic theories which minimize the gap, over theories which widen it. It follows that the option I have just mentioned should be seriously considered only if every other reasonable attempt fails. (It will not be considered in the rest of this paper.)

Option (iii) I find most promising. The descriptive condition associated with an incomplete description such as 'the woman' becomes uniquely identifying if we restrict the domain, for example, if we focus on the perceptual scene. That is very similar to the phenomenon of demonstrative reference: we look at the scene before us, and are thereby related to various perceived individuals — say, a man and a woman — whose behaviour we monitor through our continuous perception of the scene. The non-uniquely-identifying descriptive condition associated with the description 'the woman' suffices, within the domain of objects thus singled out, to make the hearer understand which object is in question. Domain restriction, in such a case, proceeds through something like *demonstrative reference to a global situation*. Option (iii) is therefore compatible with a quasi-referentialist approach, according to which incomplete descriptions (or incomplete quantifiers) are completed via an act of reference on the speaker's part (and a correlative act of identification on the hearer's part). On the particular version I call situational referentialism, the entity tacitly referred to is a partial situation with respect to which the descriptive condition  $F$  happens to be uniquely-identifying (section 3).

Option (ii) is probably the most popular and it too is compatible with a quasi-referentialist approach. In the rest of this section I will discuss that option and try to make clear why I think option (iii) is, on the whole, preferable.

Option (ii) can be interpreted in several ways. The 'ellipsis' at issue can be construed either as syntactic ellipsis in the strict, grammatical sense or as ellipsis only in a loose, semantic sense. In previous papers (Recanati 1989, 1996) I argued against the ellipsis approach construed in the strict, grammatical sense. I have the feeling that most theorists nowadays consider such a theory as preposterous and hardly worthy of a serious reply (see the collection of papers in *Mind and Language* 15:2-3, 2000).<sup>iv</sup> Let us therefore ignore it and consider only a semantic, non-syntactic construal of the ellipsis theory. On such a construal, the sentence 'The table is covered with books' is not syntactically elliptical for another, more complete sentence, but the statement which the speaker makes by uttering this sentence involves a contextually provided property of the table, which property enriches the matrix of the description (analysed à la Russell-Neale): 'the  $x$ :  $Fx$ ' is contextually enriched into 'the  $x$ :  $Fx \ \& \ Hx$ '.<sup>v</sup>

A well-known problem with the ellipsis theory is that it is *indeterminate* which completion the speaker has in mind. That problem arises at several levels. To see that let us distinguish three things:

- $o$ , the reference or *denotatum* (an object);
- $P$ , some uniquely-identifying property of  $o$  through which it is singled out, and which provides the (contextual) sense of the description;
- $\alpha$ , some linguistic expression explicitly expressing  $P$ .

If one opts for a syntactic version of the ellipsis theory, it will be indeterminate which among many different, possibly synonymous sentences the elliptical sentence is

elliptical for. Even if we fix the property P which is used to uniquely-identify  $o$ , still it is indeterminate which expression  $\alpha$  expressing P the incomplete description is elliptical for. Is 'the table' elliptical for 'the table which Aunt Martha bequeathed us' or 'the table we inherited from Martha'? By opting for a semantic version, we suppress that source of indeterminacy: the same property P is involved in both cases, and that is all that matters. But there remains a major source of indeterminacy: a great number of distinct, uniquely-identifying properties  $P_1, P_2, P_3$  etc. can be invoked to render the description complete. Which one is the right one? As Wettstein argued, there is no principled answer to that question, hence the ellipsis theory cannot be right:

When one says, for example, 'The table is covered with books,' the table the speaker has in mind can be more fully described in any number of ways, by the use of any number of nonsynonymous, uniquely denoting descriptions (for example, 'the table in room 209 of Camden Hall at  $t_1$ ', 'the table at which the author of *The Persistence of Objects* is sitting at  $t_1$ ', etc.)... It might be supposed that we could decide on one of these Russellian descriptions as the correct one by reference to the intentions of the speaker. In many cases, however, the speaker will have no such determinate intention. (Wettstein 1981: 41-42)

In defense of the ellipsis theory, several philosophers have argued as follows.<sup>vi</sup> Let us use a *referential completer* instead of a *descriptive completer*. For example in the murderer case, let us follow Wettstein and say that the description is completed by a demonstratively given individual (the victim). The description 'the murderer' encodes a two place relation, 'murderer-of', the second argument-place of which is filled by the demonstrated individual, namely Smith. That individual is not described, he is demonstratively given; hence the problem of the plurality of nonsynonymous,

codenoting descriptions does not arise. The trick consists in *moving from the level of sense to the level of reference* so as to bypass the problem of the multiplicity of potential senses.

When it comes to other, nonrelational examples ('the woman', 'the table'), the same sort of solution can be appealed to — or so it is argued. All the completions mentioned by Wettstein in connection with the incomplete description 'the table' (e.g. 'in room 209 of Camden Hall at  $t_1$ ', 'at which the author of *The Persistence of Objects* is sitting at  $t_1$ ') are descriptive, but we can also think of demonstrative completions like: 'over there'. Thus 'The  $x$ :  $x$  is a table' can be enriched into: 'The  $x$ :  $x$  is a table and  $x$  is there', or into 'The  $x$ :  $x$  is a table and  $x = \text{that}$ '. Since demonstratives are directly referential, what completes the content of the description in such cases is a place in egocentric space or an object (the table itself). In this way, it is claimed, we avoid the indeterminacy problem. The completion takes place at the level of reference, not at the level of sense; hence the problem of the plurality of potential senses does not arise.

This alleged solution to the indeterminacy problem rests on a confusion, due to an ambiguity in the very notion of a 'referential completer'. A referential completer is meant to be a worldly entity — e.g. an object or a place. That is required for the argument to go through. Such completing entities are indeed involved in what I called demonstrative completions; but they do not do the completing by themselves. If by 'referential completer' we mean what really does the completing, then a referential completer is not an object, but an object-dependent *property*. Once we see that, however, we realize that the indeterminacy problem has not been solved.

Except perhaps in special cases where there arguably is an 'implicit argument' (as in 'the murderer'), we need a relation to bridge the gap between the incomplete description and the completing entity. In the table example, we need the LOCATED\_AT relation if the completing entity is a place, and we need the identity



relation if it is the table itself. Like the completing entity, the bridging relation is contextually provided. Together with the completing entity, it determines a (demonstrative) property of the *denotatum* which is what putatively completes the incomplete description: the property of being identical with that (where that = the table in question) or the property of being located there (where there = the location of the table in question). Now there is absolutely no reason to think that we can get rid of indeterminacy by using such completers. For it is still indeterminate *which* completing demonstrative property *H* is contextually provided: the property of being there, the property of being this object, the property of being in front of me, or whatnot. I conclude that the appeal to demonstrative completions does *not* meet the indeterminacy objection which besets the ellipsis approach. We have not really moved from the level of sense to the level of reference. Demonstrative, object-involving properties such as those mentioned in connection with the table example determine possible contextual senses for the incomplete description, and there are many potential senses of that sort, just as there are many potential descriptive senses.

Another solution to the indeterminacy problem has been put forward in the literature. It consists in biting the bullet and *accepting* the indeterminate nature of the contextual completion (Blackburn 1988, Schiffer 1997). It is a fact that, in a normal situation of utterance, there will often be a collection of potential and equally legitimate completers for a given incomplete description. Insofar as the speaker does not have one of them in mind to the exclusion of the others, the proposition expressed by the utterance, 'The *F* is *G*', will be somewhat indeterminate; but this does not prevent us from ascribing definite truth-conditions to it, using supervaluation techniques. We can say that the utterance is true iff all the potential completions are true, false iff all the potential completions are false, and unevaluable otherwise.

For that solution to work we must be given a set of potential completers. At this point, an advocate of the quasi-referential account may argue as follows. Such a set, hence the truth-conditions of the utterance, can be established only as a side effect of an act of reference. Typically, the potential completers will correspond to salient properties of the *denotatum* in the context at hand. The properties in question are made available through the speaker's act of demonstrative reference to the *denotatum*, hence the referentialist viewpoint is vindicated: what completes the description and enables the hearer to overcome the non-uniquely-identifying character of the descriptive condition is the speaker's act of reference which gives us access to the *denotatum* and its properties, hence to several potential completers.<sup>vii</sup> If the description is not used referentially, still, as Wettstein pointed out, *something* is referred to, which determines a set of potential completers. In the murderer example, what is demonstratively given is a certain object — Smith's body — in a certain state, which state presumably results from someone's action. The action itself has several facets and can be described both as a killing and as a mutilating. The object, the state, and its presumed etiology are among the aspects of a complex, holistic situation which determines the set of potential completers for the incomplete description 'the murderer'. The murderer is the person who did the killing; but he is also, presumably, the person who did the mutilating. The description can be understood not only as 'the person who murdered Smith' but also, still more explicitly, as 'the person who murdered Smith and savagely mutilated his body', or perhaps as 'the person who broke into the house, murdered Smith and savagely mutilated his body'. As soon as we are allowed to enrich the description with contextually provided properties, several, equally legitimate enrichments spring to mind. To meet the indeterminacy objection, we can supplement the ellipsis theory with an appeal to vagueness and supervaluation; but again, this presupposes that a set of

potential completers is somehow given, and it is given only through some form of reference to a complex, holistic situation.

In the next section we shall see that the quasi-referentialist view cannot be maintained. What matters to my present purposes is not the quasi-referentialist view, however, but rather the need to appeal to *something* in order to account for the provision of a set of completers. The ellipsis-cum-vagueness theory presupposes that a set of completers is somehow given. My claim has been that such a set is given only against a certain background, namely, with respect to a situation in which the *denotatum* is involved. In the relevant situation the *denotatum* has properties and stands in relation to other objects. Those features of the *denotatum* which happen to be instantiated in the situation at issue determine the set of the potential completers for the description. The plurality of potential completers therefore corresponds to the internal complexity and the holistic character of the focus situation. (On this analysis the referential use of a description falls out as a special case: the case where the focus situation is demonstratively given and the *denotatum* itself is demonstratively given as part of the situation in question. Thus when I see a man and a woman quarelling and I say 'The woman is vulgar', the set of completers for the description is determined by the perceived situation. In such a case, there is demonstrative reference both to the deictically given situation and to the *denotatum* who centrally features in it.)

Now the reason we have for preferring option (iii) to option (ii) can be stated quite simply: we need a focus situation to determine the set of completers which the ellipsis-cum-vagueness theory requires in order to run its supervaluations. Once available, however, the situation in question can be used directly to complete the description, by providing a restricted domain with respect to which the descriptive condition happens to be uniquely-identifying. Hence there is no need to go into the complications of the ellipsis-cum-vagueness theory.<sup>viii</sup>

### III. Situational referentialism

From what I have said it follows that definite descriptions do not constrain the *context* (the situation of utterance), as referential terms do; rather, they constrain an arbitrary *focus situation* which may but need not be the situation of utterance. If I say 'I am bald', the *denotatum* (the person who is said to be bald) must be speaking in the situation of utterance. But if I say 'the President is bald', the *denotatum* need not be President in the situation of utterance. He may be President in a remote situation (e.g. a distant country) which simply happens to be the topic of the current conversation.

According to what I call situational referentialism (a particular version of the quasi-referential approach), the *denotatum* need not be referred to, but at least *the situation in which it is to be found* (the focus situation) *must be referred to*. Is that right? Undoubtedly, there are cases in which the relevant situation is demonstratively given. In the example I used several times, the speaker and the hearer witness a scene in which there is a man and a woman. The situation is perceptually accessible, and the reference of the description 'the woman', *qua* constituent in that situation, is also perceptually accessible. That is characteristic of referential uses of definite descriptions. In other cases, a situation is demonstratively given, but we need to extend it beyond what is demonstratively given in order to secure a referent for the description. Thus, in the murderer example, we need to go beyond the demonstratively given situation  $s_1$  (a situation in which Smith lies dead and horribly mutilated) and extend it by considering another, temporally prior situation  $s_2$  having  $s_1$  as one of its effects. Situation  $s_2$  is the killing and mutilating of Smith by someone — the murderer. As the murderer is to be found in  $s_2$ , but not in  $s_1$ , we must go from the demonstratively given  $s_1$  to its hidden cause  $s_2$  to evaluate the description. So there is a form of demonstrative reference in

that example, as Wettstein stressed, but it can be argued that it is neither a reference to the *denotatum*, nor even a reference to the situation in which the *denotatum* is to be found, namely  $s_2$ . It is a reference to another, causally related situation, namely  $s_1$ . This provides a prima facie counterexample to situational referentialism (s-referentialism, for short).

On the basis of that and similar counterexamples a refutation of situational referentialism can be attempted. The argument runs as follows:

1. One cannot demonstratively refer to a situation without demonstratively referring to its constituents. (Assumption)
2. The *denotatum* is a constituent of the focus situation. (Since the focus situation is, by definition, the situation where the *denotatum* is to be found.)
3. It follows that one cannot refer to the focus situation without referring to the *denotatum*.
4. Therefore, if the focus situation is always referred to, as situational referentialism claims, the *denotatum* also is always referred to, and no attributive (nonreferential) use of incomplete descriptions is possible.
5. But it is a fact that there are attributive uses of incomplete descriptions (as in the murderer example).
6. It follows that the focus situation is not always referred to: hence situational referentialism is false.

Faced with the alleged counterexample and the alleged refutation, the situational referentialist has an easy reply. Assumption 1 can and should be denied. Just as one can perceive a complex object without perceiving all its parts (e.g. I can perceive a cow without perceiving its tail), one can perceive or demonstratively refer to a situation

without perceiving or demonstratively referring to all its constituents. That is arguably what happens in the alleged counterexample to situational referentialism — the murderer example. Let us re-analyse that example as follows. The speaker and hearer are perceptually confronted with a situation in which Smith is dead and mutilated. That is situation  $s_1$ . The relevant focus situation is not  $s_1$  but an extension of  $s_1$  incorporating the event  $s_2$  that caused  $s_1$ . Let us dub that extension  $s_3$ . Situation  $s_3$  contains both  $s_1$  and  $s_2$  as proper parts. It is demonstratively given since its proper part  $s_1$  is, just as the cow is perceptually available as soon as a relevant portion of the cow is. And just as the perceptual availability of the cow does not entail the perceptual availability of all its parts (e.g. its tail), there are aspects of the demonstratively given situation  $s_3$  which are *not* demonstratively given. In particular, the temporally anterior portion of  $s_3$ , namely  $s_2$ , is not demonstratively given; and it is in that portion that the *denotatum* (the murderer) is to be found.

Of course, it may be deemed arbitrary to claim that the focus situation is  $s_3$  rather than  $s_2$ . But that option is not ruled out, and that is sufficient to dispose of the alleged counterexample to situational referentialism.

In another important class of alleged counterexamples, the relevant situation is mentioned in the discourse — it is given linguistically rather than extralinguistically. Anaphoric uses of definite descriptions such as (1) fall in that category.

(1) I met a child and a woman in Lyon the other day. The woman gave me her newspaper.

The situation relevant to the evaluation of the description 'the woman' in the second sentence is the situation described by the first sentence: a particular event in the life of the speaker, namely his meeting a child and a woman in Lyon the other day. 'The

woman' denotes the unique woman in that situation. Since the focus situation is described rather than demonstratively referred to, this type of case constitutes another alleged counterexample to situational referentialism.<sup>ix</sup>

But that type of counterexample is not convincing either. According to John Austin (1950), when we say things like 'I met a child and a woman in Lyon the other day', we do two things: we refer to a historic situation via the demonstrative components of the sentence (e.g. the past tense, the name 'Lyon' etc.), and we describe that situation as a situation of a certain type (involving a man and a woman etc.). There are various ways of implementing Austin's proposal (Recanati 1999: 113-115), but as soon as we accept the basic framework we can no longer say that the situation which serves as focus situation for the next sentence is merely described. In the Austinian framework the first sentence both describes and refers to the situation in question. Hence anaphoric uses of descriptions do not constitute a counterexample to situational referentialism.

The Austinian reply itself can be found unconvincing. If the speaker refers to a historic, real situation, how can we be sure that that situation did not involve several women, even if the speaker, in his description of the situation, mentions only one? Assume, for example, that the speaker met the child and the woman in the train station. Presumably, there were other women around, which the speaker may or may not have noticed. The uniqueness implication conveyed by the description 'the woman' in the subsequent sentence therefore suggests that the completing situation is not the real situation (with all its complexity, including passing women in the background), but rather *the situation as described by the previous sentence*. Only in that situation will the woman be suitably unique (since the speaker mentioned only one woman). But if we so construe the focus situation, the Austinian response on behalf of situational

referentialism is no longer available: we can no longer say that the focus situation is referred to rather than merely described.

The situational referentialist can make the following reply. The historic situation  $s_1$  in which the meeting took place is complex and different sub-situations can be discerned within it. Arguably, the focus situation tacitly referred to by the speaker when he utters the incomplete description 'the woman' is not  $s_1$  in its entirety but a sub-situation  $s_2$  contained in  $s_1$ : a *minimal* sub-situation satisfying the description the speaker makes of  $s_1$ , that is, a minimal sub-situation  $s_2 \leq s_1$  in which the speaker meets a child and a woman. In that minimal sub-situation  $s_2$ , there is only one woman.<sup>x</sup>

That is not the end of the discussion. Suppose the speaker *is* a woman. In the minimal sub-situation  $s_2$  there will be two women, namely the speaker and the woman she met. Yet the definite description 'the woman' still carries a suggestion of uniqueness. What are we to do to solve this difficulty? I have no definite answer to that question, but I am confident that ingenious solutions have been, are being or will be devised, and I conclude that anaphoric cases such as (1) provide no decisive counterexample to s-referentialism.

That is not to say that there are no decisive counterexamples. I think there are plenty of them. Often, the relevant situation is not 'given' at all, whether linguistically or extralinguistically. Rather, the speaker quantifies over situations of the relevant type. Thus she can say:

(2) Whenever I go to Lyon by train, the controller is a woman.

Here the situation with respect to which the description 'the controller' is to be evaluated is not singled out uniquely, by whatever means. The speaker universally quantifies over situations in which she goes to Lyon by train. Each particular



assignment of value to the quantified variable (each train trip to Lyon) provides a domain of objects in which there is a unique controller, but none is singled out in particular. This sort of case constitutes a decisive counterexample to situational referentialism and, presumably, to the quasi-referentialist project of showing that incomplete descriptions are always completed through an act of reference.

Just as there may be tacit as well as explicit reference to the relevant situation, there may be tacit as well as explicit quantification over situations. In one reading of

(3) The President lives in the White House

there is implicit universal quantification over a certain sort of situations which we may call 'US situations'. In all such situations *s*, whoever is the President in *s* lives in the White House. (Below I shall represent such cases by enclosing the implicit quantifier within angle brackets instead of square brackets.) If, instead, the speaker refers to the *actual* US situation, in which Bush is president, (3) gets another reading. Note that the 'referential' interpretation is not mandatory, even on that reading. We may tacitly refer to the current situation and say of *whoever is the President* in that situation that he lives in the White House. Although nonreferential (as far as the *denotatum* is concerned) that interpretation is quite different from the 'generic' reading, in which we tacitly quantify over situations.<sup>xi</sup>

In an important class of examples, often discussed in the recent literature (Stanley and Szabo 2000, Bach 2000, Lepore 2003), there is explicit quantification over objects, and a correlative, albeit implicit, quantification over situations. Thus Kuroda gives this example from Japanese (1982: 48-49):

(4)

subete no kyoozyu-ga gakusei-o minna rakudai-saseta  
all professor-SUBJ student-OBJ all flunked

In French, this would be translated as:

Tous les professeurs ont recalé tous les étudiants  
(Literally: All the professors flunked all the students)

Like the Japanese sentence, the French sentence is ambiguous. Among its possible readings there is the following: every professor flunked *all of his/her* students. Here each professor  $x$  determines a situation  $f(x)$ : the teaching situation involving that professor and his or her students. It is the teaching situation  $f(x)$  which serves to evaluate the quantifier 'all the students': every professor  $x$  flunked all the students in the situation  $f(x)$ . The situations in question are (implicitly) quantified over, as a result of (explicitly) quantifying over the arguments to the (unarticulated) function  $f$  from professors to situations.

Finally, we should take notice of a group of cases which possess features in common with all the examples discussed so far:

(5) Each time I go to Lyon, I meet a woman and a child. The woman gives me her newspaper and I thank her for her kindness.

Let us focus on the interpretation in which the indefinite descriptions in the first sentence take narrow scope, in such a way that, like the controller in example (2), the woman-child pair can be different for each trip to Lyon. As in (1), the definite description 'the woman' in the second sentence of (5) is evaluated with respect to some

situation(s) introduced in the first sentence, namely the (minimal) situation(s) in which the speaker goes to Lyon and meets a woman and a child. Here, however, it is clear that the speaker does not refer to the historic situation in which he meets a woman and a child; he quantifies over such situations without singling out any particular one of them. That is similar to (2), except for the following feature: in (2), the description 'the controller' is evaluated with respect to a range of situations introduced by the universal quantifier 'Everytime I go to Lyon by train', *and it occurs within the scope of that quantifier*. Hence it can be suggested that some form of 'binding' occurs (see section 4 below). But in (5) the description does not occur within the scope of the quantifier. If, therefore, we think that some form of binding takes place even in (5), we must posit an implicit quantifier in that example just as we did for examples (3) and (4). I will argue that, in the second sentence of (5), there is an implicit quantification over situations which is parasitic on the explicit quantification over situations that takes place in the first sentence.

#### IV. Explicit and implicit binding of situational variables

It is often said that the completion problem concerns quantifiers in general, and descriptions as a special case (since descriptions themselves can be construed as quantifiers — a view which I accept). The treatment in terms of situations seems to support such a view. In Recanati 2000 I offered the following picture: a situation is a portion of the world which determines a set of facts — the facts which hold in the situation. Each fact consists of a  $n$ -place relation and a sequence of  $n$  arguments. The domain of a situation is the set of objects that are constituents of some fact holding in the situation. Often the domain of discourse is restricted to the domain of the situation which happens to be in focus. When we say 'Everybody came', we mean that everybody

in the relevant situation  $s$  came. ('Everybody in situation  $s$ ' means: every person who belongs to the domain of  $s$ , that is, every person who is a constituent of some fact in the 'factual set' of  $s$ .) Situations thus provide a restricted domain of discourse, over which quantifiers can range.

Still, I think it is a mistake to view situational completion as primarily concerning quantifiers. Situational completion primarily concerns *predicates*. In a standard conception, predicates denote sets of objects, and quantifiers denote relations between sets of objects. In 'Every  $F$  is  $G$ ', 'every' denotes that relation which holds between the set of  $F$ s and the set of  $G$ s just in case the former is included in the latter. In 'The  $F$  is  $G$ ', 'the' similarly denotes a certain relation between the set of  $F$ s and the set of  $G$ s, namely the relation which holds just in case  $|\{F\}| = 1$  and  $\{F\} \subseteq \{G\}$ . In both cases the completion problem arises because predicates denote sets of objects only relative to situations; hence before we can evaluate a quantificational statement we must evaluate the predicates with respect to situations so as to determine the sets of objects which serve as arguments to the quantifier.

When I say that predicates denote sets of objects only relative to situations, I intend this as a rather trivial point. Some objects are red in a given situation, which may no longer be red in a different (say, temporally posterior) situation. So the set of red objects is variable and depends upon the situation at stake, even if we do not vary the domain from one situation to the next. There may be properties which stick to their objects in the sense that, if an object has them in a situation, it must have them in any situation to the domain of which that object belongs. Even if there are such sticking properties, still the predicates which correspond to them will possibly denote different sets of objects in different situations because the domain of objects itself can vary from one situation to another.

So predicates require situations for their evaluation. The same thing holds for sentences. Whether a sentence is true or false depends upon how things are in the relevant circumstance of evaluation. When a sentence is asserted in isolation, the circumstance of evaluation is determined pragmatically. That pragmatically determined circumstance of evaluation I call the *exercised situation* — the situation with respect to which the speaker intends his utterance to be evaluated. The circumstance of evaluation for a given sentence may also be determined linguistically, by prefixing that sentence with a situation-indicator. In such a case, the circumstance of evaluation for the sentence is determined by the nearest situation-indicator above it. For example, if we analyse the sentence 'It will rain' as 'It will be the case that + it rains', we shall say that that sentence is true in a situation  $s$  iff there is a situation  $s'$  temporally posterior to  $s$  such that the embedded sentence 'it rains' is true in  $s'$ . The situations relevant to the evaluation of the embedded sentence 'it rains' are determined by the temporal operator 'it will be the case that' right above that sentence.

Whether or not a sentence occurs in isolation, the main predicate in that sentence — the predicate which corresponds to the topmost verb-phrase — is always evaluated with respect to the circumstance of evaluation for the sentence in question. Consider the simple sentence: 'Every student laughs'. There is simply no possibility of a divergence between the situation with respect to which the sentence is evaluated and the situation with respect to which the main predicate, 'laughs', is evaluated. That means that, if the sentence is asserted in isolation and evaluated with respect to some exercised situation  $s$ , the set of laughers which serves as second argument to the quantifier 'every' will be the set of laughers-in- $s$ . In contrast, the predicate which occurs as part of the noun-phrase, 'student', can be evaluated with respect to *any* situation: it may be the exercised situation  $s$  (in which case every student-in- $s$  is said to be among the laughers-in- $s$ ), it may be the situation of utterance  $c$  (in which case every student-in- $c$  is said to

be among the laughers-in- $s$ ), or it may be any auxiliary situation which happens to be sufficiently salient for either linguistic or extralinguistic reasons.<sup>xii</sup>

In line with what has been said, we can adopt a notation inspired from Kuroda's 'indexed predicate calculus' (Kuroda 1982) and associate a free situational variable with each noun-phrase predicate. Such a variable can be pragmatically assigned a value in context, but it can also be semantically bound, as in the examples I gave in the previous section:

(2) Whenever I go to Lyon by train, the controller is a woman.

Here the main clause 'the controller is a woman' is evaluated with respect to the situations introduced by the situation-indicator 'whenever I go to Lyon' (construed as a universal quantifier over situations of a certain type.) The noun-phrase predicate, 'controller', is associated with a situational variable which can be assigned any value, but which can also be bound by the quantifier, as in the most natural reading of (2):

[Every  $s$ : in  $s$ , I go to Lyon by train] [the  $x$ : controller $_s$  ( $x$ )] (woman ( $x$ ))<sup>xiii</sup>

As I pointed out, situational binding can also be implicit. Thus I represent example (3), on its generic interpretation, as follows. (Implicit quantifiers occur within angle brackets instead of square brackets.)

<Every  $s$ : US-situation ( $s$ )> [the  $x$ : President $_s$  ( $x$ )] ( $x$  lives in the White House)

The most interesting cases of that sort are those in which the implicit quantification over situations is parasitic on some explicit quantification, as in (one reading of) Kuroda's Japanese example:

(4) Every professor flunked all the students [i.e. all of his or her students]

While the situational variable associated with the noun 'professor' remains free and must be pragmatically assigned a value, that associated with the noun 'student' is indirectly bound by the quantifier 'every professor': the situations which fill the extra argument place associated with the predicate 'student' are the values of the implicit function  $f$  from professors to teaching situations, hence they covary with the professors. Kuroda represents this reading of (4) straightforwardly as (4a), where a functional expression ' $f(x)$ ' is used instead of a situational variable to complete the predicate 'student':

(4a) [Every  $x$ : professor <sub>$S$</sub>  ( $x$ )] [Every  $y$ : student <sub>$f(x)$</sub>  ( $y$ )] (flunked ( $x$ ,  $y$ ))

In order to provide a unified semantic analysis, Stanley and Szabo (2000) generalize that sort of move: they systematically replace situational variables by ordered pairs of an objectual variable and a higher-level function variable. Relative to a context, the higher-level function variable is assigned a function from objects to quantifier domains (sets), while the other variable is assigned an object. In this framework (4) will be analysed as

[Every  $x$ : professor <sub>$g(z)$</sub>  ( $x$ )] [Every  $y$ : student <sub>$f(x)$</sub>  ( $y$ )] (flunked ( $x$ ,  $y$ ))

Here, the object variable 'z' will be contextually assigned a certain school, and the function variable 'g' the function mapping schools to the set of people working for them. The set denoted by 'professor<sub>g(z)</sub>' under this assignment is the set of professors in school z. As for the other noun, 'student', the associated function variable will be assigned, as in Kuroda's treatment, the function mapping professors to the set of students in their class. Since the object variable 'x' is bound by the initial quantifier 'every x: professor<sub>g(z)</sub>(x)', different sets of students will be denoted by 'student<sub>f(x)</sub>' relative to different assignments of values to the quantified variable 'x': for each professor x, 'student<sub>f(x)</sub>' will denote the set of students in that professor's class.

Stanley's and Szabo's proposal complicates the picture by forcing us to introduce a pair of an objectual variable and a higher-level function variable even when we could directly relativize a predicate to a given situation. This is OK if the complication is necessary to achieve a uniform analysis, but in the present case the complication seems to me unnecessary. If we acknowledge the phenomenon of *implicit* quantification, as we clearly should, then we can use straight situational variables and represent (4) as follows.

[Every x: professor<sub>s</sub>(x)] < Every s': s' = f(x) > [Every y: student<sub>s'</sub>(y)] (flunked (x, y))

The situational variable associated with the noun 'student' is bound by the implicit quantifier 'every s': s' = f(x)', which itself contains an occurrence of the objectual variable 'x' bound by the initial quantifier 'every x: professor<sub>s</sub>(x)'. In this way the indirect binding of situational variables by objectual quantifiers is accounted for.

In the previous section I sketched an analysis of (5) along similar lines and I want to pursue it here. There are two sentences in (5):



- (5) a. Each time I go to Lyon, I meet a woman and a child.  
b. The woman gives me her newspaper.

The first sentence, (5a), explicitly quantifies over situations: it says that every situation in which I go to Lyon is a situation in which I meet a woman and a child (not necessarily the same each time). The second sentence contains the definite description 'the woman', which is intuitively evaluated with respect to the situations introduced into the discourse by the preceding universal quantifier, 'each time I go to Lyon'. (For qualifications, see below.) Since the description in the second sentence falls outside the scope of that quantifier, we must handle the dependence of the description's domain upon the preceding quantifier by positing an intermediate, implicit quantifier over situations. How can we do it?

The situations that are implicitly quantified over in the second sentence cannot be exactly the same as those that are quantified over in the first sentence, viz. the situations in which I go to Lyon. They must contain a *unique* woman (since they will serve for the evaluation of the definite description 'the woman'), hence they should be thought of as the *minimal* situations which satisfy the conditions set up in the previous sentence. By 'the conditions set up in the previous sentence' I mean the conditions conveyed by (i) the restriction of the explicit quantifier, and (ii) the matrix clause. If the first sentence says that for  $\delta$  situations such that  $p$  (restriction) it is the case that  $q$  (matrix), then an anaphoric description 'the  $F$ ' in the following sentence will be evaluated with respect to the minimal situations in which it is the case that  $p$  and  $q$ . Along those lines, example (5) can be tentatively represented as follows:

*Each time I go to Lyon, I meet a woman and a child.*

[Every  $s$ : in  $s$ , I go to Lyon] [an  $x$ : woman $_s$  ( $x$ )] [a  $y$ : child $_s$  ( $y$ )] (I meet  $x$  and  $y$ )

*The woman gives me her newspaper.*

<Every  $s'$ :  $s' \in \min\{s$ : in  $s$ , I go to Lyon & I meet a woman and a child}> [the  $z$ : woman $_{s'}$  ( $z$ )] ( $z$  gives me her newspaper)

That is not quite satisfactory, however. Just as, in the first sentence, the clause 'I meet a woman and a child' is evaluated with respect to the situations introduced by the quantifier 'each time I go to Lyon', in the second sentence the clause 'the woman gives me her newspaper' is to be evaluated with respect to the situations introduced by the implicit quantifier. If we take those situations to be *minimal* situations in which I go to Lyon and I meet a child and a woman, as in the foregoing analysis, then we are prevented from accounting for simple variants of (5) like the following:

(6) Each time I go to Lyon, I meet a woman and a child. The woman introduces me to another woman.

Since the second sentence, 'the woman introduces me to another woman', is to be evaluated with respect to the situations introduced by the implicit quantifier, those situations cannot be the minimal situations mentioned above (i.e. situations in which there is a unique woman). They must be *non-minimal* extensions possibly containing several women — since there must be at least two women in the relevant situations for the second sentence of (6) to come out true.<sup>xiv</sup>

What this shows is that we need to draw a distinction between the situation(s) with respect to which the second sentence of either (5) or (6) is evaluated, and the situation(s) with respect to which *the definite description in that sentence* is evaluated. The latter situations must be minimal so as to contain a unique woman, but the former

must be nonminimal (extended) so as to possibly contain several women. The analysis of (5) must be revised accordingly. I suggest that we add another implicit quantifier, in the scope of the implicit universal quantifier over minimal situations, so as to introduce the extended situations with respect to which the second sentence of the example is to be evaluated. (A situation  $s_1$  extends a situation  $s_2$  just in case  $s_2 \leq s_1$  &  $s_1 \neq s_2$ .) The analysis we arrive at is the following:

*Each time I go to Lyon, I meet a woman and a child.*

[Every  $s$ : in  $s$ , I go to Lyon] ([an  $x$ : woman $_s$  ( $x$ )] [a  $y$ : child $_s$  ( $y$ )] (I meet  $x$  and  $y$ )) $_s$

*The woman gives me her newspaper.*

<Every  $s'$ :  $s' \in \min\{s$ : in  $s$ , I go to Lyon & I meet a woman and a child}> < $\exists s''$ : Ext ( $s''$ ,  $s'$ )> ([the  $z$ : woman $_{s'}$  ( $z$ )] ( $z$  gives me her newspaper)) $_{s''}$

For the sake of perspicuousness I have marked the situations with respect to which the clauses 'I meet a woman and a child' and 'the woman gives me her newspaper' are evaluated. (The situations in question are determined by the explicit or implicit quantifier right above the clause.) As we can see, the clause 'the woman gives me her newspaper' is now evaluated with respect to a nonminimal situation  $s''$ , possibly containing several women, while the minimal situation  $s'$  of which it is an extension serves for the evaluation of the definite description 'the woman'.

Another class of examples which can be handled in this sort of way are the so-called 'bound' uses of definite descriptions. George Wilson (1984: 23) gives the following example:

(7) Every Bulgarian scientist who was fired from the observatory was consoled by someone who had known *the Bulgarian scientist* as a youth.

According to Wilson, 'the Bulgarian scientist' in this sentence functions like a pronoun bound by the quantifier 'every Bulgarian scientist'. Such a use is not amenable to Russellian analysis, he says; for it carries 'no implication or presupposition that the descriptor is satisfied uniquely, and there is no suggestion at all that the speaker or the audience could supply a qualification to the descriptor in virtue of which it would uniquely apply' (Wilson 1984: 23). In his contribution to this volume, however, Stephen Neale insists that even that type of example can be accounted for in a Russellian framework. He shows this by appealing to the approach in terms of semantic ellipsis (the 'explicit approach', as he calls it): he analyses the description as 'the  $y$ : Bulgarian-scientist  $y$  &  $y = x$ ', where (i) ' $x$ ' is a variable bound by the higher quantifier 'every  $x$ : Bulgarian scientist  $x$ ', and (ii) the entire clause ' $y = x$ ' is unarticulated and results from contextually enriching the matrix of the description. Neale concludes that the description 'the Bulgarian scientist' 'is not, *pace* Wilson, a variable, but just another description that is elliptical for a fuller description that *contains* a variable.'<sup>xv</sup> Now the same sort of solution is available if we opt for the approach in terms of situational completion (the 'implicit' approach, in Neale's terminology). Instead of enriching the matrix of the description with an unarticulated clause, as Neale does, we can appeal, once again, to an implicit quantifier over situations (or, rather, to a pair of quantifiers, as in the previous example). Wilson's example (7) can be given the following analysis:

[Every  $x$ : Bulgarian-scientist <sub>$s$</sub>  ( $x$ ) & fired-from-the-observatory <sub>$s$</sub>  ( $x$ )] <Every  $s'$ :  $s'$   
 $\in \min \{s: \text{in } s, \text{ Bulgarian-scientist } (x) \ \& \ \text{fired-from-the-observatory } (x)\} > < \exists s'': \text{Ext } (s'', s') > ([\text{The } y: \text{ Bulgarian-scientist}_{s'} (y) ] (x \text{ was consoled by someone who had known } y \text{ as a youth}))_{s''}$

The description 'the Bulgarian scientist' in the second relative clause is evaluated with respect to a situation introduced by an implicit universal quantifier. (The relative clause itself is evaluated with respect to yet another situation, introduced by an implicit existential quantifier in the scope of the implicit universal quantifier). The dependence of the description upon the higher quantifier 'every Bulgarian scientist' is accounted for by having the matrix of the implicit universal quantifier contain variables bound by the higher quantifier. On this analysis (7) is very much like (4): in both cases a situational variable is *indirectly* bound by an overt quantifier, via an implicit quantifier which binds that variable and itself contains a variable bound by the overt quantifier.

## V. Conclusion

In this article I have argued that neither the referential nor even the quasi-referential analysis solves the incompleteness problem. Instead I have put forward a theory according to which every nominal predicate is associated with a situation variable. (See Recanati 1987, 1996 for earlier versions of this view.) That variable may be contextually assigned a value, but it may also be bound by a higher quantifier, explicitly or implicitly. In this framework domain restriction proceeds through the assignment of values to the situational variable. The descriptive condition corresponding to the predicate '*F*' in a definite description 'the *F*' becomes uniquely identifying (it is satisfied by a single object) when that predicate is evaluated with respect to the situation which is the value of the associated variable. The uniqueness constraint which the determiner 'the' imposes on the predicate '*F*' is what guides the assignment of value to the situation variable associated with it: 'the' in 'the *F*' tells us that the predicate '*F*' must denote a singleton-set in the relevant situation, and the situation variable associated with '*F*' is assigned a value accordingly.

In this framework one can unify a number of the uses of definite descriptions. A definite description is analysed as a restricted quantifier 'the  $x$ :  $Fx$ '. What distinguishes the families of use that have been recorded in the typological literature is the situation with respect to which the predicate ' $F$ ' is evaluated. Four distinctions emerge:

- *Complete vs. incomplete.* — The difference between 'complete' and 'incomplete' descriptions pertains to the situation with respect to which such descriptions are meant to be evaluated — a partial situation for incomplete descriptions, the total world for complete descriptions (assuming there are any).
- *Ordinary vs. anaphoric.* — What characterizes the so-called anaphoric uses of descriptions is the fact that the description is evaluated with respect to situations introduced in the discourse, instead of situations made salient in some other way. Anaphora may be intrasentential or intersentential, depending on where the 'antecedent' is found.
- *Situationally singular vs. general.* — That is the distinction between cases in which the relevant situation is referred to and cases in which there is quantification over situations. Both anaphoric cases (whether intra- or intersentential) and ordinary, non-anaphoric cases may be either situationally singular or situationally general.
- *Explicit vs. implicit.* — Whether the situations of evaluation are referred to (s-singular uses) or quantified over (s-general uses), this can be done explicitly or implicitly. Several difficult cases, such as the bound uses of definite descriptions mentioned by George Wilson, can be handled in terms of implicit quantification over situations.

Even though the four distinctions are independent, there seems to be a strong connection between anaphoricity and explicitness. Non-anaphoric cases are, by definition, cases in which the relevant situation is not given in the discourse, but in

some other way. It follows that the relevant situation cannot be 'explicit' (i.e. linguistically articulated) in such cases. But the connection between the explicit/implicit distinction and the anaphoric/non-anaphoric distinction is not as strong as it may seem. The situations with respect to which a given description is evaluated may remain implicit even though the description counts as 'anaphoric' in a loose sense. That is so, for example, whenever the relevant situations are implicitly quantified over but the course of values of the situational variable is parasitic upon that of an explicitly quantified variable found elsewhere in the discourse, as in examples (4) and (7).

Before closing, I would like to say something about the referential uses of definite descriptions with which our inquiry started. That use falls out as the special case in which the completing situation — the value of the situational variable — has the following properties: (i) it is demonstratively given, and (ii) it bears a specific relation to the *denotatum*, namely that relation which holds between a situation *s* and an object *o* just in case one cannot demonstrate *s* without demonstrating *o*, because *o* occupies a central position in *s*. (When that is so, I say that the situation *s* *highlights* the object *o*.)

To say that the completing situation is 'demonstratively given' is to say that it is an aspect of *c*, the situation of utterance. By focussing exclusively on that feature of referential descriptions, one may be tempted to oversimplify and to treat referential descriptions as nothing but *descriptions evaluated with respect to c*. That, I think, is a mistake: the second feature of referential descriptions is no less important than the first one. To see that, let us consider an example discussed by Heim in her paper 'Articles and Definiteness' (1991).

Heim considers a view very similar to that which I put forward regarding the completion of nominal predicates. On the view she considers, nouns and verbs possess extra argument positions for worlds and times, but nouns are special in that their world and time arguments can be chosen freely. (In contrast, the world and time arguments of

a verb are always locally bound, i.e. bound by the proposition abstractor or tense or modal operator at the clause boundary right above it.) Heim argues that the extra argument positions enable us to obtain something very much like a referential reading for definite descriptions even in contexts where the description takes narrow scope. She gives the following example:

(8) It is always the case that the player on the left wins

Because of syntactic scope barriers, the description cannot take wide scope over the temporal operator 'it is always the case that'. Still, we find that (8) has a reading in which the actual player-on-the-left is said to win in all situations (whether or not he plays on the left in those situations). The existence of such a reading seems to support the view that descriptions have a genuine referential use which is irreducible to a matter of scope. As Heim points out, we can account for that reading in terms of the extra argument positions associated with nouns: we can consider that the situation (world-time pair) with respect to which the nominal predicate 'player on the left' is evaluated is not the circumstance of evaluation for the sentence (i.e. the class of situations introduced by the operator 'it is always the case that') but the situation of utterance  $c$ : a situation in which a certain man happens to be playing on the left. Using situation variables, (8) can be represented as

[Every  $s$ :  $s$  is a game of the relevant sort] ([the  $x$ : player-on-the-left $_c(x)$ ] ( $x$  wins)) $_s$

This suggests that the so-called referential reading much emphasized by Strawson, Donnellan and others can be accounted for within the classical approach — say, in the



Russellian framework — even though, as (8) shows, it cannot be reduced to a matter of scope.

I agree with Heim that the relevant reading can be accounted for in this way. But I want to emphasize that this is definitely *not* the 'referential' reading — the reading talked about by Strawson, Donnellan and others. Even if we assume that the completing situation invoked by the speaker is demonstratively given in the context of utterance, still this does not, by itself, guarantee that the *denotatum* also is demonstratively given. That will be guaranteed only if the situation highlights the *denotatum*. But there are many situations which involve an object without highlighting it. Thus we can construct the following variant of Heim's example:

(9) It is always the case that the player on the left, whoever he is, wins at the last minute

(I have added 'at the last minute' for purely stylistic reasons.) This has a natural interpretation on which 'player on the left' is evaluated with respect to the situations *s* introduced by the operator 'it will always be the case that' — situations across which the identity of the player-on-the-left may vary. As Heim pointed out in connection with (8), another, 'rigid' reading is available, where only the *actual* 'player on the left' is at issue. In this case the speaker says of the man who happens to be the player on the left in the current situation that he always wins. Still, as the qualification 'whoever he is' in (9) makes clear, the speaker is not in a position to refer to or identify the person in question; she can only describe him as 'the player on the left'. For example, we may imagine that the player in question is hidden from view, so that the speaker can demonstrate the global situation, but not the player on the left who is a (hidden) constituent of that situation. Thus construed, the situation in question does not highlight the player on the left. The description is not used referentially, even though the

completing situation is demonstrated. So we need two further distinctions within the category of 'singular uses':

- *Deictic vs. nondeictic.* — A situationally singular use of a description (i.e. a use in which the situation of evaluation is tacitly or explicitly referred to) counts as deictic whenever the focus situation is (an aspect of) the situation of utterance. That is the case in the relevant readings of (8) and (9).
- *Referential vs. nonreferential.* — A deictic use of a description counts as referential (in the sense of Strawson-Donnellan) iff the focus situation highlights the *denotatum*. That is definitely not the case in (9).

#### References

- Austin, J. (1950/1970). 'Truth', reprinted in his *Philosophical Papers*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 117-133.
- Bach, K. (2000). 'Quantification, Qualification and Context: A Reply to Stanley and Szabo'. *Mind and Language*, 15: 262-283.
- Blackburn, W. (1988). 'Wettstein on Definite Descriptions'. *Philosophical Studies*, 53: 263-278.
- Heim, I. (1990). 'E-Type Pronouns and Donkey Anaphora'. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 13: 137-177.
- Heim, I. (1991). 'Artikel und Definitheit', in A. von Stechow and D. Wunderlich (eds.), *Semantics: An international Handbook of Contemporary Research*. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Kripke, S. (1977). 'Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference'. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 2: 255-276.

- Kuroda, S.Y. (1982). 'Indexed Predicate Calculus'. *Journal of Semantics*, 1: 43-59.
- Lepore, E. (2003). 'An Abuse of Context in Semantics: The Case of Incomplete Definite Descriptions'. This volume, 00-00.
- Neale, S. (1990). *Descriptions*. Cambridge: MIT Press/Bradford Books.
- Neale, S. (2000). 'On Being Explicit: Comments on Stanley and Szabo, and on Bach'. *Mind and Language*, 15: 284-294.
- Neale, S. (2002). 'Radical Contextualism Means Radical Indeterminacy'. Abstract submitted to the 4th European Congress of Analytic Philosophy, Lund, June 2002.
- Neale, S. (2003). 'This, That, and the Other'. This volume, 00-00.
- Perry, J. (1986). 'Thought Without Representation'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supp. Vol.*, 60: 137-151.
- Recanati, F. (1987). 'Contextual Dependence and Definite Descriptions'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 87: 57-73.
- Recanati, F. (1989). 'Referential/Attributive: A Contextualist Proposal'. *Philosophical Studies*, 56: 217-249.
- Recanati, F. (1993). *Direct Reference: From Language to Thought*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Recanati, F. (1996). 'Domains of Discourse'. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 19: 445-475.
- Recanati, F. (1999). 'Situations and the Structure of Content', in K. Murasugi and R. Stainton (eds.), *Philosophy and Linguistics*. Boulder: Westview, 113-165.
- Recanati, F. (2000). *Oratio Obliqua, Oratio Recta: An Essay on Metarepresentation*. Cambridge: MIT Press/Bradford Books.
- Schiffer, S. (1997). 'Descriptions, Indexicals, and Belief Reports: Some Dilemmas', in W. Kunne et al. (eds.), *Direct Reference, Indexicality, and Propositional Attitudes*. Stanford: CSLI Publications, 247-275.
- Soames, S. (1986). 'Incomplete Definite Descriptions'. *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, 27: 349-375.

- Stanley, J. (2000). 'Context and Logical Form'. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 23: 391-434.
- Stanley, J. and Z. Szabo (2000). 'On Quantifier Domain Restriction'. *Mind and Language*, 15: 219-261.
- Strawson, P. (1950/1971). 'On Referring', reprinted in his *Logico-Linguistic Papers*. London: Methuen, 1-27.
- Strawson, P. (1952). *Introduction to Logical Theory*. London: Methuen.
- Strawson, P. (1961/1971). 'Singular Terms and Predication', reprinted in his *Logico-Linguistic Papers*. London: Methuen, 53-74.
- Wettstein, H. (1981). 'Demonstrative Reference and Definite Descriptions'. *Philosophical Studies*, 40: 241-257.
- Wiggins, D. (1975). 'Identity, Designation, Essentialism and Physicalism'. *Philosophia*, 5: 1-30.
- Wilson, G. (1984). 'Pronouns and Pronominal Descriptions: A New Semantical Category'. *Philosophical Studies*, 45: 1-30.

*Acknowledgments.* I am indebted to Anne Bezuidenhout (and her colleagues), Herman Cappelen, Eros Corazza, Stephen Neale, Philippe Schlenker, and Isidora Stojanovic for helpful comments or discussions.

---

<sup>i</sup> See Recanati 1993: 135-167.

<sup>ii</sup> Many theorists hold that the condition associated with demonstrative pronouns is token-reflexive: thus a token of 'she' is said to denote the female the speaker is pointing at while uttering that token, or the most relevant female in the context of utterance of the token. As far as I am concerned, I admit that the complex pragmatic-cum-descriptive condition associated with demonstrative pronouns is both uniquely-identifying and token-reflexive (see below), but I deny that the descriptive condition *per se* has either of these properties.

<sup>iii</sup> This applies to the bound uses of descriptions, as much as to their referential uses. Just as the referential use of a description resembles the deictic use of a pronoun, the 'bound' uses of descriptions resemble the bound uses of pronouns. A theory which takes these similarities at face value is preferable, *ceteris paribus*, to a theory which does not. As George Wilson says (1984: 11), 'the uses of pronouns *and* descriptions need to be understood together'.

<sup>iv</sup> 'The syntactic ellipsis approach... strikes me as a nonstarter' (Bach 2000: 267n); 'I find it hard to believe anyone has ever proposed such a clumsy and bizarre view' (Neale 2000: 292).

<sup>v</sup> There are two versions of the theory, depending on the exact status of the contextually provided property *H*. According to one account the contextually provided property is an *unarticulated constituent* of the statement made by uttering the sentence, just as the location of rain is an unarticulated constituent of the statement made by saying 'It's

---

raining' (Perry 1986). Thus Schiffer says that a possible meaning rule for 'The *F* is *G*' is:

Utter 'the *F* is *G*' only if there is a property *H* such that you mean that the *F* and *H* is *G*.  
(Schiffer 1997: 256)

Other theorists deny that there are unarticulated constituents and think such constituents are always the value contextually assigned to a free variable in logical form (Stanley 2000). If one takes this line, one will say that every description 'the *F*' comes with a free variable for the extra property *H*, which variable is assigned a definite value in context.

<sup>vi</sup> Soames 1986: 352; Neale 1990: 101.

<sup>vii</sup> As Wiggins puts it (in a different context), to know which entity a given expression refers to is 'a single piece of knowledge which can be given in countless different ways by countless different descriptions' (Wiggins 1975: 11).

<sup>viii</sup> As Herman Cappelen pointed out to me, giving up the ellipsis theory may not be sufficient to get rid of indeterminacy. There is no reason why there shouldn't be indeterminacy also with respect to the focus situation: for a given utterance involving a definite description, several distinct completing situations may turn out to be compatible with all relevant aspects of the context. Indeed, according to Stephen Neale, indeterminacy *cannot* be eliminated, whichever framework one opts for. 'To the extent that there are aspects of what is said that are not directly traceable to particular semantic features of [the uttered sentence], indeterminacy is going to be inevitable — at least if what is meant by «indeterminacy» is that there are competing characterizations of what *U* said among which no principled choice can be made' (Neale 2002).

---

If Cappelen and Neale are right, the case against the ellipsis theory is admittedly weakened. But how much? ‘One consequence of the ubiquity of indeterminacy’, Neale says, ‘is that all versions of a type of argument used by Wettstein, Récanati, Reimer, Schiffer and others against traditional *explicit* (or *ellipsis-based*) accounts of what *U* said by uttering *X*, where *X* contains a so-called incomplete description, such as «the book», are discredited’ (*id.*). This goes a bit too far, I think. Even if it is ultimately ineliminable, indeterminacy should not be multiplied without necessity. For that reason the ‘semantic’ version of the ellipsis theory is preferable to the syntactic version, and the semantic version in terms of ‘referential completers’ is preferable to the semantic version in terms of ‘descriptive completers’. For the very same reason, the approach in terms of situations seems to me preferable to the ellipsis theory. Still, I agree with Cappelen and Neale that considerations of indeterminacy cannot be decisive, given the pervasiveness of the phenomenon. Hence I do not take myself to have *refuted* the ellipsis theory. Rather, I have tried to provide reasons for exploring the alternative approach in terms of situations. A systematic comparison of the two approaches will be possible only after each one has been sufficiently elaborated.

<sup>ix</sup> According to a Davidsonian, event-based analysis, the first sentence of (1) should be understood as saying that *there is* a situation of a certain type, namely a past event consisting of my meeting a child and a woman in Lyon the other day. The situation is no more referred to than the child and the woman are.

<sup>x</sup>  $\leq$  is the part-of relation between situations. A minimal situation such that *p* is a situation *s* such that (i) in *s*, *p*, and (ii) there is no *s'* such that (a) in *s'*, *p* and (b) *s'* is a proper part of *s*. (See Heim 1990: 146. Borrowing ideas from S. Berman, Heim defines 'minimal' as follows:  $\min S = \{s \in S : \neg \exists s' \in S [s' \leq s \ \& \ s' \neq s]\}$ , where *S* is a set of situations.)

---

<sup>xi</sup> As this brief discussion shows, a simple sentence such as (3) has a number of possible interpretations. One may or may not refer to the *denotatum*; and one may or may not refer to the situation with respect to which the description is to be evaluated. In the generic reading of the description in (3) we don't refer but quantify over situations; in the referential reading we refer to both the situation and the *denotatum* which features in it; in the attributive reading, we don't refer to the *denotatum*, but we may or may not refer to the situation with respect to which the description is to be evaluated. (Sentence (3) can be interpreted as saying that in all US situations  $s$ , the President in  $s$ , whoever he is, lives in the White House; or as saying that in this particular situation,  $s_1$ , the President in  $s_1$ , whoever he is, lives in the White House.) Moreover, when there is implicit quantification over situations, the implicit universal quantifier can be variously restricted.

<sup>xii</sup> See Recanati 1996: 454-457, where I discuss, inter alia, Kempson's example: 'The hostages were welcomed home by the President'. As Kempson points out, 'at the point in time in the past at which a set of people is welcomed home by their president, they are transparently no longer hostages', hence we need to evaluate the noun-phrase with respect to a situation distinct from that with respect to which the sentence is evaluated.

<sup>xiii</sup> It is possible to explicitly represent the situation with respect to which the main clause 'the controller is a woman' is evaluated, by introducing another situational variable bound by the situation-indicator:

[Every  $s$ : in  $s$ , I go to Lyon by train] [the  $x$ : controller $_s$  ( $x$ )] (woman ( $x$ )) $_s$

Such a variable is redundant, however, since the situation of evaluation can only be determined by the situation-indicator right above the sentence. This feature makes the situation-indicator similar to a modal operator, and I emphasize that similarity by omitting the redundant situational variable in the nuclear scope.



---

<sup>xiv</sup> Here again, I am indebted to Heim's discussion of related issues in Heim 1990.

<sup>xv</sup> This volume, p. 00. Note that this provides us with the means for reducing pronouns to descriptions if we want to. E-type pronouns are classically treated as descriptions; deictic pronouns can be treated as incomplete descriptions ('he' = the male, etc.). The main difficulty raised for descriptive theories of pronouns comes from bound pronouns. Now, following Neale's suggestion, we can treat bound pronouns as not themselves variables, but rather as descriptions containing (bound) variables.