Indefinite Descriptions as Referring Terms

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Abstract: I argue that indefinite descriptions are referring terms. This is not the ambiguity thesis: that sometimes they are referring terms and sometimes something else, such as quantifiers (as argued by Chastain and recently Devitt). No. On my view they are always referring terms; and never quantifiers. I defend this thesis by modifying the standard conception of what a referring term is: a modification that needs to be made anyway, irrespective of the treatment of indefinites. I derive this approach from my speech-act theoretic semantics (2004). The basic thought is that referring terms have as their meanings speech-acts of a certain kind called proto-referring acts. These are acts in which speakers advertise or present intentions to denote, where denotation is a word-world relation, and advertising an intention is acting as if one has intentions, where it is open whether one has them or not, or whether the referring term used denotes or not. I show how this works for proper names. The meaning of a proper name is the speech-act proto-referring act type defined by a certain referential tree. This gives us the basis for an account of proper name meaning irrespective of denotation: a uniform treatment of full and empty names. Applied to indefinites, we can capture cases where speakers perform proto-acts—in which they advertise an intention to denote something—where they intend to denote, but others where they do not, but they still perform the proto-act: advertising an intention to denote. Two cases are 'Fred saw a hippo' and 'Jane did not see a hippo'. In both cases U performs the same proto-act, represent it as R($a\ hippo$)$_{pro}$, but possesses the advertised intention in the first case, but not in the second. In the first case, R($a\ hippo$)$_{pro}$ gains referential content—its descriptive content is expanded to include seen by Fred, whereas in its second token use it has no content augmentation or sentential determination of reference. In the second case 'a hippo' is an empty referring term, just as 'Pegasus' is empty in 'Fred did not see Pegasus; he does not exist'. But in both sentences 'a hippo' functions in the same basic way: in both cases the basic proto-referring act R($a\ hippo$)$_{pro}$ is performed. Using this approach, I show how definite descriptions can be construed as indefinites with added meaning.

Keywords: definite descriptions, proto-referring acts, proper names, indefinites.

I argue that indefinite descriptions are referring terms. This is not the ambiguity thesis: that sometimes they are referring terms and sometimes something else, such as quantifiers (as argued by Chastain 1975). No. On my view they are always referring terms; and never quantifiers. What makes this thesis seem implausible is the orthodox theoretical focus on referring terms that denote, which blinds us to our frequent and perfectly meaningful use of non-denoting referring terms, e.g., empty names. If we fashion a theory of referring terms that happily integrates denoting and non-denoting terms, we can fully accommodate the idea that indefinites are always referring terms: it is just that they often do not denote, and are knowingly used as non-denoting terms. The resulting theory provides a new perspective on how semantic meaning relates to reference, denotation, and intention.

A cannot fully describe this thesis here. I confine myself to giving a sketch, and clearing some philosophical barriers that might make this way of thinking unacceptable. I briefly indicate the framework in which this is possible, which is the speech-act theoretic semantics of Barker (2004), dubbed STA. I deal with a set of objections, and show that not only can the thesis deal with them, but that it has many explanatory advantages over the quantificational analysis.

1   Speech-act Theoretic Semantics: Names and Sentences

The approach to indefinites as referring terms I defend is derived from Barker's speech-act theoretic (STA) semantics — Barker (2004). The STA approach allows us to treat both denoting and non-denoting terms on a par, by defining meaning independently from denotation. The basic contention of that semantics is that referring terms have as their meanings speech-act types of a certain kind called *proto-referring acts*. These are speech acts in which speakers *advertise* or *present* intentions to denote something. Here *denotation* is a relation between words and objects. *Advertising an intention to denote something* is what goes on when a speaker utters a phrase and acts as if she has an intention to denote something; but it is open as to whether she has the intention or not, or intends that others recognise that she has the intention or not. Another way of putting it is that U utters N and proto-refers with N, if and only if she intentionally engages in a behaviour characteristic of a

speaker who, following certain rules, has an intention to denote some-thing.

So in uttering 'Bush', for the US president, a speaker utters 'Bush' advertising an intention to denote a certain individual called 'Bush'. Thus, in doing that U intentionally engages in a behaviour characteristic of a speaker with certain intention to denote an individual exploiting a certain denotative technique: that characteristic of names. Now there may be other ways of denoting the man Bush. We are just concerned with one way. In uttering 'Bush' so understood, and in fact has the inten-tion, and wants others to recognise she has the intention. In contrast, in uttering 'Pegasus' for the mythical horse, U utters 'Pegasus' advertising an intention to denote a certain entity called 'Pegasus', but lacks the in-tention, and wants others to recognise she lacks it. In both cases, speak-ers perform proto-referring acts, but in the first case, denotative inten-tions are possessed, but not in the second. In the first case, something is denoted, but no in the second.

Typically, proper names are said to lack linguistic meaning, and to only possess a semantic value, in that sense, proper names are thought of as outside language. STA is completely at home with the idea that names have both linguistic meaning, which we might call character, and meaning, qua semantic content, what the name contributes to the mean-ing of singular simple subject-predicate sentences. In STA, the linguistic meaning of a proper name is a certain proto-referring act type. Thus the character of *Smith* is that act in which U utters 'Smith' advertising an intention to denote something called 'Smith'. But what is semantic con-tent of a token of 'Smith'. The standard answer would be a denotation or perhaps some more complicated description. No STA's. It proposes that it is another kind of speech-act type, one fixed by a certain referential tree. Let us represent the tree thus:
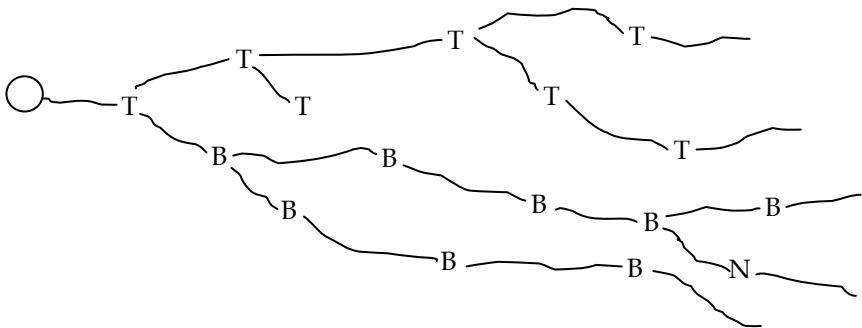
Each letter is a tokening of a name—the performance of a (nominal) proto-referring act. The letters differ since the same source, origin of the practice, may spawn different phonemic types. We have a complex causal-social-intentional structure. It is basically a convergence of very specialized anaphoric chains.

The claim than is this: the semantic content of a name token is the proto-referring act type all of whose instances are nodes on a referential tree. Thus referential though, that which is tokened in performing $R(n)_{pro}$, does not depend on their being any denotation, common descriptive content, or what have you. Thus, the semantic content of 'Pegasus', qua name for the flying horse, is the proto-referring act type all of whose tokens are nodes of a certain referential tree. The tree for 'Bush' issues in a denotation, the tree for 'Pegasus' does not: but both names are meaningful, since they determinate speech-act types. To be in a tree, basic facts about the intentions advertised have to be established, as well as certain causal conditions. But no descriptive content is required by all speaker temporal stages, that are at tree nodes. So on this account, the meaning of proper names is not tied to denotation—since often names lack them—nor to description—since grasping the name N cannot reside in grasping any particular description. The result is a theory of names which has many explanatory virtues.

Sentence meaning

However, adopting this conception of the semantic content of a name means giving up a conception of meaning dear to many. This is that the content of simple sentences of the form 'Bush is a man', etc., is a proposition, qua entity which contains as a constituent an object denoted by the name. If we adopt a theory according to which name-meaning is independent of denotation, then we have to adopt the idea that sentence-content is independent of propositions *qua* object-dependent entities. But that strikes me as a virtue and not a liability.

Very briefly that theory goes like this. We should treat the semantic contents of sentences as proto-assertion types. What is an assertion: very roughly it is the act of defending a mental state of a certain kind. Defence here means taking epistemic responsibility for that mental state. To utter a sentence and take epistemic responsibility for a state is to represent oneself as having reasons for that state, and being able to response to

challenges about possession of that state. So much is relatively uncontroversial. What is controversial is what the mental state defended in assertion is. The standard view, which ultimately leads us to the idea of semantic contents as propositions is that the mental state, Π, defended is a belief state: the belief that P. If a belief state is the Π-property, then as beliefs are truth-apt, and we understand them as relational, then we are quickly drawn to the concept of truth-bearers as propositions, qua assertion independent entities. The primary truth-bearers are propositions.

One of the central moves of STA is to deny that Π is a belief state. Rather, the state defended in assertion is prior to belief: it is a mental state that may have a representational character, but may not. Representationality is not what defines a state as belief, since motivational states can be representational as well.

Having captured assertoric content in a way that does not make reference to a force-sentence distinction, we are left with the task of explaining the possibility of a compositional semantics, but there is not difficulty, since we do so in terms of the idea of a proto-act. The semantic contents of sentences are proto-assertion types. Thus, in uttering, *Bush is cute*, U utters a sentence and advertises a defensive with respect to a Π-property: one of the form of being disposed to find some aesthetic preference for the denotation of 'Bush'.

We can then explain embeddings. In

(1)   If Bush is cute, he will win the election

the embedded 'Bush is cute' is proto-asserted: U advertises an intention to defend a certain Π-property—whose specification includes reference to the denotation of 'Bush'. Thus the structure of (1) can be represented as, where C {|} indicates conditionality:

(2)   C {A(*Bush is cute*)$_{pro}$ | A(*he will win the election*)$_{pro}$}

Thus we have embedded proto-assertions. We think of '*if…, ….*' as a sentence structure whose arguments are proto-assertions. As we shall see, it is not required in STA that the proto-assertions that are embedded have to be thought of as truth-apt. That would be to try to minic a propositional semantics: but in fact, having constructed a theory that is essentially non-proposition, there is no point in trying to reproduce the character of a propositional semantics. Indeed, there are considerable advantages in not doing so as we shall see.

It is a further story to say what this function of conditionality is. Still, I must say something since conditionals and indefinites have interesting connections and will concern us below. The rough idea is that indicative conditionals involve two proto-assertions that receive interpretations: the first is suppositional, and the second is conditional. Supposition involves the stipulated permissibility of the proto-assertion A(*Bush is cute*)$_{pro}$: this means that the speaker indicates that this proto-assertion is to be allowed in the conversation, at a certain point, so as to determine the consequences of that stipulation. Basically, supposition is *treating as sayable*. Hence suppositions can be introduced through locutions such as *Say that P*. Conditional interpretation of a proto-assertion is that where the permissibility of the proto-assertion is simply determined by whether it follows as permissible from a supposition given other background proto-assertions which are either standard assertions or suppositions in turn. Thus in asserting *if P, Q*, U indicates through if the suppositional status of A(P)$_{pro}$, and indicates through attaching Q to *if P*, and A(Q)$_{pro}$ is to be judged permissible just in case it follows as permissible from A(P)$_{pro}$ and background permissible proto-assertions. See Barker (1993, 1995, 2004) for defence of versions of this theory.

I will not explore here how we should analyse disjunctions or negations—see Barker (2004, 2007, 2007a) for details. But more or less structures that correspond to basic intuitions about these connectives can be provided, though there the structures involved as simpler in many ways than conditionals. Needless to say, the semantics is not one using truth as an explanatory component. Rather it is a semantics of the kinds of acts performed, from which truth-conditions can then be recovered.

In sum: We have a semantics of acts, where acts in the case of sentences are partially defined by property specifications. These will be conventionally determined: the type of speech-act performed is a rule-based manner determined compositionally by rules that tell us what the results are of proto-acts combined with other proto-acts. Of course, we can make room for various notions of context dependency: the contents of speech-acts may depend indexically on context.

In this semantics, we replace the force/sense distinction by an assertion/proto-assertion distinction. That is, what gets embedded in sentential context are proto-assertions, and not pure force-less senses—propositions—as in the Fregean picture.

2   Indefinites and Definites in STA

That, in very broad terms, is the STA-framework applied to names and sentences. How does it get applied to indefinite descriptions? It might seem we should see how it applies to definite descriptions first. But in fact looking at indefinites first makes things look a little clearer. There is a sense in which indefinites are the fundamental descriptive referring terms in a language: definites are interesting developments thereof.

Like names, indefinites are referring terms. They are terms that are capable of denoting an entity: but they don't have to denote an entity.[1] They are frequently used in contexts in which it is manifest to all the users that they do not denote, and it is intended that they do not denote—again like names. But unlike names, there are more contexts in which these non-denotative uses arise.

Like names, in STA, the meaning of a definite is defined by a certain proto-referring act. The meaning of an indefinite description, as in 'a hippo', is a proto-act type of a certain kind. For example, 'a hippo' has as its meaning written $R(a\ hippo)_{pro}$. This is the act in which U utters a term advertising an intention to denote something of the hippo-class. Again, as in names, she may or may not have the intention, her term may or may not denote, and may or may not want her audience to recognise that the term does not denote.

To see how this approach works, let us take two cases:

(3)   Fred saw a hippo.
(4)   Jane did not see a hippo.

In both cases the speaker U performs $R(a\ hippo)_{pro}$, advertising an intention to denote something from the hippo-class. In (3), her use succeeds in denoting something, assuming (3) is true, but in (4) it does not. In (3), $R(a\ hippo)_{pro}$ gains in the sentence itself referential content—its descriptive content is expanded to include *seen by Fred*. If it denotes, paradigmatically, it picks out the entity that is a hippo seen by Fred. Hence we can continue (3) with (5):

(5)   It was pink.

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[1]   Through out I shall restrict myself to singular noun phrases, and shall not examine plurals. For a speech-act theoretic analysis of plurals see Barker (2004).

In which we use the pronoun to anaphorically pick out whatever was picked out by 'a hippo' in (3). We take, paradigmatically, it to denote the hippo seen by Fred. In (4), by contrast, the token use of 'a hippo' has no content augmentation or sentential determination of reference. In (4), 'a hippo', is an empty referring term, just as 'Pegasus' is empty in 'Fred did not see Pegasus; he does not exist'. But it is still a referring term. It has the only plausible general characteristic of a referring term: it is used to perform a proto-referring act. More about this kind of case later.

Using this approach, I show how definite descriptions can be construed as indefinites *with added meaning*. The core of the idea is that a definite description 'the hippo' has as the core of its meaning a proto-referring act of the same basic form as that for an indefinite, indefinite are open to sentential determination of referential content, as indicated above, whereas definites are not. Rather referential content is determined independently of the main clause of the assertion, though it may be augmented through restricted relative clauses.

Let us see how this works. Compare:

(6)   Jo saw the hippo.
(7)   Jo saw a hippo.

The difference is this. In the case of 'the hippo', U performs a proto-referring act in which she advertises an intention to denote something from the class {hippo}. There may, contextually speaking, be more referential content to her act. The context may indicate that she has in mind a particular hippo, one that has been spoken of before. Be that as it may, the crucial matter is this. Definite descriptions have pre-sententially determined referential content. This means that we have to establish the content of R(*the hippo*)_{pro} independently of its position in the main predication of the sentence, in this case (6). This places a need on the speaker to establish uniqueness conditions just using the material in 'the hippo' or in 'the hippo' and some implicitly attached relative clause, as in 'which we were speaking of before' or, material that is salient in a context, as in where a demonstrative gesture, that one, could secure referential content supplementation. But note: the predication itself, i.e., that *Jo saw x*, is not part of the content that secures denotation.

But note the contrast with (7). Indefinites have sententially determinable referential content. In this case, the referential content that R(*a hippo*)_{pro} needs to do its work can be supplied by the sentential context.

Thus in (7), R(*a hippo*)$_{pro}$ has the content *x is a hippo & Jo saw x*. It gains this through the predicative act. This is not to say that (7) has the same content as:

(8)   Jo saw the hippo that Jo saw.

(7) and (8) are semantically quite distinct. First note that R(*the hippo that Jo saw*)$_{pro}$ has the same referential content as R(*a hippo*)$_{pro}$ in (7). But the difference is that there are lexically fixed constraints on how they gain this content.

It is not required that indefinite descriptions gain sententially determined referential content. Their content may remain unsupplemented. Thus compare:

(9)   Jo did not see the hippo.
(10)   Jo did not see a hippo.

In the case of (9), we find the definite description functioning just as it does in (6). The sentential context is different — negation is present — but this is irrelevant to its processing as a component of a referring act. The contrast could not be starker with the indefinite in (10). In this case there is no sentential determination of content. In this case, the proto-referring act R(*a hippo*)$_{pro}$, retains *x is a hippo* as its only content. Furthermore, unlike (9) above, there is no doxastic grounding. That is, U lacks an intention to denote an entity, and it is manifest to her audience from the context, that she lacks the intention. The proto-referring act is indeterminate with respect to content. This is no objection to its functioning as a referring term. It is just indeterminate. Compare negative existentials using names. In asserting *Pegasus does not exist*, R(*Pegasus*)$_{pro}$ is a proto-referring act in which U lacks a denotative intention — it is not doxastically grounded — but it functions as a referring term. OK, there is a difference between (10) and the negative existential. One might say that R(*Pegasus*)$_{pro}$ is determinate in a sentence in which R(*a hippo*)$_{pro}$ in (10) is not. Compare:

(11)   Fred did not see Pegasus. Jane did not see him either. He does not exist.
(12)   Fred did not see a hippo. *Jane did not see him either. *He does not exist.

The difference is manifested in the anaphoric relations that can be set up. Does this show that 'a hippo' is not functioning as a referring term? One

might argue that this is corroborated by the fact that within the scope of negation we can set up an anaphoric relation. Compare:

(13)   Fred did not see a hippo that had a crocodile sitting on it.

In this case, 'it' enters into an anaphoric relation with 'a hippo' where the latter is in the scope of negation. Thus it could be argued that there are syntactic constraints in operation here that present anaphoric connection in the case of (12) but allow it in the case of (13), and this indicates that 'a hippo' is not a referring term in either case.

But we do not have to postulate any such syntactic constraints inconsistent with the status of 'a hippo' being a referring term to explain these cases. Here is an explanation. Pronouns such as 'he' have sententially predetermined referential content. They inherit their content either demonstratively or anaphorically, from prior antecedents. Thus the second sentence in (12) is defective. It is like 'I did not see the hippo' where one simply fails to specify which hippo. Of course, in the case of (13) where the anaphoric relation is fine 'it' lives with this indeterminacy. But that is fine, since in the case of (13), we have a negation. The speaker is rejecting the application of the complex predicate 'see a hippo that had a crocodile sitting on it' to the noun phrase 'Fred'. But such rejection does not require that any determinate semantic content assigned to 'it' or 'a hippo'.

In sum, the bold hypothesis is this. Definites and indefinites are semantically identical but for this difference: definite descriptions have an extra lexical meaning rule that requires that they have pre-sententially determined referential content. Apart from that they are identical.

3   Scope Relations, Existentials, Predication, and other Matters

Having established what the claim is and fended off some objections we now need to deal with a serious set of objections. Here are some.

Scope

Scope relations with negation might seem again to be a problem. Compare:

(14)   A hippo was not allowed into the room.

(14) has two readings, which, in terms of standard analysis are given:

$(\exists x)$(Hippo $[x]$ & ~(Allowed into the room$[x]$))
~$(\exists x)$(Hippo $[x]$ & (Allowed into the room$[x]$))

If we introduce the quantifier variable apparatus we can explain the ambiguities in (14) syntactically — in terms of underlying logical form. But how does the present hypothesis deal with (14)? This is a slightly sticky matter.

The reply is that referring terms can be interpreted topics. In expressive terms (14) can be interpreted in two ways:

(i) Defending a rejection of the application of Pred(*allowed into the room*) to R(*a hippo*)$_{pro}$.
(ii) Defending application of Pred(*not allowed into the room*) to R(*a hippo*)$_{pro}$.

In the first case we have the narrow scope reading, and the second the wider scope reading. In the second case, the subject term is treated as a topic. That means that U is committed to the possibility of anaphoric relations being set up.

Two Functions for Indefinites

There are two general roles for indefinites, which is explained by their sentential determinability of referential content. Indefinites can be used to introduce topics or to characterise things that have already been introduced as topics. We see these two different functions in the sentences:

(15) A hippo was caught here last night.
(16) Ernesto is a hippo.

In the first case, we have introduction of a topic. We need to introduce a topic through a device that does not presuppose reference to that topic. Indefinites do this, since they have reference determined in the predicative act. But what about (16). We might formalise, using standard semantics, as:

$\exists x((x = \text{Ernesto}) \ \& \ \text{Hippo}[x])$

This of course requires using a predicate that is not really expressed in English: Hippo$[x]$. Perhaps it could be captured by 'is a member of the hippo class'. But do we really want to say that (16) has such a complex logical form? An alternative is to treat 'is a hippo' as a syntactically primitive predicate expression. We formalise it as *Hippo* [*Ernesto*]. But

this again has the disadvantage of treating surface grammar in a cavalier way.

What does STA say about these predicative cases? In STA, 'a hippo' in (16) functions as it normally does, as a referring term. We could capture the spirit of (16) as: *Ernesto is identical to a hippo*. The 'is' is the 'is' of identity. Of course, (16) may not seem to be a statement of identity because of the sentential determinability of the content of R(*a hippo*)$_{pro}$. It does not have the flavour of Ernesto is the hippo, in which there is presententially determinable referential terms on both sides.

Existential quantification

There are the so called existential quantifiers, as in:

(17)   There exists a hippo that is pink.
(18)   There is a hippo that is pink.

Here standard analysis formalises these as:

$\exists x(\text{Hippo}[x] \ \& \ \text{Pink}[x])$

Now this is objectionable on one level. It treats 'there is an x' or 'there exists an x' as irreducible idiomatic lumps. Of course, those used to buying into the Fregean paradigm are used to riding roughshod over surface grammar. Surely we should try to understand what 'there is' or 'there exists' do first, and then how they combine with 'an F' to form the locutions *There is/exists an F*. But you might object that 'there is' has no independent existence. But it does. We say 'There is George', as in 'There is the Empire state building' where we are merely committing ourselves to the being of such things. What is this use? I think propositional frameworks will never find out what it is. But in STA we can give an analysis. And I will say very quickly what it is.

> In asserting 'There is N', where N is a phrase of some kind, U defends a disposition to use 'N' in true assertions in which N has subject position.

In short, 'there is' is a means of introducing something as a topic. But there is-statements are not metalinguistic statements, that is, equivalent to 'We can use N in true assertions'. To think *there is*-statements must be metalinguistic is to force oneself into the constraints of the propositionalist paradigm. But STA rejects this paradigm completely. Thus in assert-

ing 'There is a hippo that is pink', U is defending a commitment to the use of '(the) hippo that is pink' in certain positive assertions. That is it. That is perfectly consistent with 'a hippo…' being a referring term. Claims of the form *There exists an F* are a variation on this.

If that is right, the general expressivism of STA enables it to give a compositional account of locutions of the form *There is an F* which standard quantificational accounts treat as idiomatic lumps.

4　Uniqueness Implications

Perhaps the toughest aspect of this theory to accept is that indefinites have uniqueness implications. According to STA, they have exactly the same uniqueness implications as definite descriptions. But this fact is masked by the sentential determinability of referential content that indefinites have.

Consider the following case: Sam is spending the day walking in the jungle. There are many hippos around bathing in the swamp, amongst the crocodiles, and fish. Suz asks him when he gets home that day:

(19)　Did you see a hippo in the swamp today?

Now it seems that under the circumstances Sam could answer affirmatively:

(20)　Yes, I saw many.
(21)　Yes. I saw a hippo. In fact, I saw about one hundred and fifty.

But now it is objected, that these replies are all inconsistent with the referring term theory of indefinites, since, according to that theory, indefinites carry uniqueness implications. In saying 'I saw a hippo' Sam is committing himself to seeing one and only one hippo. On the other hand, the existential analysis has no difficulties since 'a hippo' means 'at least one hippo'.

We need first to understand the form of Suz's question (19). In STA, Suz is expressing an information request. That information request is about the proto-assertion of the form below, as produced by Sam:

(22)　A(*I saw a hippo today*)$_{pro}$

The act R(*a hippo*)$_{pro}$ is one that is not doxastically grounded: she lacks any intention to denote a hippo. Suz is enquiring if there is any token-

ings of the type (22) that is assertable. In doing this the tokens are allowed to have the form:

(23)   A(*I saw a hippo (that was …..) today*)$_{pro}$

In short, it is allowed that the instances of (22) may be enriched with further referential content. Thus, it is not a presupposition of her question that the answer must have the form: *I saw a hippo today*, where there is no added content. Rather, in replying *Yes* to the question, all that Sam is committing himself to is the performativity of assertions of the form (22/3), which may have supplementary content. If that is correct, we can understand the range of answers (20) and (21).

In the case of (20), Sam is acknowledging a commitment to many assertions of the form (22), by asserting that he saw many. In the case of (21), Sam does offer an assertion of *I saw a hippo*. But is it a tokening of (22) without supplementary content? In saying *I saw a hippo*, Sam can have a certain hippo in mind. An image comes to Sam's mind of a hippo lolling by the bank. And this is no more strange than using a definite description with understood supplementary content. Or, Sam may be producing I saw a hippo as a kind of multi-assertion.

It might be objected that there is a clear distinction between the uniqueness requirements introduced by definites and those of indefinites. Standing in front of one hundred and fifty hippos, 'I see a hippo' is odd, perhaps, but not where near as odd as 'I see the hippo'. How can the referring term account explain that? Again, we can appeal to the difference in meaning between definites and indefinites: sentential determinability of referential content.

So far it might seem that on the issue of uniqueness implications it is the STA referring account that is on the back foot, whereas the quantifier approach needs to do no explaining. But this is not the case at all. Consider the following cases:

(24)   I see a hippo. It is fat.
(25)   I see at least one hippo. *It is fat.
(26)   I see a hippo. The hippo I see is fat.
(27)   I see at least one hippo. *The hippo I see is fat.

How does the standard quantificational treatment explain these instances? Not very well. Consider how a D-type analysis—Neale (1990)—works. On that account, pronouns outside the syntactic scope of in-

definites — 'it' is in (24) — are proxies for definite descriptions, which may be uniqueness implying or numberless. Thus 'it' is proxy for:

> *the hippo I see*
> *the hippo or hippos I see*

But this won't explain the phenomena presented in (24) to (27). If existentials just have the meaning of at least one, then why is (25) odd? And similarly, why is (26) fine, but (27) defective? I note that there is no problem for the STA account in explaining these cases. *A hippo* just does not mean *at least one hippo*.

Antecedents of Conditionals

The antecedents of conditions present another objection to the uniqueness implications that are attributed to indefinites if we accept the referential theory. Consider:

(28)   If I see a hippo I will chase it.

Suppose we come upon fifty hippos. Then it seems, we are committed to chasing all the hippos we see. But on the STA view, it might seem, the antecedent of (28) is defective, since we cannot assert *I see a hippo* under these circumstances. And therefore, we cannot discharge a consequent commitment through application of modus ponens. This charge is in fact false. I will explain in a moment why. Let us first ask how the existential treatment deals with (28).

In this case the existential approach must either ignore surface grammar completely, and treat 'a hippo' as a universal, and if as material implication, which is unattractive, since it massacres surface grammar, and indicative 'if' just isn't material implication — see Bennett (2001). It can avoid those pitfalls by treating the pronoun as à la Neale (1990) as proxy for a description, be it numbered uniquely or numberless. But here again in which case again it is easy to generate the wrong implications. Take embedded as in:

(29)   If I see a hippo, then if it is very fat, I will chase it.

On either reading, numberless or singular, we generate the wrong results — see Barker (1997) for more detailed description of the limits of D and E-type theories.

The standard analysis, then, is a mess. What then does STA say in the case of (28)? The issue again turns on how we understand the interpreta-

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tion of indefinites in non-asserted contexts. In (28) the proto-assertion (30) falls within the scope of 'if' and has a suppositional interpretation:

(30)   A(*Jo sees a hippo*)$_{pro}$

Thus assertion of (28) expresses a commitment to A(*Jo chases it*)$_{pro}$ following as permissible the stipulated permissibility of A(*Jo saw a hippo*)$_{pro}$ given back ground accepted assertions. The proto-assertion (30), as the antecedent of (28) is stipulated to be permissible. There is no fact of the matter about what 'a hippo' refers to. U lacks any intention to denote an object with it. The performance of (30) is merely the display of the form of a possible assertion. But what forms must that assertion take? Token assertions that correspond to (30) could have the form *(i)* below — in which R(*a hippo*)$_{pro}$ has the referential content: *x is a hippo seen by Jo* – or *(ii)* below — in which R(*a hippo*)$_{pro}$ has the content: *x is a hippo seen by Jo & x is F*, that is, supplemented by further content:

(i)   A(*Jo sees a hippo*)$_{pro}$
(ii)   A(*Jo sees a hippo that is F*)$_{pro}$

Thus if it turns out that Jo saw many hippos, and chased them all, it does not follow that the antecedent of (28) is defective since the antecedent of (30) does not correspond to a fully-fledged assertion of the form A(*Jo saw a hippo*) with referential content *(i)*. Rather, (28)'s antecedent corresponds to a range of possible assertions. The commitment incurred by (28) is this:

> If there is a true assertion of the form A(*Jo saw a hippo (that is F)*), then U is committed to A(*Jo chased it*), where *it* is anaphoric on *a hippo* in the first assertion.

The (*that is F*) part, may or may not be present in the assertions involved. In short, the antecedent proto-assertion corresponds to a plurality of antecedent assertions: where it is not required that all of these are assertable for commitment to a consequent assertion.

On this account, there is implicit generality in (28). It is equivalent to:

(32)   If Jo saw any hippo, she chased it.

In STA, *any hippo* is simply an indefinite with further meaning restrictions imposed on it. It is a bit hard to tell exactly how 'any' work — see Barker (2004, ch. 10). But roughly, 'any' is used to indicate the context in which *an F* finds itself is one in which *substitutional indifference* is

generated by the presence of a semantic structure. Substitutional indifference is that where any term that has the includes as a proper part referential content of *a hippo*, can replace *a hippo*. Hence, we can replace 'a hippo' in (£) by any name we have for hippos. This free reign to substitution is created by the context in which the indefinite finds itself. This explains why there is a kind of generality in such sentences.

4   Conclusions

We have clearly not covered all the terrain that needs to be covered to fully defend the thesis that indefinites are referring terms. There are uses of indefinites that we have not considered at all. For example there are uses in the scope of universal phrases, as in *Every boy who owns a donkey beats it*, and there are also generic uses, as in, *A cat is a four-limbed creature*, or uses in combination with adverbs of generality, as in *If a boy owns a donkey, he usually beats it*. I conclude that far from looking like a long shot, the indefinite as referring term is looking rather stronger in explaining what is going on in these non-generic cases.

The advantages of this kind of approach over the standard quantificational analysis are significant:

One: it treats surface grammar as non-misleading; we don't have the gulf between logical form and grammatical form implicit in the framework bequeathed to us by Frege. For Frege, 'I saw a hippo' is analysed as:

$(\exists x)(\text{I saw}[x] \ \& \ \text{Hippo}[x])$

But we do more than just provide a rapprochement between surface grammar and logical form. One might argue that you can do that with generalised quantifiers. In the case of generalised quantifiers we can treat names as quantifiers: all noun phrases are assimilated to quantifiers. But the thing about STA is not simply that it can set up a correspondence between logical form and grammar. Rather it explains why natural languages have the surface grammar that they do.

Two: it allows for a unified treatment of descriptive phrases, definite and indefinite, which also explains facts about other languages that don't feature articles: such Slavic languages. In Polish there are no definite and indefinite articles. But the current theory explains neatly how there is basically a noun phrase that, in different contexts, might be interpreted in terms of sententially and presentially determined con-

tent. In Polish it is a contextual matter. In English, and other languages with articles, it is a rule-based lexical matter.

Three: It offers a much better treatments of pronouns and donkey pronouns, which is consistent with independently plausible accounts of 'if', which is to say, theories that do not equate indicative 'if' with material implication.[2]

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[2] This is the big problem with DRT or Discourse representation—Kamp (1984), and Kamp – Reyle (1993) theory which treats indefinites as kinds of variables, but nevertheless gives them more or less truth-conditions in terms of existential quantification.