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# On Pragmatic Regularities

**Abstract:** The aim of this essay is to help illuminate a relatively neglected aspect of a Gricean picture of the semantics-pragmatics interface: namely, the notion of a pragmatic regularity. (Another term which Bach (2004, among other places) has used to designate this phenomenon is “standardized non-literality”.) The guiding idea is that better charting the notion of a pragmatic regularity will have some significant effects on some ongoing debates.

**Key words:** semantics, pragmatics, Grice, Bach, Devitt

## 0. Introduction

A pragmatic regularity is a kind of pragmatic implication (i.e., carried by the act of using a particular expression in a particular context, as opposed to being constitutive of what is semantically expressed) which is nonetheless systematic and regular. In being systematic and regular, pragmatic regularities are clearly distinct from one-off, thoroughly context-dependent particularized conversational implicatures (PCIs). They are also distinct from such similar, more familiar phenomena as conventional implicatures,<sup>1</sup> idioms and dead metaphors, and indirect speech acts. Rather, they are just simply common patterns of usage which regularly convey a certain implicature, independent of what is semantically expressed.

Paradigmatic examples of pragmatic regularities include Gricean generalized conversational implicatures (GCIs) (e.g., ‘X is meeting a woman this evening’), rhetorical uses of interrogatives (e.g., ‘Who do you think you are?’) and certain kinds of standardized irony (e.g., ‘Way

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<sup>1</sup> Bach (1999) has questioned whether CIs exist at all, but for present purposes I will follow Potts (2005) in reading Bach as arguing for certain theses about CIs.

to go, Einstein!'). Many take these kinds of phenomena to be precisely the sorts of considerations which motivate alternative, non-Gricean approaches to the semantics-pragmatics interface (such as relevance theory, or some variety of semantic contextualism). However, this essay is crafted as a development within the Gricean framework. While, in this context, I cannot engage in a global battle against relevance theory or contextualism, in the first section I will recapitulate an important contribution of Grice's, which is still entirely relevant to many active contemporary debates at the semantics-pragmatics interface.

In the second section I work through a few different examples of pragmatic regularities, toward the aim of sketching a tenable and significant account of the category. The third section is focused on one open debate in which the notion of a pragmatic regularity plays a key role – namely, the debate between Bach (2004, 2007) and Devitt (2004, 2007) over whether the phenomenon of referential uses of descriptions is amenable to a pragmatic explanation. In the final section, I draw out some general morals.

### **1. Framing the issues (within a neo-Gricean framework)**

Grice's systematic factoring of what is communicated with a use of a sentence (in context) into what is semantically expressed and what is pragmatically implicated was an epochal development in the philosophy of language, which has also helped to shape related areas of linguistics and psychology.<sup>2</sup> By 'neo-Gricean', I mean to designate the variety of

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<sup>2</sup> Here I depart from Grice's terminology, in employing the following terms to characterize Grice's factorization:

WHAT IS COMMUNICATED with a use of a sentence (in context) is a function of two factors – (i) WHAT IS SEMANTICALLY EXPRESSED, and (ii) WHAT IS PRAGMATICALLY IMPLICATED.

Along with many others nowadays, I find 'WHAT IS SAID' to be hopelessly vague and ambiguous – while Grice was exceedingly consistent in his usage of the expression, unfortunately one finds it subsequently used in different ways by different theorists. I will also make no use of the notion of 'conventional meaning', as my main focus here is on a kind of pragmatic implication that is systematic and regular, and so 'conventional' in some senses of the term.

views which accord a central theoretical place to (some version of) Grice's factorization.<sup>3</sup> Neo-Griceans hold that semantics and pragmatics are distinct and discrete (though intimately interrelated) channels involved in linguistic communication. To cite one paradigmatic example, Grice's (1975) famous letter of reference semantically expresses that Mr. X has an excellent command of English and a good attendance record, while pragmatically implicating that Mr. X is no good at philosophy.

Neo-Griceans, thus understood, may depart from the letter of Grice's views on many specific points; and the varieties of neo-Gricean views are rather heterogeneous, in several respects. Some examples of points of contention within the neo-Gricean ranks include whether conventional implicatures should be counted as truth-conditionally irrelevant, whether metaphors can or should be understood as PCIs, or how much stock should be put in the classic Gricean indicators for pragmatic implications (e.g., cancelability, calculability). (There is further discussion of the status of these Gricean indicators below.)

Nonetheless, the term 'neo-Gricean' is not so broad as to include all parties to the debates at the semantics-pragmatics interface. In particular, the centrality of Grice's factorization has been challenged by relevance theorists and semantic contextualists. One core objection is that the entire factorization itself is a drastic oversimplification and an untenable relic from a bygone era. (As Borg (2007: 340) puts it, non-neo-Griceans hold that "pragmatic effects are endemic throughout the literal, truth-evaluable content expressed by sentences", or that "pragmatics infects semantic content in a substantial way.") Some good reasons have emerged to question whether semantics and pragmatics are, in general, discretely separable.<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding all that, for several reasons, this essay is crafted as a development within the neo-Gricean framework. For one thing, the case

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<sup>3</sup> Examples of neo-Griceans, thus understood, include Kripke (1977), Neale (1990, 2007), Levinson (2000), and Horn (2004). Of particular relevance to Section 3 below is that neo-Griceanism is part of the commonly conceded ground between Bach (2004, 2007) and Devitt (2004, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Recanati (2004) is a good recent survey of them.

study in which I am interested in Section 3 takes place within that framework. More deeply, though, I think that Grice's factorization is a great leap forward in our understanding of linguistic communication, and that many moves made by relevance theorists and contextualists run afoul of the core, basic insights on which it is founded. Part my aim here is to further develop (and hence, ultimately, to shore up) the neo-Gricean stance. The general picture is tailored to account for semantic regularities and pragmatic happenstance; but what of pragmatic regularities? How would such phenomena fit in? What theoretical work could or should this notion do?

To round off this opening section, I should develop at some length what I mean by the epochal impact of Grice's factorization for the philosophy of language. It immediately follows from Grice's factorization that not all differences in what is communicated by two expressions E1 and E2 (in context) should be counted as, or traced to, a difference in what E1 and E2 semantically express. (A key sub-case is where  $E1 = E2$ , in which case the question is whether the relevant expression should be understood as ambiguous.) This was a devastating blow to some strands within the ordinary language tradition in philosophy, which fed on case-by-case cataloguing of subtle distinctions between what is communicated via different uses of certain terms.<sup>5</sup> More generally, though, Grice's factorization has a drastic and across-the-board effect on how philosophers can go about motivating conclusions about meanings.

I'll call this '**Grice's challenge**' (i.e., differences in what is communicated do not suffice to show differences in what is semantically expressed). It is my view that many contemporary strands within

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<sup>5</sup> A case in point is Strawson's (1952) argument that 'and' is ambiguous, based on the consideration that 'P and Q' (in context) sometimes communicates temporal order, sometimes communicates a causal relation, sometimes communicates neither such relation, etc. In effect, Grice's factorization demonstrates why it is that this kind of argument is hopelessly incomplete – one has to address the alternative of a difference in pragmatic implications, in order to shore up the gap between premises and conclusion. Other instances of what Grice does here for the case of 'and' include Grice's (1975) discussion of 'a' (cf. Section 2 below), and Kripke's (1977) work on 'the' (cf. Section 3 below).

relevance theory and semantic contextualism run afoul of Grice's challenge; and, as a consequence, are guilty of positing implausibly many distinct meanings. (That is, relatives of Strawson's (1952) ill-fated arguments concerning 'and' live on in the guise of referential meanings, pragmatic meanings, metaphorical meanings, etc.) It is of course controversial exactly how much weight should be afforded to such general methodological principles as Ockham's semantic razor, but still some fundamental considerations about the learnability and systematicity of meanings (among other things) impose considerable pressures against their proliferation.

(Another consequence of Grice's factorization is that sameness in what is communicated by E1 and E2 (in context) does not suffice to show synonymy (i.e., sameness in what is semantically expressed). I will call this '**the reverse-Grice point**'. While this latter point lacks for the same kind of historically significant splash as the former, it is my view that certain positions on the contemporary landscape run afoul of it. In this latter case, the charge is the opposite of the above, too-many-meanings charge; it is rather that important semantic distinctions get conflated.<sup>6</sup>)

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<sup>6</sup> Consider, for example, a line of argument against the Russellian approach to definite descriptions, developed by Schiffer (1995, 2005), and dubbed by Neale (2004) 'the argument from psychological parity'. The idea here is that, in context, 'The woman is insane' and 'She is insane' (say) communicate exactly the same content; and hence that 'the woman' has as strong a claim to conventional referring status as does 'she'. A second case concerns some of King's (2001, 2008) arguments in favor of a quantificational analysis of complex demonstratives – specifically, what King calls 'NDNS' uses (short for 'no demonstration, no speaker reference') such as "That student who scored 100% must be a genius". Here, again: the premise that such uses of demonstratives are communicatively equivalent to definite descriptions is taken to be a key reason in favor of their semantic equivalence.

At least *prima facie*, both moves might fall prey to the reverse-Grice point. Just as difference in what is communicated does not entail a failure of synonymy, sameness in what is communicated does not suffice to establish synonymy. In both cases, all things considered, the notion of a pragmatic regularity may afford the best explanation of the data in question (in conjunction with the claims that, contra Schiffer, pronouns are referring expressions but definite descriptions are

To sum up, then: In the wake of Grice's factorization, it is more difficult to draw any conclusions, back or forth, between what is communicated and what is semantically expressed. One cannot establish synonymy merely on the basis of sameness in what is communicated, nor can one refute a claim to synonymy by pointing to a difference in what is communicated. One would have to address the alternative of a pragmatic explanation, in order to justify any such conclusions.

The aim of this paper is to work towards illuminating one aspect of this broadly Gricean picture: namely, the notion of a pragmatic regularity. While this notion plays at least an implicit role in some ongoing debates at the semantics-pragmatics interface, it deserves a more extended treatment than it has yet been given (at least, to my knowledge). The guiding idea is that charting and further illuminating the notion of a pragmatic regularity might have significant affects on some ongoing debates.

## **2. What is a pragmatic regularity? Some work towards a theoretical account**

In this section I work through a few different examples of pragmatic regularities, with a view to sketching the general contours of the category.

First off, I take the phenomenon of generalized conversational implicatures (GCIs) as a paradigm case of a pragmatic regularity. Here are two constructions which Grice (1975) uses to illustrate this notion:

- (1) X is meeting a woman this evening.
- (2) X went into a house.

(1) would normally implicate that "the person to be met was someone other than X's wife, mother, sister, or perhaps even close Platonic friend", and (2) would normally implicate that the house is other than X's own. Based on such cases, it might be said that a lack of familiarity,

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not, and that, contra King, complex demonstratives are referring expressions but definite descriptions are not).

ownership, or otherwise (context-relative) close relation is commonly communicated by the use of the indefinite article ‘a’.

However, this is no part of what is semantically expressed by the indefinite article, as the following cases suffice to illustrate:

- (3) X broke a finger.
- (4) X has been sitting in a car all morning.

This claim rests only on the following three (fairly safe) assumptions: (i) that (3) would normally implicate that X broke X’s own finger, (ii) that (4) is completely neutral as to whether or not the car was X’s own, and (iii) that there is nothing remotely non-literal or non-standard about these latter uses of ‘a’. Hence what (1) and (2) instance here is, though systematic and regular, a pragmatic matter (i.e., carried by the speaker’s use of the indefinite article in this particular context, as opposed to a matter of what is semantically expressed by ‘a’). Not surprisingly, we find these GCIs to carry such classic pragmatic hall-marks as calculability and cancelability.<sup>7</sup>

So, this phenomenon instanced by (1) and (2) is a case wherein something communicated (with a use of an expression, in context) seems to be pragmatically implicated, not semantically expressed. However, it clearly differs from one-off, thoroughly context-dependent PCIs in being

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<sup>7</sup> That is, it might be decidedly odd, but is no contradiction, to say: “I am meeting a woman this evening, and she is my mother.” Similarly, it is easy to imagine scenarios in which the GCI associated with (2) is canceled. Hence, GCIs are cancelable.

As for calculability, the idea here is that pragmatic implicatures can be represented as the conclusion of a certain chain of reasoning, sometimes called a ‘Gricean derivation’. The key point is that semantic competence is necessary, but not remotely close to sufficient, for working out pragmatic implicatures. Extra-semantic calculation, in some form or other, is also required. (It is important not to take calculability as a claim about psycho-linguistic processing. As Bach (among others) has pointed out, “Grice did not intend his account of how implicatures are recognized as a psychological theory or even as a cognitive model. He intended it as a rational reconstruction” (2005: 8). Some objections to the Gricean picture may well be attacks on a straw target, for want of attention to this distinction.)

relatively systematic and regular. Hence, it should be understood as a pragmatic regularity. Now, what else might belong in such a category?

The case of rhetorical questions provides a second candidate. Consider the following:

(5) Why are you so lazy?

What a use of (5) (in context) semantically expresses is a question about the cause of, or explanation for, the addressee's laziness. Literal uses of (5) are thus relatively rare (e.g. a therapist might literally ask this of her patient). What is more common is that speakers use (5) rhetorically – i.e., to pragmatically implicate that the addressee is lazy. In general, and as is typical of rhetorical uses of questions, while what (5) semantically expresses is interrogative, what it pragmatically implicates (by asking *that* question in *that* context) is assertoric.

So, *prima facie*, we have here a second case wherein something that is communicated (with a use of a sentence, in context) is at once relatively systematic and regular, while at the same time independent of what is semantically expressed. It is systematic and regular in that some questions (like (5)) especially lend themselves to this kind of usage, even to the extent that literal, interrogative uses of them are hard to motivate. Another such case is:

(6) Who do you think you are?

So, this phenomenon, too, seems rather distinct from a PCI – i.e., it would be hard to deny that there is a context-independent *communicative* regularity to use (5), (6), and etc. rhetorically. Again, there are good reasons to think of that regularity as *pragmatic*. Intuitively, it is using *that question in that context* that generates the implication in question; and, again, the implication is both cancellable and calculable. Certainly, one who wanted to argue that (5), (6), and etc. are semantically ambiguous between an interrogative meaning and an assertoric meaning would be subject to pretty rough handling. There would be serious questions both pertaining to the theoretical motivation for these putative assertoric meanings, and pertaining to the boundaries of the category.



To the contrary, regardless of how common the association between (5), (6), or etc. and its implication has become in the minds of speakers, still the implication is carried by the act of using that expression (in a specific context), not simply by what is semantically expressed. Here again, as in the case of ‘and’ and ‘a’, the neo-Gricean stance seems vastly preferable to the proliferation of meanings. Rhetorically-used questions seem to fall naturally into the category of pragmatic regularities, along with GCIs. I will briefly discuss a third type of example, not because I think that it exhausts the category of pragmatic regularity, but rather to illustrate exactly the opposite: i.e., the notion of a pragmatic regularity is bound to be quite widely applicable, should its legitimacy and interest be conceded. The following brief discussion is tentative because it involves irony, and the question of the correct theoretical explanation of irony (and of how irony intersects with the semantics-pragmatics interface) is a complex and thorny matter, which (as far as I know) has not received much in the way of sustained philosophical treatment. Nonetheless, despite all that, this next case does help to illustrate some of the general confines of the category of pragmatic regularity, and hence helps to ward off the suggestion that the phenomenon instanced by the above cases is isolated and circumscribed.

Consider an utterance of the following, in a context in which a mistake or accident has just occurred:

(7) Way to go, Einstein!

Arguably, this instances two distinct kinds of pragmatic regularity. First, there is the ironic use of the compliment, to indirectly assert its opposite – compare: ‘Nice job, Einstein!’, ‘Good work, Einstein!’. Second, there is the non-literal, mocking use of a famous name – compare: ‘Check out Elvis over there’, ‘Finally, Socrates deigned to enlighten us with his brilliant opinions’.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Note that this is a distinct phenomenon from what is often called an ‘inverted commas’ use of a name, such as when one humors a delusional man who thinks he is Napoleon by so-referring to him. Both kinds of use fit fairly well within the category of what Kripke (1977) calls ‘speaker reference’ (provided that we explicitly reject Kripke’s occasional suggestion that it is essential to the cases of

In any case, again, clearly we have here, as in the above cases, a *communicative* regularity. This is why I call this ‘standardized’ irony – as an empirical matter, non-literal, mocking uses of (7) are epidemic (in at least some contemporary dialects of English).

But, also, I take it that it is just as clear that this should hardly be taken to show that either the compliment or the proper name is semantically ambiguous. Surely one does not want to say that the currency of these kinds of ironic, mocking uses of ‘Einstein’ (and ‘Elvis’, ‘Socrates’, etc.) has engendered the terms with a new semantic meaning. Apart from its sheer implausibility, that option would also bring in its train a host of difficult questions, concerning the precise boundaries of this distinctive kind of ambiguity. To the contrary, this kind of communicative regularity too is, on balance, best explained in terms of pragmatic implicature – i.e., the message is carried by *the use of that sentence in that context*, as opposed to by what (7) semantically expresses. All things considered, the claim that these names are semantically univocal, but that they are subject to a pragmatic regularity, seems much more satisfactory.

So, the neo-Gricean has a straightforward explanation which covers many such cases. The distinction between what is semantically expressed and what is pragmatically implicated has long been evident; and it suffices to ground a simple, comprehensive account with potential to cover an indefinitely broad range. The fact that speakers often use questions (e.g., ‘Why are you so lazy?’) rhetorically, to make statements, does not mean that the interrogative form is semantically ambiguous; the fact that speakers often use compliments (e.g., ‘Way to go!’) sarcastically, to insult, does not show that the relevant sentences are semantically ambiguous; and the fact that certain famous names have come to be used in a certain mocking way does not show that they have become semantically ambiguous. This ties in with some aforementioned instances of Grice’s challenge (i.e., differences in what is communicated do not suffice to show differences in what is semantically expressed). In

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speaker/semantic reference divergence that the speaker and audience share a factual misconception as to the semantic reference). However, the inverted commas uses are more explicitly meta-linguistic.

each case, the literal semantic meaning is operative, and plays a role in the further post-literal speech act. The regularities in question are pragmatic ones, and so should not be understood as semantically encoded or determined.

We are now in a position to see how it is that pragmatic regularities differ from such similar phenomena as conventional implicatures (CIs), idioms and dead metaphors (IDMs), and indirect speech acts (ISAs). For one thing, the distinctive communicative properties of CIs and IDMs are more clearly a function of the semantics of the expressions in question, as opposed to properly characterized as pragmatic phenomena. Relatedly, as distinct from CIs or IDMs, pragmatic regularities *need not be* lexically encoded, or traceable to (the semantics or pragmatics of) one distinguishable sub-component of the expression in question.<sup>9</sup> (For example, while it makes sense to isolate questions about the semantics and pragmatics of (say) pejoratives or idioms – considered as independent sub-sentential lexical items – no such point holds, in general, across the range of pragmatic regularities.) Further, as distinct from ISAs, there *need not be* two items of information (or propositions) involved, let alone need there exist any regular sort of relation between the communicatively relevant bits of information.

So, while many multiplicities of use are cases of semantic ambiguity, crucially, not all are. Some should be understood as pragmatic regularities; i.e., cases in which one expression with its univocal semantic properties has come to be used in diverse ways. Pragmatic regularities, then, may well constitute an interesting and useful pragmatic natural kind, which merits further investigation.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The ‘need not be’ qualification is important – for some putative pragmatic regularities (e.g., those associated with ‘a’ discussed above and ‘the’ discussed below) might be seen as lexically encoded or triggered. The key point is that, even if that is so, that *per se* does not suffice to show that those putative pragmatic regularities should instead be classified as a semantic phenomenon, akin to CIs or IDMs.

<sup>10</sup> As mentioned above, Bach’s sometimes refers to this phenomenon as “standardized non-literality”. Cf. Bach (1995, 1998) for development, and (2004, 2007) for applications. It is crucial for Bach that no Gricean derivation (let alone a deliberate, conscious inferential process) is required in order to arrive at what is

### 3. A case study: One contemporary debate in which the notion of a pragmatic regularity plays a key role

The notion of a pragmatic regularity plays a role in ongoing debates between Bach (2004, 2007) and Devitt (2004, 2007) over whether referential uses of definite descriptions admit of a satisfactory pragmatic explanation. I will use the term ‘RDs’ as an abbreviation for ‘referential uses of definite descriptions (principally, among some other quantified noun phrases)’. One of the points which are conceded in common by both Bach and Devitt (in addition to the commitment to the neo-Gricean framework, as already mentioned) is that while the phenomenon in question is most prevalent for the case of definite descriptions, it is also – to varying degrees – instanced by other quantified noun phrases.

Next, I will sketch what I will call ‘the Russellian orthodoxy on RDs’. Second, I will describe some of Devitt’s (2004, 2007) criticisms of the Russellian orthodoxy. After that, I will describe Bach’s (2004, 2007) replies to Devitt on behalf of the Russellian orthodoxy, which appeal to the notion of a pragmatic regularity.

The Russellian orthodoxy on RDs is the view that ‘the’ has one univocal meaning, i.e., roughly, the quantificational meaning articulated by Russell (1905), though as modified by subsequent developments in syntactic and semantic theory.<sup>11</sup> (Especially important here are some developments within quantification theory, and the notion of a restricted quantifier.) The Russellian orthodoxy concedes that there are common

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pragmatically implicated in these cases. This is one of the important differences between pragmatic regularities and PCIs.

<sup>11</sup> The Russellian orthodoxy is sketched by Grice (1969: 143) – as Grice puts it, despite admitting of both ‘identificatory’ and ‘non-identificatory’ uses, “descriptive phrases have no relevant systematic duplicity of meaning; their meaning is given by a Russellian account”. Kripke (1977) then develops this line of thought into a powerful counter-argument against anti-Russellians – in his (1977: 263) words, the phenomenon of RDs “shows nothing against a Russellian or other unitary account”, and so treating referential uses via “a general theory of speech acts” is, all things considered, preferable to positing a “semantic ambiguity” in the definite article. Neale (1990) and Bach (2004) add important amplifications and further developments. See Neale (2004) for more thorough discussions of the development of the view.

and significant non-quantificational (i.e., referential) uses of definite descriptions (as well as of various other kinds of quantified noun phrases). However, it holds that, all things considered, these should be understood as a pragmatic phenomenon (i.e., a kind of speech act), not by positing a distinct referential meaning for ‘the’. Basically, the idea is that certain of the putative criticisms of Russell (1905) raised by Strawson (1950) and Donnellan (1966) fall prey to Grice’s challenge – i.e., that what Grice does for ‘and’ and ‘a’ also applies to ‘the’. While it can scarcely be denied that there exist non-trivial differences between what sentences of the form ‘The F is G’ (in context) can be used to *communicate*, conceding this still falls well short of establishing anything along the lines of a semantic ambiguity.

Second, as for Devitt’s views: while Devitt is hardly the first or only critic of the Russellian orthodoxy,<sup>12</sup> he has helped to push the confines of the debate in a way that is relevant to the central interests of this paper. For one thing, he is one of the few to take a bold, categorical step beyond Donnellan (1966) – i.e., on Devitt’s (2004, 2007) view, ‘the’ is absolutely and unequivocally semantically ambiguous between quantificational and referential senses (like ‘bank’ is ambiguous between financial and geographical senses). Hence, there is a distinctively clear split between Devitt and the Russellians. Furthermore, Devitt has also contributed to the development of what many take to be a strong line of argument against the Russellian orthodoxy, which Neale (2004) dubs ‘the argument from convention’. The core idea here is that RDs are so “common, standard, regular, systematic, and cross-linguistic” (Neale 2004: 173), that it seems somewhat *ad hoc* and theoretically-driven to deny that they are a significant semantic phenomenon. (After all, what are semantic properties, if not ‘common, standard, regular, systematic’ properties of linguistic communication?)

Devitt (2004, 2007) has been stubbornly demanding, when it comes, specifically, to the question of exactly how the Russellian orthodoxy’s pragmatic explanation of RDs is supposed to go. He has helped to force the recognition that Russellians are generally quite vague on the

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<sup>12</sup> In particular, many of the points discussed with reference to Devitt below were anticipated or developed by Reimer (1998).

mechanics. Is this supposed to be a PCI? A GCI? Some other sort of implication? If so, what, exactly? In addition, Devitt has helped to further cloud the issue of how we might determine whether or not RDs can or should be classified as a pragmatic phenomenon. For example, one upshot of his dead-metaphor argument (which, again, follows Reimer 1998) might be taken to be that calculability buys you nothing, because anything can be described as calculable. (It is a fairly trivial matter to sketch a Gricean derivation from more or less any P to any Q; and so the availability of such a calculation can hardly do much theoretical work.)

The challenge for the Russellian orthodoxy, then, is to explain exactly how it is that, in the case of RDs, one specific singular proposition gets pragmatically implicated, while a distinct general, quantificational proposition is semantically expressed. Devitt is surely right, too, that there is not much in the way of specific directions in the classical Russellian orthodox corpus (cf. note 11) for how to meet this challenge.

So, third, then: onto Bach's (2004, 2007) responses to Devitt, in which the notion of a pragmatic regularity is employed in order to bolster the Russellian orthodoxy. One thing to observe right off the top is that, as mentioned above, proponents of the Russellian orthodoxy typically take this issue to be a battle in the global wars over the status and tenability of the neo-Gricean framework. A core idea motivating the Russellian view is that Strawson (1950), Donnellan (1966), and much of the subsequent work inspired by them, fall prey to Grice's challenge. Thus, there is something idiosyncratic about Devitt's conceding the neo-Gricean framework in general, but then arguing in favor of referential meanings for RDs. At the very least, many of his neo-Gricean allies will take Devitt to be putting himself in with some unsavory elements, when it comes to the unnecessary and unprincipled proliferation of meanings.

Of course, according to Devitt, there is nothing unprincipled about this particular case of RDs, because of the force of such considerations as the argument from convention. So, one of Bach's (2004) main contributions to this dialogue has been to counter that argument, from a Russellian perspective. Bach concedes that, to be sure, there is a much stronger case for classifying definite descriptions as referring

expressions, than there is for any other kind of quantificational expression. Definite descriptions especially lend themselves to referential uses, precisely because they semantically single out exactly one individual. When one wants to express object-dependent information about an unnamed individual, or about an individual whose name is not mutually known among present interlocutors, definite descriptions are often the best means available. Still, there is nothing here that a Russellian must downplay or whitewash. Given the Russellian claim that definite descriptions are quantificational expressions whose compositional semantics single out exactly one individual, then it is not at all surprising (let alone inconvenient or embarrassing) that referential uses of them are ‘common, standard, regular, systematic, and cross-linguistic’. The definite description’s one univocal, quantificational semantics is still evident and operative on referential uses.<sup>13</sup> So, contra the argument from convention, definite descriptions stand out among quantified noun phrases as the best tailored for referential uses, but it is far from clear that this does anything to undermine the Russellian orthodox view.<sup>14</sup>

Bach (2004) explicitly concedes that RDs do not involve any sort of PCI, and – in response to Devitt’s badgering – Bach (2007) also concedes that they are not GCIs. The question then becomes whether there is an alternative pragmatic explanation of how a singular proposition can be communicated while a distinct general proposition is semantically expressed.

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<sup>13</sup> For example, even if the description is used referentially – and even if the relevant descriptive information does not in fact apply to the intended designatum – still the context-independent semantic properties of, say, ‘the man drinking the martini’ play an ineliminable role in characterizing what is communicated with an use of a sentence containing it.

<sup>14</sup> This highlights why it is that I want to avoid the term ‘conventional meaning’ (cf. note (2)). To concede a communicative regularity is to concede that there is something conventional going on, in at least some senses of the term ‘convention’. However, provided that there is a significant and coherent notion of pragmatic regularity, conceding a communicative regularity is not yet to concede anything having to do with meaning. Hence, if there are pragmatic regularities, then Grice’s challenge shows that we ought to be wary of the idea of conventional meaning.

Bach (2004, 2007) clearly thinks that there is – here see especially (2007: 38-39) – and this is where he appeals to the notion of ‘pragmatic regularity’ (or, alternatively, ‘standardized non-literality’). He calls RDs “akin to GCIs”. The idea is that the pragmatic natural kind sketched above in Section 2 might provide the best means for understanding the phenomenon of RDs. The claim is not that RDs are rhetorical questions, or GCIs, or etc. – they are a distinct kind of speech act – but nonetheless they are enough like both of them that this notion of a pragmatic regularity may be exactly what the Russellian ought to reach for, at this stage in the dialogue.

Now, one reason why Devitt remains unmoved by this is that Bach (2007) is still (though perhaps not inappropriately) vague on the mechanics. That is, for example, concerning the paradigm case cited at the outset of Section 1, Grice (1975) provides an explicit, stepwise calculation for how semantically expressing that Mr. X has an excellent command of English and a good attendance record thereby pragmatically implicates that Mr. X is no good at philosophy. Perhaps Devitt would give up, if a Russellian could offer him something parallel and solidly plausible, for the case of RDs; but, as far as I can tell, Bach does not even attempt to meet Devitt’s challenge in this direct way.

In support of Bach, and against Devitt, I think it is important to bear in mind that, once we get beyond straightforward paradigm cases of conversational implicature (e.g., Grice’s 1975 letter of reference), crisp, clean Gricean derivations are exceedingly hard to come by. Further, this factor is predicted by the Gricean picture, rather than a decisive knock against it (cf. the discussion of “indeterminacy” in the last paragraph of Grice 1975). Further exculpating Bach’s lack of explicit precision is the fact that we are running up against massive open questions about quantifier domain restriction here. I will elaborate on this theme for a bit, before returning to the main issue.

To illustrate the problem of quantifier domain restriction: We typically take sentences such as the following to make significant, and possibly true, assertions:

- (8) *Everyone* is here now.
- (9) *There is* no coffee left.



Hence the quantifiers are not taken to range over the entire universe – otherwise neither (8) nor (9) would, as a matter of fact, ever semantically express truths. So, such constructions in natural language are generally taken to be restricted quantifiers – quantifiers which range over some limited (more or less vague) contextually salient domain. (The fact that there is coffee on the island of Sumatra does not contradict my utterance of (9), at 7 am in my kitchen, because Sumatra is clearly outside of the relevant contextually salient domain.) What, then, determines the exact truth-conditions for such cases? Again, this is a massive and difficult open question in the philosophy of language.<sup>15</sup> The important present point is that, to the extent that definite descriptions have a quantificational semantics, the same complications will pertain to ‘The book is on the table’ or ‘The car broke down’.

The complexity of these issues, then, surely goes some way to exculpating Bach for not directly meeting Devitt’s challenge. If the challenge for the Russellian orthodoxy is to explain exactly how it is that, in the case of an RD, one specific singular proposition gets communicated, while a distinct general, quantificational proposition is semantically expressed, then it seems that this challenge cannot be comprehensively addressed until we have a satisfactory account of quantifier domain restriction.<sup>16</sup> It seems that the same challenge could be pressed for (8) or (9), and (8) and (9) are completely independent of any controversial Russellian theses about descriptions.

To sum up, then: all parties to these debates concede that RDs constitute a communicative regularity (i.e., definite descriptions are often used with the intention to communicate a singular proposition). Both Bach and Devitt concede that this phenomenon cannot easily be

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<sup>15</sup> For a good programmatic discussion see Stanley and Szabó (2000), and the responses by Bach (2000) and Neale (2000).

<sup>16</sup> To run a parallel case against Devitt, imagine someone trying to argue that ‘everyone’ cannot plausibly be given a univocal, quantification semantics because it is sometimes used to communicate information about my logic class, other times used to communicate information about a certain soccer team, other times used to communicate information about the participants at a certain conference, etc. I take it that this argument is very weak, exactly what Grice’s challenge was designed to eradicate.

accounted for on the model of Gricean PCIs or GCIs. Devitt then concludes that this phenomenon should be given a semantic explanation; while Bach holds that the notion of a pragmatic regularity provides the best means of theoretically incorporating RDs into the neo-Gricean picture. So, while it is beyond doubt that RDs constitute a communicative regularity, it is far from clear how to settle the question of whether that phenomenon is best amenable to a semantic or pragmatic explanation.

Indeed, the question of whether any phenomenon admits of a pragmatic explanation has become more complicated, as more theoretical positions get peopled at the semantics-pragmatics interface. Grice (1975) did bequeath some tentative criteria (i.e., calculability, cancelability, etc.); but, as we have seen, one hardly needs to be a radical iconoclast to be skeptical as to the theoretical worth of some of these. (More on this ongoing theme immediately below.) Not only does the question of where semantics ends and pragmatics begins receive rather different sorts of answers from neo-Griceans vs. relevance theorists vs. contextualists vs. etc.; even further, the idea that the question should receive different answers for different parts of the lexicon has even been floated (cf. Taylor 2007). Some are skeptical as to whether there is such a thing as a pre-theoretical semantics-pragmatics interface, which it is the job of linguists and philosophers to limn and chart (cf. Cappelan 2007).

To illustrate the murkiness of this semantics-pragmatics interface a bit further: We have seen reasons not to rest too much on the notion of calculability, but what of cancelability? Well, if RDs were cancelable, then surely that would help Bach against Devitt, in suggesting that a pragmatic explanation is most appropriate. However, the status of that antecedent is rather murky.

Recall (cf. note 7) that Gricean PCIs and GCIs provide paradigm instances of cancelability – as well as illustrating why cancelability has been thought to be relevant to the pragmatics/semantics interface. For example, if Grice's (1975) aforementioned letter of reference had continued, after mentioning Mr. X's handwriting and attendance record, "Furthermore, Mr. X is also the most brilliant philosophical mind of his generation", the result would be an odd letter of reference, but it would

not carry any implication that Mr. X is no good at philosophy. The original PCI gets canceled by the added material; and that it does so is a reason to think that the original PCI is pragmatically implicated, rather than semantically expressed.

However, the relation between RDs and cancelability is not straightforward. RDs turn out to pattern with irony, in something of a halfway-house between clearly cancelable pragmatic implications and clearly uncancelable semantic meanings. Consider first the following:

(10) *Way to go, Einstein!* Though, I do not mean to mock you.

A speaker of (10) has not semantically expressed a contradiction; and hence the strong negative message that is communicated by the ironic use of the first sentence uttered is distinct from what is semantically expressed. However, clearly, there is an explicit and drastic contradiction between what is pragmatically implicated and what is subsequently semantically expressed. Irony is thus less cancellable than paradigmatic pragmatic implications (i.e., PCIs or GCIs); but still it is merely an odd speech act, as opposed to a contradiction, to cancel it.

Turning now to RDs, we find the very same phenomenon. Consider a referential use of the following:

(11) The man drinking the martini looks interesting. Though, *he*  
[demonstrating the referent of the previous RD] doesn't."

Again, (at least to me) this falls short of semantically expressing a contradiction – i.e., ‘P and ~P’ has not been semantically expressed.<sup>17</sup> As in the case of irony, though, there is here an explicit and drastic contradiction between what is pragmatically implicated and what is subsequently semantically expressed. When it comes to cancelability, then, RDs seem to fall into this halfway-house of less cancelable than paradigmatic pragmatic implications, though more cancelable than semantic meanings.

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<sup>17</sup> Perhaps it is possible to run a pro-Bach, anti-Devitt argument on this intuition; though I will make no attempt to do so here.

Of course, the point was already made by Camp (2006) that the fact that irony does not seem to be cancelable (in the same way as Grice's PCIs) does not show that irony is semantic, but rather shows that we have to be careful not to put too much stock in cancelability as an indicator of semantic vs. pragmatic content.

In any case, the primary aim of this present work is not to draw a firm, comprehensive semantics-pragmatics divide, and then to prove that RDs belong on the pragmatics side of the divide. It is rather to further the study of pragmatic regularities, for the neo-Gricean movement.

#### **4. Conclusions and morals**

The most general point I wish to urge here is that the notion of a pragmatic regularity merits further investigation. It has some promise to be quite a useful notion for neo-Griceans, in the course of global battles against the non-neo-Gricean forces.

A related upshot is to criticize the methodology behind Devitt's line of argument against the Russellian orthodoxy. While, again, I think that Devitt has done us all (including Russellians) a valuable service in obstinately refusing to rest content with vague gestures, as opposed to more specific explanations, still he is being unimaginative in carrying on as if one could refute the Russellian orthodoxy by merely showing that RDs are not paradigm cases of either PCIs or GCIs. Provided that there is a coherent notion of a pragmatic regularity, that line of argument is no more likely to successfully attain its goal than was Strawson's (1952) case for the ambiguity of 'and'.

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