According to current theories, sentences with definite descriptions that fail to refer are either false or lack a truth value; but they cannot be true. However, I present examples where such sentences are, in fact, judged true. I propose that a definite description may be accommodated as a conditional, and that, in such cases, it is precisely the failure to refer that makes the sentence true.

Russell (1905) and Strawson (1950) have discussed sentences with definite descriptions that fail to refer, such as the well-known (1).

(1) The present King of France is bald.

Given that there is no King of France, (1) is false, according to Russell. According to Strawson, on the other hand, the sentence lacks a truth value, being a case of presupposition failure. What is common to both Russell’s and Strawson’s approaches is that, according to them, sentences with a definite description that fails to refer cannot be true. I will argue, however, that there are cases when such sentences are, in fact, true; moreover, it is precisely the lack of reference for the definite description that makes them true.

Of course, sometimes the definite description does not have a reference as far as the hearer knows, but, from the point of view of the speaker, it does refer. In such cases, rather than reject the sentence, the hearer tends to accommodate it (D. Lewis 1979). For example, suppose the speaker says:

(2) My car is in the garage.

If we do not know that the speaker owns a car, the definite description my car will fail to refer for us. The sentence, however, is not normally rejected; rather, we will easily accommodate the referent of the definite description, by adding to our knowledge the relevant existential statement, i.e., that there exists a car owned by the speaker. After doing this, we can accept the sentence as true.

However, there are cases when such accommodation is impossible, because it would lead to a contradiction. Consider the following sentence, for example:

(3) The first fish you catch will be a whale.
We do not know whether or not the hearer will catch a fish, so we do not know whether the definite description the first fish you catch refers. We do know, however, that if there were such a fish, (3) would be a contradiction. That is to say, even after accommodating the relevant existential statement (3) cannot be true. It appears, then, that there is no way (3) could possibly be judged true. But is this really the case?

The philosopher C.I. Lewis describes a scenario where (3) is judged true. He considers an imaginary conversation with a friend:

[I]f our friend should say: “The first fish I catch will be a big one” (a [definite] singular proposition), we might rejoin, “The first fish you catch will be a whale,” meaning that this is true because there will not be any first fish. (C.I. Lewis 1956, 438; emphasis added)

According to C.I. Lewis, a speaker who utters (3) intends the hearer to accept it as true, rather than false or truth-valueless. Moreover, the hearer is expected to conclude from the truth of (3) that no fish will be caught.

Presumably, a hearer who accepts (3) is expected to follow the chain of reasoning below:

(4) a. The first fish you catch will be a whale (given, by the speaker’s utterance);
   b. assume you catch a fish; let \(f\) be the first fish you catch;
   c. by (a) and (b), \(f\) is a fish and a whale;
   d. but (c) is a contradiction;
   e. hence the assumption (b) is rejected, and we conclude:
   f. you will not catch any fish.

Note that crucial to this reasoning is the claim that (3) is accepted as true; it is relied upon in the derivation of the contradiction. So this is a case of a sentence that is judged true even though its subject fails to refer.

Is C.I. Lewis’s account of the interpretation of (3) convincing? Some may claim that it is not. Perhaps, it could be claimed, the inference is pragmatic rather than semantic. Perhaps we conclude that the friend will not catch a fish not by the chain of reasoning described in (4), but in a pragmatic way, perhaps similar to Grice’s (1975) account of irony. In this way, we do not have to assume that speakers judge (3) to be true.

Others may even doubt whether the exchange described by C.I. Lewis is a realistic one. Perhaps uttering (3) in this context, with the intended meaning, is not very natural. In order to decide the matter, it would be nice if we could find a naturally occurring example of a sentence like (3). Ideally, we would like a text that contains such a sentence together with an explicit statement of the inferences it gives rise to.