
ON WHAT THERE ISN'T

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to analyse one of the central questions in Russell's Theory of Description, whose answer entails the possibility of overcoming several problems aroused by Frege's theory of meaning and objections such as Strawson's view of meaning and word use.

The central point in Russell's theory can be summarized with the question: '*How can a non-entity be the subject of a proper name?*'¹.

For by uttering sentences of the form: 'Pegasus doesn't exist' at least Pegasus must refer to some kind of entity so to be able of denying its existence.

Therefore the topics that will be considered in this paper are the following:

1. Frege's problem of identity
2. Russell's theory of description
3. Problems concerning Russell's theory applied to natural language
4. The *form* of definite descriptions and consequent Strawson's objection.

Point 2 and 3 will be the center topic and will require a deeper analysis. Points 1 and 4 will be considered only briefly. No analysis will be given of Donnellan's objection to Russell and Strawson or Kripke's analysis on Russell.

Frege's problem of Identity

To properly clarify the achievements in Russell's theory, a brief analysis of Frege's theory of meaning is required.

An important distinction is that while Frege's main interest is in resolving puzzles concerning the problem of identity, Russell's approach is directed on a more defined ontological resolution.

Frege introduces the distinction of sense and reference as the main aspect to resolve the problem of informative assertions of identity. By taking different signs such as *a* and *b*, the possibility of identity is not in what the signs (designators) are, for in this case it would all be reduced to a meta-

¹ Russell, *On Denoting*, (1905)

linguistic problem (which is absurd and would led to inconsistent solutions). However, by considering the assertion of identity from the point of view of the *reference* and the *sense* we give to it, and by applying the main principles of identity:

- Not two things can be identical
- Everything is identical with itself

Then it follows that no assertion of identity can ever be informative for $x'=x'$ is uninformative and $x'=x''$ (by following the first principle) would be necessary false.

Frege's solution is then that it is all a matter of confusion between sense and reference where a sense of a name is given by its definite description and the reference is that thing that *fits* this description.

It follows from his analysis that we can have the following possibilities:

- reference is always determined by sense
- a reference can have different senses
- sense can have no reference

Russell's Theory of Description

Given these possibilities, however, we can entail the consequence that we can define the being of something even though no existence is given (as stated in *Principles of Mathematics*) as for example 'the planet between Mercury and the Sun'² which is (in Frege's terminology) *a name with sense but no reference*.

However by being such a name not able to have a reference (contrary to *proper names*) whenever we have propositions of the form 'the planet between Mercury and the Sun *is green*' it means that such declarations are neither true nor false: therefore meaningless. But this is absurd for Russell, and a proof of its invalidity would entail the inconsistency of Frege's evaluation of *sense*.

Russell's solution is then that we must understand *definite descriptions* differently.

By following Linsky I shall consider from now on Russell's Theory of Description by analyzing extracts from *Principia Mathematica; Descriptions; On Denoting*.

Russell main distinction is between *incomplete* and non-*incomplete* symbols. The first class consists of entities which need to be defined contextually; this is the case of definite descriptions and they are opposed to non-*incomplete* symbols such as *proper names*.

The definition given by Russell for proper names is the following: *the only possible subject term of propositions genuinely of the subject-predicate form*; and it can be summarized as a 'genuinely referring expression'. A proof of such definition is given by the condition for which given the assumption that 'the round square doesn't exist' we can conclude that if the grammar subject exists then the assumption would be false. But given the necessity that a proper name always refers to existent entities, the round square cannot be a proper name.

To better understand this point, it is well worth to remark the validity of the distinction of *being* and *existence*; for initially Russell agreed with

² Russell, *Descriptions*.

Meinong's theory of objects whereas we can distinguish the *being* (*Sein*) from its *existence* (*existieren*). Ideal objects are able of being even though they don't exist (they are *ausserseiend*); but the later Russell defined such possibility as an extravagance that must be rejected.

Consequently, if definite descriptions are incomplete symbols and therefore need of being defined contextually, Russell's proposal is by quantifying such descriptions so to eliminate *descriptive phrases* from any context in which they occur.

Nonetheless a proof of the invalidity of meaningless declarations, whose constituents are characterised by sense but lack of reference, is still needed in order to demonstrate the inconsistency of Frege's concept of *sense*. And to do so Russell relies on the concept of Identity for if we have:

A is *the* b

If we attempt to consider '*the* b' as a proper name, then following the *principle of reference* (for which any name attributed to the same object cannot change its nature) we would have no restrictions in calling *the* b 'Z'. But then if 'A is *the* b', nonetheless 'A is Z'; from which follows either that: (i) $A \neq Z \rightarrow$ then the proposition is false; or (ii) $A = Z \rightarrow$ then $A = A$, therefore a tautology. This shows that if '*the* b' is a proper name, then 'A is *the* b' is either false or a tautology. The solution aroused by Russell is then that definite descriptions cannot be proper names for they mean nothing by themselves (they are indeed *incomplete symbols*).

In order to prove its validity, Russell shows the solution of four important puzzles which I shall expose briefly.

UD: PKF (Present King of France)

The Problem of Empty Descriptions:

(1) PKF is bald

In assertion (1) Russell's theory shows that the entity in question is not a proper name, and must therefore be taken as a definite description. So doing, we determine (1) as meaningful (by deleting the descript phrase *via* quantification) and false (for there is no entity to which PKF refers to).

Indeed, (1) can be paraphrased as follow:

(1') there is at least one PKF

(1'') there is at most one PKF

(1''') whoever PKF is, he is bald

(1x) $\exists x (PKFx \ \& \ \forall y (PKFy \rightarrow x = y) \ \& \ Bx)$

As Russell points out, in fact, 'the so-and-so will always involve reference to some propositional function [...] which defines the property that makes a thing a so-and-so'.

The problem of Informative Identities:

This puzzle concerns the possibility of an identity statement between two definite descriptions. However, by quantifying such descriptions we obtain their meaningful attributes and consequently informative existential statements.

The Law of Excluded Middle:

If every instance of $(p \vee \sim p)$ is true then for assertions such as ‘either PKF is bald’ or ‘PKF is not bald’ the truth-value must be true. But PKF is neither in the first nor in the second class. However by considering different scopes we obtain that the Law is not respected only in case of appliance of *narrow* scope; while is preserved with *wide* scope, such that:

$$\sim \exists x (PKFx \ \& \ \forall y (PKFy \rightarrow x = y) \ \& \ Bx)$$

A better symbolization is given in *Principia* (which I shall consider for a better understanding of the following topic) where the so-and-so entity is represented by $(1x)(Qx)$ and the property such-and-such as $U(1x)(Qx)$. So that *via* wide scope we obtain

$$\sim [(1x)(Qx)] U(1x)(Qx)$$

The problem of Negative Existential Statements:

It is now possible to answer to the main question proposed at the beginning of this paper: ‘*How can a non-entity be the subject of a proper name?*’ by following Russell’s solution for:

(2) PKF does not exist

In fact by asserting (2) I cannot substitute it with, for example, ‘*a* does not exist’ but only with the wide scope negation of quantification of the Theory of Description; so to obtain that ‘there is not a unique *x* which is PKF’:

$$\sim \exists x (PKFx \ \& \ \forall y (PKFy \rightarrow x = y))$$

However a first immediate doubt is that, in so doing as much as we are justified in applying existence to the so-and-so entity by the form:

$$E! (1x)(Qx)$$

The same can be conceived for genuinely referring expressions (proper names) by the form $E!x$.

However, by relating to Frege’s idea that a name is always associated with a particular way of thinking of its reference (*Sinn*), Russell deduces that whatever is said to exist must always be described so that existence cannot be significantly applied to subjects immediately given. So it is now possible to consider the topic concerning natural language.

Problems concerning Russell’s theory applied to natural language

In cases such as ‘Pegasus doesn’t exist’ we cannot interpret the assertion with the form $E!x$ for Pegasus is not a proper name (in which case ‘Pegasus’ would mean Pegasus). In fact Pegasus is defined as a *disguised description* whose qualities are those the speaker has in mind. We can then return to Puzzle 2 “The Problem of Informative Identity” for then only with

assertions of identity where there is at least one descriptive phrase we can obtain a true truth-value and meaningful proposition; whereas if identity is generated between two proper names the assertion is either false or tautological.

Russell then considers the possibility that most of what are ordinary proper names are really disguised descriptions. This leads us to the consequence that what is a proper name for speaker A is not in general a proper name for listener B; so that we can have the case in which:

Speaker A refers to Fa

But Listener B interprets it as $F(1x)(Qx)$

But if $a = (1x)(Qx)$ is not true then we obtain a misunderstanding in communication. And if $a = (1x)(Qx)$ is true, then Listener B gets the correct reference (for in this case what A means has the same truth-value of what B understand).

However here a problem of *total* misunderstanding arises if attributed to non-existential predicates, for if we consider a three-place relation where speaker A says: 'x wants to know if a is $(1x)(Qx)$ '; then listener B is justified in interpreting by substitution of the proper name: 'x wants to know if $(1x)(Q'x)$ is $(1x)(Qx)$. And even though by quantifying it we do determine its truth-value, listener B understands something completely false. This problem in natural language, well defined in Jubien's *Contemporary Metaphysics*: '[...] it is not obvious that an instance in which the two-place relation holds guarantees that a coordinate instance of the three-place relation holds' (p.68), is what I think can justify Strawson's objection.

The *form* of definite descriptions and consequent Strawson's objection

What is misleading in Russell's Theory is the possibility of properly understand the ways of determining definite descriptions. Its *form* is indeed only defined as the so-and-so or as stated in *On Denoting* 'a phrase is denoting solely in virtue of its form'; but this gives the possibility to justify Strawson (1950) interpretation as 'phrases beginning with the *definite article* followed by a noun, qualified or unqualified, in the singular'.

Then, a brief exposition of Strawson's theory in opposition to Russell's is needed.

Strawson introduces the possibility that definite descriptions *are* genuinely referring expressions. And if it is so, then any assertion that includes *existence* represented by definite descriptions which don't refer to any entity (or whose entity lacks in existence) such as (1) 'PKF is bald' would not bring us to the conclusion that (1) is false. Rather we would determine the capacity (or in this case the *incapacity*) of the speaker in reaching the point.

So doing, Strawson defines that we must give a proper distinction between *mentioning / referring* and *meaning*; where 'to talk about the meaning of an expression or sentence is not to talk about its use on a particular occasion, but about the rules [...] governing its proper use'; or in other words 'to give the meaning of an expression is to give *general directions* for its use to refer to particular objects'. The whole concept is schematically synthesizable in the distinction between *expressions* and their *use* where '[...] the expression itself does not refer to anything'.

But even though this analysis seems to reject Russell's theory of description, Linsky (1967) proposes a different approach to Strawson's. For, while Russell 'is concerned with the analysis of a certain class of propositions [...] Strawson's account is a theory about statements. But then, given the definitions that *every* proposition is either true or false, while statements can be truth-valueless 'it follows that the concept of a statement is different from the concept of a proposition'³. And then Russell would be more than justifying in rejecting Strawson account as unable to find any solution concerning the *impossibility* of non-existential assertion to be truth-valueless.

Another important objection in Strawson (1950) is about the problem of *uniqueness*, or of incomplete definite descriptions; from which we now come to the problem ascribed above concerning the *form* of definite descriptions. Indeed, by maintaining Strawson's definition, then sentences such as:

(3) The table is covered by books

Are sentences of the subject-predicate form which fail in defining the proper truth-value (for the participation of incomplete definite description would convince us of its truth validity, while the theory of description is forced to admit its falsity in order to *save* the concept of *uniqueness*). However several solutions are possible in order to *save* Russell's theory, one of which is the natural tendency of *restriction of quantification*. Such possibility, as exposed by Neale (1990), includes the natural possibility in ordinary language of restricting the boundaries of discussion. In a sense, this is referable to the concept of *sensitivity* needed for any valid theory of *causation* where only a certain number of entities situated in a well ascribed world can presuppose the validity of any possible assertion. So that when we are presupposed to understand sentences such as:

(4) Everything is packed into the suitcase

We presuppose its validity by referring to the context which gives us the restrictions needed.

³ Linsky, *Referring*, p.90-91