

Termpaper on
Bertrand Russell's "On Denoting"
from 1905

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*"Say my name, then" the unicorn begged him,
"If you know my name, tell it to me."*

*"Unicorn. Old French, unicorne. Latin, unicornis.
Literally, one-horned: unus, one, and cornu, a horn.
A fabulous animal resembling a horse with one horn."*

From "The Last Unicorn" by Peter S. Beagle

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1 Introduction

In this critical paper I discuss the theory of definite descriptions which Russell presented in his paper "On denoting" from 1905. I compare the views of the Russellians and the so called Referentialists, who think that Russell's theory failed in giving an account on definite descriptions, mainly because he didn't take into account the referential use of descriptions. I will focus on the objections discussed by Stephen Neale, in particular the argument from misdescription and the argument from incompleteness, but I will not follow his interpretation in all points. The main question will be whether Russell's theory of description is only applicable to attributive used sentences (which is hardly controversial) or also to referential used ones (which is highly controversial). Within this discussion, the classical arguments of Strawson, Grice, Kripke and Donnellan will be analyzed.

My main issue is to show that Russell never claimed to have developed a linguistic theory of description, i.e. a theory that explains how definite descriptions work in ordinary language. Therefore I will argue that the attempt of Neale to defend the Russellian-Griceian view as a linguistic theory is mistaken. Moreover, I try to determine the application range of the Russellian theory of description, and to show on which basic background beliefs this theory is built.

2 Russell's Theory of Definite Descriptions

2.1 Types of Denoting Phrases

Russell distinguishes three kinds of denoting phrases:

1. those that have no denotation
2. those that denote a definite object
3. those that denote ambiguously (given by indefinite descriptions)

In "On Denoting", Russell only deals with definite descriptions (1 and 2), which he calls complex concepts (in opposition to improper names like "Apollo"), and only with definite descriptions in singular that are indicated by the word "the". For definite descriptions in plural Russell employs his theory of classes.

Russell admits that we often have no acquaintance with the objects that are denoted unambiguously¹ ("the center of mass of the solar system")². Denoting is therefore to be distinguished from referring. But according to Russell we can

¹Russell, On Denoting, p. 35

²This distinction between denoting phrases with whose denotations we are acquainted with and those with whom we are not acquainted seems to anticipate the distinction between referential usage and attributive usage, but as will be shown later, these distinctions are independent from each other.

also have acquaintance with abstract objects such as the objects used in mathematics.³

In "The Principles of Mathematics" (1903) Russell defined a proposition as anything that is true or false. He altered his view many times later and even denied the existence of propositions, but he always believed that propositions, as long as they are significant, are always either true or false. The purpose of his paper "On denoting" was mainly to show that phrases containing denotations of nonexistent objects like "the present King of France" are not meaningless but false.

2.2 Meaning and Denotation

Russell distinguished (based on Frege) between the meaning of an expression and the denotation of an expression - this is essential in "On denoting". For example, the word "Apollo" has meaning (that one can look up in a dictionary), but no denotation. (An important point is that Russell uses the notion "meaning" not synonymous with "linguistical meaning"⁴, but with what is called "value" by linguists, that is the evaluated meaning of a certain utterance - and not the denotation!) But, as Russell remarks, there is a problem concerning this distinction:

But the difficulty which confronts us is that we cannot succeed in both preserving the connexion of meaning and denotation and preventing them from being one and the same.⁵

For the same denotation there can be an infinite number of denoting phrases, differing in meaning. As the second puzzle will show ("Scott is the author of Waverly"), meaning *is* relevant. To anticipate: The solution will be that the meaning of a denoting phrase is exactly given by a quantification phrase. This is the main thesis of Russell's theory of descriptions: definite descriptions do not refer but are quantifiers. In isolation, they have no meaning (here: semantical value). With this strategy, Russell claims to solve three problems concerning denoting phrases:

1. their logical complexity,
2. the analysis of aboutness, and
3. the failure to comply with the principle of acquaintance

³I do not understand why Russell speaks about objects instead of concepts.

⁴Stephen Neale, Descriptions, p. 75

⁵Russell, On Denoting, p. 41

2.3 Denoting Phrases as Incomplete Symbols

A first consequence from the approach of quantification is that denoting phrases themselves have no meaning in isolation. They are incomplete symbols, and they can only be defined contextually. It is worth discussing in which sense Russell regards "The F" as an incomplete Symbol. All quantifiers are incomplete symbols, since they only occur to complete a propositional function.

Russell is concerned with the meaning of "the author of Waverly", and his analysis of the first puzzle will show that the meaning cannot be identical with the denotation: "Scott is Scott" has a different meaning from "Scott is the author of Waverly". But it also cannot mean anything different from "Scott" since then "Scott is the author of Waverly" would be wrong. Russell concludes from this that "the author of Waverly" must be meaningless.

This argumentation seems fuzzy to me. One could, using a similar argument as Russell, that if "the author of Waverly" has no meaning, then also "Scott" has no meaning (what seems to be right since Scott is a proper name and has only denotation), and therefore only the identity of denotation is important for identity statements. But "Scott is the author of Waverly" and "Scott is the author of Rokeby" differ in meaning.

I guess Russell makes a mistake in the above argument that shall demonstrate "the F" to be meaningless, a mistake he himself warned to make in "Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy"⁶: He employs for his proof two different meanings of "is". The first states an identity (the morning star is the evening star), the second indicates that something is attributed to an object. Being "the author of Waverly" is in my opinion a property. To state an identity between "Scott" and "the author of Waverly" seems to me mistaken since Scott is more than just the author of Waverly.⁷

Besides, in my opinion, Russell didn't show that the denotation of "The F", as well as "Some F" or "All F" is only defined by the context in which they occur. Whether these phrases have a denotation and which one they have is independent from the question which property is assigned to them. "The present King of France" has no denotation independent of whether I attribute baldness, non-baldness, wisdom or anything else to it. "The author of Waverly" denotes Scott independent of the context as well.

Maybe it is best to go along with Russell, regarding definite descriptions within formal languages (and here it is plain that it is an incomplete symbol as much as the differential operator⁸), but also admit that in common speech

⁶Russell, Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy, p. 172; but I disagree with his analysis, in my opinion "is a man" and "is human" are both predicates.

⁷But, as we will see later, I get an identity statement if I use "the author of Waverly" *referentially*.

⁸Russell, Principia Mathematica, p. 54

definite descriptions have meaning in that sense that we automatically imagine an object as its denotation that might fit the description best. For this to be possible, the linguistic meaning of the phrase alone is sufficient, and this is something that Russell leaves aside.

2.4 The quantification terms

The key step in Russell's paper to treat denoting phrases "the F" in analogy to other quantification-expressions such as "some F", "every F", "no F" leads him to formulate truth conditions for this denoting phrases. He characterizes "the F" as stating uniqueness, and therefore he gives a logical account of uniqueness using the identity.

To obtain this logical equivalent, Russell analyzes a statement of the form "the F is G" into three distinct propositions that are contained:

1. there is at least one F
2. there is at most one F
3. all F are G

The first two propositions are obtained by analyzing the uniqueness condition "there is exactly one F", which I will discuss in section 4.3. Proposition (3) can be formalized in stating that if there are two variables x and y which both are F, then x and y are identical.

In Principia Mathematica, Russell gives the following definition of "The ϕ is ψ ":

$$[(\iota x)(\phi x)].\psi(\iota x)(\phi x). = (\exists b) : \phi x. \equiv_x .x = b : \psi b \text{ Df}^9 \quad (1)$$

where the left side is the definiendum and the right side is the definiens. In common speech, the right side states: "There is a b such that for all x: x is ϕ if and only if x is b, and x is ψ ." or, shorter: "There is a b such that only b is ϕ , and b is ψ ."

2.5 Puzzle 1

Russell justifies his theory as the only one that is able to solve three puzzles that he suggests a theory of descriptions should be able to solve: The first one can be called the puzzle of denoting within propositional attitudes. The problems connected with propositional attitudes were analyzed by Frege: He

⁹In modern symbolic language: $[(\iota x)(\phi x)]\psi x := \exists b\forall x(\phi x \equiv x = b) \wedge \psi b$

observed that, although "The morning star is the evening star." is necessarily true (since both names denote the same object), "John believes that the morning star is the evening star" is not necessarily true, since this proposition has to be distinguished from "John believes that the morning star is the morning star", which means that John believes a tautology. Russell's example is more complex. He analyzes the proposition:

George IV wished to know whether Scott was the author of Waverly. (2)

In this example, we deal with the identity "Scott is the author of Waverly". Russell proceeds to show that this is not a statement of the identity of two objects. Since the first is a proper name, but the second a definite description, we only have an identity of denotations, but not an identity of meanings.

Russell solves that problem in regarding a proposition of the form

$$Scott = (\iota x)(xwrote\ Waverly)^{10} \quad (3)$$

not as an identity statement (we already saw in the section about incomplete symbols that this would lead to contradictions), but as a more complex structure that can be formalized¹¹ (using (1)) as

$$(\exists b) : xwrote\ Waverly. \equiv_x .x = b : b = Scott \quad (4)$$

The fact that e.g. in this context $(\iota x)(xwrote\ Waverly)$ cannot be regarded as a variable, since "the author of Waverly" is not a name, illustrates that it has to be an incomplete symbol.

2.6 Puzzle 2

The second puzzle may be called the puzzle of excluded middle. It arises in case that the denoting phrase has no denotation. Intuitively one might think that if "the F is G" is false, "the F is not G" must be true. But

The present King of France is bald. (5)

and

The present King of France is not bald. (6)

are both false since there is no such thing as the present King of France. This puzzle is solved by Russell since his quantification-approach allows to treat both propositions as having quantifications with narrow scope, and therefore

¹⁰mainly discussed in Russell, Principia Mathematica, p. 53, 55

¹¹Russell, Principia Mathematica, p. 55

these propositions are not contradictory. (see section "Ambiguity and Scope")

With this example, Russell wants to oppose the view of Meinong (who states that objects like "the present King of France", "the round square", "the golden mountain" do not exist but have being) and Frege (who states that by convention "the present King of France" denotes the null-class), since both cannot solve the second puzzle.

In fact no philosopher denies that Russell's theory of description solves it, but one might doubt that his approach is the only one that solve it. Strawson objects that Russell's proceeding consists just in identifying the truth conditions of a proposition with the proposition itself, although they are not identical in meaning.¹²

Both Russell and Strawson agree that proposition (5) is significant, i.e. has linguistical meaning. We can understand propositions of the type "The F is G" even if we do not know which object "The F" denotes and whether such an object uniquely exists. But whereas Russell believes that all significant propositions have to be true or false, Strawson denies that: In his view, a significant proposition can be meaningless. A detailed discussion will follow later.

2.7 Puzzle 3

The third puzzle is only rarely discussed in secondary literature. It might be called the puzzle of denying the existence of something. According to Russell, the proposition

The difference between A and B does not exist. (7)

implies the subsistence of a difference between A and B, since this difference is the subject of the proposition. But if A does not differ from B, then the difference does not exist. I think one can regard this puzzle as akin to the second puzzle, except for that it deals with a relation instead of an object. Therefore we do not need to discuss it here.

2.8 Ambiguity, Scope, and the de re/de dicto-distinction

All puzzles are inscrutable due to a hidden ambiguity. In the first puzzle, proposition (2) can be interpreted in two ways:

One and only one man wrote Waverly, and Geroge IV wished to know
whether Scott was that man. (8)

¹²this will become clearer in referential use, see section 3

Geroge IV wished to know whether one and only one man
wrote Waverly and Scott was that man. (9)

In the second reading, George IV literally wished to know: "Is Scott the author of Waverly?" In the first reading, George IV does not even need to know that there is something like the author of Waverly. He might refer to "The author of Waverly" using a different description. A further important observation made by Russell is that (9) can be true whereas (8) is false, namely if there is no such thing like the author of Waverly. This is what explicitly is illustrated in the second puzzle. The proposition (6) also entails an ambiguity, where (10) is false, but (11) is true:

The present King of France is not bald. (10)

It is not the case that the present King of France is bald. (11)

Russell writes that the denoting phrase in the first of the pairs have primary occurrence, and in the second secondary occurrence. Another appellation of this distinction that is due to Quine names the first *de dicto*, the second *de re*.¹³ A third appellation talks about large and small scope of the quantifier. One might see this distinction more clearly in the formalized version:

$[(\iota x)(x \text{ is King of France})]$ It is not the case that $(x \text{ is bald})$ ¹⁴ (12)

It is not the case that $[(\iota x)(x \text{ is King of France})](x \text{ is bald})$ (13)

Such ambiguities can in fact be observed with all logical operators such as negation, modal operators or quantifiers. The more operators a proposition has in it, the more ambiguous is the proposition. A certain operator in a proposition with three operators can also have medium scope, besides small and large scope. This fact was considered by Kripke¹⁵ as an argument against the primary/secondary distinction. But this clearly does not affect the credibility of Russell's theory.

Carnap regards the quantificational approach of Russell as a disadvantage because of the ambiguities that arise¹⁶, and he prefers the method of Frege, since in his theory of description (where definite descriptions might denote to the null-thing) ambiguities do not arise. Carnap argues that the choice of the

¹³Since in the *de re*-reading the quantifier "The present King of France" applies to the object, in the *de dicto*-reading to the whole sentence.

¹⁴Since it is unnecessary to reproduce $(\iota x)(Fx)$ in every occurrence after it is quantified, I will for the sake of clarity just write x .

¹⁵Kripke, p. 230

¹⁶Carnap, p. 126

method for descriptions is a pragmatic question of taste¹⁷, and therefore favors the one that is simplest. But according to natural language, where - as we have seen - the ambiguities analyzed by Russell really arise (although there might be a default or preferred reading), this cannot be an argument against Russell's theory of descriptions.

More serious problems in connection with scope ambiguities are what Neale calls the "Argument from Opacity"¹⁸, but to discuss them leads too far away from what I want to discuss here.

3 Criticism on Russell

3.1 Referential and Attributive Use

The distinction between a referential and an attributive use was first made by Strawson¹⁹. He writes:

It would be natural to say that in using this sentence ["Napoleon was the greatest French soldier.", W.U.] I was talking about Napoleon and that I was saying about him was that he was the greatest French soldier. But of course I could use the expression, "the greatest French soldier", , to mention an individual; for example, by saying: "The greatest French soldier died in exile."

What Strawson suggests in his last example is that a description can be used to refer to a distinct object (here: Napoleon). As he puts it, there are the following distinct usages of expressions²⁰:

1. using an expression to make a unique reference; and
2. asserting that there is one and only one individual which has certain characteristics (e.g. is of a certain kind, or stands in a certain relation to the speaker, or both)

Strawson accuses Russell to "assimilate more and more sentences of class (1) to sentences of class (2)." Russell's attempt to treat names as disguised descriptions, how Strawson remarks, also illustrates that Russell only had sentences of class (2) in mind.

The above distinction became famous by Donnellan, who called (1) the referential use and (2) the attributive use. In his paper "Reference and Definite Descriptions" he choose the example: "Smith's murderer is insane." and he illustrates that one and the same sentence can be used attributive as well as referential, in giving the following two contexts²¹:

¹⁷Carnap, p. 124

¹⁸Neale, Descriptions, p. 118

¹⁹Strawson, p. 136

²⁰Strawson, p. 149

²¹Donnellan, p. 176

(Attributive use:) Suppose first that we come upon poor Smith foully murdered. From the brutal manner of the killing and the fact that Smith was the most lovable person in the world, we might exclaim, "Smith's murderer is insane."

(Referential use:) suppose that Jones has been charged with Smith's murder and has been placed on trial. Imagine that there is a discussion of Jones's odd behavior at his trial. We might sum up our impression of his behavior by saying "Smith's murderer is insane."

In referential use "Smith's murderer" refers to Jones, whether or not Jones is the murderer; therefore it states an object-dependent proposition. In both contexts the same is said, but something different is meant. This is because the speakers have different intentions. Donellean writes that whether a sentence is used attributive or referential is a function of the speaker's intention and therefore a matter of speech acts. The distinction is purely pragmatic.

Donellean has the interesting view that a referential used utterance differs from an attributive used utterance in the speaker's belief that there is some particular person or thing that fits the description used.²² It was also suggested that a referential used sentence can be considered as containing a demonstrative instead of a definite description. (Wettstein²³ speaks about pointing). It was claimed that utterances of the form "The F is G" which are used referentially can be replaced by "That x is G" without altering the meaning. This view of course is mistaken: to use the description given by "The F" might be the only possible way of the speaker to communicate about a certain object successfully. To use Donellean's second context: at court we can still say "That man is insane" while pointing at him, but when we meet friends and tell them about the case, we won't be able to do this.²⁴ Instead of *pointing*, we should better speak of *picking out*. Kripke writes²⁵:

In the "referential" use, a speaker uses the description to enable his audience to pick out whom or what he's talking about...

Pointing is one form of *picking out*, but *naming* is another. And this is exactly the use of "Smith's murderer is insane." when I tell my friends about his behavior at court - since they might have heard about Smith, but not about Jones, my description works as an alternative way to name him. Neale therefore distinguishes between a referential_N and a referential_D use ('N' for 'name', 'D' for 'demonstrative').²⁶

²²Donellean, p. 180

²³Wettstein, p. 270

²⁴The use of "this x" I discussed above, the demonstrative one, has to be distinguished from the use I will discuss concerning Ellipsis

²⁵Kripke, p. 228

²⁶Neale, p. 85

Let us now reconsider the proposition (8). This proposition Russell himself also interprets in two ways: "One and only one man wrote Waverly, and Geroge IV wished to know whether Scott was that man.", and he continues, "This would be true, for example if Geroge IV had seen Scott at a distance, and had asked "Is that Scott?" For (8), Russell therefore employs the referential use. In contrast, (9), the de re-reading, is certainly attributively used. But to suggest a correlation is a wrong: Kripke shows that the attributive/referential-distinctions is not to be identified with the de re/de dicto distinction.²⁷ To illustrate this let us again consider "Smith's murderer is insane." and translate the utterance made by - let's say Paul - explicitly:

Paul says that the murderer of Smith is insane. (14)

Now there is the de re-reading (concerning the operator "The murderer of Smith")

Paul says that there is one man who murdered Smith
and this man is insane. (15)

and the de dicto-reading

There is one man who murdered Smith and Paul says
that this man is insane. (16)

This example might suggest that the de re-reading accords to the referential use whereas the de dicto reading accords to the attributive use. But our intuition is confuted by the following counterexample Kripke's:

The police know concerning Smith's murderer,
whoever he is, that he committed the murderer;
but they are not saying who he is. (17)

Here, "Smith's murderer" is used attributively but is also de re.²⁸ Kripke also shows that a definite description in indirect course is neither referential nor attributive used,²⁹ as becomes clear in his example: "Jones said that her husband is kind to her."

Another important observation made by Kripke is that the same sentence, uttered by the same person A in the same situation can be interpreted referential as well as attributive used, which is illustrated by the following dialogs which both seem to be proper :³⁰

²⁷ Kripke, p. 229

²⁸ Kripke, p. 230

²⁹ Kripke, p. 234

³⁰ Kripke, p. 247

Dialogue 1:

A: "Her husband is kind to her"

B: "No, he isn't. The man you are referring to isn't her husband."

Dialogue 2:

A: "Her husband is kind to her"

B: "He is kind to her, but he isn't her husband."

In the first dialogue, "he" refers to the speaker's referent, in the second to the semantic referent. Since both dialogues are regarded to be correct (and I agree), "her husband" is not purely referentially used: the attributive use is somehow contained.

3.2 Semantics versus Pragmatics

In his influential paper "On Referring", Strawson focusses on the difference between what is said and what is meant. He calls for the distinction between

1. a sentence,
2. a use of a sentence, and
3. an utterance of a

He holds that a sentence cannot be true or false, but only its use to make a true or false utterance. Not the sentence itself represents the proposition, but its utterance.³¹ Russell also was aware of the distinction between (1) and (2), and he explicitly defends his view in his reply to Strawson³²:

"As regards 'the present King of France', he fastens upon the ego-centric world 'present' I had substituted the words 'in 1905", the whole of his argument would have collapsed."

In fact the distinction between (1) and (2) is the distinction between linguistic meaning and the evaluated meaning. But (3) goes beyond, and it seems plausible that only (3) can express a proposition, since "it is people who mean, not expressions".³³

Russellians are only interested in what is actually said, but not in what is being meant. Referentialist think that this is not sufficient. The reason why in my opinion also the pragmatic aspects should to be taken into account is that utterances can be regarded as pictures of thoughts. Therefore, if propositions are held to be thoughts, the intentions involved in speech acts also have to be

³¹One might contrast this with the view Frege's, who held thoughts to be propositions.

³²Russell, My Philosophical Development, p. 176

³³Strawson, p. 143

contained in the thought that accompany the utterances. In my opinion, the whole dispute between the Russellian-Griceans and the Referentialists is rather a dispute between what shall be regarded as a proposition: the Russellian-Gricean, as I think, has to deny that propositions are thoughts (that can be held to be right or wrong), but are rather more abstract entities.

3.3 Referential Use as a Pragmatic Issue

From the analysis of the attributive/referential-distinction and the distinction of what is said and what is meant we can conclude that what is called "the argument from misdescription" only holds in the case of referential usage. That misdescriptions often do *not* fail - i.e. still refer to the object the speaker want to communicate about, what Russell cannot explain - is a pragmatic phenomenon. In reverse, valid descriptions might still not happen to succeed, for example if the audience cannot figure out to whom the description suits. (This is called the problem of identification, see section 4.3).

Therefore, I want to conclude that at least the referential use is not explained by the Russellian account. Grice has made influential objections against this conclusion: he aims to show that the meaning is still always given by the Russellian account.³⁴ His argument is that, when a misdescription was made, and even when the audience does not know which object the speaker wanted to refer to, we still know *that* a misdescription was made. Grice is concerned with the meaning of what is said (or, to put it in Kripke's words³⁵, "with what the speakers words mean"), while Strawson/Donnellan are concerned with the meaning of what is meant. On the one hand we have the *semantic reference*, on the other the *speaker's reference*. In attributive use, both are necessarily identical, but in referential use this is not the case. I regard Grice's move as a step back to return to the analysis of what is said, since here the difference between attributive and referential use simply does not arise. One might object that such a move might ensure that the theory of description only deals with semantics and does not take into account the pragmatic phenomena, but one should bear in mind that a natural language without reference won't work. (Kripke calls such a language the *weak Russell language* and contrasts it with the *Donnellan language*, in which there are two distinct words for "the": "the" for the attributive use and "ze" for the referential use, so that Donnellan language becomes unambiguous.) Referential usage is essential for communication (see final discussion).

3.4 Context

It is plain that as soon as pragmatical issues enter into a theory of description, context becomes in many ways highly relevant. Context also plays a role in

³⁴Grice, p. 199

³⁵Kripke, p. 236

Russell's theory . For him, the circumstance of evaluation was of great importance. In his reply to Strawson, he explicitly states that "The present king of France is bald" has to be evaluated before one can grasp its meaning. Therefore, when this sentence is uttered in 1905, this sentence is equivalent to "The King of France in the year 1905 is bald."³⁶ Russell accused Strawson to mix up what he calls the problem of egocentricity (the usage of indexical expressions like "here", "now", "present") with the problem of descriptions, and that "On Denoting" only dealt with the latter. We therefore have to assume that Russell was aware of the problem that contexts is relevant for meaning.

But in my opinion Russell simplifies matters in accusing Strawson that the problem of egocentricity is independent of the problem of description. Let us consider again proposition (5), "The present King of France is bald." The formalized version is

$$(\exists b) : x \text{ is present King of France.} \equiv_x .x = b : b \text{ is bald} \quad (18)$$

In Russell's formalism, the evaluation of the term "present King of France" is not done. Therefore, in this form, (18) is not equivalent to

$$(\exists b) : x \text{ is King of France in 1905.} \equiv_x .x = b : b \text{ is bald} \quad (19)$$

Propositions (18) and (19) differ in what is said (but, ironically, not in what is meant if uttered). What Russell needs to do is to indicate *formally* the circumstance of evaluation in (18), as he calls it, to make them equivalent. This can be done in many ways, but Russell actually never did it. In fact, the formalism of Principia Mathematica does not deal with indexical expressions.

Besides, as we have seen, and more important, Russell was not aware of the distinction between referential and attributive usage. This distinction does not deal with the problem of egocentricity but with the problem of different intentions.

4 Three questions

In connection with ordinary language, I want to discuss three questions in this section.

4.1 Does, in ordinary language, "the F is G" always establish a true or false proposition?

As we have seen, Strawson denies that significant propositions have to be either true or false. I think there are strong reasons to support his view, in hindsight

³⁶Russell, My Philosophical Development, p. 176

of common speech.

Strawson alludes to that Russell gives only necessary conditions in his analysis of what has to be true such that "The F is G" is true, namely: that F exists, that there is no more than one F, and that all F are G. He regards Russell's conditions to be correct but incomplete.³⁷ Strawson denies that if "The present King of France is bald." is uttered and there is no F, it only can be false. It is also of course not true, but it might well be that the question of truth or falsehood of an utterance simply does not arise.³⁸

The problem if significant propositions are either true or false arise particularly in the case that there is no F. Therefore we might ask:

4.2 Does, in ordinary language, "the F is G" state the existence of an F?

Strawson only admits that the "the F is G" implies - in a non-logical sense - the existence of an F but does not really state it. This is compatible to Strawson's view since he thinks that Russell's truth conditions are not sufficient, and therefore, as long as one (e.g. the existence condition) is missing, "the F is G" is not necessarily false.

Also Donellean denies - but in hindsight to questions ("Does the King of France exist?"³⁹) - that definite descriptions always presuppose the existence of a denotation.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, a theory of definite descriptions should also be able to deal with all other kinds of utterances (not only assertions), and therefore the question arises which meaning such utterances have (since Russell's method does not apply).

There is another argument going along with Meinong that opposes Russell's view: Regarding the proposition "The golden mountain is golden", many people (including me) would consider this to be a tautology, independent of if the golden mountain exists or not (for Meinong, it has being).⁴¹ Same with "A uni-

³⁷Strawson, p. 139

³⁸One might wonder if this is not just a question of who is interested in truth or falsehood. As soon as the audience realizes that the speaker made an invalid assumption, he might lose his interest in the truth conditions of what he said. But that does not mean that the utterance itself is not evaluable.

³⁹If one does not like this example because existence is not a proper predicate, one can also regard the question "Is this man the King of France or the President of France?"

⁴⁰Donellean, p. 178

⁴¹In my opinion this example is to be distinguished from "The round square is round", since this, translated into "The thing that is round and square is round" contains plainly a contradiction. Such a thing is logically impossible, but "the golden mountain" is possible. I always wondered why Russell mentions both examples without hesitating in the same gap. Russell explained in "Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy" (p. 169, concerning the unicorn) that Logic has to deal only with the real world and not with possible worlds, just as the empirical sciences. I regard this to be mistaken, since logic itself does not endue

corn is a horse with a horn on his forehead." (here an indefinite description)⁴².

Another example that perhaps is more plausible than the golden mountain is the following proposition, uttered seriously in the medieval by an ordinary man to his son:

The witch in town has an awry nose. (20)

The speaker of this sentence has successfully communicated that he believes that a certain person is a witch and that she has an awry nose (here it succeeded because the son also believes in witches). This sentence can be used referential as well as attributive. (Attributive in the case that the man believes that every town has one witch and every witch has an awry nose.)

Since there are no witches, this sentence is, according to Russell's theory, plainly false. Nevertheless, *if referentially used*, the man made still a significant statement. We might infer (since we don't believe in witches) that there is a woman in town with an awry nose. My example demonstrates that according to a sentence "The F is G", if there is no F, "the F" might still refer to something. What makes the word "witch" to refer successfully to a woman? My point is that even although the proposition (20) is false in Russell's sense, it is not completely wrong in a wider sense. And *that* there is also something true stated in it is precisely *because* denoting did not fail. This also shows that Russell's view that all significant propositions have to be true or false is questionable. Truth or falsehood seems to be a property of utterances relative to the convictions of the speaker (and the audience), and is maybe not a matter the outside world. I will discuss these issues in section 6 somewhat deeper.

But when we look closer to the above example, (20) - and as I think, all examples of this kind - is used referentially.⁴³ The impossibility to construct an attributively used proposition in which the denotation does not exist but the proposition still is not false (but neither false nor true) is as far as I can see a great indication for the view that Russell's theory works fine with attributively propositions. Attributive used sentences (like "The tallest man in the world is larger than one meter.") are highly abstract propositions.

To conclude: I share Meinong's view insofar that at least objects that are imaginable have something one might call (logical) being, that in my sense is simply *being possible*. (Who knows if one day evolution will bestow us unicorns?) Russell rejected Meinong's theory because he thought it to conflict with the law

the means to attain empirical knowledge. And I think it is uncontroversial that empirical knowledge and logical/mathematical knowledge are distinct (in some way, even although the analytic/synthetic-distinction is problematic).

⁴²Russell admitted in Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy, p. 168, that "I met a unicorn" is a perfectly significant proposition. His view that those propositions always have to be either true or false forces him to regard such a proposition as false.

⁴³This was also observed by Donellan (p. 182)

of contradiction. But this argument fails, if Strawson is right.

In everyday life, objects cannot be defined precisely and therefore words that denote them have no fixed meaning (aside from the fact that their meaning can also change with time). Of course one could stick to a Russellian language in which definite descriptions have by convention the meaning that Russell attributes to them. But such languages would be highly artificial and of no use for communication.

4.3 Does, in ordinary language, "the F is G" state the uniqueness of an F?

One might doubt that Russell's view that "the F is G" always states a uniqueness of the object that is denoted is always correct. It is plain that in common speech we often use denoting phrases that do not fulfill Russell's uniqueness condition. Such denoting phrases are known as *incomplete definite descriptions*. One such example discussed by Donellean⁴⁴ is the phrase "the book on the table". Let us consider the following sentence:

The book on the table is my favorite book. (21)

But we still have not answered our question, since from the fact that there are incomplete definite descriptions does not follow that these do not denote uniquely. The main question we are concerned with in the next section therefore is: How is it possible that an incomplete definite description still denotes uniquely?

5 Incomplete Definite Descriptions

5.1 Incompleteness in referential versus attributive use

We already dealt with an incomplete definite description that was referential used, (21). Here, "the book on the table" is not uniquely denoting since there might be many tables with books on it, but from the context it is clear that the one table in the room is meant in which both speaker and audience stay.

On first glance, it is difficult to find also an incomplete description used attributively. But Peacocke shows that neither the incompleteness of a sentence implies its referential use nor the referential use implies the incompleteness.⁴⁵ An attributively used sentence (since object-independent) that entails an incomplete definite description is the following:

The headmaster doesn't have much control over the pupils. (22)

⁴⁴Donellean, p. 1780

⁴⁵Peacocke, p. 208

The other implication is refuted by

The man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo yesterday
had holes in his shoes. (23)

which as a particular utterance might denote one certain man, i.e. entails a complete definite description *and*, whereby the use of this sentence is referential.

5.2 Identification Problem

Ostertag⁴⁶ called the following two difficulties identification problems:

1. The audience is maybe not in the position to determine how a completion might look like
2. There might be no fact that allows a completion

The first is given if the speaker uses information within his description the audience does not possess. In this case, the speaker can easily complete his description. Usually the completion arises automatically from the context. Almost always, in referential use, context and information is shared by speaker and audience therewith communication succeeds. It is often not *necessary* that the description can really be made complete.

The second case is more serious. If the speaker himself has not enough information to make his description unique, there is of course the danger that the audience will not understand him. In the referential case this is for example given when I want to refer to a man in a crowd and I do not know how to describe him uniquely. (Maybe the people look all very similar, and it is so crowded that indexical expressions like "there" cannot be used.) In the attributive case one might doubt if a completion is necessary, since it does not matter to whom the description shall fit: considering sentence (22), a completion is certainly not necessary.

5.3 Ellipsis

But even if a complete definite description is available and could be easily stated, in common speech we often do not use them. The main reason for this is that we often do not need to worry to be misunderstood: we often have reason to believe that our audience will easily be able to identify the object we are talking about. This holds for the referential use as well as for the attributive use. The economic use of descriptions is called *ellipsis*. Descriptions that were given in

⁴⁶Ostertag, p. 21

full length are repeated in shorter Versions are replaced by pronouns or demonstrative expressions. ("The King of France is bald. He is also wise.")

In connection with elliptical expressions, one interesting usage can be observed: the transformation of an indefinite described to a definite described expression. Let us consider the following example:

I saw a man with a bunch of flowers today.
The man sold me a rose. (24)

In the second sentence, "the man" is referentially used, and refers to the same object that was referred to indefinitely before. This example supports the thesis of Donnellan that the main character of definite descriptions in the referential case is less stating uniqueness but rather implying that one has some certain object in mind (independent from if there are other similar).

There is an explanation why the speaker could refer to "the man" with a definite description: this is because the speaker's action made the object unique. The elliptical sentence in (24), rewritten as containing the definite description, would be:

The man I saw today and who had a bunch of flowers sold me a rose. (25)

There are, of course, many more problems involving elliptical expressions (and attempts to solve them), but an account of this lies beyond the scope of this paper.

6 Thoughts Concerning Epistemology

Russell and Strawson have very different theories of meaning, and their disagreement about denoting is very fundamental and grounded in their epistemological convictions.

Russell never aimed to describe how descriptions in ordinary language work. In his reply to Strawson's "On Referring"⁴⁷ he explicitly agreed that ordinary language is not formalizable.⁴⁸ But his reasons differ from those of Strawson, who as a philosopher of ordinary language considers ordinary language to be sufficient to express philosophical ideas: "I, on the contrary, am persuaded that common speech is full of vagueness and inaccuracy." Russell's contributions to

⁴⁷Russell, *My Philosophical Development*, p. 178

⁴⁸In the introduction to his reader "Definite Descriptions", Gary Ostertag writes that "Russell's remarks about descriptions apply equally to both natural language descriptions and to descriptions in the formal language of Principia." I disagree - as shall have become clear - that Russell's theory applies also to natural language in the same way.

formal logic *combined* with his epistemology can also be regarded as an attempt to make the facts about the world (mathematical as well as empirical facts) explicit. In fact it is just a small step from Russell's philosophy of logical atomism to the philosophy of the early Wittgenstein or the philosophy of Carnap, who accepted only log records ("Protokollsatz-Lehre") as scientific propositions. All such problems are now to be regarded as highly problematic, since language is not "transparent"⁴⁹, how Russell assumed when he wrote his theory of descriptions.

The problems that Russell's theory is confronted with in the referential use is caused by the correspondence theory of truth on which it is based on. In my opinion, the dispute between the Russellian and the Referentialist is partly induced from the dispute between the correspondence theorist and the coherence theorist.⁵⁰ Russell and the logical positivists held a correspondence of true propositions and facts. (Russell's sense-datum-epistemology is an especially exaggerated one.) This is, as I hope to have shown, problematic when propositions resemble thoughts (thoughts are not distinct entities⁵¹) as well as they resemble sentences (since sentences have no meaning, but only utterances of sentences).

The Referentialist's view, in my opinion, works well with a coherence theory like Davidson's. His epistemology ("shared world", "triangulation") gives a great account for how we achieve knowledge. I cannot go deeper into this matters here, but I hope to have given an idea in which direction a linguistic theory of descriptions could be developed.

7 Conclusion

Russell's theory of descriptions cannot give an account of the meaning of definite descriptions in natural language but only in formal language (since there is no meaning that depends on contexts). But it can give an account of the truth conditions of definite descriptions in natural language and is therefore the preferable theory for the purpose of translating thoughts of natural language in formal language. It is a great tool of philosophical analysis. But it fails to show how definite descriptions really work, and is therefore insufficient as a linguistic theory, mainly because it cannot capture the difference between what is said and what is meant. For analyzing what is said, it might be sufficient to analyze the logical form of the proposition (that is to translate the grammar of natural language into the grammar of formal language⁵²). But the analysis of what is

⁴⁹Russell, My Philosophical Development, p. 108

⁵⁰I do not want to state that all Russellians argue for the correspondence theory and all Referentialists argue for the coherence theory, but only that this ascription will explain the incompatibility of these views.

⁵¹One can question if two thoughts thought of two different minds, maybe in two different languages, are comparable at all.

⁵²Some philosophers regard analysis just as a translation from one unprivileged vocabulary into another. Therefore, logical analysis might be a pipe dream.

meant also has to take into account the intentions of the speaker, something that cannot be captured in terms of logical form.

To quote Wettstein: "Russell's theory fails as an account of what is communicated." But what else is natural language about if not communication? Since Russell's theory of names that treats proper names as disguised descriptions is certainly wrong, one needs to include referential (e.g. demonstrative) used sentences anyway.

In mathematics, only the attributive use is employed.⁵³ (The acquaintance we have with abstract objects does not enable us to refer to them in the way we refer to physical objects.) But there is the danger that the only application for Russell's theory of descriptions therefore lies just in pure mathematics.⁵⁴ It should be investigated which value a Russell-language might have in other disciplines that deal with abstract thoughts. Theoretical philosophy might be within its scope. In fact, the question that is in the center of the dispute between Russell and Strawson: whether formal language or natural language is more adequate to treat philosophical problems, remains unanswered. A proper theory of definite descriptions might help to give an answer.

⁵³Neale writes : "In simple formal language like the first-order predicate calculus, there is neither room nor need to distinguish between meaning and value." This is true, but not because of the formal character of such propositions, but because of their content. The linguistic value of the utterance "Two is the smallest prime number." has the same meaning in all contexts, simply because such logico-mathematical assertions do not involve experience. In contrast it seems to be characteristic that referential used propositions involve experience. Maybe there are counterexamples, but it seems to me that exactly the issues related to experience make referential use necessary.

⁵⁴And even in mathematics there is no need for definite descriptions since the usage of symbols (like numbers) is defined contextually or in terms of functions.

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