

Meaning, Reference and Modality 10

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A Centennial

- Russell 1905, “On Denoting”,
- Strawson 1950, “On Referring”,
- Russell 1957, “Mr. Strawson on Referring”,
- Strawson 1964, “Identifying Reference and Truth Values”,
- Donnellan 1966, “Reference and Definite Descriptions”,
- Donnellan 1978, “Speaker Reference, Descriptions and Anaphora”,
- Kripke 1979, “Speaker’s Reference and Semantic Reference”,
- Neale 1990, “Descriptions”,
- Reimer and Bezuidenhout 2004 (655 pages),
- Special issue in *Mind* 114, 2005 (414 pages),
- Symposia in the US, in Hungary, (. . .?) and Utrecht, 2005.

Overview

- 1 Background
- 2 Russell’s On Denoting
- 3 (Russell’s Reply to) Strawson’s Reply
- 4 (Kripke’s Reply to) Donnellan’s Challenge
- 5 Issues for Meaning, Reference and (Epistemic) Modality

Our Background

- *Logicomix*, Apostolos Doxiadis and Christos Papadimitriou.
- Pronouns, Names, Indefinites, Definites, Quantifiers.

	Pron	Name	Indf	Def	Quant
• Comp.	+	-	-	+	+
Lang.	+	-	+	+	-
Math.	-	+	-	+	+
Phil.	-	+	+	+	-

- With the most interesting exceptions.

Russell's Background

- Logic, Ontology, Epistemology, Philosophy of Language, Semantics of Natural Language.
- Not as distinct as they are nowadays.
- Gottlob Frege (1892), Russell in “The Principles of Mathematics” (1903): definite descriptions are associated with denoting concepts, and their reference, if any, is what they denote.
- “When the meaning of a name can occur in a proposition, the meaning of a denoting phrase should also be able to occur.” (David Kaplan, 2005)
- No longer after 2005.

Denoting Phrases Do Not Refer

- “This is the principle of the theory of denoting I wish to advocate: that denoting phrases never have any meaning in themselves, but that every proposition in whose verbal expression they occur has a meaning. The difficulties concerning denoting are, I believe, all the result of a wrong analysis of propositions whose verbal expressions contain denoting phrases.” (p. 480)
- “Here the notion “ $C(x)$ is always true” is taken as ultimate and indefinable, and the others are defined by means of it.” (p. 480)

The First Analysis

- “Thus ‘the father of Charles II was executed’ becomes: ‘It is not always false of x that x begat Charles II and that x was executed and that “if y begat Charles II, y is identical with x ” is always true of y .’” (p. 482)
- “I will only beg the reader not to make up his mind against the view—as he might be tempted to do, on account of its apparently excessive complication—until he has attempted to construct a theory of his own on the subject of denotation. This attempt, I believe, will convince him that, whatever the true theory may be, it cannot have such a simplicity as one might have expected beforehand.” (p. 493)

The Theory of Descriptions

- Alfred Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, Principia Mathematica, 1910, (definition * 14 · 01)

$$[(\iota x)(\phi x)].\psi(\iota x)(\phi x). = : (\exists b): \phi x. \equiv_x .x = b : \psi b$$
- $\psi(\iota x \phi x) = \exists x (\forall y (\phi y \leftrightarrow y = x) \wedge \psi x)$
- The present king of France is bald.
- There is presently a king of France.
There is only one of them.
He is bald.

Knowledge by Description

- Propositions expressed with sentences containing denoting phrases contain only the meanings of the constituent parts.
- On the basis of *acquaintance* with the meanings of the constituents, we may produce knowledge about things we are *unacquainted* with—the things denoted.
- “All thinking has to start from acquaintance; but it succeeds in thinking *about* many things with which we have no acquaintance.” (p. 480)
- Things like the centre of mass of the solar system at the beginning of the century; other people’s minds,

A Possible Objection Plus Reply

- Stephen Neale: “The following objection to Russell’s theory (which one hears with alarming frequency) involves a logical mistake:”
 - ! George IV wonders whether the author of *Waverly* was present. entails:
 - ▶ George IV wondered whether there was exactly one author of *Waverly* and that person was present.
 - so also:
 - ? George IV wondered whether there was exactly one author of *Waverly*.
- But “George IV wondered whether *p* and *q*.” does not entail “George IV wondered whether *p*.”
- Like “George IV wondered whether everybody was there.” does not entail “George IV wondered whether Chris was there.”

Merits of the Theory

- Against Alexius Meinong: “It is contended, for example, that the existent present king of France exists, and also does not exist; that the round square is round, and also not round; etc.”
 - ▶ Not so on Russell’s account.
- Against Frege: “If Ferdinand is not drowned, Ferdinand is my only son.”
 - ▶ If Ferdinand is drowned, it is not nonsense, but true.
- “George IV. wished to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverly*.”
 - ▶ George IV is not supposed to be interested in the law of identity.

On Referring and Mr. Strawson on Referring

- “The doctrine struck the then editor as so preposterous that he begged me to reconsider it and not demand its publication as it stood.” (Russell, 1959)
- “I think it is true to say that Russell’s Theory of Descriptions (. . .) is still widely accepted among logicians as giving a correct account of the use of such expressions in ordinary language.” (Strawson, 1950, p. 321)
- “The main purpose of the article is to refute my theory of descriptions. As I find that some philosophers whom I respect consider that it has achieved its purpose successfully, I have come to the conclusion that a polemical reply is called for.” (Russell, 1957, p. 385)

On Referring (Strawson 1950)

- “Obviously, (...) we cannot talk of *the sentence* being true or false, but only of its being used to make a true or false assertion (...).” (p. 326)
- “Meaning (...) is a function of the sentence or expression; mentioning and referring and truth and falsity, are functions of the use of the sentence or expression. To give the meaning of an expression (...) is to give *general directions* for its use to refer to or mention particular objects or persons (...).” (p. 327)
- “So the question of whether a sentence or expression *is significant or not* has nothing whatever to do with the question of whether the sentence, *uttered on a particular occasion*, is, on that occasion, being used to make a true-or-false assertion or not, or of whether the expression is, on that occasion, being used to refer to, or mention, anything at all.” (p. 327–8)

Mr. Strawson on Referring (Russell 1957)

- There is the problem of descriptions, and the problem of egocentricity.
 - ▶ The second one Russell solved elsewhere.
- The first one he solved in 1905.
 - ▶ Not just for “The present king of France”, “The books on the table”,
 - ▶ also for “Scott is the author of *Waverly*.”

The Use of Definites

- “If I talk about my handkerchief, I can, perhaps, produce the object I am referring to out of my pocket. I can’t produce the meaning of the expression, “my handkerchief”, out of my pocket.” (p. 328)
- “When a man uses such an expression, he does not *assert*, nor does what he says *entail*, a uniquely existential proposition. But one of the conventional functions of the definite article is to act as a *signal* that a unique reference is being made.” (p.331)
- “We use ‘the’ either when a previous reference has been made; or when, in the absence of a previous indefinite reference, the context (including the hearer’s assumed knowledge) is expected to enable the hearer to tell *what* reference is being made. We use ‘a’ either when these conditions are not fulfilled, or when, although a definite reference *could* be made, we wish to keep dark the identity of the individual to whom, or to which, we are referring.” (p. 342)

Logic or Semantics

- There is the question of what to do with non-denoting descriptions.
- “He admits that the sentence is significant and not true, but not that it is false. This is a mere question of verbal convenience. He considers that the word “false” has an unalterable meaning which it would be sinful to regard as adjustable, though he prudently avoids telling us what this meaning is. For my part, I find it more convenient to define the word “false” so that every significant sentence is either true or false. This is a purely verbal question; and although I have no wish to claim the support of common usage, I do not think that he can claim it either.” (p. 388-9)

Natural and Formal Languages

- “This brings me to a fundamental divergence between myself and many philosophers with whom Mr. Strawson appears to be in general agreement. They are persuaded that common speech is good enough not only for daily life, but also for philosophy. I, on the contrary, am persuaded that common speech is full of vagueness and inaccuracy, and that any attempt to be precise and accurate requires modification of common speech both as regards vocabulary and as regards syntax. Everybody admits that in physics and chemistry and medicine each require a language which is not that of everyday life. I fail to see why philosophy, alone, should be forbidden to make a similar approach towards precision and accuracy.” (p. 387)
- Ideals like that of Gottfried Leibniz, Gottlob Frege.
- Good for Natural Language?

Speaker's Reference

- “Personal reference—i.e. reference corresponding to the verb “refer” as predicated of persons rather than of expressions—is of negligible importance for logic; and I mention it only to get it out of the way. Let me take an example: Smith says indignantly to his wife, “The fat old humbug we saw yesterday has just been made full professor!”. His wife may know whom he refers to, and will consider herself misinformed if and only if that person has not been made a full professor. But the actual expression “the fat old humbug we saw yesterday” will refer to somebody only if Mr. and Mrs. Smith did meet someone rightly describable as a fat old humbug on the day before Smith's indignant remark; if this is not so, then Smith's actual words will not have conveyed true information, even if what Mrs. Smith gathered from them was true.” (Geach, 1962, p. 8)

Identifying Reference and Truth Values (Strawson 1964)

- *The* exhibition was not visited by *the* king of France.
- Both uses seem to be possible.
- “Neither Aristotelian nor Russellian rules give the exact logic of any expression of ordinary language; for ordinary language has no exact logic.” (Strawson, 1950, p. 344)
- “Let me remark that I do not claim to have done more than mention one factor which may sometimes bear on the fact that a truth-value gap theory for the case of radical reference failure is apt to seem more intuitively attractive in some instances than it does in others.” (Strawson, 1964, p. 118)

Attributive and Referential Descriptions (Donnellan 1966/78)

- Donnellan 1978 (p. 54): the speaker's reference is semantically relevant after all.
 - ▶ Mrs. Smith: I don't think he's fat; he's just large boned. And as for his being a humbug, he seemed quite genuine and above board.
- “Smith' murderer is insane.”
- Two uses of a description:
 - *attributive*: (near the place of the murder, and close to the badly damaged body) “The person, whoever it is, (who did this), is insane.”
 - *referential*: (in court, where the suspect is put to trial and behaving like a madman) “That man is insane.”

Some Other Cases

- The man drinking champagne over there is happy tonight.
 - ▶ When an invisible other man is actually the only one really holding a glass of champagne.
- Who is the man drinking a martini?
- Bring me the book on the table.
- On its attributive use a description may function in the way Russell indicated, as a presupposition though.
- On its referential use a description is a tool for doing a certain job: picking out a specific referent.

Truth, or What?

- “Her husband is kind to her.”
 - ▶ said of a man who is not her husband.
- » “The assertion may be true of the intended referent, but is the assertion as a whole true?”
- If the assertion could be true even when her actual husband is cruel, then we would have decisive evidence . . .
- “but Donnellan rightly disclaims any such intuition. On the other hand, I myself feel that such a sentence expresses a falsehood, even when “her husband” is used referentially to refer to a kind man; but the popularity of Donnellan’s view has made me uncertain that this intuition should be pressed very far. (p. 20)

Semantic Reference and Speaker's Reference (Kripke 1977)

- Agrees with Donnellan’s observation, but not with his conclusions.
- They do not refute Russell’s theory.
- Methodological concerns, hardly substantive.
- Prefers semantic theories without ambiguities, but with pragmatic explanations.
- Despite Donnellan’s own claims to the contrary, Donnellan is taken to posit a semantic, and not a pragmatic ambiguity.

A Gricean Analysis

- Distinguish “what the speaker’s words meant, on a given occasion” and “what he meant in saying these words on that occasion.”
- Language is used with the general intention to refer to the semantic referents of the words used,
- and with the specific intention to refer to certain objects.
- In complex cases the intentions may be believed to coincide, while they actually do not.

Smith and Champagne

- “Jones is raking the leaves.”
 - ▶ said when observing Smith raking the leaves.
 - ▶ Is the name “Jones,” thus, ambiguous?
- “The man drinking champagne over there is happy tonight.”
 - ▶ Has a semantic and a speaker's referent, both available.
- A pragmatic analysis applies uniformly to proper names, indefinite and definite descriptions, and even quantifiers—under a uniform semantic analysis.
- No ambiguity needed.

Conclusion

- “Since the phenomenon Donnellan cites *would* arise in all the Russell languages, if they *were* spoken, the fact that they *do* arise in English, as *actually* spoken, can be no argument that English is not a Russell language.” (p. 17)

Russell Language Argument

- Against the idea that the phenomena of referential usage constitutes an argument against Russell's analysis of descriptions.
- (recall the aim is only methodological . . .)
- Imagine a hypothetical language which is exactly like English but for the fact that the Russellian analysis of descriptions is stipulated to be correct. (It comes in three kinds.)
- “Would the phenomenon Donnellan adduces arise in communities that spoke these languages? Surely the speakers of these languages are no more infallible than we.” Kripke's answer is “obviously affirmative.”

Indirect, Marginal Evidence

- (A) Her husband is kind to her.
- (B) He is kind to her but he isn't her husband.
 - That seems fine. *He* refers to, apparently, the speaker's referent.
- (A) Her husband is kind to her.
- (C) No he isn't. The man you're referring to isn't her husband.
 - How can this be? Apparently, *He* picks up the semantic referent.
 - How can this be if there is *only* a speaker's referent?

Another Methodological Consideration

- Two questions used to test a posited ambiguity.
 - ▶ Would we be surprised, intuitively, to hear that languages disambiguate the distinction?
 - ▶ Do we in fact find languages that do?
- Kripke's intuitions have it that Donnellan's ambiguity fails the first test.
- The second test hasn't turned out positive at the time of writing.
- What are our intuitions on the first question in view of the fact that the second test is now positive for a number of languages.

On Disambiguating Readings

- 1 Smith's murderer is insane.
Jones is raking the leaves.
- 2 A: Her husband is nice to her.
B: He is nice to her, but he is not her husband.
- 3 Anke, Laura, and Petra went to the bank.
Every professor introduced every student to his class.
- 4 The last 20 years the president was a republican.
The next 20 years he will be a democrat.

Critique of the Russell Language Thought Experiment

- Michael Devitt, 1981/2004, "I reject Kripke's claim: the phenomena would differ because there is no convention in Russell English of using definites to express singular thoughts (...). With careful stage setting there would be the occasional use for this purpose, just as there is with any quantifier in English, but there would not be the regular use. When speakers of Russell English wanted to express a singular thought they would typically rely not on definites but on other devices in the language that are conventionally for that purpose."
- Open question: What can a thought experiment bring you?
- Maybe a January project!

Semantics and Pragmatics

- How do we sort out whether a reading is semantic or pragmatic?
- Can we sort out this question at all?
- Is it a purely methodological question?
 - ▶ Grice's modified Occam's razor.
 - ▶ Which was not from William of Occam by the way.
- Is it as vague and pragmatic as the notion of meaning is?
 - ▶ The contextualist debate.
 - ▶ We come back to this in two weeks!