

Russell on denoting and naming

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1 The distinction between naming and denoting

Already in Frege’s theory of reference, we have a distinction between the class of expressions which stand for objects, and the class of expressions which stand for (roughly) functions from objects to truth-values. Let’s use ‘singular terms’ as a label for the first class. Though Frege distinguished singular terms from other kinds of expressions, he did not draw any distinctions, at the level of reference or the level of sense, between different kinds of singular terms.

The class of singular terms includes:

1. Ordinary proper names, like ‘Gottlob Frege’ and ‘the University of Notre Dame.’
2. Definite descriptions, like ‘the tallest graduate student at Notre Dame’ or ‘the worst philosophy paper ever written.’
3. Simple demonstratives, like ‘that’ and ‘this.’
4. Complex demonstratives, like ‘that book’ or ‘this piece of chalk.’

A Fregean treatment of these expressions would treat them all as having an object as their reference, and a mode of presentation of that object as their sense.

One of the key divisions between Russell and Frege is that Russell, unlike Frege, thought that the apparent similarity between these kinds of expressions is only superficial. Some of these expressions are logically proper names, whereas others are denoting expressions.

A denoting expression is one which refers to whomever, or whatever, uniquely has a certain property. So the paradigm of a denoting expression is a definite description: ‘the student

who has already written his term paper' refers to whomever (if anyone) uniquely has the property of having written his term paper already.

A logically proper name, by contrast, is a word which 'merely and solely name' objects. A logically proper name, it is sometimes said, is a kind of tag; its linguistic function is simply to stand for an object.

Russell had distinctive views about how logically proper names and denoting phrases work. But the key point to get at the outset is just that the view that there is such a distinction between two classes of singular terms: ones are tags for particular objects, and ones which stand for whoever or whatever has a certain constellation of properties.

2 Russell's theory of denoting phrases

Russell had a distinctive theory of denoting phrases, which it is worth mentioning briefly. Whereas Frege assimilated denoting phrases like 'the F ' to proper names, Russell assimilated them to quantifier phrases like 'Every F ' or 'Some F .'

According to Russell, a sentence 'The F is G ' means, roughly, 'There's exactly one thing which is F , and it is G ', or in a more complicated version, 'There is something which is F , and anything else which is F is identical to it, and it is G .'

So

The cat is in the hat.

can be analyzed according to Russell's theory as

$$\exists x (x \text{ is a cat} \ \& \ \forall y (y \text{ is a cat} \rightarrow y = x) \ \& \ x \text{ is in the hat})$$

Lots of people, some of whom we'll be reading, now avoid the hassle of writing things out in this way, and use a 'restricted quantifier' notation which expands the vocabulary of standard logic. Using this notation, the sentence would be written as

[the x : x is a cat] x is in the hat

Here the bracketed expression is a quantifier — it plays the same syntactic role as ' $\forall x$ '. It binds variables, and combines with a formula containing a free occurrence of ' x ' to form a sentence.

This is often given as an example of the thesis that logical form diverges from grammatical (surface) form.

There are lots of issues raised by Russell's theory, which we won't go into now, unless you really want to. A good overview of the relevant arguments by a defender of Russell's theory is Stephen Neale's book *Descriptions*.

3 Russell's theory of (logically proper) names

As we've already discussed, Russell thought that logically proper names 'merely and solely' stand for objects — so he thought that what they contribute to the propositions expressed by sentences in which they occur is the object for which they stand. If they merely and solely stand for objects, what else could they contribute?

But this view of proper names led Russell to the view that very few of the things that we ordinarily take to be proper names really are. He thought that we are only capable of using names for things in the following categories:

- Sense data.
- Universals.
- Relations.
- Oneself.

This means that all of the expressions which appear to be proper names but don't stand for any of these things aren't really proper names; they are denoting phrases in disguise.

One argument which Russell had in mind for this limitation of the possible referents of logically proper names relied on contentious views about perception. But it is possible to develop a Russellian line of argument for this view which does not explicitly rely on views about perception which most people would now reject.

First, consider the following thesis about our access to our own thoughts:

- [1] We can never be mistaken about whether or not we are thinking a thought.

This is closely linked to another principle:

- [2] One can never be mistaken about whether a sentence of one's own language expresses a proposition.

These principles are linked because, you might think, if [2] were false then [1] would be as well. For if one could be mistaken about whether a sentence of one's own language was meaningful, then one might say that sentence to oneself, thereby taking oneself to be thinking a thought. But if the sentence was meaningless, one would not be thinking a thought, and so one would, contra [1], be mistaken about whether one was thinking a thought. This is some reason to think that [1] entails [2].

Consider now the following plausible principle about the meaningfulness of words and sentences of which they are a part:

- [3] If one expression in a sentence is meaningless, the sentence as a whole fails to express a proposition.

Consider, e.g., 'They're serving flibbertyflam in the cafeteria today.' It's plausible that this sentence fails to express a proposition because 'flibbertyflam' lacks a meaning.

[4] The meaning of a genuine name is its reference.

From [4], it is natural to infer the following principle:

[5] If a name lacks a reference, it also lacks a meaning.

But it follows from [3] and [5] together that

[6] Any sentence involving a name which lacks a reference fails to express a proposition.

But from [2] and [6] seems to follow that

[7] One can never be mistaken about whether a name of one's own language has a reference.

since, were this false, one would (contra [2]) be able to be mistaken about whether a sentence expressed a proposition: one would make this mistake if the sentence involved a name which one mistakenly took to have a reference.

But it is hard to see how [7] could be true unless it was also true that

[8] We can only understand names for objects about whose existence we cannot be mistaken.

For suppose that we could understand a name for an object about whose existence it is possible for us to be mistaken. Consider the possible world in which we mistakenly take that object to exist. In that world, contra [7], we would be mistaken about whether a name of our own language had a reference.

If this is right then, as Russell says, almost all of the expressions that we ordinarily take to be proper names are really disguised denoting phrases. As Russell mentions, this view makes sense of two features of the expressions we ordinarily take to be proper names:

1. If ' n ' is an ordinary name, sentences involving it can be meaningful and, as in the case of negative existentials, true.
2. If ' n ' and ' m ' are proper names which stand for the same object, ' $n = m$ ' can still be informative, and even difficult to discover. But if these names were just tags for objects, this sentence would express the same proposition as ' $n = n$ ', which is neither informative nor difficult to discover.

When we discuss Kripke, we'll discuss some arguments which seem to show that Russell's view of ordinary proper names is false, at least in the simple form that his discussion suggests. But the above should be enough to show that it is, on the face of it, an extremely appealing theory.