

- (1) Today is the first of three lectures which will be about the theory of reference, that is about how words connect up with the things they stand for. For simplicity, we will focus on *singular terms*: words which can take subject or object position in a sentence and which have a unique bearer. Roughly speaking, there are three main kinds of singular terms.
  - (a) *Proper names* like ‘Niklas’.
  - (b) *Descriptions* like ‘the prime minister of Sweden’ or ‘a philosopher’.
  - (c) *Indexicals* like ‘I’, ‘there’, or ‘that’.
- (2) This lecture will be concerned with *definite descriptions*. These are, simply, descriptions which are grammatically definite; they don’t just specify some *unique* thing but rather a *specific* thing. What characterises definite descriptions as a type of singular term is that they consist of a predicate  $F$  which specifies what is being talked about. English grammar makes this distinction explicit by having separate articles for definite (‘the  $F$ ’) and indefinite descriptions (‘an  $F$ ’). Other languages, such as Swedish, express this difference by conjugation. Some languages, like Finnish and Japanese, have no grammatical markers for definiteness and the distinction is entirely contextual.
- (3) We’re starting with definite descriptions for two main reasons. One is historical, which is that Russell’s analysis of them is one of the foundational texts of analytic philosophy of language. This has also led to descriptions occupying a central space in Anglophone philosophy of language, which we will see more of during the next lecture.
- (4) Now, as you may have noticed from the reading, Russell is deeply concerned with definite descriptions. As he says in *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (1919):

[I]n this chapter we shall consider the word *the* in the singular, and in the next chapter we shall consider the word *the* in the plural. It may be thought excessive to devote two chapters to one word, but to the philosophical mathematician it is a word of very great importance: like Browning’s Grammarian with the enclitic  $\delta\epsilon$ , I would give the doctrine of this word if I were “dead from the waist down” and not merely in a prison.

There are two main reasons for why he considers the definite article to have such importance: one metaphysical and one epistemological.

- (a) He wants to avoid Meinong’s metaphysical conclusion that in order for the sentence

The present king of France is bald.

to be meaningful (which for Russell means that it can have a truth value), there must be a present king of France.

- (b) Russell also makes a distinction between knowledge by *acquaintance* and knowledge by *description*. The former is direct sense experience whereas all other knowledge must be mediated by linguistic descriptions in order to pick out what it's about. So, Russell's epistemology turns crucially on a theory of descriptions.
- (5) Before we look closer at Russell's explanation of definite descriptions, there are a few puzzles about singular terms we need to have in mind. These are four problems that quickly arise when theorising about terms which any theory must face. Russell's goal in *On Denoting* (1905) is precisely to present a view which can do so.
- (6) Perhaps the most important of these is often called *Frege's puzzle*, which is the reason Frege dismissed the idea that names just stand for their bearer. He noted that only one of the following sentences is informative.

Lewis Carroll is Lewis Carroll.

Lewis Carroll is Charles Dodgson.

But if all a name does is to stand for its bearer, then both of these sentences express the very same thing since these are just two names for the same person. And if the sentences have the same meaning, then they should be equally informative.

- (7) We have already seen the Meinongian problem with sentences like

The present king of France is bald.

We want to say that this sentence is meaningful whilst simultaneously denying that the singular term actually refers to anyone.

- (8) Things get even more tricky when we consider sentences which directly deny the existence of something. Consider the sentence,

Pegasus does not exist.

On the one hand, we want to say that this sentence is meaningful and even true. But the very fact that there is no winged horse for the name to refer to, means that there is nothing which the sentence can be true about.

- (9) Finally, we have a problem with substitution in what's called *non-transparent* or *opaque* contexts. Normally, we think that if two names refer to the same person or thing, then exchanging one for the other in a sentence isn't going to change its truth value. If a sentence is true about Lewis Carroll, then it's going to be true about Charles Dodgson. Now, let's say that Max doesn't know that Lewis Carroll and Charles Dodgson are two names for the same person. Then, even if it's true that

Max believes that Lewis Carroll is a good author.

we can't conclude that

Max believes that Charles Dodgson is a good author.

So, there seem to be sentences where substitution can change the truth value of a sentence even when the names refer to the same person.

(10) So, these are the problems which Russell wants to tackle.

- (a) The first step towards his theory of definite descriptions is to say that the grammar of sentences which contain them is misleading. Although they seem to be subject-predicate sentences, there is an underlying *logical form* which specifies what the sentence really means.
- (b) The logical form of a sentence can be understood as the structure of the thought or meaning it expresses. We often call this structured content of a sentence a *proposition*.
- (c) So, we shouldn't explain how definite descriptions (or the word 'the') works in isolation. Instead, Russell approaches the problem by offering an analysis of complete sentences which contain definite descriptions.
- (d) This move is essentially the same as one which we naturally make when we're confronted with the sentence

I saw nobody.

Although this sentence is grammatically a subject-predicate sentence, we think that the logical form of what's expressed is better captured by the existentially quantified claim that

There is nobody whom I saw.

(11) The next step is to identify the logical form of sentences which contain definite descriptions. We can do this by considering which claims must be true for such a sentence to be true. Consider Russell's favourite example:

The present king of France is bald.

- (a) First, Russell argues that this sentence can only be true if there is someone who is the present king of France. That is,

There is some  $x$  such that  $x$  is presently king of France. (1)

- (b) Since the description is definite, there also can't be any more than one person who satisfies it.

If  $y$  is presently king of France, then  $y = x$  (2)

- (c) Finally, whoever satisfies this description must also satisfy the predicate which is said about it.

$x$  is bald. (3)

- (d) Putting these three criteria together we get that for a sentence with the grammatical form

The  $F$  is  $G$ .

Russell claims that it's real logical form is:

$\exists x(Fx \text{ and } \forall y(Fy \rightarrow x = y) \text{ and } Gx)$

(12) Using this analysis, Russell takes on the four problems.

- (a) Frege's puzzle for definite descriptions is quickly solved. There is a clear difference between the claims

Lewis Carroll is Lewis Carroll.

The author of *Alice in Wonderland* is Lewis Carroll.

The former is a trivial identity claim. But the latter is, on Russell's analysis, actually a complex existentially quantified claim about there being a unique author of that book who happens to be Lewis Carroll.

- (b) The Meinongian problem is an even simpler solution. Since Russell's analysis of

The present king of France is bald.

results in a logical form which doesn't contain any singular term, there's nothing which yields the metaphysical conclusion.

- (c) The issue with non-existence claims can also be applied to definite descriptions. If we have a sentence of the form

Not (the  $F$  exists).

then Russell's analysis tells us (if we write  $E$  for an existence predicate) that the sentence actually has the form

$$\neg\exists x(Fx \text{ and } \forall y(Fy \rightarrow x = y) \text{ and } Ex)$$

Once more, the singular term has been analysed away and the sentence can be meaningful and true without requiring the existence of the  $F$  it denies.

- (d) Finally, we have the problem of non-transparent contexts. For definite descriptions we need to compare the sentences:

Max believes that the author of *Alice in Wonderland* is a good author.

Max believes that the author of *Symbolic Logic: Part I* is a good author.

But when we use Russell's theory to analyse the two claims attributed to Max, we can see that they are two distinct quantified statements rather than substitution variants of a subject-predicate sentence. So, there is no reason to expect that they should share a truth value.

(13) The most famous objections to Russell's theory are due to P.F. Strawson in *On Referring* (1950). Essentially, he levels three criticisms against Russell.

- (a) Strawson makes the point that sentences themselves can't be true or false. We can only evaluate them for truth when they've been used to make an utterance. Russell's analysis confuses sentences (types) and uses of sentences (tokens).

- (b) It's not true that all definite descriptions are uniquely satisfied.

The book is on the table.

is a true sentence containing two definite descriptions but there are far more than just a single book or table in the world.

- (c) Further, Strawson argues that it's not right that definite descriptions require or entail that there is something which satisfies the description. Such sentence *presuppose* that the description is satisfied and if that presupposition is wrong, then we fail to say anything at all. If someone uttered the sentence

The present king of France is bald.

then we would respond by saying that they have said something false. We would be confused by that person saying something strange.

- (14) In an attempt to mediate between Russell's and Strawson's respective views, Keith Donnellan (1966) makes a distinction between two ways that we can use a definite description. Consider the sentence

The murderer of Smith is insane.

- (a) If we utter this sentence whilst standing over Smith's mutilated body, it's clear that we're talking about whoever satisfies the description (the person who did in fact murder Smith) whoever they are. Donnellan calls this an *attributive use* of a definite description.
- (b) But if we utter the sentence when Jones is charged with the murder of Smith and acts erratically in the courtroom, then it's clear that we're talking about Jones; regardless of whether Jones in fact is innocent. This is what Donnellan calls a *referential use* of a definite description.

According to Donnellan, Russell and Strawson are talking past each other. Russell only analyses attributive uses of definite descriptions whilst Strawson only considers referential uses. But an adequate theory must explain both.

- (15) Not everyone shares Donnellan's view of the situation. Saul Kripke (1979) instead makes the distinction between *semantic reference* and *speaker-reference*.

- (a) The semantic reference of a definite description is whatever thing actually satisfies it. In both of Donnellan's cases it is whoever actually murdered Smith who the description semantically refers to.
- (b) The speaker-reference of a description, however, is whatever the speaker intends to refer to. So, even if Jones is innocent, we can speaker-refer to him as Smith's murderer in the latter case. But if he is innocent, he is not semantically referred to by that description.

So, where Donnellan thinks that there are two distinct semantic uses of definite descriptions, Kripke prefers to make a distinction between semantic reference and a pragmatic notion of speaker-reference. This kind of dispute about where to draw the line between semantic and pragmatic phenomena is one which we will see in many places throughout the course.