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Philosophy of Language

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A definite description is a phrase that contains a descriptive function in the form of “the X”. The X in this case is a singular noun or noun phrase, and the phrase is only true if X is unique. The operative word in a definite description is “the”. The use of “the” distinguishes it from Russell’s other types of definition. In *On Denoting*, Russell specifies three types of definition. The first is a phrase that is denoting something, but yet does not denote anything. He uses the example “the present king of France”. France no longer has a king so the denotation in the phrase is not denoting anything. The next is a phrase that denotes one specific object. He uses the example “the present king of England” . There is, and will only ever be, one king of England at any given point. This type of denotation is a definite description. The third is a phrase that denotes ambiguously. He uses the example “a man”. The phrase denotes a single man but it is not known which man is being denoted. Russell calls this an indefinite description.

Russell describes a format that all statements containing definite descriptions follow. It breaks down every definite description into smaller components, each of which must be true for the statement to be true. Take for example, “The President of Tufts is new”. This phrase is broken down into three smaller propositions. If we are assuming that this sentence is true, and we are, then each of these smaller propositions must be true. Russell would break the sentence into the following components. There exists something X, such that X is a President of Tufts. For every X and every Y, if X and Y are both Presidents of Tufts then X=Y. (This implies that there can be only one or no President of Tufts.) If something is a President of Tufts then it is new. All of these components are true, as is the original statement. Russell proposed a general form for definite descriptions: ∃x[(F(x) & ∀y(F(y) → x=y)) & G(x)] where x and y are variable objects and F and G are descriptive functions. This form says that there exists an object x such that F(x) is true, and for all objects y, F(y) is equal to F(x) and that G(x) is also true.

Russell’s system for denotation was proposed to address some of the issues that others had had with reference. His theory provides clear answers about the truth values of statements with *empty* descriptions, statements with varied degrees of information, and statements describing beliefs.

Regarding empty reference, he uses one of his better known examples, “The present king of France is bald.” France, being a republic, has no king. Initially the truth value of the statement is uncertain, due to the non existence of the king not allowing him to have the option of being bald or not. Following Russell’s structure for definite description that is also the case. The first component of the statement is false. There does not exist an X where X is the present king of France. So the truth value of the statement is false. If it is the case that “the current king of France is bald” is false, logically the statement “the current king of France is not bald” must be true. For every statement P, (P V ~P), either p is true or the negation of p is true. That would be the case in this situation if one were to make the statement “x is bald”, where the truth value of “the present king of France”. If “x is bald” is false then “x is not bald” must be true. However, if the value of “x” is false then the rest of the statement is false, as it the case with the present King of France who does not exist. Using this structure of definition allows for a system of language where the truth values of statements that deal with nonexistent things are very clear. It is worth noting what Russell means when he says something *exists*. The example he uses is a comparison of Napoleon and Hamlet. There is writing about both of them, but beyond that writing one of them will continue to be, while the other will not. Russell says that the thoughts and feelings associated with Hamlet exist, but Hamlet cannot do anything outside of the words written about him, while Napoleon can.

Situations with multiple statements referencing the same topic seemingly conflicted with the ideas of some of Russell’s predecessors. Frege concluded that if there were two sentences that could be understood by a competent speaker, and that person could accept one and not the other then they had different meanings. In the context of reference there are some issues with this statement. Take for example the statements: “The inventor of Ultimate Frisbee is a man” and “the head producer of *The Matrix* is a man”. It is conceivable that a person could believe one of those statements and not the other. It happens though, that Joel Silver is not only a man but also the inventor of Ultimate Frisbee and the head producer of *The Matrix*. In both cases Joel Silver is being referred to and in both cases it is being claimed that he is a man. Seemingly the two sentences have the same meaning, despite the possible rejection of one of them. Russell’s definition of definite descriptions shows that the two statements are not the same, because they do not have the same truth conditions. In order for the first to be true, there must be a person who invented Ultimate Frisbee, there must be at most one person who invented Ultimate Frisbee, and that person must be a man. These conditions are different from that second statement’s conditions, there must be a person who head produced *The Matrix*, there is at most one person who head produced *The Matrix*, and that person is a man. Since their truth conditions are not the same, “the inventor of Ultimate Frisbee” and “the head producer of *The Matrix*” are cannot be substituted for each other and thus the two sentences are not the same. While the two statements may be referring the same person they are only able to do so under different conditions.

A similar situation occurs when a speaker uses reference in a statement about belief. Again, talking about Joel Silver one could say, “I believe the inventor of Ultimate Frisbee is a man.” And one could also say, “I believe the producer of *The Matrix* is a man.” In the previous case if a person did not accept both of the statements he would have been incorrect in doing so. In this case it is possible that either statement is either true or false, and most importantly, that the truth values of the two statements could be different. Again, even though the two statements are referencing the same person there are different truth conditions inherent to the description itself which cause any two statements with different definite descriptions to have different truth conditions regardless of any other truth conditions they may have.

P. F. Strawson approached some of the same problems that Russell did from a different angle. On the issue of empty reference Strawson said that it was possible for a sentence that referenced something that did not exist to be neither true nor false. In the case of the King of France, Strawson would have argued that the reference being made did not refer to anything and that sentences with definite descriptions that did not reference to anything are neither true nor false. The reason that statements like this are neither true nor false is because, Strawson argues, they do not form a valid proposition. He argued that the truth value of the statement should be evaluated presupposing that the reference is valid. If the reference is not valid the statement is then not a proper proposition and cannot be evaluated.

Russell was a staunch logician and much of his philosophy was based on logic and the reduction of phenomena to logical principles. It was because of this, adherence to logic is present in his thoughts about definite description. His solution to empty reference, in accordance with the laws of logic, framed the only possible truth values of a statement as true or false. Strawson introduced a third option, and I do not agree with his decision to do so, both because of my agreement with Russell about the necessity of following logic, and my initial conceptual reaction to the examples he used.

I think the issue here is how each Russell and Strawson have chosen to perceive and deal with vacuous truths. A reference that makes a claim about all the members of a set that is empty is vacuous. There are certainly issues involved with dealing with vacuous statements. For example the statements “all purple dogs can fly” and “no purple dog can fly” are both vacuously true because there are no purple dogs (at least no naturally purple). The case of the statement “the purple dog can fly” however is a different case. Again “the” is the operative word. The use of “the” implies that the speaker is referring to a specific object. It is implied by the speaker that there is a purple dog, and if there is not, then that implication is false, and the statement is false. I would agree with Russell’s framing of the statement in the form of there exists a purple dog and there is at least one purple dog, and that dog can fly. In this case there is no purple dog, so the entire statement is false. Strawson’s interpretation seems to me to be something like arguing that the statement is vacuous because of a claim that is being made about an empty set, the set being empty due to the non-existence of a purple dog or king of France. If this was the case I would agree with his decision to make it an exception. However I would agree with Russell’s idea that the use of “the” implies the existence of an object that is the only member of its set. Conceptually this follows with my initial reaction that if there was no king of France, any claims made about him would be false.