

## Philosophical Logic

### Lecture 8: Referring Descriptions

**1. The problem of non-existence** Recall, we had difficulty interpreting:

S. The present king of France is bald.

**2. Russell's 'On Denoting'** *Semantic solution.* Russell argues that 'the present King of France' is a *denoting* expression, not a referring expression—it doesn't introduce some object as constituent (value) of the proposition.

What do denoting phrases contribute to complete statements? Their contribution can only be understood in light of what the entire statement means. Simple case: 'some'. In itself 'some' is not meaningful. Russell thinks that 'some are red' means that  $RED(x)$  is not always false. Instead of saying something about red things (there might be none!), the statement 'some are red' says something about the *propositional function* ' $RED(x)$ '. Denoting phrases like 'a person' or 'the present King of France' follow this pattern.

**3. The logical form of 'the'** Denoting phrases function *grammatically* in the same way as proper names. But sentences containing denoting phrases have an entirely different *logical form* from sentences using only proper names and predicates.

- (U) 'Nothing is red'
- (U') The function  $RED(x)$  is never satisfied
- (U'')  $\neg \exists x RED(x)$

**Indefinite description:**

- (T) 'A person is in the room.'
- (T') The function  $[PERSON(x) \ \& \ IN-THE-ROOM(x)]$  is satisfied.
- (T'') 'There exists something that is both a person and in the room.'
- (T''') ' $\exists x (person(x) \wedge in-the-room(x))$ '

### Definite description:

- (S) ‘The present king of France is bald.’
- (S′) The function PKOF( $x$ ) is uniquely satisfied by something that is bald.
- (S′′) ‘At least one person currently is the king of France and at most one person currently is the king of France and whoever currently is the king of France is bald.’
- (S′′′) ‘ $\exists x(pkoF(x) \wedge bald(x) \wedge \forall y(pkoF(y) \supset y = x))$ ’
- (Russell’s own: ‘It is not always false of  $x$  that  $x$  is presently the king of France and that  $x$  is bald and that ‘if  $y$  is presently the king of France,  $y$  is identical with  $x$ ’ is always true of  $y$ .’)

**4. Puzzle-proof** Russell suggests his theory is superior because it can deal with puzzles rival theories cannot deal with.

- **Substitution Failure:** It explains why you cannot always substitute ‘Jane’ for ‘the friend I saw yesterday’ even if the friend I saw yesterday was Jane.
- **Excluded Middle:** It explains how ‘the present king of France is bald’ can be false instead of nonsense.
- **Negative existentials:** It explains how ‘the round square does not exist’ can be true without committing you to there being a round square.

**5. Work to do?** Can Russell’s theory of descriptions make sense of the following descriptive statements? (1.) The dogs are sleeping. (2.) The dog was domesticated more than 15000 years ago. (3.) The dog food is spoilt.

**6. Reference and Denotation** Donnellan: definite descriptions function in two different ways: (1) as merely denoting expressions (Attributive Uses); (2) as referential expressions (Referential Uses).

A speaker who uses a definite description attributively in an assertion states something about whomever or whatever is the so-and-so. A speaker who uses a definite description referentially in an assertion, on the other hand, uses the description to enable his audience to pick out whom or what he is talking about and states something about that person or thing. (‘Reference and definite descriptions’, p. 285)

If Donnellan is right, then what does this tell us about reference? And what does it tell us about the truth value of definite descriptions that lack a denotation, such as (S)?