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## Denoting Phrases and Logical Form: Russell's Solution to Problems of Meaning and

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Russell's analysis of denoting phrases through logical form aims to resolve problems of meaning and reference, especially those raised by identity statements and non-existent objects. This paper examines Bertrand Russell's theory of denoting phrases and its role in resolving classical problems of meaning and reference. Motivated by puzzles concerning identity statements, non-existent objects, and informative judgments, Russell proposes that denoting phrases do not function as referring expressions but must be analyzed through their underlying logical form. It examines Bertrand Russell's critique of ordinary language and his advocacy of logical analysis as a foundational method for philosophical inquiry, particularly in relation to problems of meaning, reference, and truth. Russell, following the tradition initiated by Gottlob Frege and later developed by logical positivists, maintains that ordinary language is inadequate for philosophical analysis due to its inherent vagueness, ambiguity, and misleading grammatical structures. It further evaluates the strengths of Russell's solution, particularly its explanatory power in handling empty descriptions and identity statements, while briefly noting the philosophical costs of rejecting semantic content at the level

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of denoting phrases. Russell critically engages with Frege's solution and rejects the necessity of introducing sense as an intermediary entity between language and the world. He argues that Frege's notion of sense is redundant and that the puzzles Frege addresses can be resolved through a more rigorous logical analysis of propositions.

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## Introduction

Questions concerning meaning and reference have long stood at the forefront of analytic philosophy, especially in efforts to clarify how language connects with reality. Everyday speech frequently includes expressions that seem meaningful yet lack any actual referent, thereby creating philosophical difficulties about truth, falsity, and comprehension. Bertrand Russell confronts these challenges through his theory of denoting phrases, proposing a logical examination that redefines the connection between linguistic appearance and logical structure. Russell maintains that many philosophical misunderstandings stem from neglecting the distinction between the grammatical surface of language and its deeper logical form. His theory of descriptions, presented in *On Denoting* in 1905, offers a structured resolution by interpreting denoting phrases, including definite descriptions, not as simple names that point to objects but as quantified expressions within formal logic. This analysis makes it possible for sentences containing non-referring terms to remain meaningful without assuming the existence of corresponding entities. By uncovering the logical structure concealed beneath ordinary expressions, Russell shows how propositions may be assessed as true or false without relying on questionable ontological commitments. Through precise logical analysis, he seeks to remove ambiguities and deceptive grammatical patterns that hinder philosophical clarity. His account not only explains the functioning of denoting phrases in language but also establishes logical form as an essential instrument for addressing problems of meaning and reference. Consequently, Russell's contribution represents a significant movement toward formal methods in philosophy and shapes later developments in analytic philosophy and the philosophy of language.

### 1.1 Denoting phrase:

1. Denoting phrases which do not denote anything, for example "the present king of France".
2. Phrases which denote one definite object, for example "the present President of the U.S.A."
3. Phrases which denote ambiguously, for example, "a man", "an man".



Hence a denoting phrase may refer or may not refer or may refer ambiguously. The subject of denoting is having great importance not only in logic and mathematics but also in the theory of knowledge.

## **1.2 Theory of knowledge:**

Russell has talked about two types of knowledge: knowledge of things and knowledge of truths. He further distinguishes two types of knowledge of things:

### 1.2.1. Knowledge by Acquaintance

### 1.2.2. Knowledge by Description

#### **1.2.1. Knowledge by Acquaintance:**

Knowledge by acquaintance is when we are directly aware of a thing, without any inference. So, Russell says:

In order to make clear the antithesis between "acquaintance" and "description," I shall first of all try to explain what I mean by "acquaintance." I say that I am acquainted with an object when I have a direct cognitive relation to that object, i.e. when I am directly aware of the object itself.

We are immediately conscious and acquainted with a color or hardness of a table before us, our sense-data. Russell says:

When we ask what are the kinds of objects with which we are acquainted, the first and most obvious example is sense-data. When I see a colour or hear a noise, I have direct acquaintance with the colour or the noise. The sense-datum with which I am acquainted in these cases is generally, if not always, complex.

Knowledge by acquaintance is non-judgmental in nature. Through it, we are directly aware of sense-data or universals rather than propositional truths. According to Russell's denotative theory of meaning, such acquaintance supplies the meanings of the subject and predicate terms in an atomic sentence. Knowledge by description or propositional knowledge presupposes knowledge by acquaintance, since words must already be meaningful before they can be combined to form true or false statements. Hence, acquaintance with things is logically independent of knowledge of truths: one may be immediately acquainted with an



object without knowing any proposition about it. For example, one can know the colour of a table fully and directly through perception, even without knowing any truth concerning the colour itself.

### 1.2.2. Theory of Description:

Russell has made a distinction between two kinds of descriptions. Description is a method of analyzing any fact of expression or event or any state of affairs, where we are analyzing the different aspect of a given thing. Russell distinguishes definite description from indefinite one. So according to Russell:

There are two sorts of descriptions, what one may call “ambiguous descriptions”, when we speak of “a so-and-so”, and what one may call “definite descriptions”, when we speak of “the so-and-so” (in the singular).

There are two types of descriptions namely,

#### 1.2.2.1 Definite Description

#### 1.2.2.2. Indefinite Description

##### 1.2.2.1 Definite Description:

The phrase which is prefixed by the article “the” is called definite description. Definite description is of the form “the so and so”.

Ex: - The present C.M of Odisha is Mohan Majhi.

The above proposition says about a definite person.

##### 1.2.2.2. Indefinite Description:

The phrase which is prefixed by the article of “a” and “an” is called indefinite description. Indefinite description is of the form “a so and so” e.g. I met “a man”. The phrase “a man” does not refer to any definite person it could be any man. Another example is: “any dog is annoying”, it is not meant that there is a particular individual dog, namely *any dog* that has the property of being annoying (similar considerations go for “some dog”, “every dog”, “a dog”, and so on).

The definite article “the” is used to refer the uniqueness, and because of this any statement which is prefixed by this definite article assumes that there must be something exist stated by the proposition. For example, “The golden mountain is beautiful”, where it is viewed that because the phrase golden mountain is prefixed by the definite “the”, therefore the golden mountain must exist if not in this world then in some other world. The traditional philosophers assume a possibility of another world, but Russell



argued that they are misguided by the grammatical form of a proposition so we need to understand the logical form of a proposition.

Now we will see how Russell has tried to solve the problems. The two major problems are:

#### 1.2.3.1 Co-referring expression

#### 1.2.3.2 Non-referring expression

#### **1.2.3.1 Co-referring expression:**

The problem of co-referring expressions originated primarily with Gottlob Frege as the problem of informative identities. For example, if the morning star and the evening star are the same planet in the sky seen at different times of day (indeed, they are both the planet Venus: the morning star is the planet Venus seen in the morning sky and the evening star is the planet Venus seen in the evening sky), how is it that someone can think that the morning star rises in the morning but the evening star does not? This is apparently problematic because although the two expressions seem to denote the same thing, one cannot substitute one for the other, which one ought to be able to do with identical or synonymous expressions.

In order to solve the problem of co-referring expressions Russell has made a distinction between names and definite description. According to Russell, names are the simple symbols whereas descriptive phrases are the combinations of words having meaning. He further says that names can only be substituted by a name and definite description can only be substituted by definite description.

He said the problem arises when we substitute name for a definite description and definite description in the place of a name. Russell has explained it through an example:

(i) Scott is the author of Waverley.

Here “Scott” is the name and “the author of Waverley” is the definite description. So when we substitute “Scott” in the place of “the author of Waverley” and “the author of Waverley” in the place of “Scott” then the propositions are:

(ii) Scott is Scott.

And

(iii) The author of Waverley is the author of Waverley.



Here the proposition “Scott is Scott” does not give new information because of the substitution of name with definite description and also the proposition “the author of Waverley is the author of Waverley” does not give new information because of substitution of definite description with name. Therefore, we cannot substitute name with definite description and definite description with name. So Russell holds that name can only be substituted by a name and definite description by a definite description. This distinction is not made by Frege, he has given similar status both name and description.

### 1.2.3.2 Non-referring expression:

Russell further says that ordinary names are not proper name, because ordinary names are disguised definite description. Russell claims that every ordinary names are not proper names. According to him proper names are the names which do not have reference problem. In this sense only demonstratives are called as proper name. According to Russell, demonstratives are definite pronouns like - This, that, these, those, She, I, you, it, we, here, there, etc.,so according to Russell:

We may even go so far as to say that, in all such knowledge as can be expressed in words – with the exception of “this” and “that” and a few other words of which the meaning varies on different occasions – no [genuine proper] names occur, but what seem like [genuine proper] names are really descriptions.

Where as Ordinary names are disguised definite descriptions. The problem arises when we consider ordinary name or disguised definite description as proper names.

Then, the second problem is the problem about empty names or non-referring expressions. There are certain expressions which do not have any reference, but according to Russell, the sentences containing such expressions are meaningful but false proposition. For example:

- “The present king of France is bald”.

In this proposition the expressions “The present king of France” does not have any reference or it does not refer to anyone, but the proposition containing such expressions are meaningful but they are false. Now the question is:

- If “The present king of France is bald” is false

Then what will be the truth value of the proposition

- “The present king of France is not bald”



Here the law of excluded middle requires that one of the following propositions must be true either “the present king of France is bald” is true or “the present king of France is not bald” is true, because both cannot be true together and cannot be false together.

By the law of excluded middle, either “A is B” or “A is not B” must be true. Hence either “the present King of France is bald” or “the present King of France is not bald” must be true. Yet if we enumerated the things that are bald and then the things that are not bald, we should not find the present King of France in either list. Hegelians, who love a synthesis, will probably conclude that he wears a wig.

Therefore, Russell has proposed that the negation of the proposition “the present king of France is bald” is not “The present king of France is not bald” but the negation would be

- “It is false that the present king of France is bald is false”, which is true.

For Russell, the statement “the present king of France” does not exemplify a straightforward subject–predicate proposition; rather, it should be understood as an existential claim. In traditional logic, a proposition of subject–predicate form is considered true if and only if the subject falls within the extension of the predicate. However, there is at present no king of France. Because the supposed subject lacks existence, it cannot belong to the extension of any predicate, whether the predicate is “is bald” or “is not bald.” Consequently, the situation seems to present a challenge to the law of excluded middle, since neither affirmation nor negation appears applicable. This apparent difficulty suggests that the original grammatical form of the sentence is misleading and that a different logical analysis is required to resolve the confusion. According to Meinong, such reference less propositions may not exist in this world still they may exist in another world; this statement of Meinong violates the “law of contradiction.” (Law of contradiction stands a is either true or not true but not both at the same time). Again Meinong says, if a sentence grammatically well-formed then it must have a reference. But according to Russell, because of this grammatical form we fall into trouble and we are bound to assume the possibility another world.

There are a great many sorts of incomplete symbols in logic, and they are sources of a great deal of confusion and false philosophy, because people get misled by grammar.

So Russell said that if we introduce the logical analysis of the proposition then we can remove such problems from language system.



Russell has given a logical analysis of the proposition “The present king of France is bald” in the following manner. He has divided the proposition into the conjunction of three propositions. They are

- (i) At least there is a king of France
- (ii) At most there is a king of France
- (iii) If anything is a king of France then he is bald.

In the three analyses outlined above, the definite article “the” does not explicitly appear in any of the logical formulations. This demonstrates that the mere presence of the word “the” in ordinary language does not require us to assume the existence of a corresponding object. When the separate components of the analysis are combined, they reconstruct the content of the original proposition. According to the principle governing conjunction, if any single conjunct is false, then the entire conjunctive statement must be false. In this case, the first conjunct, namely that there exists at least one present king of France, is false. Therefore, the statement “The present king of France is bald” is false, though it remains meaningful. Both Frege and Russell maintain that proper names possess semantic content even when there is no object that fulfils them. Each philosopher thus affirms that meaning does not depend upon the actual existence of a referent.

## Conclusion

Russell’s examination of denoting phrases addresses enduring problems of meaning and reference by separating linguistic surface structure from underlying logical form. Through his theory of descriptions, he argues that such phrases do not operate as names that designate particular entities, but instead function as quantified logical constructions that do not require us to assume the existence of nonexistent objects. This method of logical analysis clarifies how statements containing empty or indeterminate descriptions can still possess meaning and be assessed as either true or false.

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