Elizabeth Coppock
coppock@phil.hhu.de
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Seminar on Presupposition
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Strawson: *On Referring*

1 Strawson's view on Russell

> One of the questions [Russell's] Theory of Descriptions was designed to answer was the question: how can such a sentence as "The king of France is wise" be significant even whent there is nothing which answers to the description it contains, *i.e.*, in this case, nothing which answers to the description "The king of France"? (p. 321)

Meinong reasoned that there must in fact exist a king of France in some sense, and Russell wanted to show that this was wrong.

> The postulation of a world of strange entities, to which the king of France belongs, offends, he says, against "that feeling for reality which ought to be preserved even in the most abstract studies". (p. 322)

Strawson agrees. But he still thinks that Russell is wrong.

- D: the phrase "the king of France"
- S: the phrase "the king of France is wise"

> I think Russell's reasons for rejecting [Meinong's] arguments can be summarised as follows. The mistake arises, he says, from thinking that D, which is certainly the *grammatical* subject of S, is also the *logical* subject of S. But D is not the logical subject of S. In fact S, although grammatically it has a singular subject and a predicate, is not logically a subject-predicate sentence at all. The proposition it expresses is a complex kind of *existential* proposition, part of which might be described as a "uniquely existential" proposition. To exhibit the logical form of the proposition, we should re-write the sentence in a logically appropriate grammatical form; in such a way that the deceptive similarity of S to a sentence expressing a subject-predicate proposition would disappear...

Now the critique begins:

> [Russell's] answer seems to imply that in the case of a sentence which is similar to S in that (1) it is grammatically of the subject-predicate form and (2) its grammatical subject does not refer to anything, then the only alternative to its being meaningless is that it should not really (*i.e.* logically) be of the subject-predicate form at all, but of some quite different form. And this in turn seems to imply that if there are any sentences which are genuinely of the subject-predicate form, then the very fact of their being significant, having a meaning, guarantees that there *is* something referred to by the logical (and grammatical) subject. Moreover, Russell's answer seems to imply that there are such sentences.

Such sentences would involve "logically proper names":

> Of logically proper names Russell says or implies the following things:
> (1) That they and they alone can occur as subjects of sentences which are genuinely of the subject-predicate form;
> (2) That an expression intended to be a logically proper name is *meaningless* unless there is some single object for which it stand: for the *meaning* of such an expression just is the individual object which the expression designates. To be a name at all, therefore, it *must* designate something.

So there are two ways for sentences with the same form as S to be significant: (1) the grammatical subject is a description in Russell's sense; (2) the grammatical subject is a logically proper name.

But Strawson thinks that "[e]xpressions used in the uniquely referring way are never either logically proper names or descriptions, if what is meant by calling them "descriptions" is that they are to be analysed in accordance with the model provided by Russell's Theory of Descriptions" (p. 324).

2 Strawson's claims

Strawson draws distinctions between:
(A1) a sentence,
(A2) a use of a sentence,
(A3) an utterance of a sentence

and correspondingly, between:
(B1) an expression,
(B2) a use of an expression,
(B3) an utterance of an expression.

Consider "the king of France is wise" in three different time periods:

- during the reign of Louis XIV
- during the reign of Louis XV
- in 1950

and two different speakers, Fred and Barney.

	Louis XIV	Louis XV	1950
Fred	F14	F15	F1950
Barney	B14	B15	B1950

- all different utterances
- same use: F14 & B14, F15 & B15, F1950 & B1950
- all the same sentence

Sentences are not true or false; they can be used to make true or false assertions:

> Obviously in the case of this sentence, and equally obviously in the case of many others, we cannot talk of *the sentence* being true or false, but only of its being used to make a true or false assertion, or (if this is preferred) to express a true or false proposition. And equally obviously we cannot talk of *the sentence* being *about* a particular person, for the same sentence may be used at different times to talk about quite different particular person, but only of *a use* of the sentence to talk about a particular person.

Likewise,

> "Mentioning", or "referring", is not something an expression does; it is something that some one can use an expression to do.

In general,

> Meaning (in at least one important sense) is a function of the sentence or expression; mentioning and referring and truth or falsity, are functions of the use of the sentence or expression. To give the meaning of an expression (in the sense in which I am using the word) is to give *general directions* for its use to refer to or mention particular objects or persons; to give the meaning of a sentence is to give *general directions* for its use in making true or false assertions. It is not to talk about any particular occasion of the use of the sentence or expression. The meaning of an expression cannot be identified with the object is is used, on a particular occasion, to refer to. The meaning of a sentence cannot be identified with the assertion it is used, on a particular occasion, to make... So the question of whether a sentence or expresssion is *significant* or *not* has noting whatever to do with the question of whether the sentence, *uttered on a particular occasion,* is, on that occasion, being used to make a true-or-false assertion or not, or of whether the expression is, on that occasion, being used to refer to, or mention, anything at all.

Furthermore:

> [A sentence] will be used to make a true or false assertion *only* if the person using it *is* talking about something. If, when he utters it, he is not talking about anything, then his use is not a genuine one, but a spurious or pseudo-use: he is not making either a true or a false assertion, though he may think he is.

This is not specific to definite descriptions; it also applies to deictic terms like *this*, which Russell would classify as logically proper names:

> Let me now take an example of the uniquely referring use of an expression not of the form, "the so-and-so". Suppose I advance my hands, cautiously cupped, towards someone, saying, as I do so, "This is a fine red one". He, looking into my hands and seeing nothing there, may say: "What is? What are you talking about?" Or perhaps, "But there's nothing in your hand". Of course it would be absurd to say that in saying "But you've got nothing in your hands", he was *denying* or *contradicting* what I said. So "this" is not a disguised description in Russell's sense. Nor is it a logically proper name.

Strawson agrees with Russell about the following claims:
(1) That "the king of France is wise" is signficant
(2) That "anyone now uttering the sentence would be making a true assertion only

if there in fact at present existed one and only one king of France, and if he were wise."

But he disagrees with the following claims:
(1) That anyone now uttering S would be making a true or false assertion
(2) That part of what he would be asserting would be that there at present existed one and only one king of France.

Rather, he would be *presupposing* that there at present existed one and only one king of France.

> To say, "The king of France is wise" is, in some sense of "imply", to *imply* that there is a king of France. But this is a very special and odd sense of "imply". "Implies" in this sense is certainly not equivalent to "entails" (or "logically implies").

Putting it yet another way:

> When a man uses such an expression, he does not *assert*, nor does what he says *entail*, a uniquely existential proposition. But one of the conventional functions of the definite article is to act as a *signal* that a unique reference is being made – a signal, not a disguised assertion.

Here is perhaps an argument for this view:

> Now suppose someone were in fact to say to you with a perfectly serious air: "The King of France is wise". Would you say, "That's untrue"? I think it is quite certain that you would not. But suppose that he went on to *ask* you whether you thought that what he had just said was true, or was false; whether you agreed or disagreed with what he had just said. I think you would be inclined, with some hesitation, to say that you did not do either; that the question of whether his statement was true or false simply *did not arise*, because there was no such person as the King of France. You might, if he were obviously serious (had a dazed, astray-in-the-centuries look), say something like: "I'm afraid you must be under a misapprehension. France is not a monarchy. There is no King of France."

In other words, intuitively, this sentence is neither true or false. Does this 'squeamishness' count as a fact? These types of intuitions are pretty unstable. (See Schoubye (2010) for a recent theory to explain variation in judgments of squeamishness.)

Strawson certainly explains why "the king of France is wise" is significant:

> The fact that the sentence and the expression, respectively, are signfiicant just is the fact that the sentence *could* be used, in certain circumstances, to say something true or false, that the expression *could* be used, in certain circumstances to mention a particular person; and to know their meaning is to know what sort of circumstances these are. So when we utter the sentence without in fact meanioning anybody by the use of the phrase, "The king of France", the sentence doesn't cease to be significant: we simply *fail* to say anything true or false because we simply fail to mention anybody by this particular use of that perfectly significant phrase.

3 Questions for discussion

1. What exactly is the problem with Russell's theory, according to Strawson? Does it make a false prediction? Or is it just conceptually flawed?
2. What exactly is Strawson's theory?
3. What exactly are Strawson's arguments for his theory?
4. Strawson's theory can clearly explain the meaningfulness of the sentence "The king of France is wise." Can it also explain:
   - Russell's first puzzle, Frege's puzzle?
   - Russell's second puzzle, the failure of the law of the excluded middle?
   - Russell's third puzzle, statements of non-existence?

   And what about the ambiguity in "The king of France is not wise"? And in "George IV. wished to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverley*"?

References

Russell, B. (1905). On denoting. *Mind*, 14:479–93.

Schoubye, A. J. (2010). Descriptions, truth value intuitions, and questions. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 32(6):583–617.

Strawson, P. F. (1950). On referring. *Mind*, 59(235):320–344.