

PHIL 4233: Philosophy of Language  
Prof. Funkhouser  
Russell, “On Denoting”

- A phrase is denoting “solely in virtue of its *form*” (e.g., it need not actually denote).

- 3 types of denotation:

1. Failed denotation — e.g., “the present King of France”
2. Singular denotation — e.g., “the present President of the U.S.A.”
3. Ambiguous denotation — e.g., “a man”

- Acquaintance vs. “knowledge about”:

For example, we know that the center of mass of the solar system at a definite instant is some definite point, and we can affirm a number of propositions about it; but we have no immediate *acquaintance* with this point, which is only known to us by description. The distinction between *acquaintance* and *knowledge about* is the distinction between the things we have presentations of, and the things we only reach by the denoting phrases.

- Note the *propositional function* and the interpretations of *everything*, *nothing*, and *something*.

- “This is the principle of the theory of denoting I wish to advocate: that denoting phrases never have any meaning in themselves, but that every proposition in whose verbal expression they occur has a meaning.”

- Denoting phrases with ‘the’ require a unique denotation: definite vs. indefinite descriptions.

- Q: What is the point of translating these sentences into sentences lacking denoting expressions?

A: “The evidence for the above theory is derived from difficulties which seem unavoidable if we regard denoting phrases as standing for genuine constituents of the propositions in whose verbal expressions they occur.”

○ One such alternative theory is given by Meinong:

This theory regards any grammatically correct denoting phrase as standing for an *object*.

E.g., according to Meinong even round squares exist. But admitting non-subsisting objects, and violating the law of contradiction, is just too high a price to pay.

○ A more reasonable alternative is given by Frege, with his distinction between sense (meaning) and nominatum (denotation):

One advantage of this distinction is that it shows why it is often worthwhile to assert identity.

But our sentences are generally about the denotation of words, not their meanings.

If we say ‘the King of England is bald’, that is, it would seem, not a statement about the complex *meaning* ‘the King of England’, but about the actual man denoted by the meaning. But now consider ‘the King of France is bald’. By parity of form, this also ought to be about the denotation of the phrase ‘the King of France’. But this phrase, though it has a *meaning* provided ‘the King of England’ has a meaning, has certainly no denotation, at least in any obvious sense. Hence one would suppose that ‘the King of France is bald’ ought to be nonsense; but it is not nonsense, since it is plainly false.

● Next Russell turns to 3 puzzles, to see if his theory handles these. Note his interesting methodological comments about philosophy:

... it is a wholesome plan, in thinking about logic, to stock the mind with as many puzzles as possible, since these serve much the same purpose as is served by experiments in physical science.

○ Puzzle #1: Co-referential terms can be substituted into a proposition *salva veritate*.

Hence we may substitute *Scott* for *the author of ‘Waverley’*, and thereby prove that George IV wished to know whether Scott was Scott. Yet an interest in the law of identity can hardly be attributed to the first gentleman of Europe.

○ Puzzle #2: Law of the Excluded Middle — either the present King of France is bald or he is not bald.

Hegelians, who love a synthesis, will probably conclude that he wears a wig.

○ Puzzle #3: Difference. How can there be true negative existential statements — e.g. “The round square does not exist.”?

But how can a non-entity be the subject of a proposition? ... Hence, it would appear, it must always be self-contradictory to deny the being of anything.

● Note Russell’s invocation of the use/mention distinction.

● Russell’s response to Puzzle #1:

○ “Scott was the author of *Waverley*” is a different proposition than “Scott was Scott”. Why? Because they differ in properties — George IV was curious only about the truth of the former.

○ Denoting phrases are parts of sentences and do not have meanings on their own.

“Scott was a man” and “The author of *Waverley* was a man” do not have the same logical form. The latter should be translated: “There exists one and only one person who wrote *Waverley*, and that person was a man.”

○ Now reconsider the sentence “Scott was the author of *Waverley*”. This is to be translated: “One and only one entity wrote *Waverley*, and Scott was identical with that one”. The solution to the first puzzle is that this translation “does not contain any constituent ‘the author of *Waverley*’ for which we could substitute ‘Scott.’”

○ *primary* vs. *secondary occurrences* of denoting phrases:

The story of the yacht: “I thought your yacht was larger than it is.”

● Russell’s response to Puzzle #2:

○ Is the following sentence true: “The present King of France is not bald.”? Not if it means: “There is one and only one entity that is the King of France, and he is not bald.” On this interpretation, ‘the King of France’ is primary and the sentence is false.

But the sentence is true if 'the King of France' has secondary occurrence. On this interpretation, the sentence means: "It is false that there is presently a King of France and he is bald."

- Russell's response to Puzzle #3:

All propositions in which Apollo occurs are to be interpreted by the above rules for denoting phrases. If 'Apollo' has a primary occurrence, the proposition containing the occurrence is false; if the occurrence is secondary, the proposition may be true. So again 'the round square is round' means 'there is one and only one entity  $x$  which is round and square, and that entity is round', which is a false proposition, not, as Meinong maintains, a true one.

- Then note Russell's application of this point to the Ontological Argument.