

PHIL 4233: Philosophy of Language  
Prof. Funkhouser  
Russell, "Descriptions"

\*\*\*You should read the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry for logical form (section 5, in particular),

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logical-form/>

as well as the entry on analysis (section 6, in particular):

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/analysis/>

- Russell's theory of descriptions was a major motivation for Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein thought that the traditional problems of philosophy would dissolve once the logical form of their expression was made explicit in the Frege-Russell manner.

- Terminology:

Definite description: "the so-and-so" (e.g., "I met Jones")

Indefinite description: "a so-and-so" (e.g., "I met a man")

- The assertion "I met Jones" is not the same as the assertion "I met a man", *even if* the man I met is Jones.

- Propositions with indefinite descriptions do not have the objects that they are denoting as constituents of the proposition. Rather, it is the *concept* that is a constituent. This is most evident when there is a failure of denotation. E.g., the statement "I met a unicorn" has the concept of unicorn as a constituent. Such sentences are still significant (meaningful).

- Russell argues that grammatical form can be misleading. This is a major theme from both Frege and Russell. In fact, Russell argues that "I met Jones" and "I met a man" are not of the same form.

... the first names an actual person, Jones; while the second involves a propositional function, and becomes, when made explicit: "The function 'I met  $x$  and  $x$  is human' is sometimes true." ... This proposition is obviously not of the form "I met  $x$ ", which

accounts for the existence of the proposition “I met a unicorn” in spite of the fact that there is no such thing as “a unicorn”.

- Russell’s funny comments about Meinong:

In such theories, it seems to me, there is a failure of that feeling for reality which ought to be preserved even in the most abstract studies. Logic, I should maintain, must no more admit a unicorn than zoology can; for logic is concerned with the real world just as truly as zoology, though with its more abstract and general features . . . A robust sense of reality is very necessary in framing a correct analysis of propositions about unicorns, golden mountains, round squares, and other such pseudo-objects.

- We can make true statements about that which does not exist — but this does not mean that we are describing the “unreal”:

“A unicorn” is an indefinite description which describes nothing. It is not an indefinite description which describes something unreal.

- We should be careful to distinguish the ‘is’ of predication from the ‘is’ of identity:

It is a disgrace to the human race that it has chosen to employ the same word “is” for these two entirely different ideas — a disgrace which a symbolic logical language of course remedies.

- Now Russell shifts his discussion to *definite* descriptions. Both definite and indefinite descriptions are not to be defined in isolation. To make this point about definite descriptions, Russell distinguishes *names* from *definite descriptions*.

Name:

A name is a simple symbol whose meaning is something that can only occur as subject, i.e. something of the kind that we defined as an “individual” or a “particular”. And a “simple” symbol is one which has no parts that are symbols.

- A definite description like “the author of *Waverley*” is not a name because it has parts that are themselves symbols (e.g., ‘author’ and ‘*Waverley*’).
- Importantly, we do not preserve sameness of proposition when we substitute in a name that refers to the same object as does some definite description.

○ Not all statements of the form “the so-and-so is the so-and-so” are true! For example, ‘the present King of France’ or ‘the round square’ yield false statements, when substituted.

● So, propositions involving definite descriptions have three components to their meaning:

1. A commitment to the *existence* of some thing satisfying the definite description.
2. A commitment to a *unique* satisfier of the definite description.
3. A commitment to some *predication* being true of this unique satisfier.

● We can know quite a bit about something satisfying a definite description without knowing what it is that satisfies that description — e.g., think of a detective story.

● All knowledge that “can be expressed in words” might involve descriptions only, no names.

○ Here Russell makes some interesting comments about names. He thinks that our ordinary “names” are not really names at all. The points here will become relevant again when we read Mill, Kripke, etc.

We may inquire significantly whether Homer existed, which we could not do if “Homer” were a name. The proposition “the so-and-so exists” is significant, whether true or false; but if *a* is the so-and-so (where “*a*” is a name), the words “*a* exists” are meaningless. It is only of descriptions — definite or indefinite — that existence can be significantly asserted; for, if “*a*” is a name, it *must* name something . . . And so, when we ask whether Homer existed, we are using the word “Homer” as an abbreviated description: we may replace it by (say) “the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.” The same considerations apply to almost all uses of what look like proper names.

● Russell again makes the primary vs. secondary occurrence distinction.