

# Frege and Russell on Names and Descriptions Assessment

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## The story so far

- ▶ We've looked at Frege's and Russell's theories of meaning.
- ▶ The first solves our semantic puzzles using the notions of *sense* and *reference*.
- ▶ The latter solves the same problems without recourse to *sense*.
- ▶ But it relies on the controversial *descriptivism*, taking names as disguised descriptions.
- ▶ Who wins?

# Talk outline

Russell's Theory of Descriptions

Strawson's objection

Donnellan's objection

Conclusion

# Equivalence

- ▶ Russell is relating the following sorts of sentence:
  - (D) The  $F$  is  $G$
  - (R) There is exactly one  $F$ , and it is  $G$
- ▶ What *exactly* is the relationship between these sentences?
- ▶ Options include:
  1. (D) and (R) *mean* the same
  2. (D) has a *logical form* revealed by (R)
  3. (D) and (R) are *logically equivalent*

# Equivalence

- ▶ Talk of *meaning* and *logical form* is somewhat obscure.
- ▶ *Logical equivalence*, on the other hand, is clear cut:  
**Equivalence** Two sentences  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  are *logically equivalent* iff the arguments  $S_1 \therefore S_2$  and  $S_2 \therefore S_1$  are both valid.
- ▶ Further, equivalence is the *weakest* of the options.
- ▶ If (D) and (R) aren't even equivalent, then the other options must fail too.

# Equivalence

- ▶ Equivalence is cheap.
- ▶ Consider Casimir Lewy's example:
  1. Rain is good for the crops.
  2. If anyone were to broadcast on the radio that rain is good for the crops, she would be broadcasting a truth.
- ▶ Further, we know how to defeat an equivalence claim: give a case where one is true and the other false.

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- ▶ Recall that Frege thought definite descriptions *referred*.
- ▶ Russell denied this: definite descriptions don't refer.
- ▶ They abbreviate 'There is exactly one F, and it is G'.
- ▶ There's no name there.
- ▶ Russell thought that
  - ▶  $K$  The present King of France is bald.  
is false.
- ▶ Strawson, in 'On referring' (1950), thinks that  $K$  is neither true nor false.
- ▶ So Strawson is agreeing with Frege.

## Strawson's case

- ▶ 'The present King of France' *presupposes* that there is a present King of France.
- ▶ If there is no present King of France, then your attempt to say something was unsuccessful.
- ▶ Presupposition is not entailment:
  - ▶ If  $P$  logically entails  $Q$ , then if  $Q$  is false, then  $P$  is false.
  - ▶ If  $P$  presupposes  $Q$ , then if  $Q$  is false, then  $P$  is neither true nor false.

## Reference

- ▶ Why think this? Look at how people speak.
- ▶ If someone said 'The present King of France is bald', you wouldn't say 'That's false'.
- ▶ You'd say:  
'You're confused. There is no present King of France'.
- ▶ Strawson thinks this is because of the presupposition failure.
- ▶ So (D) and (R) are not equivalent:
  - ▶ There is exactly one present King of France, and he's bald – False
  - ▶ The present King of France is bald – Neither true nor false

## Defending Russell.

- ▶ We can help Russell by considering some conversational maxims.
- ▶ Conversation is a cooperative activity guided by maxims.
- ▶ There's more to being a helpful speaker than:
  - Assert a sentence whenever you know it's true.
- ▶ Imagine you're asked:
  - Have you stopped murdering puppies?
- ▶ The right answer is: 'No!'
- ▶ But you'd say: 'I haven't stopped because I never started!'
- ▶ This answer is more informative.

# The Maxim of Quantity

- ▶ In his *Studies in the Way of Words* (1989), Paul Grice proposes:

Be as informative as is appropriate for the conversation

- ▶ This explains why you would say

'I haven't stopped because I never started!'

rather than just

No!

- ▶ Strawson is right that we wouldn't say  
'The present King of France is bald' is false.
- ▶ But that doesn't mean that it *isn't* false.

# The Maxim of Quantity

- ▶ For Russell, 'The present King of France is bald' is false if any of these fail:
  1. There is at least one present King of France
  2. There is at most one present King of France
  3. Every present King of France is bald
- ▶ Saying 'It's false' is indifferent between these options.
- ▶ It's more informative to say:  
'There is no present King of France'.

## Defending Russell

- ▶ There is a difference between *being true* and *being taken to be true*.
- ▶ Russell would say that 'The present King of France is bald' is false.
- ▶ But it may be taken as neither true nor false, given conversational maxims.
- ▶ Further, Strawson's story struggles with negative existentials:  
The present King of France doesn't exist
- ▶ Surely there's no presupposition of existence here.

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## Attributive and referential

- ▶ Keith Donnellan, in 'Reference and definite descriptions' (1966) raises different objections.
- ▶ 'The  $F$  is  $G$ ' could have two different uses:
  - Attributive use *Whatever* is  $F$  is  $G$
  - Referential use *That*  $F$  is  $G$
- ▶ 'The murderer of Smith is clearly insane'
- ▶ Attributive use: murder scene
- ▶ Referential use: court room
- ▶ For Donnellan, Russell is correct about the attributive use.
- ▶ And Strawson is correct about the referential use.
- ▶ They are wrong in that they neglect this distinction.

## Counterexamples

- ▶ Focussing on the referential use, where does Russell go wrong?
- ▶ Russell wants 'The  $F$  is  $G$ ' (D) to be equivalent to 'There is exactly one  $F$ , and it is  $G$ ' (R).
- ▶ Now consider:
  - We're at a party.
  - I say 'The historian is drinking a martini', intending to refer to a particular person.
  - My intended message is true: *that* person is drinking a martini.
  - But 'There is exactly one historian and they are drinking a martini' is false:
    - unknownst to me, there are several historians present.
- ▶ So this is a case where (D) is true and (R) false.

# Counterexamples

- ▶ Now consider:

We're at a party.

I say 'The historian is drinking a martini', intending to refer to a particular person.

My intended message is false: *that* person is not drinking a martini.

But 'There is exactly one historian and they are drinking a martini' is true.

- ▶ So this is a case where (D) is false and (R) true.

## Saul Kripke

- ▶ Saul Kripke, in 'Speaker's reference and semantic reference' (1977), defends Russell here.
- ▶ Sometimes people say one thing and mean another.
- ▶ Imagine someone asks me 'Is Kanye a good rapper?' and I answer 'He's a good producer'.
- ▶ Or I tell you 'The book is on the table'. It's actually a dresser, but you immediately understand.

## Speak meaning and sentence meaning

- ▶ These cases help to distinguish two kinds of meaning:
  - Sentence** the literal meaning of a sentence
  - Speaker** the claim someone is intending to express
- ▶ Kripke argues that Russell gets the sentence meaning right.
- ▶ Donnellan's objections are targeted at speaker meaning.
- ▶ And all Russell wanted was sentence meaning.

## Court room case

- ▶ Back to the court room.
- ▶ You say 'The murderer of Smith is insane', intending to pick out Jones and say he's insane.
- ▶ Jones is insane but also innocent.
- ▶ The real murderer is perfectly sane.
- ▶ The sentence meaning is:  
'Exactly one person murdered Smith and they are insane'.
- ▶ This is false.
- ▶ But the intention is to say something true.

## Defending Russell

- ▶ Imagine that we speak Russellish, where Russell's Theory is stipulated to be true.
- ▶ Could the speakers of Russellish make the same mistakes?
- ▶ Yes: the Russellish speaker would still say:  
'The murderer of Smith is insane'.
- ▶ This is good evidence that we already speak Russellish.

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## Who wins?

- ▶ Russell wins if he can solve the problems.
- ▶ We've seen two arguments that his analysis is incorrect.
- ▶ We've seen that, by distinguishing truth from intended message, both can be solved.
- ▶ But that leaves descriptivism.