

24.251 Exercise 1  
M.I.T. student

1) The three main puzzles mentioned by Russell in “On Denoting” are:

(a) Our understanding of the meaning of sentences such as

(i) The father of the current King of France was shot  
seem to make necessary the existence of some individual/ object in the world who is the subject of the sentence, that is, who fathered the current King of France, under a purely referential theory. Before we even worry about whether or not this individual was shot, and therefore whether the statement which is the meaning of the sentence is true or false, we are confronted with the problem that the sentence seems to claim the existence of an individual which certainly does not exist (since there is no current King of France).

(b) When we make statements such as

(ii) The author of the book was Sir Walter Scott,  
under a purely referential theory, since “the author of the book” and “Sir Walter Scott” refer to the same person in the world, the statement can be reduced to “the author of the book was the author of the book”, or “Sir Walter Scott was Sir Walter Scott”, since both terms point to the same individual – they ought to be freely interchangeable. But (with the exception of phrases like “A horse is a horse”) a statement that seems to take the form “a = a” or “b = b” seems much less meaningful – seems as if it contains much less information – than the statement “a = b”. Since we often make statements of the form “a = b” which seem useful and informative, a good theory of meaning out to account for that.

(c) We would like to be able to judge the truth value of sentences like

(iii) The largest prime number does not exist  
without self-contradiction. We would like to say such a sentence is true, but without asserting any kind of existence. If we say something like “there does not exist x such that x is the largest prime number” (equivalently,  $[[\text{NOT} [\text{THERE EXISTS } x]][x = p]]$ ), we have to face the problem that “the largest prime number” is “the largest prime number” (that  $[p = p]$ ).

Russell proposes to solve problem (a) by changing the form of (our representation) of the meaning of the sentence from identity between referents in the real world to a form composed of quantifiers and logical statements, that is, in (i), “the father of the current King of France, serves to contribute to the meaning of the sentence it appears in, even though there is no such individual. Russell would translate (i) as something like:

(iv) “there exists x ((for all y such that  $Fy$ ,  $y = x$ ) and x was shot)”,  
where the predicate  $Fy$  stands for “y fathered the current King of France”. We can then evaluate (iv) to false, rather than being stuck at calling it nonsense. (iv) does not entail the existence of any y such that  $Fx$  is true; it merely makes statements about every such y (that may or may not exist). This is preferable to an evaluation of (iv) as either true or false under a purely referential theory, because then, regardless of whether we evaluated (iv) as true or false, it would seem to entail the existence of the individual referred to as the father of the current King of France.

Russell proposes to solve problem (b) by distinguishing between names and definite descriptions. He treats names as referential (for example, Sir Walter Scott refers to Sir Walter Scott), but he treats definite descriptions much like sentence (iv); to clarify, he treats definite descriptions as being composed of quantifiers and predicates involving variables, so that, as in (iv), we can evaluate a description based on its possible contribution to the meaning of the sentence as a whole, rather than by treating it as a pointer to a real world individual (and thus indistinguishable from a name). Then (ii), instead of looking like “s = s” (‘s’ for ‘Scott’), looks like “[the individual named Sir Walter Scott, s] is equal to [the x in the statement concerning authoring the book, that is, there exists an x such that x

authored the book and for all  $y$  such that  $y$  authored the book,  $y$  equals  $x$ ]", in other words, taking  $x$  from the previous expression, the sentence means that  $x = s$ . Then there is viable informative content in sentences of identity, which supports our use of such statements (in real life use of language).

Russell proposes to solve problem (c) by similar methods; that is, by using predicates instead of references, phrases can contribute to the meaning of the sentence as a whole without being tied to the existence of real-world objects directly. So instead of saying that there is no  $x$  such that  $x$  is some name ("the largest prime number"), we can say there is no  $x$  that fulfills some predicate, [[NOT [THERE EXISTS  $x$ ]][s.t.  $Px$ ]], equivalently, "there does not exist  $x$  such that  $Px$  is true", where  $Px$  is being the largest prime.

2) I do think Russell's solutions are satisfactory to all three puzzles, in that the problems as he outlines them are addressed. I found it harder to follow Russell's solution to the first problem than his solutions to the last two problems, but I do not see explicitly any issue I would take with his first solution. However, I don't think that Russell's solutions are necessarily representative of how people use language and compute meaning in real life. For example, judging sentences as either true or false does not seem to be the only type of validity judgment we pass. I think if asked about "the current King of France is pregnant" versus "the current Queen of France is pregnant", most people would judge the former as not only false, but nonsensical. False before it "gets out of the gate", to use an expression from our class discussion. So we seem to evaluate the structure of the sentence as well, not just the fulfillment of the relevant predicates (that is, we might look at "is this predicate allowed?" before "does this subject fulfill this predicate?"). It could also be that questions such as this – about whether or not a sentence is judged as true or false or goes through some other process – could be resolved by partitioning semantics from pragmatics. But if that is the argument, I would like to use a systematic and logical approach to partitioning the subjects, as opposed to relegating all un-semantically-soluble problems to the realm of pragmatics. In addition, how we construct the predicates is unclear – somehow we are using words and syntax to assemble the statement meaning as laid out by Russell, but at the level of the individual definitions of the words that form, for example, the predicates, I don't understand how we extract meaning. That is, it seems as if the process by which the meanings of words are constructed remains unclear. Somehow the words we know point to meanings which we have gathered from the world around us (our experience, our innate brain structure), but how those meanings are constructed from real experience is not explained.

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