

The New Theory of Denoting

"[e]verything, nothing, and something are not assumed to have any meaning in isolation, but a meaning is assigned to every proposition in which they occur."

Essentially Russell applies the theory of quantification to treat these as we now do. For example, "All men are mortal" comes to "if x is a man then x is mortal" is true for all values of x .

Extension of the Theory to Definite Descriptions

Russell claims the *same thing* should be said about **definite descriptions**—it's misleading to ask "what does "the president of the United States" refer to?" That's surprising!

His proposal: "The F is G " means

"Some x is an F , any y that is an F is x , and x is G "

or, ignoring some twists in the analysis:

"There is a unique F , namely x , and x is a G "

E.g.

"The president of the United States is in Moscow this week"

means

"There is a unique president of the United States, x , and x is in Moscow this week"

So definite descriptions are used to make *general claims*. They are, in some sense, not 'about' particular people.

Back to the Three Puzzles

The main motivation to adopt something like Russell's resolution is to address his three puzzles about denoting.

Puzzle 1: Intensionality of Belief Reports. Why can (1) be true while (2) is false?

- (1) George IV wondered whether the author of *Waverley* was Scott.
- (2) George IV wondered whether Scott was Scott.

Russell now has an easy answer: "the author of *Waverley*" is not a referring term, but is contributing a complex quantificational structure. So, of course, (2) is not obtained by (1) from a substitution of coreferents.

But wait, there's more! Once Russell says the definite descriptions introduce quantifiers, there are now two things with 'scope' in (1): the attitude report, and the uniqueness claim of the description. In English, when a sentence contains two expressions with scope, typically one can get ambiguities by exchanging their scope (cf. "Everyone loves someone"). So Russell predicts there are two readings of (1), given by (1') and (1''). And there *do* seem to be two such readings.

- (1') George IV wondered whether there was a unique author of *Waverley*, *x*, such that *x* was Scott.
- (1'') There is a unique author of *Waverley*, *x*, such that George IV wondered whether Scott was *x*.

(1') and (1'') differ in the "scope" of the quantifier "there is a unique...". In (1') it takes narrow scope with respect to "George IV wondered..." and in (1'') it takes wide scope.

Exercise: Russell's theory can be applied to sentences containing multiple definite descriptions. Consider:

- (2) The red spy and the blue spy are spies.
- (3) Jones believes the red spy and the blue spy are spies.

What's the logical form of (2) according to Russell? How many *logically distinct* "readings" (that could differ in truth-value) of (3) can you get due to scope ambiguities? Which of those readings imputes some trivial beliefs to Jones?

Puzzle 2: Law of Excluded Middle. Recall our allegedly true logical claim (3).

- (4) The king of France is bald or the king of France is not bald.

This has a negated claim involving a definite description, namely (4)

- (5) The king of France is not bald.

What does this analyze to? Again, there is an ambiguity. It could mean either (5') or (5'')

- (5') It is not the case that there is a unique king of France, *x*, such that *x* is bald.
- (5'') There is a unique king of France, *x*, such that *x* is not bald.

(5') is obviously true. (5'') is false. Moreover, (5')—the claim where the negation takes "wide scope" with respect to the definite description is the one relevant to the law of the excluded middle. So we can say which of the two disjuncts in (4) is true: the second. And we now understand why.

Puzzle 3: Puzzle of Negative Existentials. Recall our trouble:

(6) The king of France doesn't exist.

Seems true. But how? Well, now we see that "the king of France" isn't talking about a particular (fictional or non-existent) person. Rather, it's a tool for making a *general* claim: a claim about how many kings of France there are, and what those kings are up to. So there's no problem about non-existent entities being the subject of (6). Perhaps (6) is equivalent to "it is not the case that there exists one and only one King of France".

But wait? What about (7) or (8)?

(7) Santa Claus doesn't exist.

(8) Bigfoot doesn't exist.

These seem to involve *names*, not definite descriptions.

Russell claims that sometimes names can be *disguised* definite descriptions. So, for example, "Superman" might just *mean* the very same thing as "The man who flies around Metropolis in red and blue tights". Thus we can resolve problems about names the same way we can resolve them for definite descriptions.

The same holds true of names which can't be substituted for each other in intensional contexts like belief reports.

How many names must be treated as disguised descriptions? Well, as many as can figure in Frege Puzzles...