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THE SPEECH ACT OF REFERRING*

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ABSTRACT. The Speech Act of Referring. *A*ccording to the speech-act theory whenever we utter a sentence, we perform two acts: the act of referring and that of predicating. By referring, we set out an object that we speak of, and by predicating, we attribute a feature to the object. My paper is a short presentation of Gottlob Frege's theory of meaning and Bertrand Russell's theory of description. I will try to outline the core concepts and thoughts/arguments that even today define the debate about reference in the analytic tradition.

Keywords: *Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, referring, description, names, sense, meaning, reference*

Gottlob Frege

Frege's Previous Stand and Its Critique

Frege in his study, *On Sense and Meaning*, examined the problem of meaning through the question of identity (equality). His point of departure is very clearly presented at the beginning of his article: 'Equality gives rise to challenging questions which are not altogether easy to answer. Is it a relation? A relation between objects, or between names or signs of objects?'[1] Frege's question is whether identity is defined as the identity of two objects, or rather as the identity between the names of these objects. Mark Sainsbury underscores the fact, that before his current one, Frege had a different theory, outlined in the *Begriffsschrift*.

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[1] Gottlob Frege, *"On Sense and Meaning"*, in Ed. Brian McGuinness, *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*, Basil Blackwell, 1984, p. 157.

According to his previous view, which after a while he rejected as a false one; two names were considered identical if the names referred to the same object. This is called the metalinguistic standpoint, according to which identity is seen as a relation between the names of objects.[2] Considering the metalinguistic view a problem arises: if identity statements express a relation between names of objects, in what measure do they describe the world (if in any), or do they just concern the language? According to the metalinguistic standpoint identity statements don't concern the world, but the language, in which case 'the sentence a = b would no longer refer to the subject matter, but only to its mode of designation; we would express no proper knowledge by its means. But in many cases this is just what we want to do.'[3]

Frege revised his previous theory and proposed a new one, saying that 'if the sign "a" is distinguished from the sign "b" only as an object (here, by means of its shape), not as a sign (i.e. not by the manner in which it designates something), the cognitive value of a = a becomes essentially equal to that of a = b, provided a = b is true. A difference can arise only if the difference between the signs corresponds to a difference in the mode of presentation of the thing designated. Let a, b, c be the lines connecting the vertices of a triangle with the midpoints of the opposite sides. The point of intersection of a and b is then the same as the point of intersection of b and c. So we have different designations for the same point, and these names ("point of intersection of a and b", "point of intersection of b and c") likewise indicate the mode of presentation; and hence the statement contains actual knowledge. It is natural, now, to think of there being connected with a sign (name, combination of words, written mark), besides that which the sign designates, which may be called the meaning of the sign, also what I should like to call the sense of the sign, wherein the mode of presentation is contained.'[4]

According to Frege's new theory, it is not just the reference, namely the object that is relevant in case of an identity statement, but also the meaning.[5] The following two examples will shed light on why Frege's new theory managed to grasp the main point of the issue:

(1) Phosphorus is identical with Phosphorus.

[2] Cf. Mark Sainsbury, "Filozófiai logika", in Ed. A. C. Grayling, *Filozófiai kalauz*, 1997. p. 80.

[3] Gottlob Frege, *"On Sense and Meaning"*, in Ed. Brian McGuinness, *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*, Basil Blackwell, 1984, p. 157.

[4] *Ibidem*, pp. 157–158.

[5] Throughout this article the word 'meaning' stands for 'sense' when directly quoting Frege, and the word 'reference' stands for 'meaning' in the same case.

(2) Phosphorus is identical with Hesperus.

Both of these statements express identity, however there is a major difference between the two examples. In case of (1) the identity expressed is self-evident. The structure of the statement is

(3) a = a.

In Kantian terms: both (1) and (3) are a priori and analytic statements. It is as if we said

(4) All bachelors are unmarried,

since the identity is based solely on the examination of the language. We need not know anything about the world to be able to decide on the truth-value of (1), (3) or (4). (2) however resembles the following structure

(5) a = b.

We cannot decide on the truth-value of (2) without examining *a* and *b* separately, and then deciding on their identity. (2) is not an a priori analytic statement, but it has cognitive (informative) value. When the Babylonian astronomers discovered the truth of (2), they did not just simply discover a trivial identity, for if this was the case, they would have had discovered the identity of Hesperus and Phosphorus previously. However, this was not the case. The ancient astronomers found out something new. They have realized that Phosphorus was the same as Hesperus, and that they were both names of the planet Venus. Both Hesperus and Phosphorus, like 'the point of intersection of a and b' and 'the point of intersection of b and c' refer to the different modes of defining things and thus have cognitive value.

As a summary: Frege by considering (1) as trivial, and (2) as informative, discovered that the meaning of (1) and (2) are different. It was clear for him, that if the informative values of two sentences differed, the meaning of the two sentences also differ. If we considered the sentences

(1') The names 'Phosphorus' and 'Phosphorus' refer to the same object, and

(2') The names 'Phosphorus' and 'Hesperus' refer to the same object,

both an expression of Frege's previous metalinguistic view – and compared them to (1) and (2) – the ones expressing Frege's new theory – we would reach the conclusion that the meaning of sentences (1) and (2) differ, but would face two difficulties nonetheless. First we would immediately notice that while (2) provides information about the world, (2') states something about the language, and secondly knowing that the act of naming is a conventional act (2') would inform us about the arbitrary nature of this conventional act. Nevertheless, the identity of Phosphorus and Hesperus cannot be a matter of a conventional act.

Based on (2) and (2') Frege concluded that identity (equality) is not a relation between the names of objects. This was in fact the reason that made him give up his previous position and recognize that when one examines the sign, besides the object of a sign, the meaning of it has to be considered too. It also explained the fact that the meaning and the truth-value of sentences (1) and (2) differed.

Frege's theory successfully deals with the issues that represent a challenge for the Millian theory of names. According to John Stuart Mill, names do not have a meaning (connotation), only a reference (denotation). Mill's theory is a denotative theory of meaning, which essentially 'identifies the essence of a linguistic expression with the reference of the expression',[6] in our case identifies the sense of a name with its reference. Frege with the help of (1) and (2) pointed out, that although both the names of 'Phosphorus' and 'Hesperus' refer to the same planet (the planet Venus), the sense or the meaning of the two sentences are different.

Let us now turn to Frege's theory of meaning.

Frege on Meaning

In his study, Frege analyses the tripartite relation between a sing, its meaning, and the reference. He claims that 'The regular connection between a sign, its sense and what it means is of such a kind that to the sign there corresponds a definite sense and to that in turn a definite thing meant, while to a given thing meant (an object) there does not belong only a single sign. The same sense has different expressions in different languages or even in the same language.'[7]

According to Frege, every sign has a meaning, and every sense has a reference, that is an object that it refers to. Consider for example the name 'Aristotle'. The name 'Aristotle' has the following meanings: 1. the ancient philosopher born in

[6] Márton Miklós, "A referencia problémái", *Kellék,* 2005, 27–28. p. 142.

[7] Gottlob Frege, *"On Sense and Meaning"*, in Ed. Brian McGuinness, *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*, Basil Blackwell, 1984, p. 159.

Stagira; 2. Plato's most famous disciple; 3. Alexander the Great's master; and then there is the name's reference, which was Aristotle the man. After this Frege make the following remark: 'It may perhaps be granted that every grammatically well-formed expression figuring as a proper name always has a sense. But this is not to say that to the sense there also corresponds a thing meant.'[8] It may seem to us that Frege contradicts himself. Earlier we saw that he claimed, that for every sign there is a corresponding meaning, and for every meaning there is a references; and now he is claiming, that for every sign there is a meaning, but not in every case there is a reference that corresponds to a certain meaning. It is not hard, however, to follow Frege's argumentation. He says that every grammatically well-formed expression has a meaning, but this meaning does not always have a corresponding object attached to it.

There are cases in which the object in the world is missing, but this does not entail, that that particular expression does not have a meaning. Take for example the expression 'the largest natural number'. We know that the largest natural number does not exist, because we can always name a number that is larger than the number preceding it; this, however, does not prevent a competent user of the language from understanding the meaning of the expression. We can of course always add such expressions to the list as 'Odysseus' (or any of the mythological characters) or 'Winnie the Pooh' (or any of the fictional characters), etc.

Consider the sentence

(6) Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep.

Most probably, Odysseus did not exist in real life. This however, does not stop us from understanding the sentence (its meaning). In connection with (6) Frege draws our attention to a different problem.

We saw earlier, that the meaning of the names is given by those definite descriptions that satisfy the reference of the names. This was the case with 'Aristotle'; the definite descriptions (ancient philosopher born in Stagira, Plato's most famous disciple; master of Alexander the Great) gave us the meaning of the name, and the reference (Aristotle himself) satisfied these meanings.

Besides names, Frege successfully applied the meaning–references pair to sentences also. He observed, that substituting a word with another word that has the same reference changes the thought expressed by the sentence, but not the truth-value of the sentence. In case of (1) and (2) the sentences' truth-values were the same, while their meanings differed. According to Frege, the meaning of the two

[8] *Ibidem*.

names were different, but their reference was the same. It was this thought that Frege applied to sentences too.

Returning to (6) Frege claims, that although the sentence is a meaningful sentence because everyone knows what we are talking about, it does not have a truth-value. We cannot decide whether the sentence is true or false. Based on this thought Frege reached the conclusion, that for us to know a sentence's truth value the names in that sentence must have a references. Therefore, in order for one to decide on a sentence's truth-value, one must designate the references of the names in that particular sentence.

It should not be a problem, says Frege, if a sentence does not have a truth-value and we are only interested in its meaning. Good instances are in this case both the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. We understood and enjoyed both of these works (we didn't consider them meaningless like Mill's theory did), but the minute we became interested in the truth value of these epic poems' sentences – beyond their meaning – the references of the names' have become important.

By underscoring the importance of meaning beyond that of the reference, Frege made a revolutionary step in the philosophy of language: he developed a two-dimensional semantics, in which both meaning and reference play a crucial part. By doing so, he showed that Mill's theory, which reduces a name's sense to its reference, could not be complete. Frege also showed that the meaning is not only important in case of the names, but also in case of the sentences. What he could not deal with properly though, was the problem concerning the truth-value of sentences, in which fictional entities are present; this is because according to Frege's theory we cannot decide on the truth-value of sentences that contain names without a reference.

Bertrand Russell

Russell's Theory of Description

Bertrand Russell presented his theory of description in his study entitled *On Denoting*. We can briefly summarize Russell's theory in the following way: the base of the theory is a proposition C(x), in which x is an undetermined variable. After this Russell introduces the indefinable basic expression 'C(x) is always true', and then interprets the most fundamental denoting expressions of 'everything', 'nothing' and 'something' with both the help of the proposition and the indefinable basic expression. According to his definitions the meaning of these denoting expressions are

Def 1 C(everything) = 'C is always true';
Def 2 C(nothing) = '"C(x) is false" is always true';

Def 3 C(something) = 'It is false that "C(x) is false" is always true'.[9]

According to Russell, denoting expressions[10] do not have a meaning; however, every expression that has a denoting expression as its part has a meaning. Thus, the expression 'a man' does not have a meaning, whereas if we said 'I met a man', the expression would have a meaning and could be interpreted according to the above-mentioned definitions.

After the most fundamental denoting expressions, Russell zeroes in on the analysis of the definite descriptions, expressions containing the word 'the'. According to him, 'these are by far the most interesting and difficult of denoting phrases.'[11] Whenever a definite expression occurs, it expresses singularity (uniqueness), like in the sentence

(7) X was *the* father of Charles II.

Russell claims that by uttering this sentence 'we not only assert that x had a certain relation to Charles II, but also that nothing else had this relation.'[12] With this thought, we arrived at one of the strengths of the Russellian theory.

According to Russell, one of the tests of any theory of description is the problem of uniqueness. It is the criteria of uniqueness that helps us to decide on a sentence's truth-value. Russell says, that if there is no unique being to which what we say applies, the sentence is false. This thought makes Russell reject Meinong's theory, which 'regards any grammatically correct denoting phrase as standing for an object.'[13] According to Meinong's idea, both the largest natural number and the king of France are objects that is things that exist.

This, however, can easily be considered a violation of the law of contradiction, because Meinong's idea takes the present king of France both an existing entity and

[9] Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting" *Mind*, Vol. 14, No. 56, (Oct., 1905), p. 480.
[10] 'By a "denoting phrase" I mean a phrase such as any one of the following: a man, some man, any man, every man, all man, the present King of England, the present King of France, the Centre of mass of the Solar System at the first instant of the twentieth century, the revolution of the earth round the sun, the revolution of the sun round the earth.' *Ibiden*.
[11] *Ibidem*. p. 481.
[12] *Ibidem*. pp. 481–482.
[13] *Ibidem*. p. 482.

a non-existing one at the same time. If this is true, such theories have to be eliminated. The criteria of uniqueness is not only breached in cases where there is no object satisfying the conditions presented by the sentence, but also in cases where more than one object satisfy these conditions. This is the case with the sentence

(8) The door is creaking.

(8) is false, because the criteria of uniqueness is not satisfied, since there is more than one door in the world.

After the criteria of uniqueness, Russell focuses on the criticism of Frege's theory. Although Frege successfully applied his sense–reference distinction to sentences containing non-existing entities, he could not resolve the problem of truth-values in regards to these sentences. Frege considered (6) to have a meaning, but could not decide on its truth-value, because the name 'Odysseus' didn't have a reference. From this point of view, Russell's theory is more efficient. Russell claims that whenever we have to deal with a sentence that contains a name without a reference, we will consider the sentence to be false. In this respect, Frege's views are similar to those of Meinong, because it considers fictional entities to be real entities, and that is clearly not the case.

Based on the former paragraph we might consider that Russell's view is an enhanced version of the Fregeian one, and that this latter one is the basis of Russell's theory. If we pay close attention however, we will see that Russell's theory is a completely different theory from that of Frege's. While Frege applied the sense–reference distinction to all sentences, Russell did not consider the distinction and built his theory on a completely different principle.

Russell's Reading of Frege

It was Imre Ruzsa, who in his study *Russell kontra Frege* underscored Russell's mistake about the Fregeian theory. The study focuses on a problem (according to Russell: 'in case of the definite descriptions differentiating between sense and reference leads to inevitable confusion')[14] that was mostly overlooked by the critics.

The critics did not pay enough attention to the fact that Russell identified the denoting sign (that is the word) with its meaning, and hence he could not differentiate between a denoting expression and the quotation of the same denoting expression.

[14] Ruzsa Imre, "Russell kontra Frege", in *Tertium non datur*, Ed. Máté András, Ruzsa Imre, Osiris, 2000, p. 54.

If we want to say something about the meaning of an expression, says Russell, we should put the expression between quotation marks. Ruzsa disagrees with Russell, claiming that we put an expression between quotation marks, if we want to talk about the name of the expression. Ruzsa also points out that this resolution of Russell leads to a complication from the start.

Consider the following examples

(9) The centre of mass of the Solar System is a point, not a denoting expression.

(10) The 'centre of mass of the Solar System' is a denoting expression and not a point.

(9) is correct, (10) however can only be accepted with certain reservations, that is only in the case when the expression enclosed in quotation marks serves as the name of the expression. (10) thus cannot be accepted if it serves as the sense of the expression. According to Frege's theory, we cannot say about the 'centre of mass of the Solar System' that it is a denoting expression. Apparently, Russell made Frege's theory more complicated, and thus misinterpreted it. Frege advised us to talk about a C expression's meaning using the phrase 'the sense of the expression C', but Russell did not differentiate between the sign and its sense.

In order to show Russell's error Ruzsa suggests us to use

(11) MEAN C

for an expression's meaning, and

(12) DEN C

for an expression's reference (an object that is denoted by an expression, that is the denotatum), and let 'C' be a variable that can only be substituted by a linguistic expression. In case we do not follow these restrictions, complications illustrated by the following example will occur:

(13) MEAN (the president of France), DEN (the president of France).

Since the president of France is not a linguistic expression but a person, it can neither have a meaning, nor a reference; unlike in the example

(14) MEAN (‘the president of France’), DEN (‘the president of France’),

where ‘the president of France’ is a linguistic expression that has both meaning and reference.

Let us now focus our attention on an issue that was raised by Russell, and see why he did not agree with the Fregeian solution, and whether his criticism of it was well founded.

Russell’s resolution

According to Russell’s

(15) The author of Waverley is Scott.

(16) Scott is Scott.

(15) and (16) are identity statements, but they differ in that George IV. did not want to know whether (16) was true. Based on this Russell concluded that (15) and (16) are not identical sentences, although

(17) DEN (‘the author of Waverley’) = DEN (‘Scott’) = Scott.

Russell claimed, that the two sentences differ because in case of (15) not only the reference of the expression ‘the author of Waverley’ is relevant, but also its meaning. Russell eliminated the meaning. According to him, a definite description does not have a meaning. Russell dismissed the concept of meaning when he reconstructed the structure of the definite description ‘the author of Waverley’ in the following way:

(18) $\exists x \{[Wx \& \forall y (Wy \rightarrow x = y)] \& Sx\}$.

In this case, Frege would claim that the truth value of (15) and (16) are identical, but

(19) MEAN (‘the author of Waverley’) ≠ MEAN (‘Scott’); the case is rather

(20) MEAN (the author of Waverley) = MEAN [DEN (‘the author of Waverley’)].

We arrive at (20) based on

(21) MEAN (C) = MEAN [DEN (C*)],

where [DEN (C*)] is the quotation of the linguistic expression; so the final solution would be

(22) DEN ('the author of Waverley') = the author of Waverley = Scott.

According to Ruzsa, 'Russell deems it chaotic, that wanting to speak about the meaning of an expression C, we arrive at the meaning of C's reference.'[15] Russell's remark is wrong, says Ruzsa, because in (21) 'we need to substitute C with the description (and not with its quotation), and substitute C* with the description's quotation.'[16] The above-mentioned examples show quite correctly, that Russell identifies an expression with the quotation of the expression. Russell instead of using the quotation marks appropriately, thus differentiating between an expression and that same expression's quotation, from the start presupposes that these two are identical; and wrongly says about Frege's idea that 'the relation of the meaning to the denotation involves certain rather curious difficulties, which seem in themselves sufficient to prove that the theory which leads to such difficulties must be wrong.'[17]

Now that we have seen Russell's mistake, we can safely say that he misinterpreted Frege's theory, and wrongfully criticized it, because as Ruzsa puts it 'the real important remark is that this text [Russell's that is] doesn't concern Frege's theory of meaning.'[18]

We also have to be careful when, at another point, Russell seemingly also criticizes Frege's position. For Frege, names and definite descriptions belong to the same logical category, and the function of both names and definite descriptions is to refer to objects. From a Fregeian point of view names and definite descriptions are referring expressions, thus the name 'Aristotle', as well as the definite description 'the ancient philosopher who was the master of Alexander the Great' refer to Aristotle. Russell does not accept this view, but shares Mill's thoughts, according to which the only function of a name is to name objects. However, Russell differentiates between logically proper names and names. Logically proper names have to name an existing

15 Ruzsa Imre, "Russell kontra Frege", in *Tertium non datur*, Ed. Máté András, Ruzsa Imre, Osiris, 2000, p. 59.
16 *Ibidem*, p. 60.
17 Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting", *Mind*, Vol. 14, No. 56, (Oct. 1905), p. 485.
18 Ruzsa Imre, "Russell kontra Frege", in *Tertium non datur*, Ed. Máté András, Ruzsa Imre, Osiris, 2000, p. 62.

object; otherwise they are not considered names. He then defines logically proper names with the help of the definite descriptions, and says that names like 'this', 'that', 'I' and similar expressions are logically proper names.

Now the following question arises: what can we say about names like 'Odysseus', 'Frege', etc., names that we usually regard as proper names? Russell claims, that because it is not certain that these names actually name an object or a person (we can question the existence of the name's reference), they cannot be considered logically proper names; they are in fact definite descriptions. Russell's argument for his claim is that the structure of the logically proper names is very different from the structure of the definite descriptions. The structure of a sentence containing logically proper names can be defined with a propositional function. For example the structure of the sentence

(23) I am a writer

is *Fa*, where *F* stands for a predicate and *a* stands for a logically proper name. In contrast with (23) the structure of the sentence

(24) The king of France is bald,

which doesn't contain a logically proper name, is more similar to the structure of

(25) Every French king is bald $\forall x (Fx \rightarrow Bx)$, or with

(26) There is (exists) a French king $\exists x (Fx \& Bx)$.

(25) and (26) are quantified propositions. Considering the structure of (25) and (26), the structure of (24) can be represented as

(24') $\exists x \{[Fx \& \forall y (Fy \rightarrow x = y)] \& Bx\}$.

The reading of (24') is: there is one and only one object, which is the king of France, and that is bald. The most important characteristic of Russell's theory is that the speaker commits herself to the existence of an object, at the same time the speaker also commits herself to the fact that there is only one object of that sort, and then she says something about the object; in other words: it attaches a predicate to the object. A sentence containing a definite description asserts that there is only one object that satisfies a certain attribute; in case of (24) the king of France satisfies

the attribute of baldness. A negative sentence, or negation that contains a definite description on the other hand claims, that there is no object that has a certain attribute.

(27) The king of France does not exist.

The logical form of (27) is

(28) ~∃x {[Fx & ∀y (Fy → x = y)].

By making (28) the interpretation of (27), Russell found a solution for the problem of sentences that state the existence of non-existent objects. Thus, we are not bound to accept, that besides those objects that really exist, there are – in the sense that they exist – also objects that do not exist, for in (28) we do not assert nonexistence, but negate existence.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

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