

Strawson, "On Referring"

We saw that the Simple Referential Theory of Meaning was too simple to be an adequate account of meaning. We did, however, learn that reference is an important notion—interesting in its own right and an important as a tool in understanding meaning.

Frege's interest was proper names (as I have presented him). He introduced the distinction between sense and nominatum (reference) to provide a fix for the four puzzles.

Russell's interest was definite descriptions. He introduced the distinction between grammatical form and logical form and argued that definite descriptions don't appear at the level of logical form.

1.
Russell Recap

Take the sentence:

(K) The present King of France is bald.

According to Russell, we can analyze this sentence into the conjunction of the following three propositions:

- i. There is at least one King of France. $\exists x(Kx)$
- ii. There is at most one King of France. $(x)(y)(Kx \ \& \ Ky \rightarrow x = y)$
- iii. Whatever is King of France is bald. $(x)(Kx \rightarrow Bx)$

Conjoined, we get:

(K*) There is one and only one King of France and he is bald. $\exists x(Kx \ \& \ (y)(Ky \rightarrow y = x) \ \& \ Bx)$

Russell's theory of descriptions allowed that propositions containing denoting phrases to possess a truth-value even if there was nothing referenced (denoted).

2.
Strawson

Strawson: Russell's theory of descriptions ignores some crucial features of language and, as a result, runs into trouble. My alternative view avoids this.

Strawson rejects the view that we should think about sentences in the abstract, concentrating on their mere logical properties. According to Strawson, we must pay attention to how sentences are *used* by *us* in *conversation*.

According to Strawson, reference is not an abstract relation between an expression/sentence and its reference (or nominatum). Rather, *referring* is an *act* performed by a speaker on a given occasion.

Expressions/sentences don't refer; people do.

Strawson's Distinctions:

- i. a sentence (i.e. a particular string of English terms)
- ii. a use of a sentence
- iii. an utterance of a sentence (i.e. some particular concrete utterance)

and

- a. an expression
- b. a use of an expression
- c. an utterance of an expression.

Meanings attach to sentences and expressions. Meanings are akin to ‘directions for use’ in making true or false assertions. An expression/sentence is meaningful if it has a legitimate use in the language for making true/false assertions.

But it is the **use** of a sentence that is either true or false, not the sentence itself. And it is the use of an expression that either does, or does not, refer.

3.

Our Old Friend: The King of France

First example:

Consider our sentence (**K**).

Russell and Strawson provide different answers the following question:

“[H]ow can such a sentence as ‘The king of France is bald’ be significant even when there is nothing which answers to the description it contains, i.e., in this case, nothing which answers to the description ‘The king of France?’”

In the reign of Louis XIV, Sally and Bob utter the sentence ‘The king of France is bald’.
(Suppose Sally utters it at t_1 and Bob utters it at t_2 .)

In the reign of Louis XV, Steve and Judy utter the sentence ‘The king of France is bald’.
(Suppose Steve utters it at t_3 and Judy utters it at t_4 .)

According to Strawson, it would be “natural and correct” (249) to say that *the same sentence* is uttered on all of these occasions. This is sameness with respect to (i).

Sally and Bob use the sentence in the same way; Steve and Judy use the sentence in the same way. This is sameness with respect to (i) and (ii); the same use of the same sentence. But Sally and Bob use the sentence in a different way than Steve and Judy.

But each individual person produces a different sound—that is, a different utterance of the same sentence, as in (iii).

What this shows:

“[W]e cannot talk of the sentence being true or false, but only of its being used to make a true or false assertion.... [Similarly] ‘[m]entioning’, or referring to, is not something an expression does; it is something that some one can use an expression to do. Mentioning, or referring to, something is a characteristic of a *use* of an expression, just as characteristics of a *use* of a sentence”

Now consider the following example:

Today, Jen and Chrissy utter the sentence ‘The king of France is bald’.
(Suppose Jen utters it at 10:52am and Chrissy at 2:45pm.)

Same sentence (as in (i)). Same use (as in (ii)). Different utterance (as in (iii)). But, we know that there is no present king of France. So, Megan and Kathryn aren’t talking about anything; they aren’t making a true, or a false, assertion. The question of the truth-or-falsity of their use simply doesn’t arise.

A sentence is significant if there exist “such language habits, conventions or rules that the sentence logically could be used to talk about something”. We account for the meaning of an expression (or a sentence) by accounting for the conventions governing the use of that expression. This is what Strawson means when he says that meaning is directions for use (in referring, or in making true or false assertions).

4.

In Sum

Strawson: when someone uses the expression 'the king of France' in a sentence, she does not *assert*, nor does what she says *entail*, a uniquely existential proposition. The use of the expression *signals* that a unique reference is being made; but the speaker does not, in using 'the...', state that certain conditions of existence are fulfilled. This, of course, is contrary to Russell.

So, according to Strawson, there are two false things Russell says about **(K)**:

1. that anyone now uttering (K) would be making a true assertion or a false assertion
2. part of what he would be asserting would be that there, at present, existed one and only one king of France.