

**Question: Explain Russell's Theory of Descriptions, and discuss the claim that the sense of a proper name is equivalent to a description of the object which the name picks out.**

Russell employed this theory in order to deal with sentences with constituents that refer to 1. unreal/non-existent things, 2. more than one thing (indefinite), and 3. one definite thing. Here, I'll explain some main concepts of the theory and, with reference to Russell's theory, Frege's '*Sense and Reference*', Saul Kripke's '*Naming and Necessity*', try to explore the claim that the sense of a proper name is equivalent to a description of the object which the name picks out.

How can it be that a sentence such as Russell's 'The King of France is bald' be both meaningful, in that we can comprehend it, and also significant, in that it is providing information about something, and yet simultaneously have a subject which is unreal? There is no King of France, and yet the sentence can be thought of as meaningful and significant. Russell's '*Theory of Descriptions*' explores the issues created by these types of sentences; sentences that contain non-referring expressions, in addition to the analysis of sentences which contain co-referring expressions, where even though two different expressions denote the same thing, they are not interchangeable.

Russell's Theory of (definite) Descriptions refers to a particular type of logical analysis of definite descriptions, where a definite description is a phrase like 'the A', and where A is a singular common noun or noun-phrase. It says that propositions of the form 'the A is B' mean that there is one thing that is A and that thing is B (or, to put it another way, at the very least there is one thing that is A, and at the very most one thing that is A, and whatever is A must be B). Russell's famous example 'The King of France is Bald' therefore means there's at least one King of France and at most one King of France, and thus whatever is a King of France is bald. Although this can be used to analyse other types of propositions that contain definite descriptions, in general, 'the A is the B' becomes 'Exactly one thing is A, exactly one thing is B, and whatever is A is B'. In Russell's analysis definite description itself is not directly defined as being able to be replaced by some other expression. The proposition which contains the definite description is treated as a whole and could be interchanged with another in which there is contained no definite description, but which varies comprehensively from the initial proposition in other ways also.

According to descriptivist theories, of which Russell's theory could be considered a variant proponent, proper names are either equal to their descriptions, or have their reference determined by virtue of the name being associated with a description that an object uniquely satisfies.

In '*Sense and Reference*', Frege says that for proper names the sense of a thing is constituted in the, normally definite, description that a speaker associates with said thing. Fregean sense being that thing which is grasped by the mind, a "meaning" in some non-technical way. Of course, the sense of a proper name can be numerous, differing from one person to the next or can be reworded in a multitude of ways. But for Frege, sense and representation are related by determination: references of names are determined by their senses as modes of representation.

Russell promoted a rather different idea. He distinguished between what he called an "ordinary" proper name and a "logically" proper name. Logically proper names are those such as *this* and *that* which refer directly to objects that can be immediately identified, whereas ordinary proper names are simply abbreviated

definite descriptions. 'Lewis' is just a shortened version of any relevant unique definite description. Russell believed that ordinary proper names are actually descriptions in disguise. So, whereas Frege says that 'Lewis' is a name, with a sense that is *equivalent* to some unique description, Russell says that 'Lewis' is not really a name at all, but is in itself a description. In seemingly rejecting Frege's sense-reference interpretation, Russell dismisses Fregean sense as semantic. For Russell, definite descriptions/names are not referencing at all and their meanings/senses are the truth conditions of a sentence's logical structure.

“Frege should be criticized for using the term ‘sense’ in two senses. For he takes the sense of a designator to be its meaning; and he also takes it to be the way its reference is determined. Identifying the two, he supposes that both are given by definite descriptions” (*Naming and Necessity*, p. 59).

Kripke's '*Naming and Necessity*' mounted an attack against descriptive theories but has been interpreted, understood, and misunderstood in various ways. Was he saying that because names are not interchangeable with descriptions that names do not have senses? Or was he rejecting the distinction between sense and reference? He proposed a Millian theory of names, according to which names do not have senses, and thought the Fregean notion of sense was inherently problematic in that meaning/semantic content and reference identification were treated as one. Instead, he says we have to think of *giving the meaning/semantic content* and *determining the reference* as separate.

If these remain conjoined, as Fregean view of names understands it, then statements that initially seem to be contingent truths, would in actual fact be necessary truths, knowable *a priori*.

1. Aristotle was a student of Plato.
2. The most famous student of Plato was a student of Plato.

Statement 1 is a contingent truth. But if we consider 'Aristotle' to simply mean 'the most famous student of Plato' then statement 1 and statement 2 are equivalent. But statement 2 is a necessary truth, knowable *a priori*, with no empirical investigation necessary, and so anything that is equal to a necessary truth must also be a necessary truth. Therefore, statement 1 is a necessary truth. But if a name's associated description only determines the reference, and doesn't provide any semantic content, of a name, we will be able to resist this unpalatable conclusion. For if 'Aristotle' and 'the most famous pupil of Plato' don't have the same meaning, then statement 1 and statement 2 are not equivalent, and may well express different propositions. Statement 2 may be necessary, but statement 1 is contingent.

Kripke rejected both that names are interchangeable with descriptions, and that they can have their reference determined by the mere fact that the name is connected to a description that is unique to said object. His casual theory of reference says that whilst a proper name refers to an object in all possible worlds in which it exists, descriptions would identify different objects in different possible worlds. Possible worlds here referring to the way things might have been in our world, and not some reference to a planet far away. The use of a *possible state of the world* perhaps would have made things clearer.

Could we not manufacture into existence (a twist on the Hesperus is Phosphorus/Venus is Venus example) two or more objects, or beings, that would be identical in every way, other than name, and subsequently imagine a circumstance where we would have to pick out one of these objects, or beings, purely by description then would we not be unable to do so according to Frege's stance? Would either Russell's or indeed Kripke's arguments being able to cope here? Could Kripke's idea of *a posteriori*

necessities, where facts that are necessarily true are deemed so only through empirical investigation, solve this? In our thought game we're imagining two or more identical objects, or beings, with different names only, and not one object with different names.