Sussex Research

A Strawsonian Objection to Russell’s Theory of Descriptions

Murali Ramachandran

Publication date
01-01-1993

Licence
This work is made available under the Copyright not evaluated licence and should only be used in accordance with that licence. For more information on the specific terms, consult the repository record for this item.

Citation for this work (American Psychological Association 7th edition)
Ramachandran, M. (1993). *A Strawsonian Objection to Russell’s Theory of Descriptions* (Version 1). University of Sussex. https://hdl.handle.net/10779/uos.23313905.v1

Published in
Analysis

Link to external publisher version
https://doi.org/10.2307/3328238

Copyright and reuse:
This work was downloaded from Sussex Research Open (SRO). This document is made available in line with publisher policy and may differ from the published version. Please cite the published version where possible. Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners unless otherwise stated. For more information on this work, SRO or to report an issue, you can contact the repository administrators at sro@sussex.ac.uk. Discover more of the University’s research at https://sussex.figshare.com/

Sussex Research Online

A Strawsonian Objection to Russell's Theory of Descriptions

Article (Unspecified)

Citation:

Ramachandran, Murali (1993) A Strawsonian Objection to Russell's Theory of Descriptions. Analysis, 53 (4). pp. 209-212. ISSN 00032638

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/2272/

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:
Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

http://sro.sussex.ac.uk

A Strawsonian Objection to Russell's Theory of Descriptions
From: *Analysis, 53 (1993) pp. 209-12.*

Murali Ramachandran
muralir@sussex.ac.uk

A Strawsonian Objection to Russell's Theory of Descriptions

The gist of one of Strawson's—by now, familiar—objections [3] to Russell's theory of descriptions [2] is that a speaker may, quite naturally and correctly, utter a sentence of the form 'the F is G' to talk about, and be understood as talking about, a particular F even when it is commonly known that there is more than one F. Yet, the objection continues, by Russell's theory (**RTD**) such an utterance would strictly speaking be false.

Modern Russellians—as is also well known—weather the attack by pointing out that the context in which an *incomplete* (definite) description is normally used will furnish either (a) an adequate 'completion' of the description or (b) an adequate delimitation of the domain of quantification. They come armed, moreover, with the Gricean distinction between *expressed* and *intended* propositions so that they can accommodate the intuition that utterances involving incomplete descriptions often convey *object-dependent* propositions. Since Strawson himself takes contextual features to aid the singling-out of objects when descriptions are used (see e.g. [3], pp. 21-22; [4], pp. 186-87), it would appear that these Russellian moves lead more or less to a stand off (see Neale [1] for a recent discussion).

Not quite. Strawson sought to displace RTD by bringing to our consideration normal, but (allegedly) RTD-countervailing, uses of descriptions. Russellians have generally responded, *not* by challenging Strawson's estimation of the (kinds of) circumstances in which descriptions are normally used, i.e. his appraisal of what counts as a 'normal' use, but by attempting to show that such uses actually square with a plausibly-embellished version of RTD. This leaves us with an alternative line of attack: that of furnishing *abnormal* uses of descriptions, i.e. uses which ordinary speakers of the language would consider 'unnatural' or 'improper', but which in fact *comply* with RTD (embellished or not).

Let us begin by considering a (hypothetical) use of an incomplete description, 'the F', where the speaker does not have a particular F in mind, and where, to boot, the context does not suggest an adequate completion of the description or a sufficiently restrictive delimitation of the domain of quantification. Suppose that someone uttered

(1) The table is covered with books.

in a room containing numerous tables, many covered with books and many not, but with no specific table (or any other object, for that matter) in mind. In my opinion, we would find that utterance, call it '*t*', *unintelligible*—in the sense that we would feel unable to specify what it would take, what the world would have to be like, for that utterance to be true.[1] Of course, we might ask the speaker which table she was talking about; but after the response to the effect that she wasn't talking about any particular table, as the supposition demands, we surely would be at a loss as to how to take (interpret) *t*. However, if RTD were correct, *t* should be intelligible even though it is not 'contextually-complete'. For, intuitively, an utterance in the same context of the Russellian paraphrase of (1), *viz.*

(1a) There is exactly one table and whatever is a table is covered with books.

would be intelligible, albeit manifestly false. The problem this poses for Russellians is clear. On their account these utterances would have the same content; but how, in that case, can the difference in intelligibility be explained? It seems that we do have a clash between RTD and ordinary language, as Strawson suggests.

---

[1] In denying that *t* is intelligible, I am not denying that the sentence-type of which it is a token, *viz.* (1), is *meaningful* in the sense Strawson takes sentences to be meaningful or *significant* ([6], pp. 9-10). For Strawson, a sentence's meaningfulness (significance) consists in its *potential* for being used to make true or false statements; clearly, (1) has this potential too.

The likes of *t* thereby give rise to a stronger Strawsonian argument against RTD (as an account of natural-language descriptions). In its general form, it runs something like this. Utterances involving contextually-incomplete descriptions are unintelligible in that we have grave difficulty in ascertaining what is asserted in such cases. We would face no such difficulty if RTD were correct, however, for the quantificational paraphrases of these utterances validated by RTD *aren't* unintelligible in this sense. Hence, the Russellian account is not correct.

It would be a mistake to see this objection as merely a variation of Strawson's point about the disparity between the verdict of ordinary language and RTD on a present-day utterance, *k*, of

(2) The king of France is wise.

According to Strawson, we—that is, ordinary speakers—would be disinclined to proclaim the utterance either as true or as false, and, indeed, it does follow from what I say that we would be similarly disinclined in the case of *t*. But, there is a significant point of disanalogy: our discomfort with *t* stems from our inability to interpret it, i.e. to determine its truth-conditions, whereas we have no such difficulty in the case of *k*. In contrast to *t*, we do know (or think we know) what it would take for *k* to be true or false—France would have to have a (unique) king who was (or was not) wise. The newer objection therefore cuts deeper in my opinion.

Some readers may find the objection unconvincing precisely because the alleged counterexamples to RTD involve 'abnormal' uses of descriptions (and, consequently, 'abnormal' speakers of the language). The following thought does seem compelling: that if a theory of content is to be challenged by way of exposing a clash with ordinary language, one needs to provide *normal*, i.e. *natural*, examples; after all, the reasoning runs, *no* theory could be expected to account for abnormal uses—these simply resist any standard analysis. This response misses the point however, or, rather, 'mislocates' the clash. The utterer of *t*, for instance, is indeed an 'abnormal' speaker—in that she is using a description abnormally by our, that is ordinary speakers', lights. But, this is precisely what presents the problem for Russellians: as already noted, they owe an explanation of *why it is* that someone who uttered (1) in the envisaged circumstances would be regarded as 'abnormal', as having *misused* language, whereas someone who uttered (1a) would *not* be so regarded.

In any case, the objection can be made without recourse to deviant uses or speakers. Suppose that in the envisaged ('many-table') scenario we were asked to assess the correctness of certain sentences, among them (1) and (1a), which were generated by a computer and displayed on a screen (say). I venture that even in that situation we would be inclined to proclaim the token of (1a) as false but would experience as much difficulty in simply interpreting the token of (1), i.e. in determining its truth-conditions, as in the earlier example. So, we would have the same problem, but no actual deviant uses or users.[2]

Another thought which might fuel reservations about the force of the objection is the thought that Russellians already *have* a perfectly adequate explanation of *t*'s unintelligibility. Surely, it may be reasoned, the fact that it is *manifestly false* is quite sufficient to account for the difficulty we experience in interpreting *t*; it is only natural that we are highly reluctant to take the utterer as saying something which she clearly knows to be false. However, if this explanation were right, we would have no more difficulty in interpreting *t* than we would an utterance, in the same context, of the manifestly false (1a). But, intuitively, this just is not so.

---

[2] I thank Peter Millican for suggesting something along these lines.

In any case, the objection can in fact be made with examples involving utterances which would be *true* by RTD. Consider the many-table scenario again. Suppose someone in that situation uttered

(3) It's not the case that the table is covered with books.[3]

I take it Russellians would assume, or regard as quite legitimate, that the domain of quantification includes the furniture in the room. In that case, the utterance should be heard as true, since the Russellian paraphrase:

(3a) It's not the case that there is exactly one table and that whatever is a table is covered with books.

is manifestly true with respect to that domain of quantification. But, intuitively, the utterance of (3) would be just as impenetrable as *t*. So, we can argue as follows. An utterance of (3) in the envisaged scenario would not appear inappropriate (improper) if the Russellian account were correct, whereas our intuition is that it most certainly would do. (Hence, ... etc.)

What moral should we draw from these clashes between RTD and our linguistic intuitions? The problematic utterances of (1) and (3) have the following feature in common: *the utterer (in each case) evidently has no intention of referring, that is, of saying something about a particular object*. I suggest it is precisely because of this absence of 'referential-intent' that the user (or use) is regarded as deviant or the utterance as unintelligible. If my diagnosis is right, the moral of our considerations would appear to be that definite descriptions really are devices for *referring* to objects rather than quantifying over them; Russell's quantificational treatment of them, however it is embellished, is, in that case, fundamentally mistaken.[4]

---

[3] I consider (3) instead of: *The table is* not *covered with books* precisely so as to preclude the *primary-occurrence* reading of the 'the table' (see [4], p. 53).

References

[1] Stephen Neale, *Descriptions* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990)

[2] Bertrand Russell, 'On Denoting', *Mind*, **14** (1905) 479-93. Also in *Logic and Knowledge*, edited by R. C. Marsh (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1956), 41-56, to which references apply.

[3] P. F. Strawson, 'On Referring', *Mind*, **59** (1950) 320-44. Also in his *Logico-Linguistic Papers* (London: Methuen, 1971), 1-27, to which references apply.

[4] P. F. Strawson, *Introduction to Logical Theory* (London: Methuen, 1952).

---

[4] The main argument was presented to seminars at the Universities of Leeds and Cambridge. I thank the participants of those meetings for fruitful discussions. I also thank Graham Bird, Martin Davies, Jonardon Ganeri, Paul Noordhof and a referee for this journal for their comments on earlier drafts.