

PHIL 332: Philosophy of Language
Class 2: Russell on Definite Descriptions

1. The main question: What is the meaning of 'the F' ('the dog', 'the person in this room', etc.)?
2. Some related questions: What is the meaning of 'the'? How is the meaning of 'the F' composed from the meanings of 'the' and F?

[Some consider possessive expressions such as 'John's dog' to be definite descriptions.]

3. A first answer: the meaning of 'the F' is the object that it denotes – the unique F. So the meaning of 'the Australian in this room' is me (a person).
4. But this theory faces problems. Here are three:
 - a. 'the dog in this room' is meaningful, but there is nothing that it denotes.
 - b. 'the person in this room' is meaningful, but there is nothing that it denotes.
 - c. 'The dog in this room does not exist' is not only meaningful but true. (**negative existentials**)

5. Bertrand Russell proposed an alternative theory. He did not give a theory of the meaning of 'the F', but rather a theory of the truth conditions of 'The F is G'. He proposed that 'The F is G' is true iff:

- a. There is at least one F, and there is at most one F, and everything that is F is G.
 $\exists xFx \ \& \ \forall x\forall y((Fx \ \& \ Fy) \rightarrow x = y) \ \& \ \forall x(Fx \rightarrow Gx)$
- b. There is something such that: it is F, and nothing else is F, and it is G.
 $\exists x(Fx \ \& \ \forall y(Fy \rightarrow x = y) \ \& \ Gx)$
- c. There is something such that: it is the only F, and it is G.
 $\exists x(\forall y(Fy \leftrightarrow x = y) \ \& \ Gx)$

6. According to Russell, we do not use 'the F' to refer to anything. Rather, we use it as a device of *quantification*.
7. He considered 'the F' to have no meaning in isolation, but only in the context of a sentence such as 'The F is G'.

It does not mean, for example, that there is at least one F, and at most one F.

8. His theory allows that 'The F is G' can be meaningful (and indeed true or false) even if there are no Fs, or more than one F.

9. According to Russell, 'The F is G' is false if there is no F, or more than one F. So the following sentences are both false:
- a. The dog in this room is barking.
 - b. The person in this room is burping.

This seems contrary to intuition, and is a problem for Russell's theory.

10. According to Russell, 'The F is not G' is ambiguous, between a reading on which 'not' takes wide scope, and a reading on which it takes narrow scope (a structural ambiguity).

The wide scope reading:

- **It is not the case that** the F is G
- **It is not the case that** there is at least one F, and there is at most one F, and everything that is F is G
- $\neg(\exists xFx \ \& \ \forall x\forall y((Fx \ \& \ Fy) \rightarrow x = y) \ \& \ \forall x(Fx \rightarrow Gx))$

The narrow scope reading:

- There is at least one F, and there is at most one F, and everything that is F is **not** G
- $\exists xFx \ \& \ \forall x\forall y((Fx \ \& \ Fy) \rightarrow x = y) \ \& \ \forall x(Fx \rightarrow \neg Gx)$

According to Russell, then, 'The dog in this room is not barking' is ambiguous between a reading on which it is true (the wide scope reading), and a reading on which it is false (the narrow scope reading). Is this the right result?

11. This is how Russell solves the problem of negative existentials. 'The dog in this room does not exist' has a reading on which it is true – the wide scope reading.
12. The reading on which 'not' takes wide scope can also be thought of as a reading on which 'the F' takes narrow scope – Russell calls this a *secondary* use of 'the F'.

The reading on which 'not' takes narrow scope can also be thought of as a reading on which 'the F' takes wide scope – Russell calls this a *primary* use of 'the F'.

If there is not exactly one F, then any primary use of 'the F' yields a false sentence.