

PHIL 332: Philosophy of Language  
Class 3: Strawson on Definite Descriptions

From last class:

1. Possessives are sometimes considered to be definite descriptions: 'John's car', 'John's car is out of gas.'
2. Meinong (1904) proposed an alternative solution to the no-denotation problem – 'the dog in this room' and 'the person in this room' both do indeed denote something. There is, in some sense, such a thing as the dog in this room, and the person in this room – they both *subsist*, but do not *exist*. Russell was reacting against this.

Today:

3. Russell's theory (1905) was widely accepted until Strawson's 1950 paper, 'On Referring' (in Martinich).
4. Strawson distinguishes *expressions* (sentences, definite descriptions, etc.) from *uses of expressions* and *utterances of expressions*.

Examples.

5. The sentence 'The dog in this room is barking' is neither true nor false – it does not have truth conditions. Rather, it can be *used* to say something true or false.

The definite description 'the dog in this room' does not refer. Rather, it can be *used* to refer.

This is similar to what we might naturally say about indexicals such as 'I' and 'here'.

[Are these claims correct? Do guns kill people?]

6. Strawson: to give the meaning of an expression is to give general directions for its use in making true or false assertions; to give the rules, habits, or conventions governing its correct use.

The definite description 'the dog in this room' is meaningful, not because it refers to something (it doesn't), but because it *can* be used to refer to something; there are conventions governing its use.

The sentence 'The dog in this room is barking' is meaningful, not because it is true or false (it isn't), but because it *can* be used to say something true or false; there are conventions governing its use.

Similar to what we might say about 'I' and 'here'.

7. Strawson agrees with Russell that 'The dog in this room is barking' can only be used to say something true if there is exactly one dog in this room.
8. He disagrees with Russell about what happens if there is not exactly one dog in this room – Russell claims that something false is said (which is counterintuitive); Strawson claims that nothing true or false has been said (in fact, nothing has been said)(which accords better with intuition).
9. Strawson explains: the conventional way of using 'the dog in this room' is to refer to the unique dog in this room. If there is a unique dog in this room then reference can succeed and something true or false can be said. If there is not a unique dog in this room then reference cannot succeed and nothing true or false can be said.
10. When a speaker tries to say something using 'The dog in this room is barking' she *presupposes* that there is a unique dog in this room.

She does not say that there is a unique dog in this room. (Strawson accuses Russell of claiming this.)

11. What do I say when I utter 'The dog in this room is barking'?

Russell:

$\exists xDx \ \& \ \forall x\forall y((Dx \ \& \ Dy) \rightarrow x = y) \ \& \ \forall x(Dx \rightarrow Bx)$

Strawson:

Bd, if there is a unique dog d in this room

Otherwise nothing

This what I presuppose:

There is exactly one dog in this room

$\exists xDx \ \& \ \forall x\forall y((Dx \ \& \ Dy) \rightarrow x = y)$

12. Difference between presupposition and entailment.