

PHIL 332: Philosophy of Language
Class 5: Russell on names as definite descriptions

1. Question: What is the meaning of a name, such as 'John' or 'London'?

Is this a good question? There is something odd about asking for the meaning of a name.

2. Millian theory: it is the object that the name denotes (or designates, or refers to, or ...). John Stuart Mill (1843), *A System of Logic*.
3. An immediate problem: There is often no such thing as *the* object that a name denotes, the same name being used on different occasions to denote different things (e.g. 'John', perhaps even 'London').

Some would say that different names are being used, but that seems implausible.

A better question: What does a speaker use a name to mean on an occasion of use? What, for example, does a speaker use 'John' to mean on an occasion of use?

In general, the answer will not be a single object – speakers will mean different objects by the name on different occasions of use. So the answer will have to be more complicated.

But let's assume that the debate can be tidied up appropriately, and pretend that names are always used to refer to the same thing.

4. Four (purported) facts about names that need to be explained:
 - a. *Empty names*. 'Phlogiston is released during combustion' is meaningful, so 'Phlogiston' is meaningful. But 'Phlogiston' is an empty name. 'Sherlock Holmes lived on Baker Street' is meaningful, so 'Sherlock Holmes' is meaningful. But 'Sherlock Holmes' is an empty name. 'Socrates is no longer alive' is meaningful, so 'Socrates' is meaningful. But 'Socrates' is an empty name.

It is controversial whether 'Sherlock Holmes' and 'Socrates' are empty names.

- b. *Negative existentials*. 'Phlogiston does not exist' (or: 'There is no such thing as Phlogiston') is not only meaningful but true, so 'Phlogiston' is meaningful. But 'Phlogiston' is an empty name.
- c. *Frege's puzzle*. 'Samuel Clemens is Mark Twain' can be informative, even to someone who understands the sentence, i.e. knows what 'Samuel Clemens' and 'Mark Twain' mean.

- d. *Propositional attitude verbs*. There are readings of ‘John believes that Mark Twain was a good writer’ and ‘John believes that Samuel Clemens was a good writer’ such that the first can be true while the second is false, thus on which they have different meanings. So they are readings on which ‘Mark Twain’ and ‘Samuel Clemens’ have different meanings.
- 5. The Millian theory seems unable to explain *any* of these facts.
 - 6. Russell rejects the Millian theory. He claims that **names abbreviate definite descriptions** – that is, for any given name there is a definite description with which it is synonymous (i.e. has the same meaning).

Note: the view is *not* that names *are* definite descriptions.

- 7. Can the Russellian theory explain the four (purported) facts above? It seems so, in tandem with Russell’s theory of definite descriptions:

Suppose that ‘Phlogiston’ means ‘The substance released during combustion’. Then:

- a. ‘Phlogiston is released during combustion’ means ‘The substance released during combustion is released during combustion’, which means ‘There is exactly one substance released during combustion, and it is released during combustion.’
- b. ‘Phlogiston does not exist’, on its true reading, means ‘It is not the case that the substance released during combustion exists’, which means ‘It is not the case that exactly one substance is released during combustion’.

Suppose that ‘Samuel Clemens’ means ‘The son of John and Jane Clemens’ and that ‘Mark Twain’ means ‘The author of *Huckleberry Finn*’. Then:

- c. ‘Samuel Clemens is Mark Twain’ means ‘The son of John and Jane Clemens is the author of *Huckleberry Finn*’, which means ‘There is exactly one son of John and Jane Clemens, there is exactly one author of *Huckleberry Finn*, and he is him’.
- d. ‘John believes that Mark Twain is a good writer’ means ‘John believes that the author of *Huckleberry Finn* is a good writer’, which means ‘John believes that there is exactly one author of *Huckleberry Finn* and he is a good writer’ (if the definite description is understood to have narrow scope; i.e. is a secondary occurrence).

‘John believes that Samuel Clemens is a good writer’ means ‘John believes that the son of John and Jane Clemens is a good writer’, which means ‘John believes that there is exactly one son of John and Jane Clemens and he is a good writer’ (if the definite description is understood to have narrow scope; i.e. is a secondary occurrence).

- 8. Note: Russell’s theory of names is independent of his theory of definite descriptions.