

PHIL 332: Philosophy of Language
Class 6: Problems for Russell on Names

1. Last time we looked at Russell's theory of names: **names abbreviate definite descriptions** – that is, for any given name there is a definite description with which it is synonymous.
2. We saw that it explains the four facts about names that are problematic for the Millian view, once it is coupled with his account of definite descriptions.
3. Are there any other reasons to accept Russell's theory of names? Here is one: Ultimately, the only way to explain to someone what a name means is to use a definite description. This is best explained on the assumption that names abbreviate definite descriptions.

Is this a good reason?

4. Here are some problems for Russell's theory:
 - a. If Russell is wrong about definite descriptions, then his theory of names is no better equipped than the Millian theory to explain the four facts about names.

Here are some problems for Russell even if he is right about definite descriptions:

- b. Which description does a name abbreviate? E.g. Which description does 'Wylie' abbreviate?

It is implausible that there is just one. Perhaps anyone who understands 'Wylie' can come up with a definite description to explain who Wylie is. But which definite description she comes up with will vary from person to person and occasion to occasion. It is implausible that any of these are what 'Wylie' abbreviates, for then one would not count as understanding 'Wylie' unless one could come up with this very definite description.

Perhaps 'Wylie' abbreviates all of these definite descriptions? But that would mean that 'Wylie' is implausibly ambiguous (even when used to talk about the one person).

Unless all of these definite descriptions have the same meaning. But that is implausible too (and false on Russell's account of definite descriptions).

Perhaps it abbreviates this: "The person named 'Wylie' "? But that seems wrong too – it must be a *particular one* of the various things named 'Wylie'.

- c. Suppose that Russell is right and 'Tony Banks' abbreviates some definite description. Then to understand 'Tony Banks' I must know which definite

description it abbreviates. But it seems that I can understand 'Tony Banks' without knowing of any definite description *dd* that 'Tony Banks' abbreviates *dd* – suppose I remember that I know a guy called 'Tony Banks', but have no idea who he is or how I know him or anything about him. So Russell is not right.

- d. Suppose that Russell is right and 'Mark Twain' abbreviates a definite description. Suppose that it abbreviates 'The author of *Huckleberry Finn*'. Consider the sentence, 'Mark Twain might not have written *Huckleberry Finn*'. This means 'The author of *Huckleberry Finn* might not have written *Huckleberry Finn*'. But the two cannot be synonymous, because the second but not the first has a reading on which it is false. So Russell is not right.
- e. Suppose that Russell is right and 'Gödel' abbreviates a definite description. Suppose that it abbreviates 'The man who proved the incompleteness theorem'. Suppose that, as a matter of fact, it wasn't Gödel but Schmidt who proved the incompleteness theorem. Then 'Gödel' still refers to Gödel, but 'The man who proved the incompleteness theorem' refers to Schmidt. So they are not synonymous, and Russell is not right.