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## **ON RUSSELLIAN THEORY OF DESCRIPTION**

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### **I**

A thorough account of the structure of linguistic expressions is possible — according to Bertrand Russell — only when (1) they concern the usual REAL world, and concern it in a SENSIBLE way.

This usual world consists of only definite (individual, isolated) objects (Russell 1956a: 173). Only those objects EXIST. ONLY THINGS EXIST. Russell rejects any other understanding of "existing."

And talking about something in a sensible way is asserting this something to be true or false, or — following the Aristotelian understanding — asserting, respectively, in accord or discord with the reality.

Thus, talking about the WORLD IN A SENSIBLE WAY is asserting truth (in accord with the reality) or falsity (in discord with the reality) about definite (existing) objects. Hence, e.g. the sentence *I met Jones* has sense because it is true that I met Jones. Also, the negation of this sentence, i.e. the sentence *I did not meet Jones* has sense because (in this case) it is false.

And about the sense of the sentence *I did not meet a unicorn*? We feel that the sentence is true, hence it should have sense. The sentence *I did not meet Jones* asserts something about Jones. Thus, one could say that the analogous sentence *I did not meet a unicorn* asserts something about a unicorn. Could it be, then, that the sentence *I did not meet a unicorn* has no sense?

To be in agreement with LINGUISTIC FEELING (usage) (Russell 1956a: 167), which does not allow us to doubt that the given sentence has

sense, and REALITY FEELING (feeling for reality) (Russell 1956a: 169, 170), which rejects a way of existing other than "real" — Russell assumes that the sentence is an ABBREVIATION, which can be DEVELOPED into the negation of the existential sentence: *There is an entity, which is a unicorn and which I met*. Here, it is clearly visible that the examined sentence does not assert anything about a unicorn, but says something (indirectly) about the notion of *unicorn*. The word *unicorn* does not name anything (does not refer to anything), but describes — namely: a certain non-existing object; an object that is a unicorn. This means that the word *unicorn* is not a name but a description; the description assigning an object the property of "being a unicorn." This is the case of every expression whenever it is it is doubtful if there is an object to which this expression refers.

For a NAME<sup>1</sup> (proper name, in a strict sense; or else: logically proper name) (Russell 1956a: 178) — i.e. an independent, directly meaningful (referring) symbol — has SENSE when THERE IS AN OBJECT that is (directly) NAMED by this name, and that is the name's meaning; if a name names nothing — it has no sense. A DESCRIPTION<sup>2</sup>, however — i.e. a dependant symbol without an independent meaning (i.e. that does not refer, but describes), indirectly meaningful (Russell 1956a: 170) — has SENSE, when it DESCRIBES either SOMETHING EXISTING or NON-EXISTING.

In the English language, because of the indefinite article *a* (or *an*) and definite article *the*, it is necessary to differentiate between an indefinite

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<sup>1</sup>According to Russell, a name is, in principle, a simple symbol, for it is not possible to indicate its component parts that are also symbols. A name as such is assigned to a certain object, its meaning is not determined (the same applies to descriptions).

<sup>2</sup>Contrary to a name, a description is usually a complex symbol, for it has component parts that are symbols themselves. Thus, if those component parts have a certain meaning, then they determine the "meaning" of the whole description (Russell 1956a: 174, 179). Czesław Lejewski wittily observes that this holds true in reference to names: indeed, if the meaning of individual component parts, i.e. words, is fixed, then in a name — with only one such word — the meaning of the whole name is fixed (namely of this one single word) (Lejewski 1960: 27). It is worth noticing that the issue of simple and complex symbols is not sufficiently clear in Russell. He juxtaposes two expressions: *Scott* and *the author of WAVERLEY* (Russell 1956a: 173—174). The parts of the expression *Scott* — namely, the five letters of the Latin alphabet — are not symbols, hence the expression *Scott* is a simple symbol. The nineteen letters of the expression *the author of WAVERLEY* — are also not symbols. Yet, it is possible to divide the expressions into parts that ARE symbols: these are the words that form the expression. There are four such words: *the*, *author*, *of* and *WAVERLEY* (cf. Lejewski 1960: 27). Their meanings are fixed. These words are certainly not complex symbols. However, are they simple symbols? And what kind of a symbol is the name *Sir Walter* or *Walter Scott*?

description of the form *a so-and-so* and a definite description of the form *the so-and-so*.<sup>3</sup> They differ in that an indefinite description may describe MORE THAN one object, while a definite description may describe AT MOST one object.<sup>4</sup>

Let us assume the following:

$\eta x(Fx)$  stands for the expression "an  $x$  that has property  $F$ " (an indefinite description)

$\iota x(Fx)$  — "the  $x$  that has property  $F$ " (the definite description)

$G$  — a predicate.

Then the sentence with an indefinite description

$$G[\eta x(Fx)]$$

is, according to Russell, an abbreviation of an existential sentence

$$\forall x(Fx \wedge Gx)$$

And the sentence with a definite description

$$G[\iota x(Fx)]$$

— an abbreviation of an existential sentence

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<sup>3</sup>Initially, Russell used the expression „denoting phrase” instead of „description” or „descriptive phrase”. He differentiated denoting phrases that denote: (1) one particular object (*the so-and-so* in the singular); (2) unclearly, i.e. one object of a particular group (*a so-and-so*, *so*, *some so-and-so*); (3) all particular objects (*all so-and-so*, *any so-and-so*), and also such denoting phrases that do not denote anything (Russell 1956b: 41). The clumsiness of the expression "a denoting phrase that does not denote anything" was probably one of the reasons why he replaced "denoting phrase" with "descriptive phrase."

<sup>4</sup>It is not possible to keep the distinction between definite and indefinite descriptions in languages that do not have articles. Hence, Polish authors do not approach the issue of descriptions AS Russell does; what they discuss is a descriptive FUNCTION (Pelc 1971: 45, 49).

$$\forall x\{Fx \wedge Gx \wedge \bigwedge y[(Fy \wedge Gy) \rightarrow (y = x)]\}$$

## II

What are, in Russell's opinion, the advantages of approaching the examined expressions in such a way? The answer has, partially, been given. First — we stay in accord with the reality feeling as we do not accept that there exist objects other than real ones. Second — we preserve language usage according to which a sentence's sense (truth or falsity) is assigned. Above all, however, the approach allows the solving of some troublesome linguistic paradoxes (Russell calls them "puzzles") (Russell 1956b: 47, 51).

1. By the identity principle, the sentence *Scott is the author of WAVERLEY* can be reduced to *Scott is Scott*. Yet the otherness (e.g. in the cognitive value) of the two sentences is evident, especially when the phrase *the author of WAVERLEY* is secondary (see below). Noting the difference between a name and a description allows for the avoiding of a cognitively empty identity of the type  $a = a$ , prevents from (an incorrect) substitution of a description in the place of a name and preserving the identity of the type  $a = b$ .<sup>5</sup> Because, in the sentence *Scott is the author of WAVERLEY*, if we substitute

the expression *Scott* with  $s$ , and

the predicate *is the author of WAVERLEY* with  $A$ ,

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<sup>5</sup>According to Lejewski (1960: 27, 28), the difference between a sentence of the type *Scott is Scott* and *Scott is the author of WAVERLEY* has nothing to do with the difference between a description and a name. It is so that either all substitutions of  $\bigwedge x(x = x)$  are true, and hence the sentence *The author of WAVERLEY is the author of WAVERLEY* is true, or  $\bigwedge x(x = x)$  is not a law. Well,  $\bigwedge x(x = x)$  IS A LAW — but with a certain restriction, however, not the one proposed by Russell, i.e. that if  $x$  is substituted with a description, then there must exist an object specified by the description. The restriction should not concern the  $x$  but the relation  $=$ , whose understanding could be strong if  $\bigwedge a, b \{(a = b) \equiv [(a = b) \vee (b = a)]\}$ , or weak if  $\bigwedge a, b \{(a = b) \equiv \bigwedge c[(c = a) \equiv (c = b)]\}$ . This is how Lejewski (using research results of Polish logicians) reconstructs Russell's whole theory. He points to the fact that when the sentence *Scott is the author of WAVERLEY* is considered a substitution of the function  $\Phi x$  where  $\Phi$  is the predicate *is-the-author-of- WAVERLEY* (and *being-the-author-of- WAVERLEY* is considered a certain property) (Russell 1956a: 171), then "is" is relieved from the responsibility IT is burdened with (which is more evident in languages without articles, e.g. in Polish): the responsibility which Russell (not necessarily correctly) assigns to descriptions (Lejewski 1960: 19, 20).

then

$$As \wedge \bigwedge x (Ax \rightarrow x = s)$$

2. By the law of excluded middle, either the sentence *I met a unicorn* or the sentence *I did not meet a unicorn* is true. However, a unicorn belongs neither to the real objects I met, nor the ones I did not meet. In order to save the sentences' sense it is possible to assume that *unicorn* is not a name, but a description.

Let us assume the following:

$\eta x(Jx)$  stands for a description *unicorn*,  
 $K$  — the expression *I met*.

Then the sentence *I met a unicorn* is

$$\bigvee x (Jx \wedge Kx),$$

which is a false sentence.

The sentence *I did not meet a unicorn* can be presented in the form

$$\bigvee x (Jx \wedge \sim Kx)$$

or

$$\sim \bigvee x (Jx \wedge Kx).$$

In the first interpretation, the description  $\eta x(Jx)$  is taken primarily (as a primary phrase), in the other — SECONDARILY (as a secondary phrase) (Russell 1956b: 52). In the first case, the sentence is false (as any sentence in which a description used primarily describes a non-existent object), in the other — it is true. In this way, both sentences have sense.

This is how we can talk about non-existent objects: those which do not exist and have never existed (not real), and those which could not even exist (contradictory). For, an (affirmative) non-existential sentence (or the one that cannot be "translated" to an existential sentence) has sense when it asserts something (true or false, but not existential) about an existent object (we fully understand the sentence when we know the object), while it

has no sense when it asserts something about non-existent objects. Unlike such sentences, an (affirmative) existential sentence has sense when it asserts something (true or false, and existential) about the object described by a description (we understand the sentence even when we do not know the described object), while it has no sense (it is grammatically incorrect) when it asserts existence of an object named (by a name).

### III

Russell's approach has attracted multidimensional criticism. It turned out that the approach cannot be applied generally (especially on the grounds of colloquial language) as it is sometimes contrary to linguistic facts.

1. Russell's criteria specifying descriptions and logically proper names are not reliable (Strawson 1963: 167; Toulmin, Baier 1963: 210). Such an absolute differentiation is not language-based (Pelc 1971: 49, 58, 114).

Some expressions, which according to Russell's criteria should be regarded as descriptions, function as names. For example, *the man over there* in the sentence *The man over there is clever* (Prior 1971: 152).

Also, even Russell himself admits that words such as *Homer* (Russell 1956a: 172) or *Scott* (Russell 1956a: 174-175) — thus simple symbols — can be USED as (abbreviated) descriptions that specify certain objects with these names; hence, eventually, it is not the syntactic difference, nor the form (shape), but a single usage that decides "what" a given expression is.<sup>6</sup>

2. Russell's interpretation patterns of (affirmative) sentences with descriptions (the interpretations were aimed at revealing the proper, i.e. predicative, nature of these descriptions) applied to some sentences producing paradoxical consequences.

Let us consider the following sentences analyzed by Russell (Linsky 1963: 80-83): *George IV wished to know if Scott was the author of WAVERLEY*. The sentence contains the description *the author of WAVERLEY*, which could be interpreted in two ways, depending whether we assume that the description *the author of WAVERLEY* is primary or secondary.

Let us assume the following:

*F — is the author of WAVERLEY,*

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<sup>6</sup>Thus, eventually, Russell claimed that names in a strict sense, i.e. such that are names not only due to their shape, that CANNOT be used otherwise than as names, that CANNOT be substituted by descriptions (Russell 1948: 78), are only indexical determiners *this* and *that*, whose denotation is relativized to the speaker (Russell 1956a: 178; Russell 1951a: 108).

$G$  — *is Scott*,  
 $H$  — *George IV wished to know if*.

In the first interpretation, the sentence will have the form:

$$\forall x [\wedge y (Fy \equiv y = x) \wedge H (Gx)]$$

while in the other:

$$H \{ \forall x [\wedge y (Fy \equiv y = x) \wedge Gx] \}.$$

a. The analyzed sentence (in its original wording version) does not entail that one and only one person is the author of *Waverley*. However, Russell's interpretation LOGICALLY ENTAILS such a conclusion. For, in accord with the law  $\forall x (Px \wedge Qx) \rightarrow \forall x Px \wedge \forall x Qx$  and the law  $(p \wedge q) \rightarrow p$ :

$$\begin{aligned} & \forall x [\wedge y (Fy \equiv y = x) \wedge H (Gx)] \rightarrow \\ & \rightarrow \forall x [\wedge y (Fy \equiv y = x) \wedge \forall x [H(Gx)]] \rightarrow \\ & \rightarrow \forall x [\wedge y (Fy \equiv y = x)]. \end{aligned}$$

In this way, it is easily provable that Bolesław Krzywousty had only one son. For example, when we prove that the sentence *I want to make sure if Bolesław Kędzierzawy (Bolesław IV the Curly) is the son of Bolesław Krzywousty (Bolesław III Wrymouth)* is true.

b. The second interpretation of the sentence *George IV wished to know if Scott was the author of WAVERLEY*, i.e.:

$$H \{ \forall x [\wedge y (Fy \equiv y = x) \wedge Gx] \},$$

LOGICALLY ENTAILS:

$$H \{ \forall x [\wedge y (Fy \equiv y = x) \wedge \forall x Gx] \},$$

which entails (!):



$$H \{ \forall x [\wedge y (Fy \equiv y = x)] \},$$

thus

$$H \{ \forall x [Fx \wedge \wedge y (Fy \rightarrow y = x)] \},$$

and further

$$H \{ \forall x (Fx) \wedge \forall x [\wedge y (Fy \rightarrow y = x)] \},$$

and finally, by De Morgan's law:

$$H \{ \sim \langle \sim \forall x (Fx) \vee \sim \forall x [\wedge y (Fy \rightarrow y = x)] \rangle \}.$$

Thus, eventually, George IV wished to know if it was false that either there was somebody who wrote *Waverley* (i.e. if *Waverley* was written at all), or there was no such person to whom everybody who wrote *Waverley* were identical (i.e. if *Waverley* was written by more than one person). And — it could be argued — George IV possibly knew that *Waverley* had only one author, he just did not know who it was.

Such paradoxical consequences are inevitable after de-intensionalisation of the function *George IV wished to know if* (which is attributed to Russell) (Lejewski 1960: 27). Then, even introducing an intuitively unjustified distinction between a primary and a secondary usage (Lejewski 1960: 22) does not help.

It has been pointed out that three misconceptions in Russell's theory are responsible for these and similar troubles (Strawson 1963: 163):

1. that (affirmative) sentences REFER to real objects;
2. that (affirmative) sentences HAVE sense when they are either true or false, i.e. when they assert (real) objects in accord or discord with the reality;
3. that (affirmative) sentences with descriptions, by IMPLICATION, ENTAIL existential sentences that concern the existence (or non-existence) of the objects specified by these descriptions.

The Russellian approach towards the issue of reference and sense in (affirmative) sentences in general and towards the matter of translation of (affirmative) sentences with descriptions is confronted with the following claims:

1. Sentences themselves do not (actually) REFER to anything. (Affirmative) sentences CAN BE USED (potentially) so as to refer to real objects (Linsky 1963: 74; Strawson 1963: 171-172).
2. (Affirmative) sentences have sense when they CAN BE USED so as to assert truth or falsity about something (Strawson 1963: 173).
3. The existential sentences discussed by Russell cannot be regarded translations of (affirmative) sentences with descriptions (as they do not entail these sentences by implication), nor are they asserted. Their validity, however, is a NECESSARY CONDITION FOR A CORRECT USAGE (and in this sense, they are "implied", but by a sentence usage) of these (affirmative) sentences (with descriptions) (Geach 1954: 34; Strawson 1963: 175). Thus, contrary to Russell's line of argument, the sentence *The present king of France is bald* does not entail, by implication, that the king of France exists. However, the existence of the king of France needs to be assumed if the sentence is to be considered correct (Geach 1954: 34). Otherwise, the sentence is incorrect, or (which is the most frequent case) the sentence's context does not involve the truth-falsity dilemma (Linsky 1963: 85-86).

#### IV

In general, what Russell is criticized for is that he attributes to expressions what, in fact, is the property of their USAGE (Strawson 1963: 179-180). Thus, it is assumed that Russell considers his theory of description as accurate on the grounds of natural language, or even as an analysis of natural language.

However, it is not as clear as most of Russell's critics would like to see. It seems that the matter is similar to the case of John Stuart Mill, who was very often criticized but not necessarily for his own views (Ryle 1963: 139), as well as to the case of Russell's criticism of Gottlob Frege and Alexius Meinong based on a superficial assessment of their views that disregarded their aims (Clack 1969: 46-47).

1. Russell refers in his comments to propositions (Russell uses that term nearly exclusively), therefore by the same token he reduces his analysis to sentences in a single usage (it is worth noting that he ignores expressions of the type *the first morning of spring*) (Russell 1956a: 170). Hence, he claims that these VERBAL EXPRESSIONS (Russell 1956b: 43, 45, 55)

OF PROPOSITIONS that contain CORRECTLY USED descriptions (so that the speaker is not self-contradictory) (Russell 1956b: 44) and NOT (affirmative) SENTENCES IN GENERAL are abbreviations of corresponding existential sentences, i.e. — to be more precise — of verbal expressions of propositions that do not contain descriptions. What Russell does is not purely descriptive (yet it is neither arbitrary — as some critics would like to believe) (Carnap 1956: 33) but REGULATIVE.<sup>7</sup>

2. The relationship between a translation and the abbreviation that develops into that translation is not unequivocally defined,<sup>8</sup> even by Russell himself. It is possible to differentiate three understandings of this relationship.

Let us mark them by:

- $p$  — a sentence with a description,
- $q$  — the translation.

The relationship between definiendum and definiens in the Russellian definition of the propositions with descriptions in their verbal expressions (Russell 1956a: 171, 176, 178) can be interpreted schematically in one of the following ways:

1.  $q$  results, by implication, from  $p$  (Geach 1954: 34),
2.  $q$  is implicationaly equivalent to  $p$  (Clack 1969: 48; Lejewski 1960: 15; Moore 1951: 182; Reichenbach 1948: 261),
3.  $q$  is synonymous to  $p$  (Black 1951: 242).

The first understanding is related to the expressions such as: "implies" (Russell 1956b: 44) and "involves" (Russell 1956a: 176). The expressions "is implied by (...)" and "(...) implies that" (Russell 1956a: 177) and "is equivalent to" (Russell 1956a: 177), on the other hand, seem to describe implicational

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<sup>7</sup>Most probably, this is what Robert J. Clack aims at when he writes that the theory of description is an analysis of their LOGICAL ROLE in colloquial language, an analysis removing a certain ambiguity and vagueness of colloquial linguistic habits (Clack 1969: 52). Clack refers to Kurt Gödel's (Gödel 1951: 130) and Russell's (Russell 1959: 243) opinions. What is peculiar in his work is that he uses the words "sentence," "statement" and "proposition" interchangeably, synonymously (Clack 1969: 47), which must not be done without restrictions.

<sup>8</sup>This ambiguity was perhaps first noticed by George Edward Moore (1951: 181-187). In response to Moore's criticism, Russell (1951b: 691) did not actually refer to this issue.

equivalence, while synonymy is related to the expressions "means the same as" (Russell 1956b: 43) and "is the same as" (Russell 1956a: 176).

Moreover, there is a certain number of expressions that are ambiguous to such an extent that cannot be undoubtedly classified as one of the above relationships. Such expressions are: "we may put, in place of (...), the following" (Russell 1956b: 51), "what we wish to say is equivalent to" (Russell 1956b: 51), "when I assert (...) I really assert" (Russell 1956a: 167), "I advocate" (Russell 1956b: 43). Also, expressions of the type: "becomes" (Russell 1956b: 44, 54), "becomes, when made explicit" (Russell 1956a: 168), "means" (Russell 1956a: 171, 176, 178), "define what is meant by" (Russell 1956a: 177).

As regards the last examples: it does not seem likely that Russell considered  $q$  the meaning of  $p$ . For, according to Russell, even in the case of a descriptive (denoting) phrase "there is no MEANING, and only sometimes a DENOTATION" (Russell 1956b: 46; 260) (more specifically: a designator). Propositions have no meaning; there are only SYNONYMOUS propositions. For it seems that the (3) UNDERSTANDING OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  $P$  AND  $Q$  IS THE ONE MOST IN ACCORD WITH RUSSELL'S INTENTIONS (provided that synonymy would be a stronger relationship than equivalence). Thus, questioning (1) is of value not as an argument against Russell's (whole) theory, but only as an argument sufficient to reject SUCH INTERPRETATION of the relationship between  $p$  and  $q$ , which indeed has not been precisely stated by Russell himself.

As regards the quoted examples in which this relationship is "objectified" — they seem to additionally support the claim that Russell (in some formulations) was not as distant from the functional account of meaning as some would like to attribute to him, or, at least, that his theory is not in opposition to this account.

It seems that Russell would not object to the below summary:

If somebody wants to utter a proposition (use a verbal expression) concerning a non-existent object, assert something about this object, then they can use either an (affirmative) sentence with a description, or an (affirmative) existential sentence without a description. In the latter case, they will avoid all the troubles that relate to abbreviatedness of the first approach, since, by means of the existential sentence they CLEARLY state what the sentence with a description states IMPLICITE, and very often ambiguously (for the sentence is an abbreviation).

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