The Limitations of Russell's Theory of Descriptions: Analyzed from the Criticisms and Doubts Raised by Other Philosophers

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Abstract. The theory of descriptions proposed by Russell has made a significant contribution to the advancement of the philosophy of language, and it has a firmly established place within the annals of philosophical history. The description hypothesis has been unchallenged for a period over 30 years.The theory of descriptions proposed by Russell faced significant criticism from three prominent philosophers, namely Strawson, Donnellan, and Kripke. These philosophers approached Russell's theory from different viewpoints, leading to a notable erosion of its status as an established theory of reference. Henceforth, this essay aims to undertake a comparative and analytical examination of the metamorphic theory, elucidating its inherent worth and inherent constraints, as seen through the distinct lenses of three philosophers. Although the theory offers a coherent approach to interpreting these words, it encounters some constraints when used to descriptive assertions that include non-unique attributes. Russell's approach intentionally disregards the intricacies inherent in communication. Firstly, it disregards the fundamental idea of context. The veracity or fallacy of a proposition is not autonomous, and its verity is contingent upon the particular situation.

Keywords: Russell's Theory of Description; Referential Problem; Meaning and Reference.

1. Introduction

To this day, there are countless monographs and papers on Russell's theory of descriptions around the world. Russell's theory of descriptions helped the development of the philosophy of language to a certain extent and has an unshakable position in the history of philosophy. In 1905, Russell published " On Denotation", the first stage of his study of the theory of descriptions. In a nutshell, the main function of descriptions is to describe the properties of a thing, that is, the referential function. Russell elaborated on this in some detail in this book. This was followed by "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism" in 1918 and "Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy" in 1919. Russell thought a "description" might be of two types: definite and ambiguous (or indefinite). A description is indeterminate if it begins with "a so-and-so," while a definite description begins with "the so-and-so" (singular) [1]. For more than 30 years, the description theory has not been challenged. It was not until three philosophers, Strawson, Donnellan and Kripke, criticized Russell's theory of descriptions from their respective perspectives, that Russell's theory of descriptions was shaken as an "official" theory of reference. Therefore, in the following article, it will try to compare and study the value and limitations of the metamorphic theory from the different perspectives of three philosophers, Frege, Strawson, Donnellan and Kripke.

2. The value of Russell's theory of descriptions

Russell's theory of descriptions is significant in that it marks an important stage in the development of philosophy, showing the great power and achievement that philosophy can achieve if new methods of analysis are used. In this sense, Ramsey Frank P. Russell's theory of descriptions is regarded as "a model of philosophy" [2]. At the same time, this theory made a significant contribution to the philosophical goals and principles of Russell's logical atomism. On the other hand, with the progress of modern logic and the development of philosophy, Russell's theory of descriptions gradually showed several limitations.

The following two aspects illustrate the value of Russell's metamorphic theory.

2.1. Resolution of the problems about references in the history of philosophy

Traditional denotational theory does not distinguish between names and descriptions, which gives the attribute of existence when the descriptions is in the position of the propositional subject. In this case, there is bound to be a paradox in the proposition that some referential descriptions act as the subject. Russell distinguishes between names and descriptions, and only names that represent definite distinctions can serve as propositional subjects, which completely avoids the paradox of existence. On the other hand, Russell treated propositions containing descriptions as propositions containing propositional terms, which are predicates that themselves contain existential properties. It is therefore meaningful to assert the proposition of its existence. Using " C (x) " to mean a proposition in which x is a constituent, where x, the variable, is essentially and wholly undetermined. Then we can consider the two notions "C(x) is always true" and "C(x) is sometimes true." Then everything and nothing and something (which are the most primitive of denoting phrases) are to be interpreted as follows:

C(everything)means "C(x)is always true".

C (nothing)means "C (x) is false' is always true"; C (something) means "It is false that ' C (x) is false' is always true " [2].

For example, the proposition "the mountain of gold does not exist" means that "the proposition 'If x is a mountain, then it is gold' is false" is true. Russell regarded the term "golden mountain" as an abbreviated description, its meaning is carried by a propositional function, and then uses the opposite nature of "existence" and the truth category of "constant truth" to fully characterize the meaning of "non-existence". The rewritten expression completely cuts off the connection between the referent of the "golden mountain" and the proposition, and there is no paradox.

2.2. The improvement Russell's philosophy system of logical atomism

The relationship between Russell's philosophical ontology and epistemology and the notion of descriptions is strengthened. Russell was a logical atomist philosopher who studied a wide range of philosophical topics, including epistemology, ontology, ethics, political theory, and the history of philosophy. According to the lengthy history of Russell's philosophy, he primarily addressed ontological and epistemological issues, and his theory of meaning was crucial in tying the two together [3]. Every straightforward verbal term formed through analysis, if meaningful, necessarily denotes some real entity, according to Russell's study of language as a means of conveying meaning [4].

3. Frege 's referential path with Russell

Russell and Frege 's reference theory had much in common, and they both agreed that common proper names and descriptions could be substituted for each other.

3.1. Frege's theory of meaning and denotation

Frege constructed a formal language in *Conceptual Texts*, and further constructed a first-order predicate calculus system in this language. At the beginning of his essay On Meaning and Referential, Frege posed an important question: "Does a = b" embody the same between two symbols or between what they express? If a = b then a is true b must be true, a and b can be interchangeable in propositions containing each other without changing the true or false values of the proposition, which Frege called the "same" problem [5]. It was in order to solve this problem that Frege distinguished for the first time in the history of philosophy between signs, their meanings, and their referents.

In the eyes of some, " a = a " and " a = b " are equivalent by referring to the same object. However, from the perspective of knowledge understanding, there is a difference between "a=a" and "a=b": the former belongs to the same language repetition, while the latter expands new understanding. "The morning star is the morning star" is clear, and "the morning star is the evening star" is a great astronomical discovery. Although "morning star" and "twilight" refer to the same (i.e., both refer to Venus), the words have completely different meanings: morning star refers to the stars that can be

seen in the morning, and evening stars are stars in the evening sky. This example intuitively invalidates the form of reasoning, but in first-order logic it is considered a valid example.

Accordingly, Frege uses the distinction between functions and free variable to distinguish between what used to be collectively called names into conceptual words and proper names; Conceptual words and proper names have meaning and denotation, respectively; A concept to which a conceptual word refers must always be distinguished from the object to which the proper name refers [6]. According to this distinction, the language is divided into proper names, concepts, and sentences. Frege's proper names are wider, including both general proper names such as personal names and facsimile words that can refer to objects. Proper names in the Frege sense are more inclined to "mark". Frege believed that the meaning of a proper name is an intermediary between the proper name and the object of the referent objects, while conceptual words are directly related to propositional terms. The "conceptual word" Frege refers to is a function without assignment, which itself has no independent meaning, and its meaning depends on the meaning of the entire sentence. The referent of "conceptual word" is relatively complex, generally we will take the extension of "conceptual word" as its referent, and the connotation of "conceptual word" as its meaning, but Frege opposes this view, in his view both connotation and extension are related to "concept", "conceptual word" refers to "concept", "conceptual word means a concept" [7]. And what is called a concept in logic has the same essence as what is usually called a function, so to speak, a concept is a function whose value is always a true value [8].

Frege discusses this aspect of the analysis of sentence meaning and denotation in detail. "Plato is Aristotle's teacher" and "Plato's student is the teacher of the author of the Instrumental Theory" are both true propositions, and the truth value output by the sentence is "true". Frege's description of meaning and denotation is ultimately about the statement that the sentence is true. Frege believed that if the referents of two words are the same object, then the truth value output of the sentence will not be affected.

3.2. Russell's solution to the "same" problem

Russell conducted a preliminary investigation of referential expressions, paying particular attention to the few descriptions that served this purpose. concentrating on proper names, definite descriptions, and indefinite descriptions.

The distinction between a name and descriptions: (1) a name, which is a simple symbol, directly designating an individual which is its meaning, and having this meaning in its own right, independently of the meanings of all other words; (2) a description, which consists of several words, whose meanings are already fixed, and from which results whatever is to be taken as the " meaning " of the description [1]. For example, taking "J.K. Rowling is the author of Harry Potter." as a proposition." J.K. Rowling "is a name, and" the author of Harry Potter" is a description. They both refer to the same person. To explain it specifically, even if " J.K. Rowling " in the proposition is replaced with " the author of Harry Potter", it will not change the truth value of the proposition. Although Russell tried to distinguish between ordinary proper names and descriptions, he also had to admit that ordinary proper names also need to use description functions, which means that ordinary proper names and descriptions are closely related, which breaks the absolute gap between ordinary proper names and descriptions.

4. Strawson's Theory of Context

The theory of descriptions has long been regarded as a successful case for applying first-order logic to linguistic analysis, and it is widely recognized as a denotation theory. It was not until 1950 that Strawson argued in On Denotation that Russell's theory of descriptions ignored the fundamental differences between linguistic expressions and their use and put forward his own contextual ideas in his critique of Russell.

Strawson criticized Russell's rewriting of the descriptions from a theoretical and technical point of view. First, he argues that Russell confuses "words" with "use of words," and "sentences" with "use of sentences. "We can analyze it specifically by one question. The question is "Today's French kings are bald." Does logic imply that "the king of France exists today." "Russell showed that the meaning of a proposition or statement lies in its truth value." Today's French kings are bald. The main term of ", which is difficult to judge its true value according to conventional methods. Russell believed that this sentence must be false, and how to reveal that it is false, only by rewriting the fdescription "king of France today" as a proper noun into the form of a predicate, can it be revealed that this is an empty class. From this empty class it can be judged that the proposition is false. Unless the present French king does exist, that is, the class expressed by the predicate is not empty, and the French king is indeed bald, the proposition is true.

Strawson's point is that the meaning of statements lies in people's daily use, rather than truth values. "The king of France today is bald." This sentence is meaningless. The first reaction to this proposition should be to deny the premise that the premise of this statement is that the king of France exists today. The fact that a sentence has a preset premise in the context in which it is used does not mean that the sentence itself substantially implies the premise in its content.

Strawson criticized Russell for not distinguishing between referential and meaning. Strawson's understanding of meaning focuses on the meaning of words, arguing that meaning focuses on the customs and regulations of language, while referents involve the use of words or sentences, which must be analyzed in context. Is the statement coherent and logical? The inquiry pertains to the criteria used in establishing the circumstances under which linguistic traditions, norms, or regulations are decided. It is important to acknowledge that the determination of a statement's meaningfulness is independent of its use in a specific context [9].

Finally, Strawson distinguishes between presuppositions and assertions. He argues that Russell confuses implication with assertion. Russell argued that all propositions containing descriptions implicit a presumption of the existence of the object, an idea Strawson opposed. He believes that referring to something implies the existence of that thing in real life, which is very different from concluding that it exists. Strawson treats a presupposition as a definition, and if the presupposition is not satisfied, the use of the statement is a "false use", and we cannot determine whether the proposition is true or false, but the statement is meaningful, such as our statement about fictitious objects. There are also "false uses" that do not involve existence at all, such as example sentences in grammar books. Strawson hypothesized that people do not necessarily have a definite assertion when they say a proposition.

5. Donnellan 's theory

Keith Donnellan's 1966 book *Reference and Definite Descriptions*, based on considerations about people's intentions and specific contexts when using descriptions, based on Strawson's theory, made a detailed distinction between two different uses of descriptions—attributive use and referential use [10]. He criticized both Russell and Strawson's related theories.

He explained both uses in detail. When a speaker uses a definite description, If an individual mentions a specific person or object and provides information about them, this may be considered an attributive use of the definite description. The speaker employs the description in order to enable the listener to identify the subject of discussion, and then imparts details about such person or thing, then a referential use is used. Donnellan argues that in attributive use, the appearance of definite descriptions is essential, because the speaker wants to determine something about something or person that is suitable for that description, whereas in referential use, the description is merely a tool used to accomplish a task, which can be used by other means. Donnellan illustrated two uses by giving examples, such as the phrase "Smith's killer was mad." If we don't know who killed Smith, then this is attributive use; If someone, such as Jones, killed Smith, is a referential use.

Even if it can be shown that the ambiguity of the statement can be used to explain the two uses of definite descriptions, Donnellan notes that "there is still an argument that is unfavorable to the theory of Strawson and Russell, since neither theory deals with the possibility of such ambiguity." In actuality, the two theories cannot account for the potential for ambiguity. In short, Strawson integrated the two uses into one and offered just one explanation, but Russell's theory did not recognize the possibility of referential use.

It is worth noting that Donnellan 's attributive use of definite description seems to be more dependent on semantics, depending on our understanding of description, while referential use requires analysis of context, which has a lot to do with the location, occasion, and history of both sides of the conversation. When I asked: Who was the one who drank juice? If attribution is used, there must be a drinker to come true; If this phrase refers to attributive use, our conversation can continue even without such a person. In addition, Donnellan criticized Russell's view that definite description can function independently of the context of the conversation, arguing that we must combine specific contexts when we talk about definite descriptions.

6. Kripke's theory of descriptions

In 1977, Saul Kripke argued in Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference that Russell's theory could not deal with linguistic phenomena in complex contexts.

Unlike Frege and Russell 's referential path, Kripke proposed " historical causal naming " to make direct referents. When we determine a name, the name will be passed down by the historical chain, and in the process of transmission, all people who meet the name will use the same name to indicate the object, and members of society will pass the name on one by one. For example, parents name their newborn child "Alexander", first the rest of the family of "Alexander" accepts the name, and uses "Alexander" to call the child, and then anyone else in the communication will also use this name to refer to the child, and the name is thus passed on through members of society, and this chain can be traced back to the object of the allegation. He referred to proper names, common names, and descriptions as indicators [11]. They were divided into fixed and non-fixed indicators. Kripke argues that proper names refer to objects not by facsimile words, but by historical causal chains. Because proper names refer to the entire object, the description describes only one or a few properties of the object. He introduced socio-historical factors into denotation theory to solve the problem of denotation.

Kripke argues that Donnellan's distinction is semantically ambiguous, i.e., according to this distinction, a particular statement cannot be assigned a clear truth value. Consider the proposition "her husband was nice to her." In fact, the person referred to was not her husband. According to Donnellan, the speaker refers to someone who is "her husband," her lover, and says that he treats her well. If we ask, "Yes, but is this statement true?" At this time, Donnellan will not be able to answer directly. According to Russell's thinking, the sentence can logically be described as $(\exists x)(Rx \wedge Cx \wedge (y)(Rx \wedge Cy \rightarrow x=y))$, where R means "is her husband" and C means "good to her", which is understood as: "There is a person who is her husband and is good to her, and if there is anyone else who is her husband and is good to her, then these two people are the same person." The sentence expresses a false proposition, since on that occasion her husband does not exist, so the existence sentence that is the first half of the sentence is false, and therefore the whole proposition is false. The grammatical structure of the sentence seems to Kripke to be the same whether the description is used referentially or attributively: that is, it is not syntactically ambiguous. Nor does it seem at all attractive to suppose an ambiguity in the meaning of the words; it does not appear to be semantically ambiguous [13].

Kripke also noted that the linguistic problem is so broad that it is not a single context and a moment that can give it full meaning. He pointed out that a detailed examination of the diachronic situation of language development may show that what was originally referred to only by the speaker is likely to become something common sense in a linguistic community after the long-term development of

the language, in which case the same word will develop into a semantic referent [12]. Kripke emphasized the complexity of language issues, while Russell always avoided these potentially uncertain examinations.

7. Conclusion

To sum up, Russell's Theory of Descriptions has made substantial contributions to the field of philosophy of language by tackling the enigmatic nature of definite descriptions. While it provides a logical solution to interpret these phrases, the theory faces some limitations regarding descriptive statements with non-unique properties. Russell's theory deliberately ignores the complexity of speech. First, it ignores the principle of context. The truth or falsity of a statement is not independent, and its truth is related to the specific context. In Strawson 's critique of Russell, a large part of it is an attack on Russell's weakness. Second, it ignores the referential use of definite descriptions in everyday language. In Donnellan 's theoretical system, definite descriptions can play a referential use, and even this referential use does not need to rely on the correct description. But in Russell's system, definite descriptions do not have a referential use, which is not in line with our understanding of everyday language. Despite this, Russell's theory underlines the importance of careful linguistic analysis and continues to shape contemporary discussions on meaning and reference.

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