

Vagueness in Strawson's Expressional Meaning

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IN “On Denoting” and “On Referring,” Bertrand Russell and P.F. Strawson present two distinct theories of denoting phrases. Both theories try to solve the problems created by sentences that do not have existing subjects. How can sentences like “the king of France is wise” be meaningful if there is no king of France? Russell’s theory uses variables to try to better understand how sentences can be meaningful if their denoting phrases denote something that does not exist. In “On Referring,” P.F. Strawson rejects Russell’s solution and suggests an alternate theory that seems to better reflect the way we use denoting phrases. Despite the intuitive appeal of Strawson’s theory, Strawson’s formulation of an expression’s meaning is flawed. In this article, I will briefly outline Russell’s and Strawson’s theories, explain why Strawson’s theory might seem more effective, and examine Strawson’s problematic proposal for the meaning of expressions.

Russell’s theory states that phrases denote solely by virtue of their grammatical form (212). According to this theory, denoting phrases may potentially denote objects that do not exist—like the queen of America—merely because they have the correct grammatical form of denoting phrases. However, if this is the case, how do phrases with correct denoting form function when they refer to nonexistent objects? “The queen of England” clearly has a meaning and a denotation. However, “the queen of America,” although of the same grammatical form, seems to have a meaning but no denotation. Russell suggests that denoting phrases like

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“the queen of America” never have any meaning in themselves, but the propositions in which they occur do have meaning. The proposition gives meaning to an otherwise meaningless denoting phrase (Russell 213). “The queen of America” does not have meaning, but when used in the proposition “the queen of America is nice,” it can be meaningful.

Russell uses logical paraphrases to illustrate how propositions with nonexistent subjects function. By paraphrasing propositions into expressions using variables, Russell shows how propositions with nonexistent subjects can be understood. In Russell’s system, if the phrase “I met a man” is true, it can be translated to “I met x , and x is human’ is not always false.” By paraphrasing these propositions into existential statements, Russell shifts the emphasis from the denoting phrase to the proposition expressed about it. In “the queen of America is nice,” the important point is not the existence of the queen of America; rather, it is the proposition “is nice.” This system of paraphrasing allows Russell to solve some of the paradoxes that arise in language.

Because of its effectiveness in solving problems presented by phrases that denote nonexistent objects, Russell’s solution seems to help us better understand the way denoting phrases work because it explains how we can talk meaningfully about nonexistent objects. Rather than talk about things that do not exist, we talk about a set of concepts that may or may not apply to a variable x . But Russell’s theory, although logically strong and effective in solving several of the difficulties of denoting phrases, does not seem to completely reflect the way we use language (213–16).

In “On Referring,” Strawson rejects the theory Russell presents in “On Denoting” because Russell’s theory argues that referring, or denoting, is something an expression does. For example, the expression “the queen of America” refers to, or denotes, a certain individual, solely by virtue of its form. Strawson thinks this misunderstanding leads Russell to try to account for the meaningfulness of sentences with nonexistent subjects. Russell’s theory solves the problems he intends to solve. But Strawson thinks it solves them in the wrong way because it does not correctly reflect the way we refer and the way we use denoting phrases.

Before we proceed, it is important to describe Strawson’s distinctions among expressions, their uses, and their utterances. First, an expression is a word or set of words that gives directions so it can be used to refer to objects (Strawson 231). Expressions include “the queen of America,” “I,”

“he,” and “my brother.” These expressions do not have meaning in themselves. They have meaning in the way they are used in propositions to refer to people or things. Second, the use of an expression is the way an expression is used to refer to a particular person or object in language. If I say that I am writing, the expression “I” has a different use than if Jeff Johnson says, “I am writing.” The first use refers to me; the second use, although the same expression is used, refers to a different person. Third, an utterance is any instance in which an expression is used, regardless of its use. In this paper, I will focus on Strawson’s first two distinctions, an expression and the use of an expression, because they are critical to understanding Strawson’s criticism of Russell’s theory.

Russell errs, Strawson claims, because he confuses meaning and reference (232). Russell assumes that the meaning of an expression must be the object to which it refers, or the reference (Strawson 233). If the meaning of an expression is the object to which it refers, all expressions that refer to nonexistent objects become meaningless unless one paraphrases them as Russell does. But this seems contrary to the normal use of language. Expressions that refer to nonexistent objects seem problematic only when they are used in sentences that imply existence. His theory stumbles because Russell believes that expressions refer independently of their use.

Strawson argues that expressions do not refer; people *use* expressions to refer. The referent of the expression “the king of France” depends on when the expression is used. If the expression had been used during the reign of Louis XIV, it would refer to an entirely different person than if it had been used when Louis XV was the king. The use of the expression determines the referent, not the expression itself. Another example is the expression “I.” The expression “I” can only be correctly used self-referentially. I cannot correctly use the expression “I” to refer to someone else. Although “I” has a correct way of being used, it does not have a built in meaning or referent. The object, or person, to which “I” refers depends on who uses it. Strawson claims that it does not make sense to say the expression “I” refers to a particular person because it can refer to any user of the expression (228–32).

Referring, Strawson argues, is a function of the use of an expression; meaning, however, is a function of the expression itself. Strawson claims that to give the meaning of an expression is to give general directions for

its use, or reference. The meaning of the expression “I” is that it is correctly used to refer to its user. The meaning gives the directions that the expression “I” should only be used by the speaker self-referentially. Consequently, Strawson argues, the meaning of an expression has nothing to do with whether the expression is being used to refer to something that exists. Meaning is a part of the expression, but not in the way we usually think (Strawson 232–33). If we say that people do not understand what an expression means, we do not (normally) mean that they do not understand the words or letters that make up the expression. We normally mean, rather, that they do not understand how the expression should be used. If people use “I” to talk about someone other than themselves, they do not understand the meaning of the expression. In Strawson’s terms, they misunderstand the directions for its use.

Strawson’s distinction between an expression and the use of an expression seems to better reflect the way we use denoting phrases. For instance, “that” does not seem to have a built-in referent. The referent of an expression depends on the context of its use and the intention of the speaker. If someone were to ask, “What does ‘that’ mean?” it would be hard to respond appropriately because the meaning of “that” is almost entirely dependent on its use. Similarly, if I were to tell someone that “I” had a different meaning for me from the meaning it had for her, she would likely be confused. Yes, “I” may refer to different people, but it does not seem that it means something different for everyone. Otherwise, we might ask someone what “I” means, and they would say, “It means him and her and him and her . . .” But this type of answer would certainly seem odd. “I” surely has a different referent depending on who uses it, but it does not seem correct to say that “I” has a different meaning for everyone.

Because Strawson distinguishes between meaning and reference, as well as expression and use, nonexistent subjects in subject-predicate sentences are not as damaging to the proper function of denoting phrases as they are in Russell’s theory of denoting phrases. Russell was forced to paraphrase this type of sentence into existential logical notation in order to effectively make sense of referentless sentences. Under Strawson’s theory, the meanings of expressions are only problematic if they are ineffective in giving general directions for their use (Strawson 232). Because the use of an expression determines its reference, a referentless expression is only troublesome if it is *used* incorrectly.

The expression “the queen of America” is not dangerous on its own—as an expression. It is only dangerous when it is *used* incorrectly. This point is effectively illustrated in the following exchange between Porthos and D'Artagnon in the Disney movie “The Three Musketeers”:

“This sash was a gift to me from the queen of America,”

Porthos says.

“There's no queen of America!” replies D'Artagnon.

“I beg to differ; we are on quite intimate terms, if you can prove otherwise,” Porthos responds.

According to Strawson's theory, the meaning of “the queen of America” is the set of rules, habits, and conventions for its use in referring (233), or the general directions for its use to refer to particular objects or persons (232). For Porthos, his claim that the queen of America gave him the sash seems both meaningful and referential, even though the queen of America does not exist. Porthos's use of this expression “the queen of America” illustrates a potential flaw in Strawson's theory. How does one account for vagueness in the general directions given by the expression “the queen of America”? Do some expressions give better directions for their use than others? If to give the meaning of an expression is to give general directions for its proper and correct use, how does one account for the seemingly incorrect ways expressions are used (Strawson 232)? Porthos may have followed the directions given him by the expression “the queen of America,” but D'Artagnon seems to have misinterpreted the use of the sentence. There seems to be problematic vagueness in Strawson's explication of the meaning of an expression. Either that, or people fail to understand the built-in directions of expressions.

I propose that Strawson's characterization of the meaning of an expression is problematic because many expressions are vague and, consequently, ineffective in the way they give directions for their use. Strawson even claims that the same expression can be used to refer to innumerable things (233). If the same expression has the capability to refer to innumerable things, is the meaning of the expression faulty—i.e., are its directions for its use incoherent or overly vague? This seems to be a double-edged sword. If you make the meaning of an expression too narrow, you cut out the validity of expressions that may not yet fit into the meaning of an expression. “The king of France,” if meaningful as an expression, needs to

give the conventions for its use in referring. It would seem that directions for its use must be broad enough to successfully guide not only present uses, but also past and potential future uses of the expression.

If the meaning of an expression is too vague, however, it may not be able to rule out incorrect uses of the expression. To refer to Porthos's use of the expression "the queen of America," our first impulse may be that he must have misunderstood the meaning of the expression, for surely a correct use of an expression cannot refer to someone that does not exist. While this may be a stretch, how can we know all the possible meanings, or directions, for every expression? Maybe Porthos is using "queen" to refer to something that is preeminent among a certain category rather than to an actual royal person. Maybe "the queen of America," as Porthos uses it, refers to the woman he feels is the superior woman of America. It does not seem that there is *one* universal intrinsic meaning in all meaningful expressions. Or, if expressions have intrinsic meaning as Strawson suggests, many people do not know how to follow the directions given for their correct use. Either the implicit directions in an expression are unreliable, or people do not know how to correctly understand the proper use of expressions. Both possibilities are troublesome.

D'Artagnon claims that there is no queen of America. Unless Porthos is lying, which may be possible, he believes that there is a queen of America. It is possible that he misinterprets the directions given him by the expression, but it may be the case that the meaning of a denoting phrase is not the directions for its correct use to refer to an object. Although there may not be a queen of America as many would interpret to be the expression's proper use (a female sovereign), Porthos's statement does not seem to be an incorrect use of the expression, unless there is some fixed referent of the expression.

Strawson errs because he believes there is something built into an expression that gives directions for its use. He criticizes Russell for misattributing the role of referring to the expression, not the expresser. But Strawson is still unable to take away the referential role of the expression entirely. He argues that to give the meaning of an expression is to give directions for its correct use and that the function of the use of an expression is to refer. Strawson's attempt to characterize the meaning of an expression as the general directions for its proper use is interesting but has the unstated assumption that there is a limited number of things that an expression can

refer to correctly. He says that the same expression may be used to refer to innumerable things, but this idea does not fit the way we normally use denoting phrases. It is also hard to believe that the same expression can correctly refer to innumerable things if the directions given by the expression are effective.

Strawson's theory of denoting phrases—particularly his distinction between an expression and its use—seems to better represent the way we think about and use language. It is an effective criticism and counterproposal to Russell's theory. However, his idea that the meaning of an expression is the general directions for its use to refer to objects seems problematic and vague. The meanings of expressions need to have more certitude than the directions for their proper use. Otherwise, there will continue to be the dispute about expressions with seemingly nonexistent referents when they are used in a seemingly proper and correct way. Not only because the expression is referring to a nonexistent object or person, but because people will struggle to correctly interpret the meaning—or directions—of an expression.

Works Cited

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