

Strawson: “On Referring”

The ‘uniquely referring use’ of an expression

This is Strawson’s term for the use of an expression to “mention or refer to some individual person or single object ... in the course of ... making a statement about that person [or] object” (p. 246).

Expressions that can be used this way include: singular demonstrative pronouns, proper names, singular personal and impersonal pronouns, definite descriptions.

Strawson distinguishes between the **expressions** used and the **uses** made of them. It is the **use**, not the expression, that is “uniquely referring.” Thus, there is nothing inherent to a definite description that makes it refer uniquely. (Contrast “the whale is a mammal” with “the whale struck the ship.”)

In fact, Strawson goes further. **Expressions do not refer at all!** It is not an expression but its **use** (by some person) that refers.

Sentences, uses, and utterances

Strawson distinguishes (as he thinks Russell did not) between a **sentence** (or an expression), a **use** of that sentence (or expression), and an **utterance** of that sentence (or expression). One and the same sentence can be used on different occasions, to make different statements with different truth-values.

Sentences (types) vs. uses (tokens)

What Strawson means by ‘sentence’ is ‘sentence-**type**’, and what he means by ‘use of a sentence’ is ‘sentence-**token**’, as his discussion on p. 250 makes clear.

Strawson thinks Russell overlooked this distinction (“he confused expressions with their use in a particular context” p. 250). To one who blurs this distinction, it would appear that it is the same thing (namely, a sentence) that is both **meaningful** and **true** (or false).

But Strawson holds that it is the sentence **type** that is meaningful, but its use on a particular occasion (i.e., a **token**) that is true or false.

Hence, Strawson maintains that the Russell sentence (“The king of France is bald”) is meaningful, but that any token of it (at least, any token produced in the last 200 years) will be **neither** true nor false.

Who (or what) refers? Expressions vs. persons

It is not a sentence that is true or false, but the statement that it is used, on a particular occasion, to make (what we have called the proposition expressed by a particular use of that sentence). Similarly, it is not an expression that refers, but the person who uses the expression on a particular occasion of its use (p. 250, left).

“...[an] *expression* ... cannot be said to mention, or refer to, anything, any more than the *sentence* can be said to be true or false. ... ‘Mentioning’, or ‘referring’, is not something an expression does; it is something that someone can use an expression to do.”

Reference vs. Attribution

In the case of a sentence that is used to make a statement, we can distinguish two distinct linguistic roles (see Strawson’s §IV, p. 255):

1. **Identifying (or referring to) something**
2. **Attributing something to it (saying something about it).**

Typically, the subject expression is used to perform the first task, the predicate the second. But the two tasks are not independent of one another. For when (1) misfires, (2) cannot be carried out. That is, when identification (or reference) fails, the attribution component **fails to occur**.

(Note: this does **not** mean that a **false attribution** is made; rather, it means **no attribution** has been made.)

Since no attribution is made by the use of a sentence whose subject term fails in its identifying (=referential) role, the use we are considering of the Russell sentence has no truth-value.

Entailment vs. presupposition

The relation between:

1. The king of France is bald.
2. There is a king of France.

Russell’s theory holds that (1) **entails** (2).

[(2) is the existence component of (1); one of the three conjuncts in its analysis.]

Strawson's theory holds that (1) **presupposes** (2).

“To say ‘The king of France is wise’ is, in some sense of ‘imply’, to *imply* that there is a king of France. But this is a very special and odd sense of ‘imply’. ‘Implies’ in this sense is certainly not equivalent to ‘entails’ (or ‘logically implies’).” (p. 252, left)

“... the fulfillment of the conditions for a correct ascriptive use of an expression is a part of what is stated by such a use; but the fulfillment of the conditions for a correct referring use of an expression is never part of what is stated, though it is (in the relevant sense of ‘implied’) implied by such a use.” (p. 256, left)

The difference between entailment and presupposition:

Russell's view, that (1) **entails** (2), means:

(1) cannot be true unless (2) is true. If (2) is false, (1) is **false**.

Strawson's view, that (1) **presupposes** (2), means:

(1) cannot be true **or false** unless (2) is true. If (2) is false, (1) is **neither true nor false**.

So Strawson's theory (a version of one option that Frege considers, but that Russell ignores in discussing Frege) introduces **truth-value gaps**: some meaningful sentences are neither true nor false. More precisely: some meaningful sentence **types have tokens that** are neither true nor false.

Criticism of Strawson

The key weakness in Strawson's theory—and the best reason to try to save Russell's—is the presence of truth-value gaps. On Strawson's theory, before we can even begin to evaluate for truth or falsity, we must ascertain what object is being identified or referred to and what is being ascribed to it (asserted about it).

This seems innocuous enough. But the separation Strawson imposes between truth (of a sentence-token) and meaning (of a sentence-type) is dubious. One would like to think that meaning and truth are more closely connected; that, for example, the meaning of x is connected somehow to the conditions under which x is, or would be, true.

Here, Strawson can respond as follows: the connection between truth and meaning is actually there, so long as you put the point carefully: the meaning of **the sentence-type x** is connected to the conditions under which **tokens of sentence-type x** are, or would be, true.

But Strawson needs to give some explanation of why a perfectly meaningful sentence (type) may fail, on a given occasion of use, to have a truth-value. The sort of case that fits his view best is one where the speaker has violated some kind of linguistic rule, where the violation causes the misfire.

This kind of case occurs most frequently with such context-sensitive words as ‘this’, ‘that’, ‘he’, ‘now’, ‘you’, etc.—i.e. **indexicals**. Thus, someone who (pointing) utters the sentence ‘She is on fire’ in a context in which no female is in the vicinity (nor anything that could be metaphorically referred to as a female), may well have violated a rule for the correct use of demonstrative pronouns, which violation would prevent any assertion from being made or any proposition being expressed.

In the case of sentences containing indexicals, we are used to the idea that **which** proposition gets expressed (not **whether** a proposition gets expressed) depends on **which** object in the context is being referred to by the indexical. Thus, when **no** object gets picked out, a necessary condition for knowing which proposition is expressed is unfulfilled.

But where there is a definite description (rather than an indexical), there is no expectation that which proposition is expressed depends on which object is getting referred to. **Definite descriptions need not be context-sensitive in the way that indexicals are.**

(Here we ignore those definite descriptions that have indexical components, such as ‘*my* mother’, ‘the capital of *this* state’, etc.).

So if a sentence **type** containing a description is **indexical-free**, the truth-value of any given **token** of that type should not depend on contextual features.

Strawson’s criticism of Russell thus seems to depend implicitly on features of indexicals, rather than of descriptions. (Notice the frequency with which he uses examples containing indexicals.) Russell may well be justified in claiming (response to Strawson, p. 261, right):

“As regards ‘the present King of France’, he fastens upon the egocentric word ‘present’ and does not seem able to grasp that, if for the word ‘present’ I had substituted the words ‘in 1905’, the whole of his argument would have collapsed.”