

Class #8 - Presupposition

I. Meaning, Truth and Use

Frege presented us with three puzzles about language and its connection to the world.

To solve those puzzles, he posited a distinction between the senses and the referents of expressions and sentences.

Russell, in contrast, encouraged us to examine the deep logical form of our statements.

One of Russell's central achievements is the cleavage between grammatical form and logical form.

We need such a distinction, independently of Russell's analysis of definite descriptions, in order to make sense of differences like that between JR and NR.

JR	John came down the road
NR	Nothing came down the road.

Still, Strawson is critical of Russell's complete abandonment of grammatical form.

Strawson presents what might be called a use theory of meaning, related to Wittgenstein's later work.

He is often called an ordinary language philosopher.

Frege (with his notion of a logically perfect language) and Russell (with his attempts to recast sentences in logical form) tried to solve philosophical puzzles by reforming language.

Ordinary language philosophers tried to solve the same puzzles by looking to how we actually use words.

Strawson denies the presupposition of Frege and Russell that our communication and reasoning is supported by an underlying rational structure.

Ordinary language has no logic (344).

Strawson claims that logicians like Frege and Russell neglect the conventions and context of the use of a sentence when analyzing it.

In order to refer, for example, one needs to tell the hearer that a reference is being made.

One needs to provide a context for that reference.

Context includes time, place, situation, identity of speaker, subjects of immediate focus of interest, histories of speaker and listener.

Conventions for referring are more complicated than those for ascribing and asserting.

Strawson laments their neglect.

Conventions for referring have been neglected or misinterpreted by logicians. The reasons for this neglect are not hard to see, though they are hard to state briefly. Two of them are, roughly: (1) the preoccupation of most logicians with definitions; (2) the preoccupation of some logicians with formal systems (337).

The logicians' emphasis on definition blinds them to contexts and conventions.

Their emphasis on formal systems makes them force expressions into limited, circumscribed roles.

Strawson emphasizes the sensitivity to use of sentences which is characteristic of ordinary-language philosophy in contrast to the Frege/Russell mathematical approach.

Strawson presents a view which may be called presuppositionalism, if one likes long words.

He claims that there are two distinct functions of language: to refer and to assert.

The uniquely referring use of an expression picks out an individual or object or particular event or some other one thing in the course of saying something about that thing.

Pronouns, proper names, and phrases beginning with 'the' all have uniquely referring uses.

Often these words are used to refer to general terms, or abstract classes.

Sometimes they are predicates, not subjects.

In JL, 'the person sitting to my left' is a uniquely referring expression.

JL Jared is the person sitting to my left.

Strawson discusses mainly the subject use, but his treatment can be extended to all kinds of reference.

Asserting is distinct from referring.

Referring is something we do with parts of sentences.

We assert with whole sentences.

Sometimes, our assertions make false presuppositions about the expressions which are part of them.

If we keep in mind that the different tasks of referring and asserting are separate, Strawson argues, we will avoid the puzzles that motivated Frege.

In particular, we must keep in mind that a sentence is a type, but meaning applies only to uses of a sentence type.

Sentences are true or false, also, only on particular uses.

We cannot talk of *the sentence* being true or false, but only of its being used to make a true or false assertion, or (if this is preferred) to express a true or false proposition. And equally obviously we cannot talk of *the sentence* being *about* a particular person, for the same sentence may be used at different times to talk about quite different particular persons, but only of a *use* of the sentence to talk about a particular person (326).

While Strawson's claim is that meaning and truth are properly ascribed to uses and not to sentences, his real disagreement with Russell is over the treatment of non-referring singular names.

II. Failure of Presupposition

The problem of empty names is one of three puzzles to which Frege's sense/reference distinction is a response.

The problem is to give an account of the meaningfulness of sentences like KW despite the non-existence of an object to which the sentence seems to refer, like the king of France.

KW The present king of France is wise

Meinong supposed that all referring expressions must refer to existent objects.

So, KW entails that there must be a present king of France, in some sense.

The Meinongian solution is clearly untenable, as we have already mentioned.

Russell and Strawson agree about that.

Frege argued that 'the king of France' has a sense despite its lack of reference.

So, while KW is meaningful, it lacks a truth value which would be its reference.

Similarly, for Frege, NKW is meaningful but neither truth nor false.

NKW The present king of France is not wise

Avoiding senses, Russell claims that the forms of KW and NKW are not subject-predicate. Rather, they are existential assertions containing three parts.

- R1. There is a king of France;
- R2. There is not more than one king of France; and
- R3. There is nothing which is the king of France and which (is/is not) wise.

Strawson criticizes Russell for sharing with the Meinong the belief that in order for a subject-predicate sentence to be true, the denoting expression must refer to an existent object.

It does seem pretty clear, and I have no wish to dispute, that the sentences (1)-(3) above do describe circumstances which are at least *necessary* conditions of anyone making a true assertion by uttering the sentence S. But, as I hope to show, to say this is not at all the same thing as to say that Russell has given a correct account of the use of the sentence S or even that he has given an account which, though incomplete, is correct as far as it goes; and is certainly not at all the same thing as to say that the model translation provided is a correct model for all (or for any) singular sentences beginning with a phrase of the form “the so-and-so” (324).

In order to make sure that subject-predicate sentences are never caught in a failure of reference, that they never include terms which refer to things which do not exist, Russell claims that the only true subject-predicate sentences are those which include logically proper names.

The meaning of such a name, Russell claims, is just the object which it designates.

Logically proper names (e.g. ‘this’ and ‘that’) refer to my sense data.

Since we are immediately and infallibly acquainted with our own sense data, Russell argues, we will never make a mistaken reference to one that does not exist.

Logically proper names can thus safely fit into the subject place of a subject-predicate sentence.

Thus, for Russell, any sentence about a particular person or object, to be significant, must really be an existential proposition or else the subject is really a logically proper name.

Grammatical form is misleading.

Opposing Russell’s view, Strawson claims that Russell was misled by the circumstances in which one might utter KW and NKW.

In order to assert KW and NKW truly, it would be necessary that there be a present king of France.

But the sentence does not mean that there is a present king of France.

Russell is right that KW and NKW are significant, and that if someone used one of them to make a true assertion, then there would have to be a wise king of France presently.

But, he is wrong that anyone now uttering either of them would make a true or false assertion, and that part of such an assertion would be that there is no a unique king of France.

Someone using KW or NKW implies that there is a king of France.

Implying is different from asserting.

When we say that there is no king of France, we aren’t contradicting KW or NKW.

We are not saying those sentences are false.

We are merely pointing out that a truth value is not possible.

Russell thus confused referring and meaning.

An ordinary personal name is, roughly, a word used referringly, of which the use is not dictated by any descriptive meaning the word may have, and is not prescribed by any such general rule for use as a referring expression... (340).

Even for logically proper names, Strawson argues, their meanings are not their referents. If someone asks the meaning of 'this', I don't hand him the object (or worse, the sense datum). Reference is achieved in use depending on the name, context, conventions, etc., not because the name is shorthand for some other expression which refers unerringly, unambiguously, and logically properly.

There are no logically proper names and there are no descriptions (in [Russell's] sense) (324).

Instead, the meaning of a name or other singular term is neither its referent, nor its referent under a particular mode of presentation, a description. Meanings of singular terms are instructions for determining whether particular uses of it refer. Similarly, meanings of sentences are not the propositions they express.

To give the meaning of an expression (in the sense in which I am using the word) is to give *general directions* for its use to refer to or mention particular objects or persons; to give the meaning of a sentence is to give *general directions* for its use in making true or false assertions (327).

For Strawson, meanings are conventions, or sets of instructions, governing the use of expressions or sentences in particular assertions. Strawson thus argues that the true forms of KW and NKW are not existential. They merely presuppose, rather than assert, the existence of a king of France. Uses of expressions signal, but do not entail uniquely existential assertions. They are presumed but not necessary.

To refer is not to assert... (253).

Strawson wants to distinguish A from B and C from D.

- A. Using a sentence to make a unique reference; from
- B. Asserting that there is a unique individual with certain characteristics.
- C. Sentences that contain an expression used to make a reference; from
- D. Uniquely existential sentences.

Russell assimilates sentences of types A and C to types B and D. Strawson wants to cleave the job of referring from the job of asserting or ascribing. KW and NKW ascribe properties to an object which they presume exists. They do not assert the existence of that object.

III. Bivalence and Bearers of Truth

Strawson says that Russell's confusion can be traced to his beliefs about the bearers of truth values. Russell thinks that sentences are either true or false. Strawson argues that we should think of utterances, not sentences or propositions, as true or false.

He distinguishes sentences from uses of sentences and utterances of sentences.
Sentences themselves are not the kinds of things that could be true or false.
Truth and falsity depend on the use made of a sentence in any particular utterance.
A sentence can be used to make a true or false assertion.
Similarly, only the particular utterance is about a particular person
The sentence in itself is not about anything.
Consider an ant, tracing out an inscription in the sand.
Even if the inscription were to have the form of AC, we would not take the ant to be claiming to like candy.

AC I like candy.

Russell's error comes from not differentiating sentences, their uses, and utterances of those sentences. Since they are different types, we must say different things of them.

I am not saying that there are sentences and expression (types) and use of them, and utterances of them, as there are ships and shoes and sealing wax. I am saying that we cannot say the same things about types, uses of types and utterances of types (327).

In order to avoid both Frege's positing senses of names and Russell's analysis of proper names into complex existential claims, Strawson drops the requirement that all meaningful sentences have truth value.

Strawson thinks that KW and NKW are neither true nor false.

Frege, too, held that both sentences lacked a truth value, despite their meaningfulness.

But, Strawson doesn't defend the distinction between sense and reference.

He argues that uses of KW and NKW fail to say anything either true or false because of the failure of presupposition.

The failure of presupposition entails that nothing has been said; the utterance is neither true nor false.

Now suppose some one were in fact to say to you with a perfectly serious air: "The king of France is wise". Would you say, "That's untrue"? I think it's quite certain that you wouldn't. But suppose he went on to *ask* you whether you thought that what he had just said was true, or was false; whether you agreed or disagreed with what he had just said. I think you would be inclined, with some hesitation, to say that you didn't do either; that the question of whether his statement was true or false simply *didn't arise*, because there was no such person as the king of France (330).

A description used to refer (e.g. 'the king of France') must be fulfilled if a statement is going to be used to make an assertion.

The failure of presupposition thus entails that a declarative sentence may be uttered while no assertion is made.

On the question of the bearers of truth values, we now have three options: Frege's, Russell's, and Strawson's.

Frege ascribed truth or falsity to propositions, abstract objects posited as the meanings of sentences in use.

Frege lost bivalence for propositions since sentences like KW and NKW are both meaningful but neither true nor false.

One could save bivalence for propositions by claiming that KW and NKW fail to express propositions. Such a move is tempting, for instance, with paradoxical sentences like L, which is called the liar.

L L is false.

If L is true, then what it says is the case.

But, what it says is that L is false.

So, L is false.

By bivalence, then, and the fact that L says that it is false, L is true.

The claim that L must be either true or false entails that L is both true and false.

In classical logical systems, a statement which is true or false leads to what logicians call explosion: every sentence follows from it logically.

Any language that includes L will entail both that Barack Obama is president, and that John McCain is president, that Lady Gaga is both in and not in the haus.

Such inferences are, of course, unacceptable.

If propositions are the bearers of truth values, though, we might say that L fails to express a proposition even when uttered.

We could thus avoid ascribing either truth or falsity to it.

That is, it might be a condition of being a proposition that it have a truth value.

We have reasons to believe that L lacks a truth value, so it is not a proposition.

Similarly, we could claim that KW and NKW, while grammatical sentences, fail to express propositions.

One obvious problem with claiming that KW and NKW fail to express propositions is that propositions are supposed to be not just the bearers of truth value, but, by definition, they are the meanings of sentences.

If KW and NKW fail to express propositions, for Frege, they are meaningless.

But, KW and NKW seem to be fully meaningful.

Russell ascribes truth or falsity to sentences in their true logical form.

Strawson points out that sentences themselves are not the bearers of truth values.

An inscription, even time-stamped, as Frege wanted, and cast in a deeper logical form, as Russell wanted, can be used in different ways.

For example, YY can be used to express either affirmation or denial.

YY Yeah, yeah.

Both Russell's claim that sentences are the bearers of meaning and truth value and Frege's claim that propositions are the bearers of meaning and truth value thus run into difficulties.

For both Frege and Russell, the things that have meaning are precisely the things that have truth value.

Strawson noticed that the bearer of truth value need not be the primary bearer of meaning.

So the question of whether a sentence or expression *is significant or not* has nothing whatever to do with the question of whether the sentence, *uttered on a particular occasion*, is, on that occasion, being used to make a true-or-false assertion or not, or of whether the expression is, on that occasion, being used to refer to, or mention, anything at all (327-8).

Strawson argues that meaning is a function of a sentence or expression, while referring (and the bearing of truth values) is a function of a particular use.

Compare someone in the 18th century saying KW or NKW with someone now uttering it.

The reference changes but the meaning stays the same.

Meanings are general directions for making true or false assertions, for making successful or unsuccessful references.

A significant sentence is one which can be used to talk about something, truly or falsely.

The question whether the sentence is significant or not is the question whether there exist such language habits, conventions, or rules that the sentence logically could be used to talk about something... (329).

Thus, Strawson ascribes truth or falsity to the utterance or assertion, rather than to the sentence or the proposition.

Strawson's focus on presupposition entails a failure of bivalence for sentences.

We saw that Russell criticized Frege for leaving some propositions neither true nor false.

If the bearers of truth values are utterances, then Strawson might argue for bivalence at the utterance level.

In that case, we would not expect bivalence for the sentences, in the same way that we would not expect every letter of the language to be either true or false.

The question just does not arise at the letter, or sentence, level.

Alternatively, Strawson could just abandon the desire for bivalence as a logician's bugaboo.

Questions about bivalence are good to keep in mind as we go forward.

Perhaps more important, though, is Strawson's claim that questions about whether a sentence is meaningful are independent of those about whether the sentence is true or false.

There is much more to be said about meaning and its relation to truth.

For now, let's see how Strawson's presuppositionalist view fares with Frege's other puzzles.

IV. Presupposition and Frege's Puzzles

Frege had three motivations for distinguishing sense and reference.

- FP1 Identity statements and the problem of cognitive content
- FP2 Failure of presupposition/empty reference
- FP3 Opaque contexts

We have seen how his distinction between sentences and assertions treats the failure of presupposition. KW and NKW can not be used, given our current world, to make an assertion, despite their meaningfulness.

Their meaningfulness consists in the rules for using sentences to make assertions.

For the problem of cognitive content, Strawson believes that distinguishing meaningfulness and assertion solves the problem.

'a = a' is ordinarily used to make a trivial assertion.

'a = b' is ordinarily used to make a contentful assertion.

Only the logicians, who confuse a referential term with a non-logical object think there is a problem of cognitive content.

Because Russell confused meaning with mentioning, he thought that if there were any expressions having a uniquely referring use, which were what they seemed (i.e. logical subjects) and not something else in disguise, their meaning must *be* the particular object which they were used to refer to. Hence the troublesome mythology of the logically proper name. But if some one asks me the meaning of the expression “this” - once Russell's favourite candidate for this status - I do not hand him the object I have just used the expression to refer to, adding at the same time that the meaning of the word changes every time it is used. Nor do I hand him all the objects it ever has been, or might be, used to refer to. I explain and illustrate the conventions governing the use of the expression. This is giving the meaning of the expression. It is quite different from giving (in any sense of giving) the object to which it refers; for the expression itself does not refer to anything; though it can be used, on different occasions, to refer to innumerable things (328).

Strawson does not write directly about the sticky problem of opaque contexts.

We can easily infer that he believes that Lois Lane can believe that Superman can fly without believing that Clark Kent can fly because ‘Clark Kent’ and ‘Superman’ carry different rules of application.

But Strawson’s claim that sentences which include empty names can not be used to make a true or false statement is clearly false in opaque contexts like SC

SC Some children believe that Santa Claus brings children presents.

Against Strawson, children who believe the proposition expressed by the that-clause in SC actually believe something false.

We’ll put these problems aside and move on to some more general questions about reference and how it is achieved.