

# RUSSELL'S "DESCRIPTIONS"

MARK COLLERAN

# **BIG PICTURE**

**Theory defining singular descriptions**

**What does 'the \_\_\_\_\_' assert?**

**Addresses problems of existence and meaning**



# NAMES AND DESCRIPTIONS

“A name is a simple symbol whose meaning is something that can only occur as a subject” (69)

**Proper Names**

**Relative Names**

“[A] description...consists of several words, whose meanings are already fixed, and from which results whatever is to be taken as the meaning of the description” (70)

**Indefinite Descriptions**

**Definite Descriptions**



# NAMES AS DESCRIPTIONS

**A proposition with a description is not the same as that proposition with a name substituted for the description**

**Names used directly to indicate the topic of speech are actually descriptions**

“We may even go so far as to say that...no names, in the strict sense, occur, but what seem like names are really descriptions” (73)



# INDEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS

## Propositions about “a \_\_\_\_\_”

I met a man

## Ambiguous description

No constituent represented by phrase

Can still be significant if “a \_\_\_\_\_” does not exist



# EXISTENCE

For ambiguous descriptions:

“A \_\_\_\_\_” exists if “**x is a(n) \_\_\_\_\_**” is true for at least one **x** (a name)

“A man” exists because “Jones is a man” is true

“A unicorn” does not exist

No real-world unicorn to refer to

“**x is a unicorn**” can not be true

# DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS

**Propositions about “the \_\_\_\_\_”**

“Scott is the author of *Waverley*”

**Distinguished from indefinite descriptions by implied uniqueness**

Propositions about “the \_\_\_\_\_” imply corresponding propositions about “a \_\_\_\_\_” as long as there is a single “\_\_\_\_\_”

**Propositions with definite descriptions can be broken into component propositions to determine what they assert**



# MEANING OF DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS

Something exists with the property  $x$ , there is only one something, and that something also has the property  $y$

One can know a proposition about “the \_\_\_\_\_” without knowing any proposition “ $x$  is the \_\_\_\_\_”

## Primary and Secondary Occurrence

**Primary:** “The King of France is bald”

**False**

**Secondary:** “The King of France is not bald”

**True**





# **RUSSELL AND FREGE**

**The theory of descriptions is an alternative to the sense/reference theory**

**Russell sought a solution to Frege's problems that did not involve the third realm (sense)**



# THE PROBLEM OF COGNITIVE CONTENT

**Hesperus is Hesperus**

**Hesperus is Phosphorus**

**Both Hesperus and Phosphorus are Venus**

What is Russell's solution to the problem?  
How does it compare to Frege's solution?



# THE PROBLEM OF EMPTY REFERENCE

**Sherlock Holmes lives at 221B Baker Street**

What is Russell's solution to the problem?  
How does it compare to Frege's solution?

