Class 7 - Strawson on Referring

I. Strawson's theory of meaning

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.
This distinction must be made, in order to make sense of the difference between

> 1. John came down the road

and

> 2. Nothing came down the road.

But, 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.
Ordinary language philosophers looked to how we actually use language instead of trying to reform language, as Frege (with his notion of a logically perfect language) and Russell (with his attempts to recast sentences in logical form) did.

> Ordinary language has no logic (260).

Logicians, like 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.
The logicians' emphasis on definition blinds them to contexts and conventions, which are no part of definitions.
Logic's emphasis on formal systems makes them force language into pre-structured boxes.
Strawson, thus, emphasizes ordinary language philosophy, rather than the Frege/Russell mathematical approach.

Strawson presents a view which may be called presuppositionalism, if one likes long words.
Strawson's central claim is 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

> 3. Jared is the person sitting to my left.

'the person sitting to my left' is a uniquely referring expression.
Strawson discusses mainly the subject use, but his topic is really 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.

II. The failure of presupposition

How can

> 4. The present king of France is wise

be meaningful despite the non-existence of a king of France?

Meinong supposed that all referring expressions must refer to existent objects.
So, 4 entails that there must be a present king of France, in some sense.
The Meinongian solution is clearly untenable, as we have already mentioned.

Frege argued that 'the king of France' has a sense despite its lack of reference.
So, while 4 is meaningful, it lacks a truth value, which would be its reference.
Similarly, for Frege:

> 5. The present king of France is not wise

will be meaningful but neither truth nor false.

Avoiding senses, Russell claimed that the forms of 4 and 5 are not subject-predicate.
Rather, they are existential assertions.
Russell analyzes 4 and 5 as having three parts:

> a. There is a king of France;
> b. There is not more than one king of France; and
> c. There is nothing which is the king of France and which (is/is not) wise.

Strawson criticizes Russell for sharing with the Meinongian the belief that in order for a subject-predicate sentence to be true, the denoting expression must refer to an existent object.
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 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 presumably infallibly, acquainted with our own sense data, 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 (that is, the grammatical form is misleading), or else the subject is really a logically proper name.

Strawson says Russell is unquestionably wrong.

> 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... (258)

The reference is achieved by 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) (248).

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.
They are conventions, or sets of instructions, governing their use in particular assertions.

III. Strawson's criticisms of Russell

Strawson says that Russell was misled by the circumstances in which one might utter 4 and 5.
In order to assert 4 and 5 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 4 and 5 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 4 or 5 implies that there is a king of France, but that's different from entailment.
When we say that there is no king of France, we aren't contradicting 4 or 5.
We are not saying those sentences are false.
We are merely pointing out that a truth value is not possible.

Russell confused referring and meaning.
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).

IV. Referring and asserting

Strawson thus argues that the true forms of 4 and 5 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:

> 6. Using a sentence to make a unique reference; from
> 7. Asserting that there is a unique individual with certain characteristics.

Similarly, he distinguishes:

> 8. Sentences that contain an expression used to make a reference; from
> 9. Uniquely existential sentences.

Russell assimilates sentences of types 6 and 8 to types 7 and 9.
Strawson wants to cleave the job of referring from the job of asserting or ascribing.
4 and 5 ascribe properties to an object which they presume exists.
They do not assert the existence of that object.

V. The bearers of truth

Strawson implies 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:

> 13. I like candy.

we would not take the ant to be claiming to 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.
Russell assimilates them all.
Strawson insists that we must distinguish 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 (250).

In order to avoid both Frege's positing senses of names and the Russellian solution, Strawson drops the requirement that all meaningful sentences have truth value.
Strawson thinks that 4 and 5 are neither true nor false, which was Frege's view.
But, Strawson doesn't defend the distinction between sense and reference.
Frege says that both sentences are meaningful.
Strawson agrees.
But, he argues that uses of 4 and 5 fail to say anything either true or false.
The failure of presupposition entails that nothing has been said; the utterance is neither true nor false.

On Strawson's view, we can keep compositionality of meaning, and deny that names without bearers have sense.
Strawson's central claim, then, is that a description (e.g. 'the king of France') must be fulfilled if a statement is going to be used to make an assertion.

On the question of the bearers of truth values, we now see three options: Frege's, Russell's, and Strawson's.
Frege ascribed truth or falsity to the proposition.
Frege lost bivalence for propositions, since sentences like 4 and 5 are both meaningful, but neither true nor false.
One could save bivalence for propositions by claiming that 4 and 5 fail to express propositions.
Such a move is tempting, for instance, with paradoxical sentences:

> 11. 11 is false.

11 is called the liar.
If 11 is true, then what it says must be the case.
But, what it says is that 11 is false.
So, 11 must be false.
By bivalence, then, and the fact that 11 says that it is false, 11 must be true.
So, it looks like the claim that 11 must either be true or false leads to the claim that it is both true and false.
Further, in classical logical systems, a statement which is true or false leads to what logicians call explosion: every sentence follows from it logically.
So, if a system includes 11, it will entail both that Barack Obama is president, and that John McCain is president.
Such inferences are, of course, unacceptable.
If propositions are the bearers of truth values, though, we might say that 11 fails to express a proposition, and 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 11 lacks a truth value, so it is not a proposition.
Similarly, we could claim that 4 and 5, while grammatical sentences, fail to express propositions.
One obvious problem with claiming that 4 and 5 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 4 and 5 fail to express propositions, for Frege, they are meaningless.
But, 4 and 5 seem to be fully meaningful.

Russell seems to ascribe truth or falsity to sentences, in their true logical form.
Strawson is of course correct to point 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.
Recall that

>   12. Yeah, yeah.

can be used to express either affirmation or denial.

Both Russell's claim that sentences are bearers of meaning and truth value and Frege's claim that propositions are bearers of meaning and truth value 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.
Strawson says 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.
Comparing someone in the 18th century saying 4 or 5 with someone now uttering it, we find that 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... (251).

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

VI. Bivalence revisited

Strawson's focus on presuppositions 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.

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

VII. Presupposition and Frege's puzzles

Frege had three motivations for distinguishing sense and reference:

> identity statements
> failure of presupposition
> opaque contexts

We have seen how his distinction between asserting and referring treats the failure of presupposition.
Actually, it is unclear whether Strawson thinks that 4 and 5 are just neither true nor false, or whether they are meaningless, though I think he meant the former.
Children believe that Santa Claus brings them presents.
If

      13. Santa Claus brings children presents.

is meaningless, then it is hard to see how children can believe it.
In fact, one might argue, against Strawson, that children, in believing 13, believe something false.

What about the identity puzzle?
Strawson thinks that distinguishing meaning and reference makes the identity statement no longer trivial.
He distinguishes identity statements from identification statements.

Strawson does not attempt to deal directly with the sticky problem of opaque contexts.
We can assume that he thinks 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.