

Russell on names and communication

I Introduction

A description theory of names claims that all names of some category are related in some way to definite descriptions. Theories may differ about what the relevant category is, and how it should be specified, but let us ignore such differences. More interestingly, theories will differ about what the relevant relation is. For the moment let us abstract from such differences by using the schematic R to indicate whatever relation is desired.

Description theories differ not only in how they specify R but also in their structure. Is it claimed that R holds universally across the language, whatever the speaker, whatever the occasion? Or is the extension of R speaker-dependent, so that name-description pairs may vary from speaker to speaker? Or is it occasion-dependent, so that even for a single speaker there may be different name-description pairs on different occasions? To allow for these variations it is convenient to think of R as a four-place relation between a name, a description, a speaker, and an occasion. Then we might represent the three structural possibilities just mentioned as follows, using “ n ” to range over names of the relevant category, “ d ” over descriptions, “ s ” over speakers, and “ o ” over occasions:

- (1) $\forall n \exists d \forall s \forall o (Rnds o)$
- (2) $\forall n \forall s \exists d \forall o (Rnds o)$
- (3) $\forall n \forall s \forall o \exists d (Rnds o)$.

(1) claims that for every name (of the selected category) there is a description such that for every speaker on every occasion the name is R -related to the description (for that speaker on that occasion). (2) and (3) specify theories with a progressively weaker structure.

In “Naming and Necessity” (1972), Kripke considers description theories which I think he intends to have the structure of (1): the $\exists \forall \forall$ structure, for short, for the initial quantifier, being common to all the theories, can be omitted. The hesitation is due to the fact that an official statement of the

structure of the theories he wishes to consider is consistent with, though it does not entail, the $\forall\exists\forall$ structure of (2).¹ As for *R*, he explicitly distinguishes two possibilities: that *R* is *fixes the meaning* and that *R* is *fixes the reference*. There are therefore up to four theories in play, two alike in structure (that is, in their quantifier prefix) and two alike in the content of *R*.

Kripke on more than one occasion attributes “the” description theory of names to Russell.² However, Russell’s theory of names and descriptions has the $\forall\forall\exists$ structure of (3), and the relation it ascribes is neither of Kripke’s candidates, but rather *makes explicit the thought in the mind of the speaker (on that occasion)*.³ Hence for two sufficient reasons Russell’s theory is not any of the theories explicitly addressed by Kripke: it differs in structure from any theory discussed by Kripke, and it differs in its specification of the relevant relation between names and descriptions. The following table makes this plain:⁴

	$\exists\forall\forall$	$\forall\exists\forall$	$\forall\forall\exists$
fixes meaning	1	2	7
fixes reference	3	4	8
fixes subject’s thought	5	6	9

The views explicitly addressed by Kripke do not go beyond 1–4. The view I attribute to Russell is 9, which in full is as follows:

DTN9 – For every name in the relevant category, every speaker, and every occasion of the name’s use, there is a description such that in order to make explicit the thought in the mind of the speaker on that occasion, one must use a sentence in which the name is replaced by the description.

- 1 Thus the numbered theses in Kripke (1972) at p. 280, and again at p. 285, use a schematic “A” for the speaker. One natural way to quantify over the conditions would yield the $\forall\exists\forall$ structure, but most of Kripke’s discussion seems aimed at the stronger $\exists\forall\forall$ structure.
- 2 For example, “Frege and Russell certainly seem to have the full blown theory according to which a proper name is not a rigid designator and is synonymous with the description which replaced it” (Kripke 1972: 277); “Frege, Russell, Searle, Strawson and other advocates of the description theory” (Kripke 1972: 349, n. 38). Kripke is not alone in making this attribution to Russell. Michael Dummett describes Russell as holding that “all ordinary proper names are disguised definite descriptions” (Dummett 1973: 97).
- 3 Russell does allow, as we shall see, that a description may sometimes be what one might call reference-fixing; but this is not the relation which is constitutive of his theory of names, and it looks rather different within a genuinely Russellian (as opposed to Kripkean) perspective.
- 4 The table does not do justice to some interrelations between structure and content. Thus, fixing meaning (taken as a feature of the public language) requires the $\exists\forall\forall$ structure.

In §2 below, I present evidence for regarding Russell as holding DTN9. This theory, as opposed to some lower-numbered description theories, does not have any immediate consequences either for the public reference of a name or for the truth conditions of utterances containing names. In §3, I sketch Russell's account of public reference and in §4 his account of truth conditions. I claim that Russell's theory of the meaning (in more or less Kripke's sense) of *ordinary* proper names is about the same as Kripke's: they are rigid designators whose meaning is their bearer. Sic! In §5 I show how Russell's theories can offer solutions (good, bad, or indifferent) to familiar problems about existence, identity, and belief. In §6, I consider to what extent Russell's theories are vulnerable to attacks on other description theories.

2 What Russell actually said

Common words, even proper names, are usually really descriptions.
(Russell 1912b: 29; 1911b: 156)

This cannot be literally true, and Russell cannot have thought it was, since the categories of names and definite descriptions are syntactically defined, and defined as disjoint (setting aside such atypical expressions as “The Holy Roman Empire”). So the quoted sentence is metaphor or ellipsis. A standard interpretation is that it means that proper names are really *synonymous* with descriptions. One has only to read Russell's immediately subsequent amplification to see that this interpretation cannot be correct:

That is to say, the thought in the mind of a person using a proper name correctly can generally only be expressed explicitly if we replace the proper name by a description. Moreover the description required to express the thought will vary for different people, or for the same person at different times. The only thing constant (so long as the name is rightly used) is the object to which the name applies.⁵

This quotation concludes the exegetical task, for the first sentence establishes my claim about how Russell understood the *R*-relation, and the second establishes the occasion-dependent $\forall\forall\exists$ structure. However, it will be useful to say something about the nature of the enterprise on which Russell was engaged,

5 The tone of these remarks contrasts strongly with that of comparable passages in Frege (e.g. the footnote about the sense of the name “Aristotle” (1892a), and the discussion of “Dr Lauben” (1918). Frege finds the variation in the descriptions problematic from the point of view of his theory, and is forced to regard it as a lapse from perfection. There is no sign of such an attitude in Russell. The variation is not inconsistent with anything else he is tempted to believe.

and, with this in mind, to comment briefly on some passages which appear to lend greater support than the one just quoted to the interpretation of Russell according to which his *R*-relation is synonymy.

Russell's conception of philosophical problems has a highly individualistic character. The subject and its thoughts and experiences are the relatively unproblematic starting-point. More exactly, to allow for his conversion to the no-self theory of self, of which the beginnings are visible at the time of the above quotation, at the centre are directly accessible thoughts and experiences. Basic thoughts have as their subject-matter these experiences and their properties. What is problematic is to allow for the external world and people as objects of thought and as objects of knowledge.

How does a public natural language, and its associated notion of *meaning*, appear within such a perspective? The fundamental phenomena are individual experience-related thoughts, assumed to be available independently of language.⁶ Different subjects will have basic thoughts with different subject-matters. Each will try to build thought and knowledge outwards from himself. But the idea that each would end by constructing a significantly overlapping set of thoughts, apt to be the public meanings of public language sentences, would be gratuitous.⁷ Certainly, there could be no identity of singular basic thoughts, since the experiences which form their subject-matters do not overlap. The most optimistic hope is for overlap in our non-basic thoughts, but if one takes Russell's epistemological assumptions with full seriousness, we would have no good reason to believe that there is any such thing, however smooth the processes we call communication appear, however similar the assignments of truth value by different subjects to the same words. A weaker hypothesis, proclaiming merely some kind of harmony between the thoughts different subjects attach to given words, will as well explain the data as the stronger hypothesis of identity.

6 See, for example: "When one person uses a word, he does not mean by it the same thing as another means by it. . . . It would be absolutely fatal if people meant the same thing by their words. It would make all intercourse impossible . . . because the meaning you attach to your words must depend on the nature of the objects you are acquainted with, and . . . different people are acquainted with different objects." (Russell: 1918: 195) "It seemed to me that belief and knowledge have pre-verbal forms, and that they cannot be rightly analysed if this is not realized" (Russell 1959: 132). Moreover, Russell retrospectively held that before 1918 he had not paid much attention to "linguistic" matters. (See Russell 1959: 154: "It was in 1918 . . . that I first became interested in the definition of 'meaning' and in the relation of language to fact".) If this comes as a surprise, it is because one has not done full justice to Russell's idea that the theory of descriptions, and the related doctrines that we assign to his "Philosophy of Language", were for him primarily doctrines about thought rather than language.

7 Consider, for example, the implicature of "If two people are both believing that two and two are four, it is at least theoretically possible that the meanings they attach to the words *two* and *and* and *are* and *four* are the same . . ." (from Russell (1912a), quoted in Russell (1959: 161)). Theoretically possible, since this is a non-basic belief.

Someone who holds this picture would never think of identifying *R* either with *fixes the meaning* (=public language meaning) or with *fixes the reference* (=public language reference). The reason is that one is quite lucky if there turns out to be such a thing as *public* meaning or reference at all, and in any case an adequate theory will need to reconstruct such phenomena from more basic ones. There is no ground-level public meaning or reference, because at ground level all each individual can think about, mean, or refer to is his or her own experience and its properties.

We will see later how Russell can effect some of these constructions. But, in order to complete the exegetical task, I need to consider passages which are apparently in conflict with my interpretation.

- (1)
 “Apollo” means really “the object having such-and-such properties”, say “the object having the properties enumerated in the Classical Dictionary”.
 (Russell and Whitehead 1910: 31)

There is no gainsaying that these words have a reading which conflicts with my interpretation, but consider the attached footnote:

The same principle applies to many uses of the proper names of existent objects, e.g. to all uses of proper names for objects known to the speaker only by report, and not by personal acquaintance.

Since two speakers may vary in this respect concerning a name both use in apparently successful communication, the appending of the footnote to the text suggests that the text’s use of “means” is not the public language use we might imagine, but rather something idiolectal.

- (2)
 When I say, e.g., “Homer existed”, I am meaning by “Homer” some description, say “the author of the Homeric poems”, and I am asserting that those poems were written by one man.
 (Russell 1918: 252; cf. the discussion of “Romulus” at p. 242.)

First, what is explicitly addressed is (possibly idiosyncratic) speaker meaning, rather than public meaning. Second, the name occurs in an existential sentence and, as we shall see, the position I attribute to Russell has it that these sentences will be accorded rather special treatment.

- (3)
 The names that we commonly use, like “Socrates”, are really abbreviations for descriptions
 (Russell 1918: 200)

However, the passage continues:

We are not acquainted with Socrates and therefore we cannot name him. When we use the word “Socrates”, we are really using a description. Our thought may be rendered by some such phrase as, “The Master of Plato”, or (Russell 1918: 201)

Here the later amplification is consistent with my proposed interpretation.

(4)

If somebody mentions Socrates and you have never previously heard of him, you can look him up in the encyclopaedia and you may take what you find there as the definition of the word “Socrates”. In that case, “Socrates” is not, for you, strictly a name, but a substitute for a description . . . I do not suggest that in ordinary language or in grammar we should refuse to regard “Socrates” (say) as a name, but, from an epistemological point of view, our knowledge about him is very different from our knowledge of things with which we are acquainted. In fact, everything that we know about Socrates can only be stated fully by substituting some description of him in place of his name, since, for us, it is only from the description that we understand what the word “Socrates” means. (Russell 1959: 168–9)

If the earlier sentence is read in the light of the later ones, my interpretation is, I believe, the natural one. A full statement of an individual’s knowledge is one thing; an account of what is involved in his communications is another.

3 Russell’s theory of communication and the public reference of names

Although Russell takes idiolect meaning as primary, he thinks that one can make derivative sense of the successful use of a name in communication. It is not a matter of thought-sharing, but of reference-sharing.

[W]e often *intend* to make our statement, not in the form involving the description, but about the actual thing described. That is to say, when we say anything about Bismarck, we should like, if we could, to make the judgement which Bismarck alone can make, namely, the judgement of which he himself is a constituent. In this we are necessarily defeated, since the actual Bismarck is unknown to us. But we know that there is an object B called Bismarck, and that B was an astute diplomatist. We can thus *describe* the proposition we should like to affirm, namely, “B was an astute diplomatist”, where B is the object

which was Bismarck. What enables us to communicate in spite of the varying descriptions we employ is that we know there is a true proposition concerning the actual Bismarck, and that, however we may vary the description (so long as the description is correct), the proposition described is still the same. This proposition, which is described and is known to be true, is what interests us

(Russell 1912b: 31; 1911b: 158)

The idea is that one using a sentence containing a name intends that he and his audience will identify (by description) the same singular proposition. In successful communication, this does actually occur (and, perhaps, is known to occur). We could put this “description theory of communication” more explicitly as follows:

DTC – A speaker, S, who utters a sentence containing a name α , and who satisfies DTN9 in virtue of associating “the F ” on this occasion with α , communicates successfully to an audience A only if:

- (i) S intends that:
 - (a) A should associate α with some definite description, δ , and
 - (b) something should uniquely satisfy “ F ” and should uniquely satisfy the predicate in δ , and
 - (c) A should recognize that S wants A to “be interested in” some singular proposition containing as a constituent an object which each can think of by means of whatever description he associates with α , and
- (ii) S’s intentions in (i) are fulfilled and
- (iii) S and A know that (ii).⁸

The idea is that this necessary condition for successful communication falls

8 Charles Daniels and Peter Hylton both raised the question how the quotation from Russell, this elaboration of it, and the further theories I am about to elaborate on Russell’s behalf would look if one took seriously Russell’s claim that there are no such things as propositions. There is no complete answer, since the theory of names involves attributing to speakers and hearers general beliefs, and we do not know how Russell’s multiple-relation theory of belief deals with these. But the theories of names raise no special problems. Call an object known only by some description a “pseudo-constituent” of a mental state whose content is expressible by that description. Pseudo-constituents will not themselves be terms of the belief-relation, but they will correspond to groups of such terms in whatever way the multiple-relation theory of belief adopts in analysing generality. (If Russellian logical form pictures the mind, then a belief involving the F known by description will correspond to something like the sequence: $\langle \exists x, Fx, \&, \forall y, Fy, \rightarrow, \text{etc.} \rangle$.) Then the main line of Russell’s theory is that objects typically enter only as pseudo-constituents into mental acts of communicating using names, even though they are witnesses to the existentially quantified conditions for such acts to constitute successful communicatings.

short of being sufficient only in so far as it fails to address the role in communication of expressions other than names. We will turn in a moment to what the “interest” specified in (i)(c) is supposed to be, and how it is supposed to relate to the name’s bearer. DTC speaks to the “standard” use of names. As we shall see, an overall view will have to allow for non-standard uses as well.

On this basis, a natural account of public reference would (as a first approximation) take the following form.

DTR – x is the public referent of a name α in a group G iff whenever a member of G uses α , then he and any audience meet the conditions set by DTC and x satisfies the quantification in (i)(b); that is x is the F and x is δ .⁹

It would no doubt be better to relax the condition so as to allow for occasional failures of successful communication, perhaps by saying that a public referent in G is also a public referent in any group of which G is a suitably authoritative and informed subset. Such nuances are more detailed than is appropriate in discussing Russell’s very undetailed suggestions.

Russell, like some subsequent commentators, is sometimes less than strict in his use of the expression “description”, as it occurs in description theories. Officially, “description” abbreviates “definite description”, that is, a phrase of the form “the so-and-so”. However, Russell sometimes appears to use the phrase more loosely, to include information which does not have any uniqueness built into it. Thus, he says in connection with our use of “Bismarck” that “the description in our minds will probably be some more or less vague mass of historical knowledge”, and in connection with my use of “Julius Caesar” that the description will be “made up of some of the things I know about him”. Historical knowledge, and the things I know about someone, do not always or even typically have uniqueness built into their content. We may thus be tempted to contemplate a different theory of public reference in which the information associated with the use of a name may not be unique, but in which uniqueness enters in the following way: the referent of a name is whatever object is uniquely such that no other object satisfies more associated information.

We might also contemplate yet another variant: the public referent of a name is whatever object is uniquely the source of the associated information. Though perfectly consistent with DTN9, we here move away from anything which could properly be attributed to Russell.

What is the “interest” which an audience is supposed to display in some

9 The descriptions “the F ” and δ may, of course, vary from occasion to occasion of the use of α .

singular proposition? Russell is not completely explicit, but it seems that the audience is intended to regard the speaker as having spoken truly just on condition that this singular proposition is true. Note Russell's emphasis in the previous quotation: neither speaker nor hearer need *know* (that is, understand, that is, be acquainted with) the singular proposition in order for it to play this role in their thoughts. For both, it may be accessible only by such descriptions as: the singular proposition whose first member is the first chancellor of the German Empire and whose second member is the property of being astute.

4 Russell's theory of the truth conditions of utterances containing names

"The only thing constant (so long as the name is rightly used) is the object to which the name applies." The quotation continues:

But so long as this remains constant, the particular description involved usually makes no difference to the truth or falsehood of the proposition in which the name appears. (Russell 1912b: 30; 1911b: 156)

I think we can read Russell as here specifying the truth conditions of utterances containing names, which I will dignify by an acronym:

DTT – An utterance of a sentence "... α ...", where x is the public referent (in the sense of DTR) of α , is true iff x satisfies "... ζ ...".

Comments

First, the truth condition treats "... α ..." as expressing a singular proposition, in the sense that an object enters into its truth condition. The truth condition is given by what occurs to the right of "iff", and there is a familiar Russellian contrast between logically proper names, which introduce an object into a truth condition, and definite descriptions, which do not. The truth condition introduced by DTT belongs firmly with the former, rather than the latter, since the bound variable " x ", unlike a descriptive phrase, is assigned an object before the truth condition is evaluated. In my view, the contrast between those grammatically singular expressions which have, and those which lack, object-involving truth conditions is the contrast which underpins Kripke's distinction between rigid and non-rigid designators, and it is available even if our metalanguage is not modal. (For example, even without modality we can distinguish object-involving truth conditions as ones which are absent in the absence of an appropriate object, and as requiring some distinctive epistemic relation between the thinker and the relevant object.) I think one can therefore say, with only

unimportant inaccuracy, that DTT treats *ordinary* proper names as rigid designators.¹⁰

The descriptions which, by DTN9, are associated with names are not (typically) themselves rigid designators. But (as Kripke would be the first to admit) a non-rigid designator can be used to specify a rigid reference condition, that is, a condition which ensures that an expression which satisfies it is a rigid designator. (Thus we could stipulate that the inventor of the zip is, with respect to every world, what “Julius” is to designate, if that person exists at the world in question. The stipulation would ensure that “Julius” designates, with respect to any world at which it designates anything, the person who in the actual world invented the zip. Yet the description “the inventor of the zip” is non-rigid.)

Second, if we take DTR and DTT together we can justify hearing the following words (as they would typically be heard by our contemporaries) as a true account of Russell’s theory of ordinary proper names: their meaning is their bearer. Contemporary ears are unlikely to demand more of *meaning* than that it be both what is common between speaker and hearer in successful communication and what determines truth conditions. Bismarck himself is, Russell says, both all that is typically in common between a speaker and a hearer in virtue of the speaker’s communicatively successful use of “Bismarck”, and the name’s contribution to truth conditions.

Third, although there are many statements of DTN9 in Russell’s writings, there is scant evidence for DTC, DTR, and DTT: I believe I have quoted almost all of it. This is not surprising in the light of Russell’s generally individualistic stance and his official lack of concern with language before the 1920s.

Fourth, many description theories, for example DTN1, entail (or make almost irresistible) theories of communication, reference, and truth conditions. By contrast, DTN9 leaves these matters open. In particular, it leaves open the possibility that the thought expressed by the speaker – the psychological unit – should be distinct from what the speaker thereby publicly expresses – the communicative unit. This separation ought to be congenial to Kripke (and to writers like Brian Loar 1988).

Fifth, the theories are designed to cater for the case in which it is “very

10 Gary Wedeking made me realize the inaccuracy. Strictly, we can speak of a rigid designator in Kripke’s sense only if we adopt a modal metalanguage, which would be uncongenial to Russell. However, the only appropriate way to set DTT in such a language ensures that it treats the names to which it applies as rigid designators in exactly Kripke’s sense. For the correct modalization of it, in possible worlds terms, is: where x is the actual public referent (in the sense of DTR) of α , an actual utterance of a sentence “. . . α . . .” is such that, for any world, w , it is true with respect to w iff x satisfies “. . . ζ . . .” with respect to w . The (implicit) uniqueness quantifier which binds “ x ” lies outside the scope of the possible worlds quantification.

much a matter of chance which characteristics of a man's appearance will come into a friend's mind when he thinks of him" and thus serve as associated descriptions (Russell 1911: 157; 1912b: 30). This is consistent with there being names for which this is not so: for which there is, instead, a conventionally associated description. For such names, a theory with $\exists\forall\forall$ structure will be appropriate. Russell suggests a pervasive possibility: the description "the person called 'N'" is available to all "consumers" in a name-using practice.¹¹

Lest a name should have some conventionally associated description, the following rule of thumb is to be commended: when reporting a person's thought or speech, by default use the name they would or did use, if it is in your repertoire. If descriptive associations are standard for this name, then you will catch those too (and thus get closest to your subject's thoughts). If they are not, nothing is lost. Of course, the default position will be overridden if you have special knowledge of the particular descriptive associations.

5 Solutions to some problems

There are a range of standard semantic problems which description theories are meant to solve. Some might challenge my attribution to Russell of a description theory of names as weak as DTN9 on the grounds that this theory will not seriously engage with, let alone "solve", these problems. In this section, I discuss three of these problems. Typically, it is correct that we will need to look beyond DTN9, and that we will need to modify some of DTC, DTR, and DTT. However, I will maintain that we need not depart from Russell's general ideas.

Existence

One problem concerning existential sentences is to explain how there can be true negative ones, like "There is no such thing as Vulcan". For it seems that the semantic role of "Vulcan" is to refer to something. If it does this, then the sentence will be false; but if it does not do this, it would seem that the sentence ought to be meaningless, through containing an expression which is failing to fill its semantic role. In either case, it would not be true.

But if "Vulcan" were synonymous with a definite description as DTN1 has it, and if one espoused a suitable theory of descriptions, Russell's for example, this problem would disappear. Such a sentence would be synonymous

11 This terminology comes from Evans (1982), who acknowledges Kripke. However, the contrast is already present in Russell, for example in his distinction between two kinds of users of "Bismarck" in the passages adjacent to those already quoted (1911b, 1912b). It occurs elsewhere, including a mention as late as 1959: 168.

with something like “There is no such thing as a unique intra-mercurial planet”. Since this contains no expression whose semantic role appears to be to refer, there is no appearance of a dilemma between meaninglessness and falsehood. This is doubtless what Kripke has in mind when he says that a theory upon which ordinary proper names are synonymous with descriptions can solve problems about existential statements.¹²

Is any such solution made possible by the theories Russell actually holds? Clearly the possibility of true negative existential sentences is *consistent* with DTN9. (DTN9 does not *preclude* the stronger DTN1.) And DTR correctly predicts that the names in such truths will have no public referent. However, the possibility of using them in successful communication is not allowed for by DTC, and their having truth conditions, and so being true, is not allowed for by DTT.

DTN9 allows for the mind of a user of a negative existential sentence to contain a truth, one of the form: there is no unique *F*. One straightforward position for Russell to adopt is that such a sentence cannot be guaranteed to have public truth conditions. From his perspective, this is not very shocking: public truth conditions are in any case a matter of good fortune, representing a particular kind of harmony within a linguistic group.

It will often happen that an empty name will be associated with a much narrower range of descriptions than a non-empty one. (One does not understand “Santa Claus” unless one associates the name with Christmas.) This is because there is no object to give rise to discrete bodies of information. So an alternative to the view that negative existentials have no public truth conditions is that descriptive truth conditions can be correctly assigned when there is a standardly associated description, which there often is for empty names. In this case, the strength of a theory with $\exists\forall\forall$ structure will be appealing.¹³

But from Russell’s viewpoint, such details matter little. The main point is that the thought in the mind of an utterer of a negative existential has a clear and determinate truth condition, and what we say after that is arbitrarily determined by the work we would like our theory of public reference and truth conditions to do.

It is interesting that Russell, so far as I know, *always* applies his description

- 12 “If you give up the idea that [the theory] is a theory of meaning and make it into a theory of reference . . ., you give up some of the advantages of the theory. Singular existential statements and identity statements between names need some other analysis” (Kripke 1972: 277).
- 13 One can’t count on such a conventional association for all empty names. Suppose the original plan is that “Vulcan” should denote a unique planet between Mercury and the sun, but that subsequent theory has it that Vulcan emits rays which are uniquely responsible for cancer. One who utters “Vulcan does not exist” may, on Russell’s account, *think* e.g. that there is no planet between Mercury and the sun, or that cancer is not caused by planetary emissions, but concerning neither thought should he count on his hearer associating it with his words.

theory to negative existential sentences in such a way as to emphasize the idiolectical nature of the truth conditions assigned (*i.e.* truth conditions for the thought in the mind of the speaker, rather than anything more public). The standard pattern has already been quoted (as (2) of §2): “when *you say* N does not exist *you mean* the F does not exist”.

Belief

One problem about belief ascription is this. If “Phosphorus is visible in the morning” can correctly be used to ascribe a belief to the ancient astronomers, why cannot “Hesperus is visible in the morning” also be so used, given that Hesperus is Phosphorus? Yet, intuitively, “The ancient astronomers believed that Hesperus is visible in the morning” is false.

The problem would be solved on DTN1, since the two names would be synonymous with different and non-synonymous descriptions, and it is not surprising that a sentence with one meaning should give a correct attribution of belief and a sentence with another an incorrect one.

Russell has little to say about belief ascriptions; at any rate, little which bears on this problem. But we could interpolate on his behalf the following line of thought. A belief attribution should aim to represent what it is like in the mind of the believer. Hence the standard account of the use of a name is suspended. In this case, we ideally aim to excite in the hearer a thought which is identical to the thought believed. In the example just given, it is obvious why “Phosphorus” comes much closer to that ideal than does “Hesperus”. Indeed, “Phosphorus” is close enough to the ideal for our attribution to be judged true, and “Hesperus” so far from it that our attribution will be judged false. Very likely, there will also be some indeterminate cases.

The rule of thumb mentioned earlier will usefully commend using the same name as that which the believer would or did use.¹⁴

Identity

One problem about identity is to explain why identity sentences between names, for example “Hesperus is Phosphorus”, should not be knowable *a priori*, if they are true.

On DTN1, the problem presents as little difficulty as the fact that it is true but not knowable *a priori* that the first heavenly body to appear in the evening is the last heavenly body to vanish in the morning.

On Russell’s actual account, this is one more case in which the standard story about the use of names must be suspended. Something more than the

14 Following this rule of thumb will also yield intuitively better results for *saying* as opposed to *believing*.

singular proposition matters to my communicative purposes when I utter an identity sentence using two names. What matters is that I should take you to identify the relevant singular proposition in a way structurally like my own, by using two definite descriptions rather than one. But this is the only difference: I need not care which you use, and no thought-sharing is required for the success of my enterprise.

The rule of thumb mentioned earlier will usefully commend using just the names which come naturally to you.

I do not say that these solutions are adequate; indeed, they are too sketchy to be adequately assessed. But I do say that they are not nugatory. So even one who thought that Russell's theory of names was intended to address them need not find my interpretation incredible.

However, it is not clear to me that we have cast the problems in the correct form for them to count as ones Russell addressed. To take one example: he was certainly deeply concerned with the question how there could be a true negative existential thought (judgement). However, I challenge the reader to find a pre-1920 passage in which he is clearly and explicitly concerned with the problem of how one gives a plausible interpersonal semantics for a shared language containing negative existential sentences some of which need to be counted as true. For Russell in this period, idiolect (or an individual's thought) is paramount, public language something to which he gave little attention.

6 Criticisms of description theories

It is quite often objected to description theories that there simply is no description common to all users of a name. Clearly objections of this type are irrelevant to theories of the $\forall\forall\exists$ structure.

The following passage exemplifies another common type of objection:

It seems to me . . . absurd to suppose that a beginning student of philosophy, who has learned a few things about Aristotle, and his teacher, who knows a great deal, express different propositions when each says "Aristotle was the teacher of Alexander". (Donnellan 1972: 316)

As Donnellan notes, the supposition would not strike Russell this way, if "express different propositions" means "associate with different thoughts". But the supposition *would* strike Russell as absurd if "express different propositions" means "engage in acts aimed at, and whose truth depends upon, different singular propositions". Russell would say that typically there is a common proposition in such a case, albeit no common thought. Donnellan's objection, as stated, thus carries no weight at all.

Many of Kripke's specific objections deal with public reference and truth conditions, and so do not touch DTN9 itself. But I will also consider whether

they touch any of the theories of communication, reference, or truth conditions which I have attributed to Russell.

Kripke says that if *R* is *fixes the reference* then his modal criticism lapses. His reason is that the reference of a rigid designator can be fixed by a non-rigid one. This is a version of what actually obtains in DTT: the entity upon which the truth of a name-containing utterance, standardly used, rigidly depends is fixed by a thought-component which may not be, and typically is not, rigid.

So the only Kripkean objections which are relevant are those which claim that someone might use a name without having any definite description in mind which denotes what the name publicly denotes. There are two cases: (1) those in which the speaker or thinker is simply unable to produce any information which has the form of being uniquely identifying. The Feynman/Gell-Mann examples fall into this category; (2) those in which the speaker or thinker has a definite description in mind, but its denotation diverges from the public reference of the name. The Gödel/Schmidt examples fall into this category. The first point runs directly contrary to DTN9, the second leaves this theory untouched, but threatens the conjunction of DTC, DTR, and DTT.

Kripke writes:

The man in the street . . . may . . . use the name “Feynman”. When asked he will say: well he’s a physicist or something. He may not think that this picks out anyone uniquely. I still think he uses the name “Feynman” as a name for Feynman. (Kripke 1972: 292)

The best response open to Russell, I believe, is to deny the case. Russell in another connection suggests a way in which this could be done.

. . . in order to discover what is actually in my mind when I judge about *Julius Caesar*, we must substitute for the proper name a description made up of some of the things I know about him. (A description which will often serve to express my thought is “the man whose name was *Julius Caesar*”). For whatever else I may have forgotten about him, it is plain that when I mention him I have not forgotten that that was his name.) (Russell 1911b: 160)

Applying the idea to the present case: we can surely credit the speaker with the description “the person (or perhaps: famous physicist) called ‘Feynman’”. This manifests the pull of the social, which Kripke has so usefully stressed: in our use of names we often defer to the use of others. This is conspicuously so in a case like the one Kripke envisages for Feynman. The speaker would have the overriding aim of according his use of the name with that of others. This is what the envisaged description in effect appeals to.

In connection with appeals to this kind of description, Kripke objects that they are circular, and professes amazement that Russell should have made such a suggestion (1972: 284). Amazement would be in order only if someone claimed that every user of the name had to rely upon a description of this kind. Russell could say that this species of description marks a user as a “consumer” in the name-using practice, but that every such practice must also have “producers”. There is no circularity here.

Let us turn to the other species of objection of this general kind: there may be a description in the speaker’s mind which denotes something distinct from the public referent. Hence public reference and truth conditions cannot be determined by associated descriptions in the manner envisaged by DTR and DTT.

Kripke’s example involves our supposing that Schmidt discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic, and that Gödel passed off the proof as his own. If we associate the name “Gödel” with the description “the person who discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic”, then an utterance by us of “Gödel was born in Vienna” would be true iff Schmidt was born in Vienna. Yet intuitively we have referred to Gödel, not Schmidt, and we speak truly just in case Gödel was born in Vienna; Schmidt’s birthplace is irrelevant (cf. Kripke 1972: 294).

Put more in Russell’s terms, his theory has it that the proposition I would like to affirm by uttering “Gödel was born in Vienna”, and upon whose truth value the truth value of my utterance depends, is one whose first constituent is the discoverer of incompleteness, that is, on the present story, Schmidt; whereas intuitively the proposition I would like to affirm is one whose first constituent is Gödel.

Russell cannot very well deny that this description could get associated with the name for one or more speakers on a number of occasions. If such speakers were in a minority, they could be regarded as using “Gödel” incorrectly, that is, not in accordance with a democratized version of DTR (in which only the majority of speaker-hearer members of *G* need satisfy the condition). But it seems conceivable that widespread *misinformation* about some object or person should affect the majority; and in that case the envisaged response would not be available.

I believe that here Kripke is correct in thinking that Russell’s position needs modification. One possibility would be to make more of the pull of the social by requiring among consumers a dominating deference to others’ usage. The description “the person called ‘Gödel’” would *dominate* any other descriptions in the following sense: a speaker’s intentions as specified in DTC would be conditional upon the description he associates with α not diverging in denotation from the description “the thing called α in *G*”, where *G*’ is a subset of the speaker’s linguistic group to which he accords special authority: the experts. Typical candidates for expertise would be the producers of the relevant α -using practice. These may not now constitute the majority of the users of the name.

The idea is not without plausibility. We may use descriptions in identifying roles in connection with our use of names, but always with the proviso that in so doing we are not diverging from the common referent, regarded as set independently of our own usage.

However, it is not my task to assess the validity of this Russellian response, but rather only to note how it ought to appear from the perspective of a correct interpretation of Russell. First, the objection is not to the theory which Russell took to be of fundamental importance, DTN9, but rather to further, distinct theories (DTC, DTR, DTT) to which, I claim, Russell devoted less than a page in the whole corpus of writings in which his “theory of ordinary proper names” is traditionally found. Second, although the details clearly require attention, and will go beyond anything explicit in Russell, it would be hard to find in the standard writings about “the” description theory of names a decisive reason for abandoning the essentials of Russell’s position: the fundamental facts are idiosyncratic facts about thought, captured in DTN9; from these together with ancillary notions one should construct an account of communication which does not necessarily require thought-sharing, together with associated accounts of public reference and public truth conditions.¹⁵

15 My thanks to Michael Lockwood and Andrew Irvine for helpful comments on an earlier draft.