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Reviewed by Anssi Korhonen

Review: *The Theory of Descriptions: Russell and the Philosophy of Language*, by Graham Stevens,

Anssi Korhonen

Bertrand Russell advocated his new theory of descriptions for the first time in 'On Denoting' in the October 1905 issue of *Mind*. The theory has thus recently celebrated its hundred and seventh anniversary, but the ideas expressed in 'On Denoting' and, indeed, the paper itself, continue to attract philosophers' attention.

The reception of the theory of descriptions has a long history. When Russell sent the paper to *Mind*, G. F. Stout, the then editor of the journal, begged him to reconsider its publication. Russell, however, refused. G. E. Moore is reported to have admitted that he could not understand the theory until it was given a clearer formulation in *Principia*, a claim that we have good reasons to doubt. In the decades following its publication, many philosophers looked upon the theory for inspiration in philosophical methodology. Acknowledging Russell's distinction between the real and apparent logical form of a proposition, they drew from the theory methodological conclusions which were apparently quite far from anything ever advocated by Russell himself. Thus Gilbert Ryle wrote, though not without sadness, that the task of philosophy was 'the detection of the sources in linguistic idioms of recurrent misconstructions and absurd theories' (1931–2, 170). To be sure, Russell himself thought that his theory was essential for logical hygiene as well as for retaining a 'robust sense of reality'; but he also thought that one could secure such desiderata without indulging in the excesses of linguistic philosophy.

In 1950 Peter Strawson published a famous attack on Russell's theory. Strawson, of course, represented a type of philosopher quite different from Russell, and even if the contrast between ordinary language philosophy and formal analytical philosophy offers no inspiration to contemporary philosophers, it does figure in the background of the extraordinarily complex cluster of debates in philosophy of language to which the Strawson-Russell debate has given rise and which involves such issues as grammatical and logical form, referring and quantifying over, presupposition, semantics and pragmatics, and so on. The latest chapter in the reception of Russell's theory is of more recent origin. The past two or three decades have seen philosophers of analytic persuasion taking more and more interest in their philosophical past, so much so that early analytic philosophy has by now grown into a well-established branch in the history of philosophy. Studies of Russell's philosophy have played a major role in this development. Two reasons for this stand out. First, there is the historical fact that Russell, more than anyone else, was responsible for creating the unique combination of mathematical logic and philosophical thought that was characteristic of much of early analytic philosophy. Second, the ongoing publication of *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, a project hosted now by the Bertrand Russell Research Centre, McMaster University, has left the philosophical community with little choice but to delve deep into Russell's philosophy, also from a scholarly point of view. The theory of descriptions offers an excellent illustration of this. The publication of *The Collected Papers* has brought to light new material that forces a re-evaluation of a key element in Russell's thinking. It reveals the context in which the theory was created and allows a diligent scholar, more or less, to reconstruct the steps that led Russell to the views that he propounded in 'On Denoting'. Apart from a broad outline of the story, there is no scholarly consensus on how and why the theory came about, and there is still plenty of room for

new interpretative insights. So, today the theory of descriptions is a topic of lively debate and discussion by philosophers of language as well as those with at least one eye on historical issues.

A conspicuous feature of the current situation is that these two concerns have been and still are cultivated to a large extent independently of one another. On the one hand, contemporary philosophers of language consider the theory of descriptions in contexts and with respect to issues that seem to owe little or nothing to Russell. On the other hand, the strict separation of 'philosophical' from 'historical' concerns is apparently justified by what seems to be the received view among scholars, namely that Russell himself had but little interest in language and did not engage in a philosophical study of natural language.

Graham Stevens' new book, *The Theory of Descriptions: Russell and the Philosophy of Language* (History of Analytic Philosophy, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), offers a novel take on its topic. The author considers a wide range of issues both from Russellian scholarship and contemporary philosophy of language; but he does this not simply by juxtaposing historical and contemporary material but by constructing a detailed argument for a unified approach to the issues raised by theory of descriptions. The result is a book that deserves to be widely read both by scholars with an interest in 'how it really was' and by philosophers of language.

The book is divided into a short introduction and seven chapters. Chapter 1 gives an overview of the theory, making a number of useful points. For instance, Stevens emphasizes that 'denoting phrases' is a purely grammatical notion for Russell and does not carry any assumptions about their semantics (it may be that there is a deep difference in this respect between 'On Denoting' and *The Principles of Mathematics*, for in the latter work 'denoting concept' appears to be a semantic notion, characterized through the notion of aboutness). Another useful point is the reminder that the 'On Denoting' theory of descriptions is independent of Russell's con-

ception of ordinary proper names as disguised descriptions, a point not always appreciated by scholars.

Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the theory of descriptions from a historical and exegetical point of view. The broad picture which Stevens paints here is familiar from recent secondary literature on Russell's development from *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903) to 'On Denoting', which is one of the most exciting periods in Russell's philosophical career. The question is: what was the motivation driving Russell during that period?

For a long time, the standard reading of 'On Denoting' was that Russell's deepest concern there was metaphysical. Before he hit upon the theory of descriptions, so goes the story, he had clung to an outlandish 'Meinongian' ontology, which postulated objects as referents for every apparently referring expression. Indeed, this ontology appears to be there in the *Principles*, witness the following well-known passage:

Numbers, the Homeric gods, chimeras, and four-dimensional spaces all have being, for if they were not entities of a kind, we could make no propositions about them. Thus being is a general attribute of everything, and to mention anything is to show that it is. (Russell 1903, §427)

That is, if you say, 'the present King of France does not exist', it is obvious that there is something of which you are saying that it does not exist. Hence the French monarch must in some sense be, even if he does not exist. The result is, in Quine's phrase, an 'intolerably indiscriminate ontology': one has to acknowledge not only the nonexistent monarch but gods, chimeras and impossible numbers as well. On the new theory, this inference is thwarted, for what the theory shows is that surface grammar is not a reliable guide to existential commitments, which are decided at the level of logical form. Of course, the theory gets fully effective in ontological pruning only when it is coupled with the view that ordi-

nary proper names are disguised descriptions; but that view is explicitly there in 'On Denoting'.

To be sure, the view that the standard reading attributes to the author of the *Principles* looks rather silly. If there is such an entity as the daughter of Hitler, then, surely, it (she?) ought to be flesh and blood. How could she be or 'subsist' but not have existence? Better to say, as the real Meinong did, that although we can make statements about such objects, they do not have to *be* on that account. This view, however, is one that cannot possibly be ascribed to the *Principles*, for as the above quotation shows, the important distinction there was between being and existence; Russell, indeed, was deeply committed to the so-called ontological principle, and hence the real Meinongian position was a definite no-no to him.

Furthermore, it should be noted—a point that Stevens, too, makes—that Russell had good reasons, quite independently of Meinongianism, for drawing the distinction between being and existence. He needed to account for the status of logical and mathematical objects, numbers, classes and whatnot. These entities do not exist, not even in our minds. Yet, they are objective entities which anyone with sufficient mental acuity can grasp. Hence they must have being. This line of thought has nothing to do with Meinongianism. The two do not even tally with one another very well: the Meinongian inference leads one to postulate such objects as the largest natural number, whereas the other line of thought has no such consequences.

Meinongianism, then, is an ontological view motivated by semantic and syntactic considerations. In Stevens' formulation, it is any ontological position according to which the existence of an object follows from a use of an expression to refer to that object so as to make a proposition about it, and which holds that the question of whether an expression is a referring term is to be answered by observing the grammatical behaviour of that term. It follows

that membership in the category of noun phrases guarantees reference to an object: Meinongianism holds reference-failure to be an illusion.

There are apparently compelling reasons to think that Meinongianism in this sense could not have been the driving force that led Russell to the 'On Denoting'-theory of descriptions. Like other scholars before him, Stevens mentions an important paper by Russell, 'The Existential Import of Propositions', published in the July-1905 issue of *Mind*, that is, before 'On Denoting'. This paper assumes a semantic framework which is quite different from 'On Denoting' but which nevertheless enables Russell to circumvent any allegation of being Meinongian in the sense defined above. The key passage runs as follows:

'The present King of England' is a complex concept denoting an individual; 'the present King of France' is a similar complex concept denoting nothing. The phrase intends to point out an individual, but fails to do so: it does not point out an unreal individual, but no individual at all. The same explanation applies to mythical personages, Apollo, Priam, etc. These words have *meaning*, which can be found by looking them up in a classical dictionary; but they have not a *denotation*: there is no entity, real or imaginary, which they point out. (Russell 1905, 487)

Here we see Russell making two absolutely crucial claims sometime before 'On Denoting': first, that there are denoting concepts which lack denotation; and second, that imaginary proper names are really shorthand for descriptions. Given these devices, Russell can now defuse the two problematic cases that give rise to the Meinongian inference: definite descriptions that apparently lack a denotation and proper names that seem to be empty.

Moreover, as the manuscript material shows, Russell arrived at this sort of view (at least) as early as the latter part of 1903 (see Russell 1994, 284–5). So, pruning a Meinongian ontology could not

have been the theme underlying 'On Denoting'. Russell was in a position to secure that desideratum well before he formulated the new theory of descriptions, and he himself saw clearly that this was so.

Two broad interpretative questions remain. First, if the traditional reading is wrong about 'On Denoting', what then is the truth about it? Second, where does the *Principles* stand with respect to Meinongianism? Stevens provides detailed treatments of both of these questions.

Let us consider the second question first. The semantic machinery that helps Russell to resist the Meinongian inference in the *Principles* involves crucially the notion of a denoting concept. Sentences express Russellian propositions: for example, the sentence 'Socrates is mortal' is paired with the proposition <Socrates, mortality>. (Like Stevens, I use an ordered sequence to represent a Russellian proposition. As he points out, this device is not unproblematic, as it glosses over the many intricate issues about the nature of propositions that so vexed Russell. Here they are not relevant, though.) Here the proposition contains as a constituent the entity it is about. But in such a case as 'the husband of Xanthippe is mortal', the corresponding proposition does not have Socrates as a constituent; instead, it contains a denoting concept, /the husband of Xanthippe/ (slashes indicate a denoting concept as distinct from a denoting phrase). This concept denotes Socrates, and in this way the proposition manages to be about Socrates without containing him as a constituent. On the face of it, this is quite helpful, because Russell can now hold that, for example, 'the present King of France is bald' is a meaningful sentence, although there neither exists nor subsists such an entity as the present King of France; meaningfulness is guaranteed by the presence in the relevant proposition of a denoting concept. That may still be a strange object, but it is less so than the putative monarch who does not exist but has being. In § 73 of the *Principles* we find Russell defin-

ing the crucial notion: the denoting concepts associated with a class concept F will not denote anything if the propositional function $F(x)$ yields a false proposition for every x . Does this show that Russell was free of Meinongianism already in the *Principles*? There are three considerations that bear on this question, each of them suggesting that the issue is not entirely clear-cut. The first two are discussed by Stevens.

First, there is the case of empty proper names. Even taking into account the resources offered by the 1903-theory of denoting concepts, we seem 'to be left with Meinongian objects as the shadowy referents of empty proper names', as Stevens (p. 57) puts it. 'Homeric gods' (Russell 1903, § 427) and the 'pseudo-existents of a novel' (*ibid.*, § 48) are things having being, and they acquire this status through the fact that they can be referred to by proper names ('Zeus', 'Mr Darcy'). The second case concerns Russell's apparently Meinongian argument about denials of being in § 427 of the *Principles*:

Being is that which belongs to every conceivable term, to every possible object of thought—in short to everything that can possibly occur in any proposition, true or false, and to all such propositions themselves. Being belongs to whatever can be counted. If A be any term that can be counted as one, it is plain that A is something, and therefore that A is. ' A is not' must always be either false or meaningless. For if A were nothing, it could not be said not to be; ' A is not' implies that there is a term A whose being is denied, and hence that A is.

The Meinongian reading is not the only possible here, however. On the face of it, the passage just explains that and why being must belong to every term: it explains, that is, why being must belong to any entity that can be counted as one. The notion underlying here is that of a Russellian proposition: the proposition <Socrates, mortality> is about Socrates and contains Socrates as a constituent. Hence, Socrates must be. Thus understood—and I am in-

clined to think that this is the most plausible reading—the passage is neutral on *what* there is; what guarantees being for an entity is its occurrence as a constituent in a Russellian proposition, being thought of and being counted as one. To be sure, this reading has its difficulties: Russell's claim that '*A* is not' must always be false or *meaningless* suggests that '*A* is not' is a sentential, rather than propositional, context: '*meaningless*', after all, is a characteristic that does not seem to apply to Russellian propositions. We would then have to say that *A* in '*A* is not' is a placeholder for expressions, and we would then be close to the Meinongian inference: replace *A* with '*Zeus*' or '*Mr Darcy*' or '*the golden mountain*', and in each case you get a false statement whose falsity shows that Zeus, Mr Darcy and the golden mountain, respectively, have being.

The Meinongian reading of the passage invites the complaint, voiced also by Stevens, that it attributes to the Russell of the *Principles* an inconsistency or at least confusion. If *A* is a denoting concept which does not denote anything, as defined in § 73 of the book, we have a clear counterexample to the claim that '*A* is not' must always be false or meaningless. I do not think that this observation is decisive, however. As anyone knows who has gone deeply into the details of the *Principles*, the book offers a number of instances where the views expressed at one point are in conflict with what is said elsewhere; and quite often these conflicts have to do with highly non-trivial issues. Nevertheless, we can avoid the Meinongian reading of § 427 and circumvent the above difficulty about whether '*A* is not' indicates a sentential or propositional context, if we assume that Russell's view was that the *A* in '*A* is not' is replaceable only by *proper names*, i.e., that '*A* is not' is false for any proper name *A*. This reading has the further merit that it fits well with what Russell asserts earlier in the passage. Proper names, that is, are just the semantic counterpart of Russell's notion of term: '*A* is not' could fail to be true only if *A* was not a name but

an empty noise (here I follow Gideon Makin 2009). The conclusion, then, lies at hand that Russell's Meinongianism, insofar as it was there in *The Principles*, depends upon the presence of imaginary proper names ('*Zeus*', '*Mr Darcy*'). As we have seen, Russell got rid of these at least soon after the *Principles*, when he argued that they are not really proper names at all but abbreviate definitions, which are a species of definite descriptions. If the above reading of § 427 is on the right track, however, we should conclude that Russell was already in the *Principles* attentive to the logical differences between genuine proper names and descriptions.

Stevens is in agreement with this broad claim—even if he probably would not quite agree with the above interpretation of § 427. He argues that the Meinongianism of the *Principles*, if it is there at all, represents at best a passing whim on Russell's part: he calls it a '*remarkable*' and '*temporary*' aberration. It is often argued that it was through getting acquainted with Frege's semantics that Russell learned to appreciate the distinction between meaning and denotation, the distinction which for a short while promised him a way out of Meinongianism. Here Stevens makes the very useful and often overlooked point that Russell himself had developed a similar distinction, and a sophisticated one at that, within his own logical framework, which he had been working on since the late 1890s. Whichever way one decides to go about the details, it would seem that imaginary proper names and denials of being offer less than compelling reasons for attributing '*Meinongianism*' to the *Principles*.

Stevens rounds out his discussion of Meinongianism by showing that Russell's 1903 semantic framework is capable of delivering truth-values even for propositions featuring denotationless denoting concepts. In part, he does this to respond to a recent interpretation of '*On Denoting*' and its context by James Levine. According to Levine, Russell was troubled by reference failure, be-

cause it raised the unwelcome prospect of truth-value gaps, which the *Principles* theory of denoting concepts was unable to defeat (see Levine 2005). Stevens is certainly right in his claim that the evidence for Levine's interpretation is rather weak.

Apart from this interpretative question, Stevens supports his reading of the Russell of the *Principles* as a non-Meinongian by sketching out a formal semantic theory which assigns unitary semantic values to quantifier phrases independently of the question of denotation, and which allows sentences containing empty denoting phrases to be determinately either true or false. His point here is not to reproduce anything that is actually to be found in the pages of the *Principles*. The sketch is useful, however, in that it shows anti-Meinongianism to be quite compatible with the logical framework in which Russell was working in that book. There is also a further point to which Stevens returns in the later chapters of the book, namely that the sort of approach that he outlines here is in many respects preferable to classical quantification theory, which underlies the 1905 theory of descriptions, when it comes to natural language semantics.

There is much in Stevens' discussion of Russell and Meinongianism with which I agree. Nevertheless, I am inclined to think that Russell was in fact rather more concerned about 'Meinongian' issues than Stevens makes him out to be; and the point retains its relevance, even if we observe Stevens' reminders that his point in chapter 2 is only to show that Russell was not in fact committed to Meinongianism, whether or not he himself was clear about this. This is the third of the three points about Meinongianism that I mentioned earlier.

The concern comes out in § 73 of the *Principles*, where Russell discusses the notion of denotationless denoting concepts. Here he considers the proposition /chimaeras are animals/ (or /all chimaeras are animals/, which is what he seems to have in mind). The proposition seems to be true and not concerned with the de-

noting concept /all chimaeras/ but with what it denotes. And yet, this cannot be, for the concept does not denote anything. He points out that the proposition is readily interpreted as a formal implication—'x is a chimaera implies x is an animal for all values of x'—but here the trouble is that while such implications are readily available in a logical calculus, propositions containing /all/, /any/ or /every/ are nevertheless supposed to be distinct from them. Significantly, he suggests concerning /all chimaeras are animals/ that 'it seems most correct to reject the proposition altogether, while retaining the various other propositions that would be equivalent to it, if there were chimaeras' (*ibid.*) The point here, I take it, is that Russell recognizes, however dimly, that apart from recourse to 'Meinongianism' of some sort, he has nothing informative to say about the aboutness of propositions containing denoting concepts in those cases where the denotation is apparently not there.

On the whole, it seems not unlikely that the *Principles* version of the theory of denoting is rather ambivalent on many issues which, with the benefit of hindsight, we are inclined to regard as its key points and which Russell only managed to clear up, relatively speaking, with his 1905 theory of descriptions. Of course, this also means that there is no returning to the pristine simplicity of the traditional Meinongian interpretation of the background of Russell's theory.

Having rejected the Meinongian interpretation, Stevens turns in chapter 3 to consider the second interpretative question that was mentioned above: what were Russell's real reasons for adopting the 1905 theory of descriptions? Again, Stevens is in agreement with much of recent scholarship when he argues that the key role here is played by the so-called Grey's Elegy Argument (GEA for short). So, the bulk of the chapter is devoted to a careful reconstruction of what is certainly the most intricate piece of dialectic that ever flew from Russell's pen. Earlier generations of philoso-

phers mostly ignored GEA, either on the grounds that whatever message Russell was trying convey with it, the message was obscured beyond recovery by confusions about use and mention or something similar; or else because they claimed to find the critical gist of the paper elsewhere, thinking that they could altogether avoid the arduous task of reconstructing the argument of the eight densely packed paragraphs that constitute GEA. The manuscript material that was brought to publicity in Volume 4 of the *Collected Papers* leaves no doubt, however, that it was precisely GEA that played the decisive role in the genesis of the new theory of descriptions.

As Stevens shows in some detail, the manuscript material predating 'On Denoting' reveals that the problematic nature of denoting concepts, conceived more or less after the manner of the *Principles*, stems from their character as 'aboutness-shifters'—as Gideon Makin has called it. That is, when a denoting concept occurs in a proposition, the proposition is (in normal cases, one would like to say) not *about* the concept, but is *about* what, if anything, the concept denotes: this is the very point of introducing such concepts, one that makes them theoretically useful. But the feature is also problematic.

It is worth emphasizing that the source of the difficulty lies quite deep: denoting concepts, it turns out, threaten to be incompatible with a fundamental feature of the ontology of Russellian propositions that Russell accepted at the time. Absolutely any entity there is, he held, must be capable of being a logical subject of propositions, and the import of propositions is primarily metaphysical: propositions are about entities, and the properties and relations which an entity has are determined by the true and false propositions which are about it or of which it is a logical subject. An entity that is not a logical subject of any proposition would thus be an entity of which nothing is true or false. With a suitable notion of proposition, that might just about be acceptable, but in

Russell's metaphysical framework it is not, as Russell himself points out in the *Principles*: if there is an entity which is not a logical subject of any proposition, then there is a true proposition of which the said entity is the logical subject and which predicates of this entity the property of not being a logical subject; the very notion of such an entity is an incoherent. If denoting concepts are to be entities, they, too, must be logical subjects. However, it is far from easy to figure out how this can be, precisely because denoting concepts have this curious property of being aboutness-shifters. Reflecting upon this, Russell came eventually to conclude that the whole matter envelops us in an 'inextricable tangle' which 'seems to prove that the whole distinction of meaning and denotation has been wrongly conceived'.

Stevens offers a plausible story of how the tangle comes about, one that has the great merit that it remains remarkably close to Russell's original text and thus has a fair chance of being close to what Russell had in mind when he composed the argument from his working notes; most commentaries on GEA appear to fail on the first point and hence also on the second, to the extent that the two go hand in hand. There are still a few passages, though, where Russell's wording continues to puzzle me, even after the careful explanations supplied by Stevens; a book review, though, is not the best forum to address such issues of scholarly detail. No doubt, scholars will continue to test their interpretative skills on reconstructing the path to the mature theory of descriptions, a path on which GEA is one of the more serious stumbling stones; no doubt, also, that a discerning scholarly eye will be able to spot problems with Stevens' interpretation as well.

In chapter 4 Stevens turns from historical aspects to contemporary philosophy of language. As I pointed out above, though, he combines historical and contemporary material not by juxtaposition but by offering an interpretation where issues in present-day

philosophy of language are directly relevant to a study of the historical Russell (and also in some cases *vice versa*).

Stevens argues, first, that Russell and philosophers of language today share a substantial common ground and that contrary interpretations of Russell as a philosopher to whom natural language was of no concern are based on a variety of misreadings (this matter is taken up in the final chapter of the book; I will consider it below). Second, he argues that to make a case for a Russellian theory of definite descriptions, we must introduce two modifications into Russell's own version of the theory (chapter 4); the author here follows Stephen Neale's revamping of Russell's theory, though not uncritically.

The first modification is that we ought to replace Russell's semantic and ontological conception of logical form by one that is explicitly syntactic, as it is only in this way that a convincing case can be made for a quantificational as opposed to referential treatment of descriptions. The second modification is that we ought to separate the theory of descriptions from the syntax of *Principia Mathematica* and reformulate it in the language of restricted quantifiers. This language provides direct representations of denoting phrases, i.e., phrases consisting of a determiner (D) and a nominal (F). Such a phrase is translated into a restricted quantifier '[Dx: Fx]', which attaches to a formula containing x : for example, 'some soprano sings' gets translated into '[some(x): soprano(x)](sing(x))'. This is equivalent to '[some(x)](soprano(x) and sing(x))', but formulas using restricted quantifiers possess distinctive virtues over their classical counterparts, at least when our interest lies in natural language semantics. In the first place, since classical quantifiers are unrestricted, the effect of restriction is achieved by making the restriction part of the complex formula whose variables are bound by the quantifier. This introduces into formulas fresh logical particles with no corresponding lexical items in the surface forms of the natural language sentences, so that there will be no direct map-

ping from the surface syntax of English to classical logical syntax, whereas with restricted quantifiers the match is retained. In the second place, there are natural language quantifiers (like 'most'), for which the classical strategy of incorporating restrictions will not work but which are readily accommodated by restricted quantifiers.

Stevens' general message is that the theory which results from such revisions is Russellian not just in the minimal sense that it holds sentences containing denoting phrases to express quantified rather than singular propositions. It is Russellian also in the deeper sense that the revisions that are claimed to be necessary to the success of the theory are measured by criteria that were Russell's own. Still further, Stevens argues that these revisions are corrections to mistaken views on language and linguistic matters held by Russell. Hence, Stevens' revisionary argument is based on an interpretation of Russell as a philosopher who *did* have a philosophy of language.

Neither of the two modifications—the syntactization of logical form and the replacement of unrestricted with restricted quantifiers—is entirely unproblematic, given Stevens' intention to put forth a theory of descriptions that deserves to be labeled 'Russellian'. The first modification gives rise to the complaint that a syntactic notion of logical form will inevitably separate the theory from Russell's ontological motivations. And the second one, the assignment of restricted quantifiers to quantificational noun phrases, seems to ignore Russell's claim—which was certainly crucial to his own perception of the theory—that descriptions are 'incomplete symbols', that is, that a denoting phrase has no 'meaning in isolation' but only a 'meaning in use'.

Stevens addresses both of these worries in detail in chapter 4, arguing that they are unfounded. Consider syntactization first. Here he points out, to begin with, that Russell's theory of descriptions was guided by the insight that 'there is a level of structure to

what we say that is not evident in the sentences we use to say what we say' (p. 115). This level—the level of 'logical form'—is not revealed by grammar in the traditional sense. And since Russell had no other notion of syntax except 'as a feature of the way that words are explicitly concatenated in ordinary sentences' (*ibid.*), he was forced to conclude that logical form is not a matter of syntax but must be grounded in some other way.

Now, there is no doubt that this will not do as a piece of 'historical explanation'. In general, it is not a commendable strategy to explain that our philosophical ancestors held such and such a view because they did not have our conception of this or that. But Stevens' point here is just that a *contemporary* Russellian need not—indeed, should not—be prevented from adopting a syntactic notion of logical form by the fact that Russell himself did not have one. The guiding insight is still there, and it is now best served, so the argument goes, by adopting a syntactically constrained notion of logical form, as in the LF hypothesis. LF hypothesis construes logical form as the 'interface' of syntactic representation and semantic rules. As a recent encyclopedia entry puts it, '[t]here is no need to first regiment the formal structures of sentences into something to which semantic rules could then apply. What one finds in the idea of LF is the idea that natural languages already have enough structure to supply a lot of what is needed for the purposes of semantics' (Blair 2006, 412).

To be sure, even if the ideology is the same, there certainly is a substantial gap between Russell's logical forms and the level of LF postulated by the linguists today; at any rate, this holds if we consider the Russell for whom logic was concerned with the most abstract features of the real world. He never managed to explain how this was supposed to come about, and the Russellian of today can safely put aside this part of the story, or consider it as a scholarly question in the history of analytic philosophy.

The second worry is that the assimilation of descriptions to restricted quantifiers obscures their character as incomplete symbols. It is unlikely that everything Russell says about incomplete symbols at different times can be neatly classified under some one heading, but in the case of definite descriptions the idea seems quite clear: to say that a description is an incomplete symbol is to say that, unlike a genuine proper name, it does not stand for an object. Russell has no difficulties in proving this conclusion by 'formal arguments'. For example, 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is a sentence expressing identity. Hence, if 'the author of *Waverley*' were a proper name, the statement would express the proposition that Scott is *c*, where *c* is some object. This proposition is either false or tautologous. But 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*' is neither. Therefore, 'the author of *Waverley*' is not a name and does not stand for anything.

Using this kind of reasoning as his cue, Stevens concludes that an incomplete symbol is simply one which does not contribute an object to a proposition; or in modern parlance, that descriptive sentences (like other quantificational sentences) are *object-independent*. This also shows that the further strategy of assigning generalized quantifiers to descriptions as their semantic values is perfectly compatible with the gist of Russell's notion of an incomplete symbol. Of course, Russell also held that descriptions had no meaning in isolation and even that they had no meaning at all. But these are further theses and only follow if one believes, as Russell did, that the distinction between meaning and denotation is wrongly conceived. Stevens does not discuss this point on its own; as we saw, it is treated as a scholarly question concerning the right interpretation of 'On Denoting'. Presumably a contemporary Russellian might, or might not, accept the separate thesis about meaning.

Chapters 5 and 6 are concerned with two extensions of Russell's theory. Chapter 5 considers complex demonstratives ('that

woman in white'), defending the view that they are quantifiers, rather than devices of direct reference, which is the orthodox view. Stevens reviews the case against the orthodox view—the case certainly looks quite strong, an opinion subject to revision by experts—and then considers how best to develop the quantificational account. Here the difficulty is to find a way of preserving the demonstrative quality of complex demonstratives (in those cases where this is present).

On the view suggested by Stevens, the semantic value of a complex demonstrative is just a generalized quantifier which is assigned to a restricted quantifier expression with respect to a domain and a context. In the case of a complex demonstrative, the restriction is typically that of being demonstrated in a context, and in paradigmatic cases we can think of the demonstrative quality as secured precisely by such concrete physical demonstration. But we can easily think up cases where the context is such as to guarantee salience, and in such cases demonstration becomes redundant; for example, when there is only one car on display, I need no demonstration to accompany my utterance of 'that car'. This is the pragmatic process of 'loosening', which renders such uses of complex demonstratives pragmatically equivalent with definite descriptions. This applies to the so-called NDNS-cases as well ('no demonstration, no speaker reference').

Should we construe bare demonstratives as quantifiers as well? Stevens mentions this possibility in passing. It may be 'formally feasible', as he suggests, just as it is formally feasible to treat proper names as generalized quantifiers. But surely this goes against our intuition, which tells us that if there are directly referring terms, then 'that' must be among them. This was of course also Russell's view, although he probably never considered the matter against the background of complex demonstratives.

Chapter 6 considers indexicality. Apart from its general importance, the topic is of special interest, because in some of his later

works Russell was much occupied by what he called egocentric particulars. And what Stevens has to say here is meant to be more than just a nod to Russell, for he argues that Russell's work has something to contribute even to current debates on the semantics of indexicals.

David Kaplan's indexical semantics is generally regarded as a 'quantum leap' forward, as it brings a number of contextual determinants of content within the range of formal semantics. Kaplan's theory, however, encounters familiar problems of its own, stemming from the fact that it takes linguistic meaning—the Kaplanian 'character' of an indexical expression—to determine cognitive significance. But consider the sort of case introduced first by Howard Wettstein: Burt the performer is appearing on stage wearing one of his extremely imaginative dresses. Seen from left, he looks quite different from how he looks when seen from right. Thus, a perfectly rational person, enjoying Burt's show from different locations in the auditorium, could well believe the proposition expressed by 'he (pointing to Burt to his left) is different from him (pointing to Burt now to his right). On Kaplan's approach, indexical utterances express singular propositions, and in both cases what the context contributes to the proposition believed is just Burt. So, this approach delivers the result that the perfectly rational person ends up believing a contradictory proposition, which looks incorrect. What we need, it seems, is a distinction between different ways of cognizing or perceiving what is one and the same singular proposition.

It is here that Russell's account of egocentric particulars might come useful. Russell argued that an indexical expression contributes not just a reference but a perspective, a 'perceptual world' of the agent of the utterance, which is relevant to the meaning of the sentences containing that egocentric particular. Stevens explores different ways of formally implementing this notion, shows how it can handle the sort of difficulties that people have raised for

Kaplan, and suggests that this can be fruitfully extended so as to cover a more general class of referring expressions.

In chapter 7 Stevens returns to the question of whether Russell had a philosophy of language. His answer is a strong 'yes'. This makes him an opponent of the view which has become common among scholars today and which holds that Russell was not engaged in a philosophical study of language or that natural language was philosophically irrelevant for him.

One standard argument for the negative view cites Russell's protestations against and often scornful remarks on 'linguistic philosophy', the emergence of which he chalked up to the later Wittgenstein's bad influence. Stevens rightly dismisses this consideration, pointing out that it would be a mistake to identify philosophy of language with linguistic philosophy in this sense, that is, with ordinary language philosophy, which he describes quite correctly as an 'outdated' and 'rather eccentric relic of mid-twentieth century British philosophy'.

In addressing the question of whether Russell had a philosophy of language it is useful to distinguish between two Russells, setting 1918–1919 as the boundary. Russell wrote in the late 1930s that '[t]he problem of meaning is one which seems to me to have been unduly neglected by logicians; it was this problem which first led me, about twenty years ago, to abandon the anti-psychological opinions in which I had previously believed' (1938, 362). Even a casual look at the later Russell's writings shows that he was, indeed, concerned with meaning; after all, he even wrote a whole book with the title *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*. True, Russell's inquiry in that book is not philosophy of language construed as an autonomous discipline (perhaps à la Dummett). This only shows, though, that he did not do philosophy of language in the way some others have done it since; and as Stevens points out, Russell's psychologistic approach to meaning has subsequently been endorsed by many other philosophers of language. We must

conclude, with Stevens, that the claim that Russell had no interest in the philosophy of language has no plausibility whatsoever, if applied to the later Russell.

What about the earlier Russell? Here the claim that Russell had no philosophy of language is based primarily on the notion of Russellian proposition: since he was concerned with the analysis of non-linguistic propositions, so goes the claim, he had but little interest in accounting for the functioning of natural language. This can be further supported by the observation that Russell was an ideal language philosopher, one who dismissed natural language as an unsuitable tool for philosophizing.

Here Stevens makes the solid observation that there can be no general argument from someone's advocating a recognizably Russellian conception of propositions as complexes of worldly constituents to the conclusion that she has no interest in the workings of natural language. After all, singular propositions are Russellian propositions and they figure prominently in contemporary philosophy of language. On the other hand, the fact that many contemporary philosophers of language make use of a notion of proposition that bears an important similarity to Russell's does not mean that the reasons for postulating such entities were the same in the two cases. Hence, to decide where Russell stood on this issue we need a particular examination and not a general argument.

Stevens is certainly correct in arguing that there are powerful reasons to think that Russell did have a significant interest in natural language. For example, Russell held non-linguistic propositions to be meanings of declarative sentences, among other things. And he was concerned with the logical forms of natural language sentences by considering the forms of the propositions expressed by these sentences, and so on. Even the negative conclusion that natural language is not an ideal tool for the sort of technical philosophy in which Russell wished to engage himself presupposes

that one has dedicated some effort to working out how natural language works and why it does not work in the way it 'should'.

Yet, when it comes to the specific issue of Russellian propositions, Russell's primary reasons for postulating such entities had little to do with philosophy of language. Certainly, when he originally introduced them, this was because he felt it was only in that way that he could maintain that logic and mathematics are fully objective, possessing a subject-matter that is neither linguistic nor psychological. Again, this is perfectly compatible with having an interest in natural language. We might say with some justification, however, that what Russell lacked at the time was a general perspective on language and meaning. This is more or less how he himself saw the matter later, as in the above quotation from the 1930s. There he argues that logicians had earlier neglected the problem of meaning, a charge that he levels against his own earlier self as well (chapter XIII *My Philosophical Development*, Russell's philosophical autobiography, is devoted to this topic). It was this linguistic turn of sorts that brought about a major revolution in Russell's thinking. And it made him, among other things, a philosopher of language.

I have raised a few minor points about some of the details in Stevens' book. It is a very valuable book, not least because it addresses different kinds of audiences and does so in an extremely competent manner. Russell scholars and anyone with an interest in early analytic philosophy will benefit from a careful study of *The Theory of Descriptions*; so will philosophers of language with an interest in descriptions; and last but not least, the book would provide advanced undergraduates and graduates with excellent introductions to the topics it is concerned with.

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