

Pre-"On Denoting" manuscripts in the Russell Archives

Three unpublished manuscripts in the Russell Archives treat the general topic of denoting: (1) "On the Meaning and Denotation of Phrases" (OMDP, 24 pp.), (2) "Points About Denoting" (PAD, 18 pp.), and "On Meaning and Denotation" (OMD, 98 pp.). These were probably written after Russell's 1904 review of Meinong.¹ They clearly were written before "On Denoting", published in 1905.²

Little is actually known about the specific preparation of any of these manuscripts. There seems to be slight chance of uncovering additional information about their precise dates.³ In the first section below I describe the manuscripts and the textual evidence for their proper ordering. In the second section I discuss the development of the theory of denoting. There is a continuity in Russell's thought from *The Principles of Mathematics*⁴ to "On Denoting". This progression provides a perspective on why denoting phrases in general, and definite descriptions in particular, are of central importance to Russell's logical theory. For Russell, the relation of a word to its meaning is merely a part of the theory of language. The significant relationships are the logical relations between meanings.

¹This was written in 1903. An entry in Russell's Journal on 8 April 1903 reads, "I am writing an article on Meinong."

²*Mind*, n.s. 14 (Oct. 1905), 479-493; in Russell, *Essays in Analysis*, ed. Douglas Lackey (London: Allen and Unwin, 1973), pp. 103-119.

³In the listing of them in *Essays in Analysis* (p. 331), they appear unordered under "1904" with the notation "(Possibly 1905)". As pointed out by Jeffrey Skosnik, "Russell's Unpublished Writings on Truth and Denoting" (*Russell*, no. 7 [Fall 1972], p. 13), PAD p. 8 contains a reference to Emile Combes as the Prime Minister of France. But Combes only held this office until 18 January 1905. Thus OMD and PAD are almost definitely 1904, but OMD may still be 1905.

⁴Cambridge: University Press, 1903.

1. *The manuscripts*

The three handwritten manuscripts are in different stages of readiness. OMDP is a first draft. It seems unfinished, and the last several pages include a digression headed "Elements of grammar for the young" (p. 17). PAD is a series of independent two- and three-page investigations. Russell removed page 16 of PAD, and inserted it in OMD as page 49.⁵ This establishes that OMD was completed after PAD. OMD is also a first draft, although it is in more finished form than OMDP. The manuscript includes 41 pages entitled "Private notes". These begin with a parenthetical remark, "(From this point onwards, I have merely put down any remarks that occurred to me, without system or consecutiveness.)"⁶ At the end of these notes is an outline of a discussion with Whitehead, which shows that Russell regarded OMD at least as a finished draft.

TEXTUAL STRUCTURE OF THE UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPTS

Issue or Problem	Pages Involved			
1. Defining Terms	OMDP	1-3	OMD	1-7
2. Denotation failure, imaginary names	"	3-7	"	8
3. Denotation and meaning of propositions	"	7-11	"	10-14
4. Assertion (OMDP) or Affirmation (OMD) of propositions (OMDP concludes considering double occurrence of variables.)	"	11-13	"	14-15
5. Theory of Knowledge	PAD	1-6	"	15-18
a. Example: Center of Mass of Solar System	"	2	"	19-21
b. False propositions ("about" and meaning of the denotation of propositions OMD pp. 23-31)	"	5	"	22
6. Independent and dependent variables (page 16 of PAD is inserted as page 49 of OMD)	"	7-18	"	32-55
7. Comments on propositions marked "2." (i.e., 2.2, 2.4, etc.) "Private notes" follow OMD pp. 57-98	"	12-15	"	50-55

⁵The page numbered "16" is missing from the PAD manuscript. In OMD, p. 49 has "49|16" written in the top right corner. In the top left corner Russell had written "Denoting etc.", which appears in the same place on the pages of PAD. "MD" is also written in the top left corner of the page in question, and it appears in that place on all the other pages of OMD.

⁶OMD, p. 57.

The chart, "Textual structure of the unpublished manuscripts", provides a useful outline of the topics covered in the manuscripts. It allows us to see an overlap between OMD and each of the other two manuscripts. The structural similarities are with topics covered and with the order of presentation. The first part of OMD (pp. 1-14) coincides with OMDP. The next part of OMD (pp. 15-57) coincides with PAD. There is almost no overlap of topics between OMDP and PAD. The definitions and explanations of terminology which are so prominently displayed in the beginning sections of OMD and OMDP are omitted in PAD. However, the implicit theory of PAD is clearly the same as OMDP. This, together with the unfinished nature of PAD, leads to the conclusion that PAD is a series of commentaries and digressions written after Russell had completed OMDP.

The proposed order of the manuscripts is, therefore, (1) OMDP, (2) PAD, and then (3) OMD.

2. "On Denoting"

Several major changes occurred in Russell's philosophy of logic and language between 1903 and 1905.⁷ The manuscripts are specific steps in Russell's development of the theory in "On Denoting". He came to see denoting phrases as the only exception in his theory of language that proper names denote and all other words mean: he held that denoting phrases both mean and denote. Only denoting phrases raise the *logical* question of the relation of a meaning to a denotation.

In 1903, Russell had stated that every word occurring in a sentence has a meaning, in the sense that it stands for something other than itself (*Principles*, p. 42). Words and sentences are linguistic entities. They *indicate* terms, which have being (p. 43). *Things* are terms indicated by proper names, and *concepts* are terms indicated by all other words. *Indication* is a relation between a linguistic entity (a word) and a non-linguistic entity (a term). Some concepts (which are terms) denote other terms. In particular, some concepts denote things. *Denotation* is a relationship between two non-linguistic entities, between two terms. We distinguish indication, a relation between a word and a term, from denotation, a relation between two terms.

The distinction between "indication" and "denotation" was essential to Russell's theory in the *Principles of Mathematics*. In Appendix A he compared it with Frege's theory: "The distinction between meaning (*Sinn*) and indication (*Bedeutung*) is roughly, though not exactly, equivalent to

⁷See my "Propositional Functions and Russell's Philosophy of Language 1903-1914" (forthcoming) where this is developed more completely. It is argued there that Russell's philosophy of language was undergoing constant change and development through this period, and most significantly that he did *not* confuse a sign with the thing signified, or use and mention.

my distinction between a concept as such and what the concept denotes ..." (p. 502). Russell was careful to note that, for Frege, "*Bedeutung*" is a relation between a word and an object. This is the reason that Russell translated it as "indication" and not "denotation". In Frege's theory, proper names have both *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*. Russell disagreed: "It seems to me that only such proper names as are derived from concepts by means of *the* can be said to have meaning, and that such words as *John* merely indicate without meaning" (p. 502).

In the *Principles*, proper names indicate some object, but have no meaning. All other expressions have meaning, and most do not indicate objects. Denoting expressions, or phrases, are not proper names, and therefore they have meaning. But a denoting expression can indicate an object. Denoting expressions are unique because they are the only linguistic expressions which can have both meaning and indication. When a definite description succeeds, some unique object is indicated by the expression. In addition some meaning is indicated by the expression, and this meaning also has a relation to the object indicated. This relation is denotation.

The central importance of denoting expressions in the *Principles* was that they are the only expressions which have both a meaning and an indication. In "On Denoting" Russell was to deny this and claim that they have no meaning and only sometimes do they refer to an object. "In the ... theory which I advocate, [in the denoting phrase] there is no meaning, and only sometimes a denotation."⁸ The net effect of "On Denoting" is to eliminate the need for a separate relation between a meaning and an object.

The theory in the *Principles* remained relatively unchanged in Russell's 1904 review of Meinong.⁹ However, the three unpublished manuscripts are all clearly before "On Denoting". They all alter the indication-denotation distinction. But the double relationship between (1) a word (or phrase) and an object, and (2) the meaning of the word (or phrase) and the object, remains constant.

"On the Meaning and Denotation of Phrases" modifies the theory in the *Principles* in several ways. The new position collapses the

⁸*Essays in Analysis*, p. 108 n.3.

⁹This review, "Meinong's Theory of Complexes and Assumptions," (*Mind*, n.s. 13, 1904) was in three parts: April (pp. 204-219), July (pp. 204-214) and October (pp. 336-354) (reprinted in *Essays in Analysis*, pp. 21-76). "Indicate" occurs only twice in the lengthy article. The second occurrence, in October--"Adopting Meinong's terminology, according to which words express a state of mind, but *indicate* (*bedeuten*) an object ..." (p. 62)--is noteworthy, because Russell attributes this use to Meinong. However, Russell continues to translate "*bedeuten*" as "indicate", so I believe he was still using the distinction of the *Principles*.

indication-denotation distinction. This is stated clearly at the beginning of the manuscript: "A proper name, such as *Arthur Balfour*, is destitute of *meaning*, but *denotes* an individual. On the other hand, verbs and adjectives have meaning, but no denotation" (p. 1). Phrases with "the" both mean and denote. Russell does not directly discuss the relationship between the meaning and the denotation. However, on several occasions, he says that the meaning denotes an object (pp. 4-5).

Denoting, therefore, is a relation both between a word and an object and a meaning and an object. But this is only the case with denoting phrases:

Words and phrases are of three kinds: (1) those that denote without meaning; (2) those that mean without denoting; (3) those that both mean and denote. *Socrates* belongs to (1), *is* to (2), *the death of Socrates* to (3). (*Ibid.*, p. 7)

Only denoting phrases both mean and denote.¹⁰ All other expressions either denote (and lack meaning) or express a meaning (and lack denotation). It is only with denoting phrases that Russell needs to be concerned with a meaning expressed denoting the denotation of a phrase. It is a direct result of his collapsing the indication/denotation dichotomy which leads to his double use of "denotation".

In OMD this double use of "denotation" is eliminated: "We must distinguish, first of all, the relation of the *phrase* to that of which it is a name, from the relation of what the phrase means to that of which it is a name" (p. 2). The former, the relation of the phrase to that which it names, is "designation" (not "indication"). The latter, the relation of what the phrase means to what the phrase names, is "denotation". More directly, Russell explains,

A phrase such as "the present Prime Minister of England" *designates* an entity, in this case Mr. Arthur Balfour, while it *expresses* a meaning, which is complex, and does not, as a rule, include the entity designated as a constituent; the relation of the meaning may be called a *description* of the entity, and the phrase may be called a *descriptive phrase*.¹¹

This represents a subtle change from the *Principles* where all words indicate terms, either things or concepts. In OMD, proper names designate things, and all other words express a meaning. Descriptive phrases designate an entity, and in addition express a meaning, which denotes the entity designated. There is a crucial dichotomy between "designation"

¹⁰This is not really accurate. At this time Russell thought that pronouns were disguised denoting phrases and had both meaning and denotation (p. 17). But he did not discuss this in any of the later manuscripts.

¹¹OMD, p. 7. This use of "express" is probably due to Meinong. Cf. the quotation in fn. 9 above.

and "denotation". "Denoting" is the logically important relation, whereas "designating" and "expressing" have to do only with a theory of language.¹² But the OMD theory was never really considered adequate by Russell.

The "Private notes" which follow OMD provide an indication of the degree of Russell's frustration. We are, however, able to construe some of these remarks as a premature version of the theory in "On Denoting". Let me quote Russell extensively:

Just as *x* itself has a definite meaning, so "*x* is human" has one also; but it is the denotation, not the meaning, that we employ: the *denotation* is that variable proposition which we before regarded as the variable meaning. Perhaps this modifies other previous conclusions.

... Now "if *x* is human, *x* is mortal" also expresses a definite meaning, but of this meaning, the meaning of "*x* is human" is not a constituent, though the various propositions denoted by "*x* is human" are constituents of the corresponding propositions in the denotation of "if *x* is human, *x* is mortal". (OMD, p. 64)

... If we have (say) $fx \supset \phi x$, the *meaning* of fx (according to what we have just decided) does not occur at all in this proposition, but only the denotation. Consequently fx , it might seem, cannot stand for the meaning. And as regards denotation, though the terms of the denotation of fx *severally* occur in the total denotation of $fx \supset \phi x$, the denotation of fx as a whole does not enter in; it enters into $(x).fx \supset (x).\phi x$, but not into $fx \supset \phi x$ or $(x).fx \supset \phi x$. This difficulty, however, is met by our previous conclusion, that we must always consider the *whole* of an expression. (OMD, p. 65)

But Russell rejects this line of reasoning at this time.

It is plain that *is* is a fundamental logical notion, and that it would be merely shirking to invent a dodge for getting on without using it. (OMD, p. 84)

Two of Whitehead's criticisms summarized by Russell at the end of these notes are worth mentioning:

2. Whitehead denies that denoting phrases are names in the same sense as proper names.
5. He thinks that in a denoting phrase both meaning and denotation are involved in a Proposition in much the same way. (OMD, p. 93)

These are fundamental objections. Although we can only conjecture at connections, Whitehead's criticisms may have provided the motivation for Russell to return to the theory mentioned earlier in the private notes. At any rate, Russell is clearly floundering at the close of the manuscript. He writes: "There is something still wrong with my theory of meaning and denotation" (p. 94). And again, "But the theory of denoting must be reformed" (p. 95).

The Fregean theory which Russell criticizes in "On Denoting" is a variation of the theories in OMDP, PAD, and OMD.

¹²OMD, p. 5.

[Frege] distinguishes, in a denoting phrase, two elements, which we may call the *meaning* and the *denotation*.

A footnote on the same page reads:

In this theory we shall say that the denoting phrase *expresses* a meaning; and we shall say both of the phrase and of the meaning that they *denote* a denotation.¹³

Russell notes that this is similar to his theory in the *Principles*, but we can easily see that there are important differences. (1) Russell is now translating "*Bedeutung*" as "denotation", not "indication", which he used in the *Principles*. (2) The denoting phrase *expresses* a meaning, as in OMD; it does not indicate it. And (3) the use of "terms" is eliminated from the account.

The crucial changes in the manuscripts from the position in the *Principles* surround (1) the relation between a denoting phrase and the meaning of the phrase, and (2) the relation between the meaning of a denoting phrase and the object denoted. Russell is bothered immensely by these relationships. Significantly, they are only crucial for denoting phrases. They are the only expressions which have both a meaning and a denotation. This is not the case with Frege's theory. As Russell notes, Frege distinguishes meaning and denotation everywhere. Thus, Russell is not concerned to refute Frege's entire framework, but rather Russell's own old theory, which happens to coincide with part of Frege's.

In "On Denoting" Russell contextually defines denoting phrases: "... we must abandon the view that the denotation is what is concerned in propositions which contain denoting phrases."¹⁴ This eliminates the logical significance of denoting phrases. Denoting phrases are not genuine constituents of propositions in whose verbal expressions they occur.

In summation, there is a steady progression of Russell's theory from (1) *The Principles of Mathematics* through (2) OMDP, (3) PAD, (4) OMD, and leading to (5) "On Denoting". With this development as a guide, we are in a better position to read and evaluate "On Denoting". In particular, it is necessary to recognize that "Frege's theory" which Russell is criticizing may, or may not, be Frege's theory, but it was certainly Russell's theory in late 1904 and early 1905.

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¹³*Essays in Analysis*, p. 108.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 109.