

RUSSELL ON LANGUAGE

GRAHAM STEVENS
Philosophy / U. of Manchester
Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK
GRAHAM.P.STEVENS@MANCHESTER.AC.UK

Keith Green. *Bertrand Russell, Language and Linguistic Theory*. London and New York: Continuum, 2007. Pp. ix, 174. ISBN 978-08264-9736-9. £65; US\$144.

It is often claimed that there is more than a hint of irony about Russell's contribution to the philosophy of language. The contribution, if assessed in terms of Russell's influence on philosophy of language, is massive—it sometimes seems that the entire subject subsequent to “On Denoting” is a vast collection of footnotes to Russell and Frege—yet, it is said, Russell himself was not interested in linguistic issues. The three items of evidence most commonly cited in support of this latter claim are (1) the non-linguistic nature of Russellian propositions and their constituents in Russell's early philosophical work, (2) his vehement attacks on Wittgensteinian and ordinary language philosophy in his later publications, and (3) his alleged lack of interest in natural language beyond a general desire to replace it with an “ideal” alternative. In fact, there is no real irony here. Many philosophers of language and linguists would agree with Russell on both (1) and (2). Furthermore, as Keith Green shows in detail in this interesting book, (3) simply does not have ample support in Russell's writings.

Green's study of Russell spans the entire period of his philosophical activity.

Throughout this period, especially after the discovery of the theory of descriptions in 1905, Russell was acutely aware of the shortcomings of natural language as a tool in technical philosophical inquiry, and regularly drew attention to them: the grammar of natural language is misleading with respect to the logical form of the propositions it is used to express in various ways, such as: its classification of some non-referring expressions as noun phrases, the fact that natural language contains vague and ambiguous expressions, that its syntax generates sentential ambiguity as in the case of scope phenomena, that it disguises descriptive elements as apparent proper names (which are not “logically proper”), and so forth. Green demonstrates convincingly, however, that such views are not symptomatic of a dismissive attitude towards language as an object of philosophical theory. On the contrary, they are the results of lengthy reflection on natural language and its semantics.

While it is true that Russell thought natural language inadequate for many tasks in philosophy, especially mathematical philosophy, he also made a detailed study of some aspects of natural language that had no place in his formal languages and which were, at the time, neglected by other philosophers. An example of this is his discussions of indexical expressions (“egocentric particulars” as he called them), the most detailed being found in *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*. Green’s study of this often neglected part of Russell’s philosophy is original and insightful. Green’s exegesis makes it clearer than previous discussions just why the term “egocentric” is so appropriate for Russell: his definition of egocentric particulars is driven to a substantial degree by his epistemology insofar as he takes it for granted that their referents must be things that the speaker has direct acquaintance with. Thus, unlike later theorists (e.g. Kaplan) who argue that the literal meaning of an indexical can be interpreted as a function from contexts to contents, often regardless of speakers’ psychological states, Russell takes the mental state of the speaker to make an essential contribution to the meaning of an indexical expression. Green contextualizes this difference within linguistic theory, drawing parallels between the egocentric approach of Russell and Karl Bühler, and contrasting it with recent “sociocentric” objections (p. 46). Furthermore, despite his emphasis on the egocentric quality of indexicals, Russell is not blind to the fact that indexicals have an objective literal meaning that remains constant across contexts while the reference varies. Green calls the constant element “intensional meaning” and the context-sensitive, variable element “indexical meaning” (p. 48). They are more familiar to philosophers of language by the names Kaplan gives them in his classic work “Demonstratives”¹: “character” and “content”. Kaplan may deserve the credit for first disentangling these two components of indexical semantics,

¹ David Kaplan, “Demonstratives”, in J. Almog, J. Perry and H. Wettstein, eds., *Themes from Kaplan* (Oxford: Oxford U. P. 1989), 481–563.

but Green quotes a passage from Russell's 1914 paper "On the Nature of Acquaintance" in which Russell clearly recognizes the distinction, though without the clarity of Kaplan or other later writers. Russell may have lacked the sophistication of more recent philosophers of language and linguists, but these discussions of indexicality, one of the most fundamental topics in natural language semantics, are compelling evidence for Green's thesis that Russell was a significant philosopher of language: "Russell ... had anticipated the major work on deixis within both philosophy and linguistics and attempted to incorporate his considerations on the phenomenon within a theory of mind — no mean feat for a philosopher 'uninterested in language' and antipathetic to 'linguistic philosophy'" (p. 52).

Running alongside this convincing primary thesis is a secondary one: Green perceives a sharp division between the two disciplines of linguistics and philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century which, he believes, led to the two being conducted largely in ignorance of one another. I suspect the degree to which one will find Green's argument persuasive here will be determined by one's particular interests in philosophy or linguistics. Both are strikingly broad subjects, and inevitably what strikes one person as central to either may seem tangential to another person. Whilst it is certainly true that Saussurean linguistic theory, which Green repeatedly brings into the discussion and clearly sees as central to linguistics, has had little or no interaction with analytical philosophy, other areas such as formal semantics have risen naturally as points of overlap between philosophy and linguistics to the extent that it is often difficult to distinguish one from the other. This enterprise has its origins in mathematical logic and, particularly, in the work of Russell and Frege. It is therefore surprising that this area where key developments in philosophy and linguistics have grown from the same Russellian source is neglected in Green's book — important theorists who are clearly indebted to Russell and who have bridged linguistics and philosophy, such as Richard Montague, are notable by their absence.

A linguist who does feature prominently in the book is Noam Chomsky. In an interesting section of the fourth chapter, Green discusses the points of difference and similarity between the two. The conclusion he arrives at further vindicates his insistence on Russell's relevance to linguistic theory. Chomsky not only follows Russell in treating linguistics much like a branch of applied mathematics, he also values the abstract structural features of language that are revealed by so studying it over the pragmatic aspects of language use. Here can be found some real irony about Russell's reputation as a philosopher of language, for while Russell's objection to ordinary language philosophy is cited as evidence of his lack of interest in linguistic issues, perhaps the most famous and influential linguist of the twentieth century was advocating a remarkably similar view to Russell's (p. 125).

The final chapter is a rather ambitious attempt to analyse Russell's relation

to modernism. Much of the emphasis here is on stylistic aspects of Russell's work that do not have direct philosophical significance and, as is common with attempts to understand the history of philosophy in the light of literary or cultural developments, the distinctions employed lack the precision required for a detailed portrait of Russell's philosophical work. For example, Green says: "Russell developed the Theory of Descriptions and his logical atomism during the beginnings of modernism, and indeed his work can be seen as part of the modernist movement in its attempt to understand the essential workings of certain aspects of human existence, and to 'connect' through analysis" (p. 144). What the theory of descriptions is being alleged to attempt here is surely what almost all philosophy attempts to do (at least when it is any good), so it is not clear that this would distinguish the theory as a modernist enterprise. Although the chapter sheds little light on Russell's philosophy, there are some interesting discussions of his relationships with T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence, and, unsurprisingly, Russell's razor-sharp style is scrutinized.

The nature of Green's project means that, as evidenced by this last chapter, his intended audience does not consist solely of philosophers and linguists but also embraces literary theorists. Inevitably this will make some parts of the work slightly obscure to some sections of its audience at times (I was certainly unable to understand the brief discussion of Derridean deconstruction in the last chapter, pp. 146–7). Nonetheless, taken as a whole, the book's main thesis is clear and persuasive, making a valuable contribution to Russell scholarship.
