RUSSELL'S CONTRIBUTION TO PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

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*O*ver the past decade, Graham Stevens has built his reputation as a lucid, durable, and oftentimes ground-breaking historian of analytic philosophy. His latest book, entitled *The Theory of Descriptions: Russell and the Philosophy of Language*, will only add to that burgeoning scholarly legacy. If it has not been established already, this book will doubtless cement Stevens' place amongst the leading Russell scholars in the world today. It may very well herald Stevens' arrival on the scene as a noteworthy contributor to contemporary philosophy of language as well.

The central goal of the book is "to bring the historical and purely philosophical analyses of [Russell's] work into closer alignment" (p. 3). Stevens hopes to overcome a "striking disparity" (p. 2) in the ways that Russell's contributions to the philosophy of language have been conceived by expositors of his philosophy, on the one hand, versus philosophers of language, on the other. In particular, though contemporary philosophers of language would tend to view Russell's enormous contribution to that subject as being "undeniable" (p. 1), and to be "bewildered" (p. 94) by any suggestion to the contrary, expositors of Russell's philosophy have nevertheless been at pains to emphasize that Russell "was not engaged in the philosophical study of language" (p. 2). As Stevens notes, this situation is especially puzzling since "these two groups [of scholars] overlap to a considerable extent" (p. 2).

Stevens' strategy for overcoming this disparity is two-pronged. First he aims to tackle, head on, the fallacious arguments of Monk,[1] Dummett,[2] and others, to the effect that Russell was not engaged in the philosophy of language. According to Stevens, such arguments have principally appealed to either (1)

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[1] RAY MONK, "What Is Analytical Philosophy?".

[2] MICHAEL DUMMETT, *Frege: Philosophy of Language*.

Russell's dismissal of ordinary language philosophy, (2) his early, non-linguistic, conception of the nature of propositions, or (3) his view that natural language was inherently defective for philosophical purposes, and so called for replacement by a "logically perfect language".

In regards to (1), Stevens argues in a word that "[o]rdinary language philosophy has had its day" (p. 176). Over the past several decades, in other words, leading philosophers of language have come to agree with Russell in viewing ordinary language philosophy as "an outdated, and rather eccentric, relic of mid-twentieth century British philosophy" (*ibid.*). The classic Russell–Strawson debate over the question whether ordinary language lacks an exact logic[3] has been settled decisively in Russell's favour, as philosophers of language have transformed "the attempt to systematically specify the semantics of large regions of natural language" (*ibid.*) into a "central project" (*ibid.*). In regards to (2), moreover, Stevens notes that by this line of reasoning, absurdly, David Kaplan would not qualify as a philosopher of language since he "explicitly invokes the Russellian non-linguistic conception of a proposition as the conception appropriate for providing the content of properly context-situated indexical sentences" (p. 170). And, of course, Kaplan is not at all unique amongst contemporary philosophers of language in appealing to a Russellian conception of propositional content, as the examples of Nathan Salmon,[4] Scott Soames,[5] and many others show. In regards to (3), finally, Stevens argues that Russell's dim view of natural language was grounded in his conception of logical form as non-linguistic, and that that conception, in turn, derives simply from the poverty of syntactic theory available to Russell, prior to the Chomskyian revolution in linguistics during the second half of the twentieth century. In light of the conceptual and analytic resources made available by this revolution, however, there exists "no insurmountable obstacle to assimilating Russell's notion of logical form to something akin to the modern notion of LF" (p. 172), where LF is conceived as one of four levels of syntactic representation within Chomsky's Government and Binding Theory (p. 98).

To better appreciate this controversial claim of Stevens', it will be helpful to turn to the second prong of Stevens' strategy for overcoming the disparity between philosophers of language and expositors of Russell. Here Stevens' approach, building on the work of Stephen Neale, is to demonstrate the fecundity of Russell's contributions to the philosophy of language, and especially of his theory of descriptions, relative to contemporary projects in formal

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[3] See Peter Strawson, "On Referring", and Russell, "Mr. Strawson on Referring".

[4] E.g., Nathan Salmon, *Frege's Puzzle*.

[5] E.g., Scott Soames, *Beyond Rigidity*.

semantics such as the analysis of complex demonstratives, and the treatment of indexicality. Indeed, at times one gets the sense that the overarching investigation into the question whether Russell was actually a philosopher of language is deployed by Stevens simply as a foil to motivate engagement with this (admittedly fascinating) project. After all, Stevens' rebuttal to each of the three arguments identified above is confined almost exclusively to a short, and concluding, seventh chapter.[6] The bulk of Stevens' exposition, contained in Chapters 1 through 6, is then instead devoted to the historical interpretation, as well as application and extension, of the theory of descriptions.

Following Russell's lead in his classic paper "On Denoting" (*OD*), Stevens commences his book with an exposition of the theory of descriptions itself, in Chapter 1. He begins by introducing the class of expressions to which the theory applies, namely "denoting phrases", or what contemporary linguists are apt to call "determiner phrases". Here already, however, Stevens cannot resist the temptation to probe and extend the scope of the theory, and in particular to examine phrases beyond those of the form enumerated at the outset of Russell's classic paper, to include possessive noun phrases, non-classical quantifiers, and complex demonstratives. To be fair, Stevens identifies some textual evidence that Russell would have considered at least some possessive noun phrases to be denoting phrases (e.g., "my only son"[7]); and he acknowledges the controversy surrounding the other cases, but defers that controversy to discussion in later chapters (p. 13). He then moves on to contrast denoting phrases with genuine singular terms, in turn tracing Russell's Millian characterization of singular terms to epistemological considerations of the sort involved in what Gareth Evans referred to as "Russell's Principle".[8] The basic idea, as articulated by Stephen Neale,[9] is that some thoughts are "object-dependent". Singular propositions containing genuine singular terms are "object-dependent", for instance, in the sense that such propositions do not really make sense unless those singular terms have referents. One thus cannot understand them unless she possesses "discriminatory knowledge" (p. 16) of the object which that thought is about. The requirement that one must have discriminatory knowledge of an object in order to have singular thoughts about it is, however, supposed to be a less restrictive requirement than Russell's principle of acquaintance. This "revised and repackaged" (p. 17) requirement of object-dependence is supposed to facilitate the extraction of Russell's theory

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[6] Although (3) also comes up for extended discussion in Ch. 4.

[7] *OD*, p. 484; *Papers* 4: 419.

[8] GARETH EVANS, *The Varieties of Reference*.

[9] STEPHEN NEALE, *Descriptions*.

of descriptions from his outdated, sense-data epistemology. Some textual evidence is provided (p. 16) to the effect that Russell might have supported such an extraction.[10]

According to Stevens, then, Russell's theory of descriptions is a theory of denoting phrases as opposed to singular terms. Though Russell famously argued that many ordinary proper names were disguised descriptions, Stevens argues that this claim is separate from and wholly supplemental to the theory of descriptions. For the purposes of explicating the theory, therefore, proper names can be treated (as they are in fact treated by many philosophers of language, in the wake of Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* lectures) as directly referential singular terms, as opposed to disguised descriptions. What the theory of descriptions says, then, is that, unlike genuine singular terms, denoting phrases do not refer to any constituent of a proposition. They instead contribute to the meaning of a quantified proposition according to contextual definitions. Denoting phrases can thus be identified with quantifiers or quantifier phrases. The authentic logical form of any sentence deploying a denoting phrase is therefore distinct from its surface grammatical form. Failure to recognize this distinction is a fertile source of philosophical confusion—confusion which can be unravelled through logical analysis. In particular, articulating the structural complexity of quantifier phrases at the level of logical form allows us to resolve scope ambiguities which generate apparent semantic puzzles in negative, modal, and intensional contexts.

While the exposition in Chapter 1 is largely ahistorical, in Chapters 2 and 3 Stevens seeks to contextualize and exposit the theory of descriptions historically. In other words, he tries to answer the historical questions of (1) what really motivated Russell to adopt the theory of descriptions, and (2) what role did that theory play in his attempts to diffuse the Contradiction? To that end, and in Chapter 2, Stevens builds upon the work of Nicholas Griffin,[11] Peter Hylton,[12] and others, to repudiate the "standard" (p. 47) Quinean reading according to which the theory of descriptions emerged as part of an attempt to prune the exorbitant, and allegedly Meinongian, ontological commitments of *The Principles of Mathematics*. Stevens attempts to break new ground here, however, by repudiating Russell's alleged Meinongianism in regards to not only empty denoting phrases, but also empty proper names and negative existential statements. In Chapter 3 Stevens goes on to argue that, while the

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[10] See "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description", in *ML*, p. 219; *Papers* 6: 154.

[11] Nicholas Griffin, "Denoting Concepts in the *Principles of Mathematics*".

[12] Peter Hylton, *Russell, Idealism, and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy*.

theory of descriptions was later "prized" (p. 77) by Russell for its applicability to resolving the Russell Paradox amongst others, and for forging a path to the ramified type theory of *Principia Mathematica via* the "no-classes" or "substitutional theory" of 1905–08, historically the theory of descriptions itself arose first in the context of a 1905 manuscript "On Fundamentals",[13] in which the theory is motivated by an early version of the notorious "Grey's Elegy" argument, which also occurs in "On Denoting".

Chapter 4 is perhaps the most provocative and interesting in the book. As Stevens insists, it "marks a point of transition" (p. 93), from the primarily historical exegesis undertaken in Chapters 2–3, to an examination of the ways in which the theory of descriptions "applies to contemporary philosophy—philosophy of language in particular" (*ibid.*). In it Stevens develops the claim, crucial for his overall argument, that "[a]nalysis of Russellian propositions is not outside the proper scope of linguistic analysis" (p. 94). This involves defending a "shift away from some key theses of Russell's" (*ibid.*), such as "his non-linguistic conception of logical form" (*ibid.*). Following Neale (*op. cit.*), in particular, Stevens hopes to reconstruct, elaborate upon and extend Russell's theory, and conjoin it "with a Chomskyian syntactic theory" (p. 95). He also purports to respond to various objections, stemming from Linsky,[14] Collins,[15] and others, to the attempt to assimilate Russellian logical form to Chomskyian syntactic structure. In the interests of space I will consider only one of these objections, due to Linsky, according to which the "attempt to conjoin the theory [of descriptions] with a Chomskyian syntactic theory inevitably discards Russell's original conception of logical form, replacing it with the LF representations provided by the best current syntactic theory" (pp. 95–6).

Stevens' response is to insist that there exist good reasons to abandon Russell's non-linguistic conception of logical form, "on Russell's behalf" (p. 102). Specifically, Russell's theory of descriptions is only one possible method for resolving the ambiguity inherent in statements like "The Present King of France is not bald" (p. 98). In particular, the same ambiguity can readily be resolved by appeal "to a referential theory of descriptions coupled with a negative free logic" (p. 100). Thus, motivating the theory of descriptions as a theory of logical form requires moving beyond semantic fecundity to syntactic data. In other words, motivating the theory of descriptions requires appeal to a Chomskyian syntactic theory, which will show that, with some important

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[13] See *Papers* 4: **15**.

[14] E.g., BERNARD LINSKY, "The Logical Form of Descriptions" and "Russell's Logical Form, LF, and Truth-Conditions".

[15] JOHN COLLINS, "Syntax, More or Less".

modifications, such as the introduction of restricted instead of classical quantifiers, natural language does indeed possess the logical form which the theory of descriptions says it does. This will come at the price that logical form is now construed as a cognitive-linguistic structure, rather than as the ontological structure of non-linguistic, non-mental facts. According to Stevens, however, that "is to the benefit, not detriment, of the theory of descriptions" (p. 115).

I wonder whether Stevens' claim is true. It may be, as he insists, that "ordinary language philosophy has had its day". But this is not so obviously the case with regards to Wittgenstein's remarks[16] on rules and private language. Indeed, over the past three decades, a mountain of literature has been devoted to Kripke's well-known exposition of Wittgenstein's so-called "rule-following considerations".[17] There continues to exist substantial controversy within it, on the question of whether it really is best to construe normative phenomena, such as grammatical rules and rules of logical syntax, as being constituted within the cognitive and biological structures of speakers, rather than in their social environments and practices.[18] Chomsky even devoted a chapter of *Knowledge of Language*, to the controversy.[19] The point is simply that I do not see what is to be gained by natural-language semanticists in taking such a firm stand on that controversy. I suppose Stevens could argue that there is much to be gained from an empirical standpoint, by conceptualizing logical form as something existing within the cognitive frameworks or biological structures of human beings; for only then it can be studied empirically from the point of view of the science of linguistics. But that does not seem to me to follow. For instance, if we view our intuitions about the appropriate formalizations of the logical form of sentences as being grounded in our competence as participants in culturally transmitted social practices, rather than as evidence of genetically transmitted cognitive-biological structures, they will be no less open to empirical scrutiny. Moreover, behaviour in a social context of the sort envisioned by Wittgenstein to be constitutive of normative practices is just as open to empirical scrutiny as are internal, cognitive-biological structures, if not more so. This fact is what led philosophers of language like Quine and Davidson to envision the empirical study of language along the lines of the thought

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[16] In WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*.

[17] KRIPKE, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*.

[18] A good, general introduction to this (enormous) field of literature can be found in ALEXANDER MILLER AND CRISPIN WRIGHT, eds., *Rule-Following and Meaning*. Paul Boghossian's contribution to this compilation appears to be the origin of the phrase "rule-following considerations" to refer to Wittgenstein's remarks on rules and private language in *Philosophical Investigations*.

[19] CHOMSKY, *Knowledge of Language*, Ch. 4.

experiments of radical translation[20] and radical interpretation,[21] respectively.[22] Stevens could argue that it is the Chomskyan paradigm, and not the paradigm of radical translation or of behaviourism, which informs the dominant methodology being deployed to study logical form by leading linguists practising in the field today. But that move would be open to the objection, made by Collins (*op. cit.*), that recent developments in contemporary syntactic theory, associated with Chomsky's so-called "minimalist programme", have led linguists to dispense entirely with any level of syntactic structure corresponding to logical form (see Stevens, p. 108). This might suggest that, whatever linguists are in fact scientifically studying, it is not what philosophers of language call "logical form". Transformational linguistics thus offers the wrong sort of empirical framework for the study of philosophical semantics. To be fair, Stevens offers a reply to this and other objections stemming from Collins' work (pp. 109–11). However, any further discussion of the details and subtleties of this reply is beyond the scope of this review.

In any case, in Chapter 5 Stevens moves on to attempt to extend the theory of descriptions to complex demonstratives, such as "that fox", or "that man wearing the polka dot trousers". Building on Russellian insights, Stevens argues against the "orthodox view" (p. 118) that complex demonstratives are best construed as devices of direct reference. In particular, and following Neale (*op. cit.*), he argues that like other determiner phrases, complex demonstratives are plausibly treated as quantifier expressions along the lines of the theory of descriptions. Amongst the many advantages of this approach is that it will allow the semantic theorist to preserve compositionality in the sense that the meaning of a sentence's constituents will make a predictable and systematic contribution to the meaning of that sentence. If one utters "that fox is making a terrible mess" (p. 118), for example, one's utterance will be true only if the demonstrated animal is, indeed, a fox, and not a badger. On the "orthodox" view, by contrast, the utterance can still be true if the demonstrated animal is a badger, not a fox. Some theorists (such as Larson and Segal[23]) have attempted to evade this ostensible problem for the orthodox view by claiming that the descriptive content of a complex demonstrative plays only a pragmatic and not a semantic role, simply assisting the hearer in picking out the demonstrated item, without contributing to the semantic content of

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[20] E.g., in W. V. O. Quine, *Word and Object*.

[21] Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*.

[22] Wittgenstein considers a similar thought experiment in *Philosophical Investigations*, §206.

[23] Richard Larson and Gabriel Segal, *Knowledge of Meaning*.

the proposition. Stevens, however, suggests that this evasion is both "*ad hoc* and frustratingly sketchy" (p. 120). It is *ad hoc* in so far as "[n]o other phrase with the syntactic form of a determiner phrase behaves in quite this way" (p. 119). It is frustratingly sketchy since it offers merely a "vague gesture" (p. 120) towards pragmatics, while not firmly anchoring the gesture, as other appeals to pragmatics do, "in the speech act theory of Gricean conversational implicature" (*ibid.*).

In Chapter 6, finally, Stevens builds upon Russell's insights so as to develop several lucid and penetrating reflections on the natural language semantics of egocentric particulars (such as "this", "that", "I", "you", "here" and "now"), and their derivatives (such as tensed verbs, e.g., "was"). Here Stevens draws primarily on work of Russell in *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* as well as *Human Knowledge*. For that reason Stevens sees himself as following up on the project which he initiated in his book on *The Russellian Origins of Analytic Philosophy*, which was specifically to challenge the "negative appraisal of Russell's later philosophical output" (p. 140). Following Jager,[24] Stevens notes that for Russell the primary function of an egocentric particular is to "specify perspectives" (p. 153), rather than to directly refer. This is not to say that egocentric particulars do not refer, only that they "do *more* than just refer" (*ibid.*). By deploying this Russellian conception of egocentric particulars so as to refine a Kaplanian theory of character, however, Stevens is able convincingly to evade several problematic counter-examples to the prominent Kaplan/Perry model of indexicality according to which "the cognitive significance of utterances of indexical sentences is attached to the character of those sentences" (p. 149). The specific counter-examples themselves are too involved to go into detail about here, but the basic problem is that two distinct utterances of an egocentric particular can have the very same Kaplanian character yet nevertheless differ in cognitive content, because they are uttered from different perspectives. This makes it hard to see how cognitive significance can be aligned with Kaplanian character. Yet according to Stevens, by deploying the Russellian conception of egocentric particulars to specify the perspectives from which those egocentric particulars are uttered, it is a fairly straightforward matter to refine Kaplanian character to capture these integral differences in cognitive significance.

This is just one of many cases in Stevens' book in which he is able to demonstrate the incredible fecundity and remarkable foresight characteristic of Russell's reflections on the philosophy of language, by applying Russellian insights to contemporary problems in natural-language semantics. Given that

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[24] RONALD JAGER, *The Development of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy*.

fact, I am somewhat surprised that Stevens is so quick to follow Kripke (and others) in rejecting Russell's descriptivist account of the semantics of many ordinary proper names (p. 15). Indeed, it would be remarkable if it turned out, as seems to be implicitly maintained by Stevens, that Russell's philosophical perspective provides deeply perceptive insights into every *other* semantic category of referential device, besides that of ordinary proper names. Near the end of Chapter 6, Stevens concedes that the prospects of resolving Frege's classic puzzles regarding the divergent cognitive significance of co-referential proper names (e.g., Clark Kent/ Superman) are quite dim if we take a directly referential approach to proper names. His suggestion is that these prospects would be much improved by refining the semantics of proper names so as to account for "the cognitive significance of speakers' or hearers' perspectives on the subject matter concerned" (p. 166). But this could be construed as a concession that many ordinary proper names, like complex demonstratives, do more than directly refer. Stevens would thus do better, contrary to his official position on the matter, to simply follow Russell in embracing a mode of descriptivism about ordinary proper names, and to respond to the relevant objections. This would make for a more satisfying and unified treatment, as well as deployment, of Russell's philosophical insights.

In any case, Stevens has gone far beyond demonstrating that Russell made an integral contribution to philosophy of language, by displaying in its details both the inestimable profundity and historical durability of that contribution. Though it engages with leading research within contemporary philosophy of language, and undertakes some fairly technical analysis, Stevens' book is nevertheless remarkably accessible and refreshingly lucid. Readers hoping to find lengthy and detailed, direct and explicit rebuttals to the arguments of Monk, Dummett, and others to the effect that Russell did not contribute to the study of natural language, may be disappointed by the paucity of such material in Stevens' exposition. Stevens' rebuttal to those claims is largely indirect, and is in the main effected through his actual performance of interpreting, applying and extending Russell's contribution to the philosophy of language. Yet, like that contribution itself, Stevens' performance here is nothing short of outstanding. *The Theory of Descriptions* thus represents a valuable new groundbreaking contribution to both Russell scholarship and contemporary philosophy of language. No scholar who counts herself amongst either of the two groups whom Stevens aims to reconcile can afford to pass it over.

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