

Russell on Proper Names

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This is meant to be another chapter on Russell's philosophy of language. In tracing the development of Russell's linguistic philosophy during his creative period of 'logical atomism', fairly large topics will be found to emerge from his theory of descriptions; among them his theory of proper names occupies a very significant place. After a brief survey of proper names as a grammatical category, a syntactic and logical definition is given. His logically proper names turn out to be inextricably bound up with the notion of 'acquaintance'. In terms of his logically proper names, ordinary names will then be found to be abbreviations of descriptions and only demonstratives are admitted as proper names. Demonstratives are among 'egocentric particulars', which in turn are examined. The paper concludes that Russell's theory of proper names may be a sort of compromise between the two opposing theories by Mill and Frege, and that in a wider perspective his theory could be linguistically regarded as a manifestation of language-acquisition problems.

0. This paper is intended to be another chapter on Russell's philosophy of language which immediately follows the discussions on his theory of descriptions. The theory of descriptions, with which we concerned ourselves previously,¹⁾ crystalised his thoughts into what he calls 'the philosophy of logical atomism'. My chief concern will then be with his linguistic philosophy mainly in this period in general, and with his views concerning the problems of proper names in particular, touching upon his later conceptions of the same problems.

1. From August 1914 until the end of 1917 Russell was wholly occupied with matters arising out of his opposition to the war, but by the beginning of 1918, having been persuaded that there was no further pacifist work he could usefully do, he began to work at philosophical subjects. His 'philosophy of logical atomism' is perhaps the best record of this period.²⁾

The eight lectures, delivered in London in the first months of 1918, are said by himself to be concerned with explaining certain ideas

which he learnt from his former pupil Ludwig Wittgenstein. They provide an extended and systematic account of Russell's thoughts in a critical period of his philosophy. My attention will be focussed on linguistic aspects of them, especially on their approach to the problems of names.

2. In my previous paper, his theory of descriptions is semantically examined and criticised. And when we try to trace the path of development of Russell's philosophy of language, we will find fairly large topics springing from the theory of descriptions; among them his theory of proper names seems to us to occupy a very significant place.

3. Before embarking upon the examination of Russell's philosophical theory of proper names, proper names as one category of the natural language (say, of English) may be briefly considered in the light of Kimihira (1963).

An ordinary proper name may be recognized as a sign having identification as its specific

1) Kimihira (1971)

2) Russell (1918)

purpose, and for that purpose it depends upon its distinctive sound alone and that without regard to any meaning possessed or acquired by the sign. This conception of proper names as identification signs can be traced back to Mill's idea of names as 'unmeaning marks'; they are labels stuck upon the referens in order to be distinguished from others. Here a connotative or conceptual meaning associated with a proper name does not constitute the theoretical meaning of the word in Language (Saussurean 'langue'), while the former must be taken account of in the actual meaning in Speech ('parole'). And this antithesis between connotative and denotative functions of names may be said to have, as we will see, its philosophical counterpart of descriptions and logically proper names.

Ordinary proper names are far from purely demonstrative logically proper names. Because of their status of linguistic signs, they get easily connoted, and, thus used descriptively, they may gain fairly fixed meanings after sufficient occurrences in some definite context, and they may finally be admitted into Language as concept-evoking symbols, i.e. common nouns.

4. In Russell (1918), Russell defines proper names as words for particulars, which in turn are defined as terms of relations in atomic facts. This may be said to be purely syntactic definition. An atomic fact is represented by a simple sentence containing no embedded sentences and having no logical words such as quantifiers or connectives. (Propositions are called 'molecular' when they contains other propositions which may be called their atoms and when they have logical connectives such as 'if', 'and', and so forth.) The 'relations' in his definition of particulars includes not only a dyadic relation (e.g. 'love'), a triadic relation (e.g. 'give') and so forth, but also a predicate as a monadic relation. The 'terms' of a relation is, in a more modern phraseology, its 'arguments'.

A proper name will be, in terms of these definitions, a word which can never occur in a sentence except as a subject or a term-word, i.e. as an argument. You may say that in a proposition 'Socrates is a man' 'a man' is an

argument of the dyadic relation 'is'; the sentence, however, has the same meaning as the sentence 'Socrates is human', so that the common noun is unnecessary and can be replaced by the predicate 'human'. The subject-predicate relationship is converted here into a monadic relationship. Using the traditional 'syncategorematic' and 'non-syncategorematic' distinction, his definition of course leads to the view that proper names are not syncategorematic.

The definition of particulars as terms of relations in atomic facts are purely logical. *Qua* logicians it is unnecessary to know beforehand 'This is a particular', or 'That is a particular'. The whole question of what what particulars we actually find in the real world is a purely empirical one which concerns empirical scientists, including linguists. "Pure logic has no occasion for names, since its proposition contain only variables. But the logician may wonder, in his unprofessional moments, what constants could be substituted for variables."¹⁾ Every application of logic (and hence of mathematics) consists in the substitution of constants for variables. In applied logic, to know what sort of constants can be substituted for what sort of variables is very important. If any kind of hierarchy is admitted among variables, 'proper names' will be 'constants which are values of variables of lowest type'.²⁾

5. A logically proper name, as defined above, can only be applied to a particular with which we are acquainted, because nothing can be named with which we are not acquainted. Thus his logically proper names center crucially around the notion of 'acquaintance'.

The concept of 'acquaintance' may be said to be the central pillar of Russell's theory of names in particular and of his epistemology in general. His account of knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description is given in Russell (1910), and, in a shorter and more popular version, in Russell (1912). There knowledge by acquaintance is contrasted with knowledge by description.

We say that "We have *acquaintance* with anything of which we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of in-

1) Russell (1948) p. 88.

2) *Ibid.*, p. 89.

ference or any knowledge of truths"¹⁾ When we are 'acquainted with an object we have a direct cognitive relation to that object. The cognitive relation here means not the sort of relation which constitutes judgement, but the sort which constitutes presentation.²⁾ Thus the relation of subject and object which is called 'acquaintance' is simply the converse of the relation of object and subject which constitutes presentation.

His systematic doubt of everything, following Descartes, leads him to the conclusion that only those objects with which a relation of direct awareness is possible are certain, and that these are always sense-data, and never physical objects; the existence of physical objects can be doubted, while it is impossible to doubt the existence of sense-data. The former are known to us by what he calls 'knowledge by description' which depends for its theoretical support on his theory of descriptions. In addition to awareness of particular existents, which may be called awareness of *particulars*, there will be awareness of *universals* (e.g. a concept or a relation).³⁾ There are thus at least two sorts of objects with which we may be acquainted, namely particulars and universals. And it is no doubt those 'particular' particulars that concern directly the problems of names.

Knowledge unobtainable by acquaintance must, if it is to be any knowledge at all, be knowledge by description. We have a descriptive knowledge of an object when we know that it is *the* object having some property or properties with which we are acquainted; when we know that the property or properties in question belong to one object and no more, we are said to have knowledge of that one object by description, whether or not we are acquainted with the object.⁴⁾ Thus our knowledge of physical object and other minds is only knowledge by description. The fundamental epistemological principle in the analysis of propositions containing

descriptions is this: *Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted.*⁵⁾ The principle may be restated as follows: *whenever a relation of supposing or judging occurs, the terms to which the supposing or judging mind is related by the relation of supposing or judging must be terms with which the mind in question is acquainted.*⁶⁾

In the light of Russell's distinction between 'knowledge by acquaintance' and 'knowledge by description', we can now understand, with Clack⁷⁾, why it is that, in the ideal language which Russell envisages, only those words with which we are acquainted can be regarded as proper names. The conclusion seems to Clack to be reached in this way: (1) in accordance with the referent theory of meaning, meanings are *objects meant*, entities designated by words functioning as names: (2) to understand a word, then, we must know *what* it means, what entity it refers to; (3) since the only genuinely cognizable entities are those with which we are acquainted, it follows that only words designating objects of acquaintance, or words definable in terms of such objects, are intelligible to us. Thus, (4) in an ideal language, all words standing for ultimate constituents (the 'logically proper names' of the language) must be words that designate objects with which we are acquainted; otherwise the basic words in the language would be unintelligible.

6. In terms of Russell's theory of acquaintance it is obvious that most ordinary names, if not all, of natural language cannot be said to function as logically proper names.

"What pass for names in language, like 'Socrates', 'Plato', and so forth, were originally intended to fulfil this function of standing for particulars, and we do accept, in ordinary daily life, as particulars all sorts of things that really are not so. The names that we commonly

1) Russell (1912) p. 46.

2) Russell (1910) (in Russell (1917), p. 152 Throughout the paper, Russell (1910) is referred to by the pagination of the 1917 reprint.)

3) Russell (1910), p. 155.

4) *Ibid.*, p. 166.

5) *Ibid.*, p. 159.

6) *Ibid.*, p. 160.

7) Clack (1972), p. 29.

use, like 'Socrates', are really abbreviations for descriptions; not only that, but what they describe are not particulars but complicated systems of classes or series."¹⁾ As defined above, a name, in a narrow logical sense of the word whose meaning is a particular, can only be applied to a particular with which the speaker is acquainted, because we cannot name anything we are not acquainted with. The descriptions here may be 'the Master of Plato', or 'the philosopher who drank the hemlock', 'the person whom logicians assert to be mortal', or if we pretend to know nothing, simply 'the person whose name is called 'Socrates'.

When Russell is talking in a popular way, he treats people and objects in the external world as if they were simple entities; he treats them as if they were particulars, and he treats ordinary proper names as if they were logically proper names. When he contrasts 'Scott' with 'the author of *Waverley*', he is evidently citing the latter as an example of a description, regarding the former as a name. Here he is giving an everyday example of this contrast as it exists in our ordinary language about the external world. If not logically true, we often do treat people and objects in the external world as if they were simple entities. As contrasted with the description, 'the author of *Waverley*', 'Scott' is a simple symbol (i. e., a symbol which does not have any parts that are symbols), a simple symbol used to designate a certain particular or by extension an object which is not particular but is treated for the moment as if it were, or is falsely believed to be a particular, such as a person.²⁾ Thus, though the ordinary proper name 'Scott' is not a logically proper name, it can be used as if it were a logically proper name. That is to say, sometimes when a person uses the name 'Scott' *he will be thinking of its actual denotation directly without the intervention of any description; in his thought the denotation will not be split up into its element.*³⁾

Russell seems to admit the acquaintance

with oneself; hence one's (ordinary) proper name is a logically proper name to oneself. "Assuming that there is such a thing as direct acquaintance with oneself, Bismarck himself might have used his name directly to designate the particular person with whom he was acquainted. In this case, if he made a judgement about himself, he himself might be a constituent of the judgement. Here the proper name has the direct use which it always wishes to have, as simply standing for a certain object, and not for a description of the object."⁴⁾ Strictly, however, Bismarck might not be the particular with which even he himself could be acquainted with; the name is, accurately, even for Bismarck, a symbol for a complicated system of particulars and relations. The concept 'person' is what he calls 'a logical fiction'; it is a kind of 'construct' out of data provided through sense experience.

His definition of proper names as words for particulars with which one is acquainted thus banishes most ordinary proper names of natural language from the domain of logically proper names. What is required as logically proper names is that they directly refer to objects without being described in any degree. This qualification makes it very difficult to get any instance of a logically proper name.

According to Russell, "the only words one does use as names in the logical sense are words like 'this' or 'that'. One can use 'this' as a name to stand for a particular with which one is acquainted at the moment."⁵⁾ These demonstrative signs alone can be used to refer to an object so directly that it would be impossible to replace them with a description. Notice that, as Russell says, if you try to apprehend the proposition that I am expressing when I say 'This is white', you are not using a proper name; you mean this piece of chalk as a physical object, which in the Russellian view cannot be named. It is only when you use 'this' quite strictly, to stand for an actual object of sense, that it is really a proper name.

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- 1) Russell (1918) (in Russell (1956), p.200 Throughout the paper, Russell (1928) is referred to by the pagination of the 1956 reprint.)
 - 2) Russell (1918), p.244.
 - 3) Pears (1967), p.49. (The italics are Pears'.)
 - 4) Russell (1912), p.54.
 - 5) Russell (1918), p.201.

A demonstrative sign as a logically proper name has a very odd property: "it seldom means the same thing two moments running and does not mean the same thing to the speaker and to the hearer. It is an *ambiguous* proper name, but it is really a proper name all the same, and it is almost the only thing I can think of that is used properly and logically in the sense that I was talking of for a proper name."¹⁾ Thus Clack sums up the truly radical character of Russell's views concerning logically proper names: (1) a logically proper name, in so far as it is functioning *as* a name, cannot designate the same object for two different people; and (2) a logically proper name can designate only those entities with which we acquainted *at the moment*.²⁾

7. The only words qualifying as logically proper names, then, are demonstrative signs, 'this' and 'that'. The demonstratives are among words which Russell calls 'emphatic particulars' in Russell (1918). He says,³⁾ "I place most reliance on the argument about 'emphatic particulars', 'this', 'I', all that class of words, that pick out certain particulars from the universe by their relation to oneself... 'This', of course, is what I call an 'emphatic particular'. It is simply a proper name for the present object of attention, a proper name, meaning nothing. It is ambiguous, because the object of attention is always changing from one moment to moment and from one person to person."

'This', as said in the above paragraph, is ambiguous in one sense, but, in another sense, it is not; it is not ambiguous, like (say) 'John Smith', which is homonymous, i. e. the ordinary proper name of many men. Unlike homonymous names, 'this' is at each moment the name of only one object in one person's speech. Given the speaker and the time, the referent (which is the meaning) of 'this' is unambiguous.⁴⁾

That the meaning of these demonstratives varies with almost every occasion of their use

may suggest that the ordinary function of words which he calls 'emphatic particulars' is not to name objects but to serve as aids to orientation.⁵⁾ Later in Russell (1940), he himself adopts something like this view, and argues that all the logically proper names denoting what he now calls 'egocentric particulars' can be defined in terms of the single demonstrative pronoun 'this'.⁶⁾

'Egocentric particulars' are defined as the words whose meaning varies with the speaker and his position in time and space; their denotation is relative to the speaker. Demonstrative pronouns, personal pronouns, adverbs of time and place ('now', 'then', 'here', 'there', 'near', 'far', etc.) are examples. Tense in verbs must be included among them; they determine time by reference to the time when the words are uttered. Reichenbach calls egocentric particulars 'token-reflexive words'⁷⁾ Here the distinction is made between 'token' and 'symbol', 'token' meaning the individual sign, and 'symbol' meaning the class of similar tokens. Egocentric particulars are signs which refer to the corresponding token used in an individual act of utterance; they may therefore be called token-reflexive.

As mentioned above, all egocentric signs can be defined in terms of 'this': 'I' is defined as 'the biography to which this belongs'; 'here' as 'the place of this'; 'now' as 'the time of this', and so on. It does not seem equally feasible to take some other egocentric word as fundamental, and define 'this' in terms of it: in this sense, 'this' seems to belong to the 'minimum vocabulary' of the English language. (when we define 'this' as 'the object to which I now attend', this is evidently circular: 'I' and 'now' are already defined in terms of 'this'.) Russell thus concludes that 'this' is to be defined ostensively and other egocentric particulars are defined nominally by means of 'this'.

The ordinary names of entities presently existent or historically existent can be defined

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- 1) Russell (1918), p.201.
 - 2) Clack (1972), p.34. (The Italics are Clack's.)
 - 3) Russell (1918), p.222.
 - 4) Russell (1948), p.100.
 - 5) Ayer (1972), p.58.
 - 6) Russell (1940), pp.108 ff; Russell (1948), pp.100 ff.
 - 7) Reichenbach (1947), p.284.

verbally in terms of 'this'. "Suppose you are in Washington and some one says 'that's Nixon', then 'Nixon' is defined as 'the person whom you are now seeing'—or, more fully: 'that series of occurrences, constituting a person, of which *this* is one."¹⁾ It will thus be found that every name applied to some portion of space-time can have a verbal definition in which the word 'this' occurs. This will be a criterion by which the ordinary name of a historical character can be distinguished from that of a fictitious person, such as Hamlet, which is a pure description. According to this later view of Russell's it would follow that, apart from such words as 'this' and 'that', every name is a description involving some *this*, and only a name in virtue of the truth of some proposition.²⁾ Here 'Socrates' is given the status of a (quasi-) name, while 'Hamlet' is excluded even from this status.

8. The conceptions of Russell's concerning proper names have offended the linguist Gardiner³⁾; it is so removed from the ordinary linguistic conception as to appear almost fantastic. A severe criticism is also made by philosophers of another camp: ordinary-language philosophers.

Russell's theory of proper names, which we have examined so far, however, may be regarded as a logical conclusion of his consistent adherence to his views of language and the extra-linguistic world; among his views one of the most important is his theory of acquaintance. The conclusion concerning proper names follows from the premise that only those objects can be named with which we are acquainted.

To answer the question whether his analysis of proper names is correct or not, we should first need to establish a standard of correctness. If the standard were conformity to everyday usage, a correct analysis would have to convey what it does convey in the way how it is actually conveyed when people use proper names. Russell would not find criticisms from ordinary-language philosophers damaging; if the

correctness of his analysis is judged by this standard, he does not care about correctness. If his analysis involves some departure from the conventions of ordinary language, so much the worse for ordinary language. Above all, we should observe that Russell is not primarily interested in elucidating the ordinary uses of natural language, as ordinary-language philosophers claim to. In this view, the Russell-Gardiner controversy might not be conflicting; they might present two different approaches to languages, natural or artificial.

My concern here has been primarily with his theory of names as an important link in his search for an ideal language. In the ideal language which he envisages, all words which function as names can be used only in the actual presence of the object being named.⁴⁾ In Russell's ideal language the words in a proposition would correspond one by one with the components of the corresponding facts, with the exception of logical connectives and quantifiers. In a logically perfect language, there will be one word and no more for every simple object, and everything that is not simple will be expressed by combination of simple words. This sort of language will be completely analytic, and will show at a glance the logical structure of the facts asserted or denied. "A logically perfect language, if it could be constructed, would not only be intolerably prolix, but, as regards its vocabulary, would be very largely private to one speaker. That is to say all the names that it would use would be private to that speaker and could not enter into the language of another speaker. It could not use proper names for Socrates or Piccadilly...."⁵⁾

9. Russell's theory of proper names is sometimes regarded as one variant of the 'referential theory of meaning': the view that the meaning of the word is the object for which it stands.

An attempt has been made in my previous paper⁶⁾ to clarify some fundamental notions concerning meaning. There the term 'meaning'

1) Russell (1948), p. 93.

2) *Ibid.*, p. 94.

3) Gardiner (1953) pp. 57 ff.

4) Clack (1972), p. 35.

5) Russell (1918), p. 198.

6) Kimihira (1962)

is introduced to designate the relation (function) constituting the linguistic sign. The two terminals (i. e. arguments) entering into the meaning relation are Saussurean 'signifiant' and 'signifié': a linguistic sign is thus a relation field established by the two terminals centering round the relation 'meaning'. Beside the intra-linguistic relation centering round the meaning, the other semantically fundamental relation is the relation between a linguistic sign and an extra-linguistic entity. The extra-linguistic entity in question is called the 'referent' of the sign. The referent is related with the sign itself, a relation field, rather than with the 'signifié', one of the terminals. The relation thus established is called the 'denotation'; and the denotation, together with its terminals, the referent and the sign, constitutes a relation field called the 'reference'.

In terms of these notions, Russell's theory of names might at first seem to be dubbed 'referential'. Russell sometimes speaks of proper names 'meaning' extra-linguistic entities. Here we are reminded of Wittgenstein; thus he says, "The name means the objects. The object is its meaning."¹⁾ The word, 'meaning', however, is very ambiguous. In our terminology, Wittgenstein's 'Gegenstand' may be reworded as 'referent'. And, when Russell speaks of names meaning things, he is not equating the meaning of a linguistic sign in general with its referent. He is merely asserting that the meaning (in our sense) of a name is different from its descriptions, and that, if we seek some counterpart of meaning in the case of a name, it may correspond to its referent.

Thus considered, it may turn out that Russell's standpoint is fairly akin to that of his opponent, Gardiner. Both share Mill's view that we use a proper name to refer and not to describe; a proper name predicate nothing and consequently does not have a sense (i. e. a meaning in our terminology). Russell of course does not ignore Frege's famous 'Morning Star-Evening Star' example which leads him to the thesis that any singular term must have a sense. He proposes the 'theory of descriptions' to take care of Frege's assertion, and thus Russell's theory, at least concerning proper names,

might be regarded as a sort of compromise between Mill and Frege. And his theory of logically proper names might be said to be Mill's thesis pushed to its logical conclusion.

In a wider perspective Russell's theory of proper names centers around the theory of language-acquisition. His theory of acquaintance, his doctrine of ostensive definition, of minimum vocabulary, and of egocentric particulars, all of them might be regarded as manifestations of his concern with problems of language-acquisition. Detailed results of his thinking on this subject appears in Russell (1921) and later works. There develops his behavioristic approach to language-acquisition problems. And this, then, will be our next theme.

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