An Analysis of Referential Theory in the Philosophy of Language

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Abstract:

This study focuses on the referential theory, and highlights the meaning of an expression. Reference theory is a key problem in logic philosophy in addition to comprising an important part of Strawson and Russell's theory. In this study, the debates of Strawson and Russell have been analyzed with logical arguments. While Russell contends that sense is reference, Strawson distinguishes words, sentences, and their usage from the perspective of pragmatics. Proposing that meaning is the characteristic of words or sentence, Strawson also ventures that while truth and falsehood are characteristics of sentence use, reference is a feature of word use. Strawson's basic theorizations in language philosophy lay the foundation for a critique of Russell's description theory which exerted a strong influence on contemporary language philosophy and analytic philosophy. Strawson's critique of Russell's theory is indicative not just of the development of reference theory research but also of the revival of ontological research in contemporary philosophy.

Key words: *reference; truth value; philosophy of language*

Introduction

Philosophy (from Greek, by way of Latin, philosophia, "love of good") can be understood as the logical, theoretical, and organized thinking of world in general or of fundamental dimensions of human existence and experience. Broadly speaking, philosophy may be understood as a broad 'human enterprise' with the objective of 'providing satisfactory answers to the "big questions" that we have

regarding the world's scheme of things and our place within it' (Rescher, 2013, p.1). Rescher adds that 'philosophical deliberations must have a bearing—direct or oblique—for the key essentials of the human condition—knowledge and truth, justice and morality, beauty and goodness, and the like'. The philosophy of language is a branch of philosophy which is distinguishable from linguistic philosophy. According to John Searle (1970), 'linguistic philosophy' is primarily the name of a method whereas 'the philosophy of language' is the name of a subject. It is suggested that the philosophy of language is rather like the midwife of the scientific study of language and language use (Scott, 2012). An old branch of philosophy which gained importance in the last century under Wittgenstein, the philosophy of language is fundamentally concerned with how language changes thinking, whereas linguistics attempts to describe the phonological, syntactical, and semantic structures of natural human languages. While the data for the philosophy of language is generated from natural human languages, many of the conclusions about what it is to be true or to be a statement or a promise, if valid, are applicable to any language capable of producing truths, statements or promises (Searle, 1970).

The history of language philosophy in analytic practice can be traced back to advances in philosophy and tensions within conventional reports of the idea and its contents towards the end of the 19th century. As a result of these developments, there came about a change of sorts called the 'linguistics turns' in belief. However, its earlier programs went into serious troubles by mid-twentieth period, and important changes in direction came about as the result. The task of philosophy is to explain and help to understand the world we live in within the context of which the linguistic turn in 19th can be identified as a turning point vis-à-vis the philosophical understanding of the world, marking a progression from an epistemological dimension in modern times to a linguistics dimension in contemporary times. In a broad sense, it may be observed that the philosophy of language explores the relationship between words and the world. In particular, the philosophy of language research addresses issues not addressed by domains like linguistics or science. Some major issues in the philosophy of language include world thought, intentionality, reference and concepts. The topic that has received the greatest attention in the philosophy of language has been the nature of meaning and within this area of research two key considerations comprise sense and reference.

In the philosophy of language, the distinction between sense and reference was drawn by the German philosopher and mathematician Gottlob Frege in an 1892 paper titled 'On Sense and Reference'; German: "Über Sinn und Bedeutung"', delineating the two ways in which he believed a singular term could have meaning. In accordance with Frege, to say that a name 'has meaning' is to say that it refers to some actual entity. The sense of a proper name is grasped by everybody who is sufficiently familiar with the language or the totality of designations to which it belongs. However, this serves only to illuminate a single aspect of the reference based on the supposition that it has one. It was Frege's (1892) argument that a comprehensive knowledge of the reference would require us to be able to say immediately whether any given sense belongs to it. Frege's account of 'The present King of France is wise' came to be challenged 23 years later subsequent to the publication of 'On Sense and Reference' by Bertrand Russell in a 1905 article titled 'On denoting'. Russell did not describe the 'denoting phrases' in more specific ways, and remained unquestionable until the next forty years.

In 1950, Peter Strawson presented another approach in his article titled " On referring" to address the philiosophical debates proposed by Russell. Strawson was one of the leading members of what came to

be known as the ordinary language school of philosophy, a school of thought which argued that natural languages and language use were as valid subjects for philosophical investigations as the conventional formalized languages of logic and mathematics (Chapman, 2003). Before progressing to a discussion of the reference theory, the next section will present details of the relevant philosophical context to catalyze a better understanding of the former.

Relevant philosophical background

Understanding the philosophical background of language development is crucial to research in linguistics. As a matter of fact, many linguistic theories are based on selected philosophical theories and are the outcome of philosophical speculation. As noted earlier, the research direction in Western philosophy experienced a shift from epistemology to language theory at the end of 19th century, thus leading to the emergence of the philosophy of language, alternatively known as philosophical semantics. The latter takes language analysis and interpretation as the philosophical method of modern western philosophy, also encompassing British and American analytic philosophy as indicated by the eponymously named approaches. American analytic philosophy is an approach to the subjects and problems of philosophy which rely on detailed analysis and the interpretive philosophy of the European continent. British and American analytic philosophy regard language analysis as the main focus of research, comprising attention to the analysis of the nature and internal structure of language, clarification and determination of the meaning of words, and advancements of a plurality of new views on the theory of meaning. Russell's description theory and Strawson's contextual reference theory were formulated in this period. The two views are both related and different for they belonged to two distinguishable schools of analytic philosophy, namely logical positivism and the ordinary language school. By way of logical analysis, logical positivism advocates transforming various kinds of scientific propositions into direct experiences or propositions which can be observed directly so as to determine their meaning. Hence, logical positivism philosophers represented by Russell were predominantly focused on the truth value of a statement. If a statement could not be proved true or false, then the sentence was presumed not to make sense. On the other hand, Strawson was affiliated with the ordinary language school as part of which he advocated that philosophical research needed to change from logical demonstration to ordinary language and from static study to dynamic study. Strawson added that the concept of context needed to be introduced so as to overcome the one-sidedness of logical structure understanding.

The Referential Theory (RT)

The referential theory (RT) refers to the meaning of an expression which refers to, (Lyon, 1981). However, Alston (1967) argues that RT focuses on the proper nouns, for instance 'David' means David and as the given name 'David' so, therefore there is nothing problematic with the person who is named so. In some cases, it is argued that meaning relies on the expression of the speakers and that it depends on the understanding of that expression. For instance, Føllesdal et al (1990) propose the triangular relationship of expressions, referent and meaning. According to this triangle, the meaning of expression is derived from the referent which is reflected from the expressions of the speakers. The reference requires a context which may help the speakers to understand the utterance. In this connection, Afzaal et.al (2020a) argues in the following words;

"Context organizes the knowledge base as traceable units in a hierarchy to decide when the knowledge should be used. Context is comprised of a series of concepts that characterize the terms used to encode ontology knowledge and requirements which regulates the way these concepts are established. Therefore, contextual information is displayed as a block of reasoning. But the interpretation of the usage of certain knowledge in other situations is quite difficult.".

Whereas, the complete relationship of expression, meaning and referent is presented in the figure below:
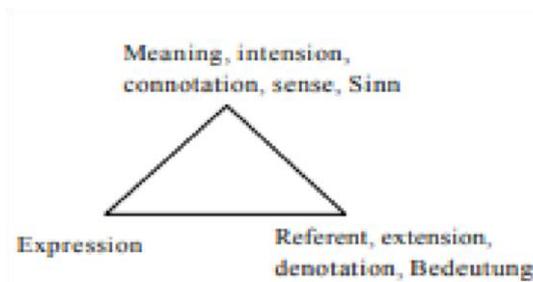
Figure 1 Ogden's Triangle

Figure 1 shows the relationship of expressions, referent, and meaning in the language.

Russell's Description Theory

Traditional reference theories (for example those proposed by Plato, Augustine, Milland and Wittgenstein (earlier period) regard the relationship between words and the things they refer to as meaning which is indicative of a relationship between language and non-linguistic things. Since things that words refer to are usually a set of similar things which constitutes the extension of the word, such a theory is also known as denotational theory. In his article titled *Descriptions,* Russell (1985) clarified the idea that sense needed to be understood as reference. He believed that there was a direct connection between language and reality. In other words, there was assumption of a direct referential relationship between language form and the things it represented, or more specifically, of a corresponding relationship between words and objects, with sentences believed to refer to more specific situations and events. According to Russellian theorization, the sense of words or sentences does not exist in reality, for which reason sense and reference are denotative of one and the same thing.

Another contribution of Russell is that he logically distinguishes proper names and descriptions, with the former referring to the proper names which have an actual referent with meaning depending on the referent and related to the facts. However, such proper names comprise a limited number in natural language. The descriptions refer to indefinite description words or definite description words which are just a description of the attributes of things. These words are abundant in natural language and make up

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the majority of words. As far as Russell is concerned, natural language is inaccurate and vague compared with logical language. Therefore, descriptions are often misunderstood as logical names. For him, expressions like the "so-and-so" is a definite description not a logical proper name as it cannot link back to a unique reference.

In addition, Russell laid emphasis on distinguishing which form can refer to which cannot. He pointed out that only logic proper nouns, demonstrative pronouns and a few limited description words have referential function and may become the subject of the subject-predicate structure in the logical sense and that such sentences make sense. Most description words used as subjects cannot constitute a real subject-predicate structure, and such sentences do not make any sense as what they correspond to does not exist, so there is no referential function. For example, in Russell's view, the sentence 'the king of France is wise' is meaningless if in the world or in some sense there does not exist anything like the king of France. As the representative of logical positivism, Russel studied description words from the perspective of logical pure theory which play a transitional role in connecting the preceding and the following. He revised the past theory and found many definite descriptions were not real reference in true sense. His postulations prompted later scholars such as Strawson to study definite descriptions from other aspects.

Strawson's Reference Theory

A member of ordinary language school, Strawson is known for his critique of Russell's description theory. His critique of logic proper noun promoted the study of definite description in Anglo-American philosophy. He emphasized the importance of language use in context which is contradicts claims by Frege, Russell and Carnap as the latter devoted themselves to philosophy of logic and regarded logical language as the object of philosophical research. The contentions of the ordinary language philosophy school represented by Strawson promoted the development of philosophy and branches of linguistics in America and Britain. In his paper "On Reference" which was published in the 1950s, Strawson lashed out at Russell's description theory and put forward a series of his own propositions on reference theory. Strawson's research represents the historical shift of language philosophy from semantics to pragmatics in reference theory.

Strawson's stance is well articulated in a later paper of significance wherein he observes that the distinction between identifying reference and uniquely existential assertion is something quite undeniable. The sense in which the existence of something answering to a definite description is used for the purpose of identifying reference and distinguished by an audience from anything else is presupposed and not asserted in an utterance containing such an expression. so used, stands absolutely firm, whether or not one opts for the view that radical failure of the presupposition would deprive the statement of a truth-value. It remains a decisive objection to the theory of Descriptions … that … it amounts to a denial of these undeniable distinctions (Strawson, 1964, p.85). This passage reveals important aspects of Strawson's approach to definite descriptions. He opposed philosophical theories of language such as those offered by Russell or Davidson, as he interpreted these to overestimate the degree to which ordinary language is akin to formal languages.

Strawson's view of ordinary language is distinct from that of Russell. Whereas Russell contended that ordinary language was imperfect and often led to confusion in logic thus prompting him to solve the

problem in semantics via language regulation, Strawson paid more attention to naturally occurring language since he was a philosopher in ordinary language. Furthermore, Wittgenstein's philosophical thought encapsulated in the idea that 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language' had great impact on him. As a consequence, Strawson attached more importance to exploring the basic structure of ordinary language. Strawson's interest in natural language use was apparent in his approach to the problem of denoting expressions which failed to refer, for instance 'the king of France' problem. His article commenced with the comment that 'we very commonly use expressions of certain kinds to mention or refer to some individual person' (Strawson, 1950, p.320), thus implying that it is the speaker rather than the expressions themselves which Strawson regarded as doing the referring. Strawson argued that ''mentioning' or 'referring' was not something an expression did; rather it was 'something that someone can use an expression to do' (Strawson, 1950, p.326). It is this very point which he suggested had been missed by 'logicians' when they discussed meaning.

Russell's logic proper noun in description theory is pure and accurate and corresponds to referents while Strawson's singular term is multiplex, naturalistic and does not refer to the object. Further, judgements are made only when people use it. Both of them belong to an artificial logic analysis method and ordinary language method. As can be seen from the aforementioned comparison, it is clear that confrontation of two analytical models is evident in the different explanations of the singular term, thus giving rise to the formation of two different referring theories.

In the last two parts of *On Reference*, Strawson pointed out that Russell had failed to distinguish the difference between referential usage and attributive usage. At the same time, Strawson expounded his point of view and discussed the function of singular term. Singular terms are defined as expressions that purport to denote or designate particular individual people, places, or other objects. They contrast with general terms (for example, 'car' or 'chair') which can apply to more than one thing. With regard to the function of a singular term, Strawson distinguishes it into referential usage and attributive usage. According to Strawson, the main purpose of using language is to state a fact, and in order to achieve that goal, two questions must be answered. The first is 'what are you talking about?', the second is 'what are you saying about it?'. The process of answering the first question is referential, and the process of answering the second question is attributive.

Strawson tried to restore the classification of subject and predicate in traditional grammar, but the referential usage and attributive usage are different from the classification of word class, and they are functional differences in the use of words. According to Strawson, Russell conflated the referential usage and the attributive usage of words, ascribing many phenomena belonging to the referential usage to the attributive usage. Strawson studied the use of words from the functional perspective of singular term which is undoubtedly an in-depth study of **reference theory**. His idea was refined by Donnellan. Donnellan referred to the process of determining the objects of a word as referential usage and the process of telling the object of a word as attributive usage. Donnellan offered support for Strawson's argument that Russell neglected the referential use of words and put too much emphasis on the attributive use of words. However, Donnellan also criticized Strawson, observing that 'we turn to a discussion of Strawson's theory instead, which should explain how a definite description is referential. But Strawson's theory goes too far in that direction. For definite descriptions have non-referential uses, even when they appear in the same sentence'. We think Donnellan's judgment is fair to some extent.

Another point is the problem of context. Strawson attached great importance to the referential function of testimony and the use of singular term is to use words in a unique referential way. In the referential process, 'in order to correctly apply words to a certain thing in its attributive use, all that is required is that the thing should belong to a certain kind and have certain characteristics'. And required principle in order to put the words in the deictic use correctly applied to something is what a word refers to should be in some relationship with the speaker and the context in which it is expressed.

Strawson argued that words differed significantly in at least three ways when used as references. Firstly, they differed in the degree of contextual dependence. Words like 'I', 'you', 'it' were most contextually dependent while in the example 'the author of Oliver Twist' such words are the least dependent. Secondly, they differed in the degree of 'descriptive meaning' whereby the proper noun lacked descriptive meaning, and the common noun presented the highest descriptive meaning. Thirdly, they differed in terms of 'general agreement' and 'special agreement' wherein correct referential use comprised the use of words regulated by general referential conventions such as pronouns and noun phrases. It was argued by Strawson that the proper use of attributions was mediated by specific referential conventions such as proper names. Strawson put reference in a certain context while Russell's description was purely abstract and disturbed by the context. According to Strawson,

'description is context-dependent', and there is only one reference in certain current context. Russell's mistake was to ignore the description word "human being" as a word used in specific language activities rather than as an abstract word independent of the body of people.

Strawson's development of Russell's reference theory

First of all, Strawson contended that there was a difference between words and words in use. He took pragmatic factors into **reference theory** consideration, asserting that reference is a pragmatic problem which should be put into primary place whereas the internal meaning of language was secondary. Starting with Strawson, the theory of meaning moved beyond logic, and the problem of language users emerged thereafter, Strawson's claims are regarded as a turning point in the study of the theory of meaning. Strawson proposed studying reference theory in specific context, endowing reference with determinacy in context, noting that object behaves differently in different contexts. In accordance with this, all empirical knowledge is relative to a certain cultural, historical, social and cognitive context, and subject to change with specific context. It is unnecessary and also impossible to eliminate the ambiguity of reference with the help of artificial logic language as only in specific context can reference obtain its valid meaning. Moreover, Strawson was the first thinker to raise the idea of existential presupposition which indicated that no matter when and what kind of words a person used, it could be assumed that the word had been used correctly from his perspective. In this way, the famous philosophical proposition that 'the king of France is wise' is solved for it stems from the presupposition that 'the king of France'does exist.

According to Russell's description theory, if an entity is the only object satisfying description A, then a is the reference of A. For instance, in sentence 'the incumbent Governor of California was once a body builder', the description 'the incumbent Governor of California' is only satisfied by Arnold Schwarzenegger who is the reference of the description. Russell's theory mainly focuses on static literal

meaning. His description theory is perfect from this perspective; however, he completely ignores words use problem and fails to consider the influence of context in reference. The aforementioned example was indeed correct during 2003-2011, whereas it is certainly incorrect currently as in the case of the description 'the incumbent Governor of California', Gavin Newsom does not have the qualities of a bodybuilder. That is to say, with the change of context (time, place, speaker's psychological state, social background, etc.), the reference of words will change and the truth value of sentences will be different.

Strawson criticized Russell for not distinguishing between words or sentences and the use of words or sentences. Russell attributed reference to the meaning of words, thus forming an isolated, static and monistic understanding of statements' truth value. In his opinion, words do not have the function of reference, and the meaning of words is to provide some general guidance for people when they use words to mention or refer to a specific object. Reference is what people do when they use words, and is the characteristics of words use. Strawson defines sense and reference and points out that meaning is in the category of words, thus belonging to semantics while reference, is in the category of words use, thus belonging to pragmatics. This is the bedrock of his claim for contradicting Russell's reference theory of meaning. To put it in another way, Russell argues that the meaning of a word can determine its reference and that meaning is a sufficient condition for the realization of reference which is included in the word. Strawson denies that the meaning of words is sufficient for determining the condition of reference and emphasizes that only in the process of using words combined with specific context via the meaning of words themselves can reference be realized.

Reference is a more complex and abundant pragmatic concept than semantics. According to Strawson, the same sentence will have different truth values due to the change of referent in different contexts.

According to Russell's description theory, the statement "the king of France is wise" is true if and only if there is an entity who is both the king and wise in France. If there is no king or there is a king but he is not wise, the statement is false in both cases as according to Russell's logical analysis method, any statement containing description can be analyzed as a conjunction containing an existential proposition. Thus in the case that the referential object of description did not exist, Russell set the true value of statement as false. This solution is based on binary logic. In other words, there are only two true and false values of a statement, namely true and false. However, no matter how influential this approach may have been in the development of computer science and analytical philosophy, it has always been contradictory to the use of ordinary language.

Strawson criticized Russell's treatment of the sentence when the reference of the description did not exist. He argued that it was not meaningless to say that 'the king of France is wise without using "the king of France" to mention anyone. The idea underlying this argument is that we do not say things of true value because we do not refer to anyone through the meaningful phrases of this particular use which is to say that the values on the true value of this statement is neither true nor false. Strawson contended that this usage was the false usage of statement and that the false use of a sentence is the false use of a word (referring to the use of words that did not mention anything). In fact, Strawson's use of threevalued logic instead of Russell's two-valued logic to evaluate the statement's description of the real world is an obvious step forward from the perspective of the practical application of language.

Strawson introduced the concept of 'presupposition' in order to explain the reasonability of adopting three-valued logic. He believed that people did not deduce an existential proposition like Russell via using statements containing descriptions. The existence of referential objects of descriptions is a necessary condition for propositions to take truth value. This presupposes the existence of such a referent, and only in the presence of such a referent can the proposition be true or false; otherwise it is called a referential failure, namely, false use of words, and the proposition is neither truth nor false.

Evaluation of reference theory

Strawson's development of reference theory has deepened understanding of language philosophy. His philosophical thought had a profound influence on pragmatics and systemic functional linguistics and has been widely recognized as the philosophical basis of pragmatics. It makes an important contribution to language philosophy to break through the barrier of semantics. Although serving as a link between the past and the future, it is worth pointing out that due to limitations of history, some of his views are immature and need to be developed further. For instance, Strawson mainly adopts an artificial language study method to develop ordinary philosophy of language and to explore the structure of ordinary language, thus inevitably ignoring the diversity of concepts and categories in ordinary language to some extent. According to Afzaal et.al (2020b) "the faults of the existing theories in a persuasive way, and his views broaden the scope of philosophy of meaning, yet no claim can be made that their views are a final solution to the problem regarding meaning, sense, and reference. Even his Causal Historical theory also lacks vastness to meet the problems convincingly."

Concluding Remarks

It is hard to provide a definitive or conclusive answer to a philosophical question. The ultimate purpose of philosophical study is not to solve philosophical problems but rather to clarify the nature of them, thereby enabling people to understand and reflect on philosophical problems continuously. Given the universal acknowledgement that philosophy is a science of doubt, skepticism and innovation are indispensable qualities of a philosopher. The way philosophers think about the same philosophical problem can diverge but that does not mean that previous philosophers are in error. Rather the case is that they just consider the question from different perspectives as evident in the case of reference theory. Furthermore, no scientific theory of humanistic research can be carried out without the participation of human beings, and language research and reference theory are no exception. Thus, in terms of Strawson's reference theory, while we can maintain the distinction between sentence and sentence use, presupposition and assertion, focusing on the important role of pragmatics or context to meaning, we can also abandon one of his specious terms, namely, the false use of statements which is closely linked the epistemological meaning of statements with their truth value. Such an approach allows us to avoid ambiguity in expression. This paper focused on Russell and Strawson's theories of meaning with a view to presenting a nuanced and well-reasoned comparative deconstruction of the underlying premises of each set of postulations.

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