



## ON THE DEFENSIBILITY OF RUSSELL'S THEORY OF NAMES<sup>i</sup>

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### Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to examine whether Bertrand Russell's logical arguments for language, called the theory of names, are defensible. Firstly, Russell's justification for logic and his claims about logic are discussed and examined. At the same time, this study examined how the philosophers who were against Russell criticized him and his theory of names that he generated in the light of his "On Denoting". Secondly, the symbolic logic examples in Russell's theory were also presented and Russell's arguments were examined in the light of these examples. Thus, benefiting from all these aspects, it is discussed whether Russell's theory of names is defensible in this study.

**Keywords:** theory of names, Russell, logic, on denoting, philosophy of language

### Öz:

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Bertrand Russell'ın isimler kuramı olarak adlandırılan dile ilişkin mantıksal argümanlarının savunulabilir olup olmadığını incelemektir. Bu bağlamda ilk olarak Russell'ın mantığın gerekçesi ve onun mantıkla ilgili iddiaları ele alınıp incelenmiştir. Bununla birlikte bu çalışma, Russell'a karşı çıkan filozofların onu ve onun "İfade Üzerine" adlı eserinde ele aldığı isimler kuramını nasıl eleştirdiğine de değinmiştir. İkinci olarak ise, Russell'ın teorisinde yer alan sembolik mantık örnekleri de ortaya konularak Russell'ın argümanları bu örnekler ışığında incelenmiştir. Böylece, tüm bu yönlerden yararlanılarak, bu çalışmada Russell'ın isimler kuramının savunulabilir olup olmadığı tartışılarak ortaya konmuştur.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** isimler kuramı, Russell, mantık, ifade üzerine, dil felsefesi

<sup>i</sup> RUSSELL'İN İSİMLER TEORİSİNİN SAVUNULABİLİRLİĞİ ÜZERİNE

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## 1. Introduction

Early 1900s, Bertrand Russell has led to the British revolt against idealism, and in this context, some people accept that he was the founder of the analytic philosophy with Wittgenstein, Frege, and Moore. The main concept of analytic philosophy is about [language](#) and the logical analysis of concepts about it. About the position of Russell in this concept, he locates in an empiricist attitude:

*“In spirit, style, and focus, analytic philosophy has strong ties to the tradition of [empiricism](#), which has characterized philosophy in Britain for some centuries, distinguishing it from the [rationalism](#) of Continental European philosophy. In [fact](#), the beginning of modern analytic philosophy is usually dated from the time when two of its major figures, [Bertrand Russell](#) (1872–1970) and [G.E. Moore](#) (1873–1958), rebelled against an antiempiricist [idealism](#) that had temporarily captured the English philosophical scene.”* (Donnellan and Stroll, 2017).

In Russell's views about empiric support in logic are against before him: *“Modern analytical empiricism... differs from that of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume by its incorporation of mathematics and its development of a powerful logical technique.”* (Russell, 1945: 834). The way to achieve solutions by Russell, he briefly suggests that:

*“It is thus able, in regard to certain problems, to achieve definite answers, which have the quality of science rather than of philosophy. It has the advantage, as compared with the philosophies of the system builders, of being able to tackle its problems one at a time, instead of having to invent at one stroke a block theory of the whole universe. Its methods, in this respect, resemble those of science. I have no doubt that, in so far as philosophical knowledge is possible, it is by such methods that it must be sought; I have also no doubt that, by these methods, many ancient problems are completely soluble.”* (Russell, 1945: 834).

In the light of this attitude, Russell's views took shape around “descriptivism”. As briefly, we can state what descriptivism concept is that: *“Descriptivism as a theory of how names refer is dead and gone, such a descriptivism is, to all appearances, alive and well. Or rather, a descendent of that doctrine is alive and well.”* (Kroon, 2004: 1). As we see, this descriptivist attitude can lead to construct a logical concept in terms of language, and in addition, Russell states his theory that:

*“We tend to believe the premises because we can see that their consequences are true, instead of believing the consequences because we know the premises to be true. But the inferring of premises from consequences is the essence of induction; thus, the method in investigating the principles of mathematics is really an inductive method, and is substantially the same as the method of discovering general laws in any other science.”* (Irvine, 2013: 17).

It is in this context that, the theory of Russell is essentially based on “give a name” concept by establishing links with objects as consequences. In this direction, Russell demonstrated his theory of names thoughts, and we can see his concepts especially in his “On Denoting”.

## 2. Russell's theory of names and “On Denoting”

Theory of names, that is a member of descriptivist theories, is logic-based theory about language by Russell, and the main attitude of this theory is about proposals for consequences such as objects. Before whether Russell's theory of names is at all defensible or not, it can be good idea to understand what descriptivist theory is according to Russell.

*“The Description Theory of names (a.k.a. descriptivism) says that each name N has the semantic value of some definite description ‘the F’. For instance, ‘Aristotle’ might have the semantic value of ‘the teacher of Alexander the Great’.” (Cumming, 2013: 7).*

In this context, as we see every name has an indicator, that refers to the semantic value, to match with their objects. Therefore, in this example, Aristotle can refer to be a teacher of Alexander the Great. This is the main factor of underlying Russell's theory, and we can see that how Russell describes giving name for objects in his “On Denoting”.

*“By a ‘denoting phrase’ I mean a phrase such as any one of the following: a man, some man, any man, every man, all men, the present King of England, the Present King of France, the centre of mass of the Solar System at the first instant of the twentieth century, the revolution of the earth round the sun, the revolution of the sun round the earth. Thus, a phrase is denoting solely in virtue of its form.” (Russell, 1905: 479).*

In this case, we have a phrase that gives definition, and an object that takes this meaning through its form. Basically, Russell's theory of names is based on this fact, moreover he processes this denoting theory in three cases:

- 1) A phrase may be denoting, and yet not denote anything “the present King of France”;
- 2) A phrase may denote one definite object “the present King of England” denotes a certain man;
- 3) A phrase may denote ambiguously “a man” denotes not many men, but an ambiguous man.

In this case, logical propositions may refer potential things, certain things, and ambiguous things. So, we can say that theory of names essentially includes these three descriptions. Furthermore, Russell states his theories through the forms of objects, for example we can think an apple that is red. We can gain colour of “red” through apple. It means that, this attitude refers an individual behaviour in terms of giving a name, in other words denoting. If we say that “apple is red”, for Russell, this does not demonstrate the apple itself:

*"... I am not acquainted with the apple itself, as misidentification is possible. My thought about the apple is therefore by description. But the description is not, for Russell, purely qualitative. Indeed, the description is individual-involving. In virtue of my visual experience of the apple, I am acquainted with a sense-datum caused by the apple."* (McKay and Nelson, 2010: 16).

As we see, there is a complication in terms of acquaintance situation. According to Russell, we can know some external objects such as *"the centre of mass of the Solar System"* through identification as description method, because of this example includes difficulties in terms of explain it by acquaintance situation just as we explain the colour of red by using a red apple. In this context, Russell claims that: *"The distinction between the things we have presentations of, and the things we only reach by means of denoting phrases... We know that a certain phrase denotes unambiguously, although we have no acquaintance with what it denotes."* (Russell, 1905: 479). In this case, our sense is an important supporter in terms of denoting act. Sometimes, we can use them during acquaintance, but for conditions like *"the centre of mass of the Solar System"*, we can solve this problem by accepting that *"All thinking has to start from acquaintance; but it succeeds in thinking 'about' many things with which we have no acquaintance."* (Russell, 1905: 480).

Before to show objections about Russell's theory, it can be useful to look at the logical propositions of Russell to better demonstrate the philosophical approach of Russell's theory about naming in "On Denoting":

*"I take the notion of the 'variable' as fundamental; I use "C (x)" to mean a proposition in which x is a constituent, where x, the variable, is essentially and wholly undetermined. Then we can consider the two notions "C(x) is always true" and "C(x) is sometimes true". Then everything and nothing and something (which are the most primitive of denoting phrases) are to be interpreted as follows:*

*C (everything) means "C(x) is always true";*

*C (nothing) means "'C(x) is false' is always true";*

*C (something) means "It is false that 'C (x) is false' is always true".*

*Here the notion "C (x) is always true" is taken as ultimate and indefinable, and the others are defined by means of it. Everything, nothing, and something, are not assumed to have any meaning in isolation, but a meaning is assigned to every proposition in which they occur."* (Russell, 1905: 480).

Therefore, as we see above, Russell basically displays such a description that is based on "true" notion and on the existence of objects. In Russell's theory, our start point is that "x" equals "always true", and then the process of give a proper name for objects can continue on this way. In this case, we should ask that, what proper names are, and what it means in Russell's theory. Basically, if we want to speak as properly, we should mention that there are some phrases, in other words referential terms for objects. Proper

names, as we see in Russell' proposition diagram above, include referring phrases. For example, if we consider these expressions such as "London", "David Beckham", and "Mediterranean Sea", there is no doubt that they refer as one particular city, one particular man, and one particular sea, respectively. In addition, Russell states that, ordinary proper name references don't include an individual thing. In other words, for instance, some horses, or all dogs don't supply an individual phrase.

Furthermore, in Russell's theory in *On Denoting*, our attitude towards some objects that refer to anything, in other words reference to something that does not exist, should be same with actual things. For example, "Sherlock Holmes", or "the Present King of France" refers no one in an actual life, but for Russell, they include possibility in terms of appearance in the actual life. Thus, we can consider that they can also refer as proper names. Essentially, this attitude takes serious criticism.

According to Russell, who was a classical descriptivist, the method of proper name should reflect "uniqueness". This means that, for every person as speakers, we attach some references with each name to every single object. However, sometimes we, as a speaker, can encounter this situation that is to give a name more than one person. According to Russell, because every individual person attaches directly a proper name for every object, there is no problem in terms of giving same names. In the light of the ordinary proper names, we can consider that difference between two same names in cognitive way. For example, I have a friend named David, but David in this expression does not refer to that David, the famous English football player. Thus, each proper name can get their own phrases through the speaker associates with that name.

Finally, in the light of all these information, we can demonstrate the theory of Russell by using a logic-based example;

*"According to Russell, an agent A can entertain a proposition P only if A is directly acquainted with all of P's constituents... Russell held that there are strong constraints on the things with which an agent can be directly acquainted. Russell held, however, that sentences containing ordinary proper names, like (1) and (2), can differ in cognitive significance. Thus, Russell held that ordinary proper names, like 'Mark Twain' and 'Samuel Clemens', are not logically proper names. They are, instead, abbreviations for definite descriptions. For a given agent, sentences (1) and (2) might be abbreviations for sentences (1d) and (2d).*

*1d: The author of Huckleberry Finn is the author of Huckleberry Finn.*

*2d: The author of Huckleberry Finn is the person who published U.S. Grant's autobiography.*

*These sentences do not express propositions that have Twain as a constituent. They instead express propositions whose constituents are the relation of authoring, the property of being a person, the relation of publishing, and so on. Thus, a rational agent can think that (1) is true and (2) is false." (Braun, 2007: 3).*

### 3. Objections to Russell's theory of names

As we see before, Russell's theory of names is processed in his thought about descriptions, and his theories criticized seriously by many philosophers. Especially, these critics appears due to his specific examples in *"On Denoting"*.

First of all; according to Russell, we should accept that *"the King of France is bald"* (Russell, 1905: 483) because of it has got a form, so it refers the King of France. Although this *"king"* doesn't refer to an actual man, due to its form, it can be accepted as the denotation. On the other hand, Strawson who is an English philosopher criticised Russell's explanation about denoting process in *"On Referring"*. According to Strawson, give a denoting to a person who does not exist, we cannot denote anything about the king. Therefore, if we consider again *"the King of France is bald"* example, denoting *"bald"* is not true. Also, it is not false. So, there is a problem in terms of bivalence, because to make a denotation for not exist things can cause a rejection of truth in logic. He states that *"'The king of France is wise'. No one would say that the sentence which had been uttered was meaningless. Everyone would agree that it was significant. But everyone knows that there is not at present a king of France."* (Strawson, 1950: 321). In this case, we should accept *"the King of France"* is an absurd thing.

In this context, if we accept the statement where the object does not exist, our denotations about this objects that do not exist just stay assumption level, so we cannot detect whether it happens or not. In this context, we cannot follow the truth condition in terms of denotations. If we look at the example of *"the king of France is wise"*, we should find that our subject can provide a correct conclusion. Strawson states his arguments against Russell by making a refutation of Russell's method;

*"'The king of France is wise' the sentence S. Then the first argument is as follows:*

*(1) The phrase, 'the king of France', is the subject of the sentence S.*

*Therefore (2) if S is a significant sentence, S is a sentence about the king of France.*

*But (3) if there in no sense exists a king of France, the sentence is not about anything, and hence not about the king of France.*

*Therefore (4) since S is significant, there must in some sense (in some world) exist (or subsist) the king of France.*

And the second argument is as follows:

*(1) If S is significant, it is either true or false.*

*(2) S is true if the king of France is wise and false if the king of France is not wise.*

*(3) But the statement that the king of France is wise and the statement that the king of France is not wise are alike true only if there is (in some sense, in some world) something which is the king of France.*

*Hence (4) since S is significant, there follows the same conclusion as before."* (Strawson, 1950: 321-322).

Secondly, we can mention that Kripke rejects the idea of Russell by using modal logic. When we consider the concepts of modal and modal logic, they mean respectively; *"A modal is an expression (like 'necessarily' or 'possibly') that is used to qualify the truth of a judgement. Modal logic is, strictly speaking, the study of the deductive behaviour of the expressions 'it is necessary that' and 'it is possible that'."* (Garson, 2014: 1). As briefly, according to modal logic is based on the use of the two expressions: *"necessarily"* and *"possibly"*. In this case, modal logic states that each proposition can give truth in every different possible world. However, Russell's thought was based on only one proposition and one object. So, we can say that the theory of names can be criticized due to its lack of support for possibly, and possible propositions in possible worlds.

For example, if we approach like Russell, we can say that *"football"* is a kind of sport game played with feet. However, for an American, this sport is known as *"soccer"*, moreover if we ask this American *"what is football"*, he will probably talk about a tough game played with hands, which is more like rugby than soccer in terms of the rules of the game. However, there is a logical problem if we consider Russell's theory. If we consider the approaches of Kripke, who states that a proper name refers to the same object in every possible world if this object exists, we can solve this problem by accepting the fact of possible worlds that accept there is not a one proposition for one definite object, as a start point.

Furthermore, in this case, we can consider the example of Aristotle. In Russell denotations, Aristotle is the teacher of Alexander the Great, so Aristotle refers that the teacher of Alexander the Great. However, at the same time Aristotle refers that a pupil of Plato. For Russell, Aristotle includes an invariable description, in other words rigid, so in *"Aristotle is the teacher of Alexander the Great"* example, if the premise of Aristotle carries a description, just as in this sentence, this designator should hook only *"the teacher of Alexander the Great"*. Therefore, it cannot refer more than one object because of the descriptivist theory about names.

On the other hand, according to Kripke, we can say that he claims that names are *"rigid designators"*, instead of descriptions. In this case, a proper name can refer to the same object that exists in a possible world. Moreover, descriptions can indicate different objects in terms of other possible worlds. For instance, the description *"the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great"* demonstrate Aristotle, but we don't know that whether a possible world has already existed or not, and it can include this description in terms of designating a different person. Therefore, we can refuse Russell's attitude about the description is rigid, because of the object describes itself depends on vary possible and changeable situations. For example, if we state that Aristotle is a rigid designator, there is no information about whether Aristotle who known *"teacher and pupil"* exists in any possible world or not, maybe he is not designated by the name *"Aristotle"*. In conclusion, as we see above, this description issue is open to criticism.

#### 4. Conclusion

A philosophy of logic issue, known as descriptivist theory of names, is open to debate since it was formed in the early years of 20th century. This theory was formed by Russell's explanations and examples in the light of logical propositions, but especially his logical theories that in "*On Denoting*" have been criticized and these critiques continue in Modern Philosophy. In this context, the question of Russell's theory of names is at all defensible seems not at all defensible, because it includes arguable theories in denotation concept such as being able to process for not existed things, like the Present King of France, and even though it refers actual things, like Aristotle, it refers only one object. Moreover, whether Aristotle is real person, as we know his in "*Aristotle*" name, or not is another controversial point in terms of truth within logical propositions. Therefore, rather than a general and ordinary criticism about all theory of name, we can accept that there is a criticism based on these specific points determined by critics such as Kripke and Strawson. In the light of their counter-ideas, descriptivist theory couldn't stay as Russell built, and it was replaced with judgements of modal logic, and the theory of possible worlds. Especially possible world theory, known as a proper name can refer to the same object that exists in a possible world, was successful against Russell's rigid subjects, in other words premises, about denotations in logic. In a nutshell, as a result of all these situations, it would be wrong to say that Russell's theory of names is at all defensible, because these theories were incorrect in terms of logical rules by other philosophers such as Kripke and Strawson.

#### Conflict of Interest Statement

The author whose name is listed immediately below certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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I began at Bingöl University, Department of Philosophy in the summer of 2017. I completed my master's degree in department of philosophy at Birkbeck, University of London in 2015 with a scholarship from the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey, and received my PhD from Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University, department of philosophy in 2020. My research interests are currently on philosophy of sports, philosophy of science, and topics of contemporary philosophy.



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