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An Evaluation on Language, Reference and Meaning Based on Bertrand Russell

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Abstract: This study is concerned with Bertrand Russell's ideas on reference and meaning, following a brief overview of the reception of his views on language. Meaning, which is one of the important problems of the philosophy of language, has been a subject that Russell has frequently emphasized. When we look at the philosophy of language from a semantic perspective, we are faced with three types of theories. These are: 'Referentialist', 'Mentalist' and 'Behaviorist' theories. In this context, by considering Russell's concept of reference, it was determined which theory he was closer to. In this sense, Russell's article "On Denoting" was utilized while trying to explain his theory. The aforementioned study explains expressions without references through Russell's paradox example of "The current King of France is bald". In this way, a discussion was carried out within the framework of Russell's views on language, meaning and logic.

Keywords: Russell, logic, language, meaning, reference.

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Introduction

Philosophy of language is the branch of philosophy that deals with language in the broadest sense. In a naive sense, it is actually all about language. Analytic philosophy, in particular, is largely an attempt to understand, analyze and explain what is expressed in language. On the other hand, disciplines such as epistemology, linguistics, logic, philosophy of mind, hermeneutics, and even mathematics have a common relationship with the philosophy of language in terms of dealing with language. The basic problems of the philosophy of language include issues such as meaning, the nature of meaning, the distinction between language and reference, and the origins of meaning.[1] In this respect, there have been many philosophers who have raised these fundamental problems in the course of the history of philosophy. In the twentieth century logical thought, especially the logical analyses put forward by Bertrand Russell have been important in solving these problems. First of all, by drawing the boundary of logic to the language-world context, Russell drew a boundary as its main task in the modern world.[2]

Russell thought that things in the world have various properties and exist in various relations with each other. The fact that things have properties and exist in several relations is a fact in his eyes. Indeed, for Russell, phenomena contain the complexity of the relations of things to each other. The basic assumption of Russell, who thought that analysis should therefore start from phenomena, was that phenomena, which have some components, should be complex and therefore suitable for analysis. Thinking that the complexity of phenomena coincides with the complexity of language, Russell argued that the purpose of the analysis is to

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[1]   İbrahim Bor, *Analitik Dil Felsefesinde Dil, Düşünce ve Anlam* (Ankara: Elis Yayınları, 2023), 10.

[2]   Mehmet Aydın, *Bilgi ve Tanım Bağlamında Bertrand Russell'ın Aristoteles Eleştirisi ve Mantık Anlayışı* (Ankara: Sonçağ Yayıncılık, 2024), 5.

ensure that we are convinced that every true sentence or proposition represents an accurate picture of the world or reality.[3] In this respect, Russell pointed to the power of language in showing reality by drawing attention to the unity of fact and proposition. At the same time, Russell mentioned a state of fact corresponding to each proposition for the emergence of meaning. When Russell speaks of a state of fact, he means that a certain thing has a certain quality or that it has a connection with something else.[4]

In "On Denoting", Russell mentions three basic semantic problems to test his theory of language. In this study, we will present Russell's views on the first problem, the problem of non-referential terms. The problem of non-referential terms, which Russell prioritizes in "On Denoting", has emerged in different forms in the history of philosophy, usually as an ontological problem. The term "the present king of France", which is the subject of the sentence "the present king of France is bald", has no counterpart in this world (i.e., no object to which it refers, or in short, no reference). In this case, according to Russell, we cannot say that the sentence makes a true claim. Assuming that every meaningful argument is either true or false, we would have to conclude that since this sentence is not true, it must be false. However, in that case, if we accept another rule of logic, "if a sentence is false, then its logical contradiction is true", then the sentence "the current king of France is not bald" must be true, which does not seem to be acceptable.[5] Russell's solution to this problem will be detailed in the study. Russell's example will also show us the situation that is indicative of language and logic. We will subject Russell's views on how language should be used within the boundaries of the world to an evaluation in terms of the philosophy of language.

1. Russell's Views on Language

In his long life of 98 years, Russell included language among

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[3]　Ahmet Cevizci, *Felsefenin Kısa Tarihi* (İstanbul: Say Yayınları, 2016), 553.

[4]　Bertrand Russell, *Mantıksal Atomculuk Felsefesi*, Tr. trans. Dilek Arlı Çil et al. (İstanbul: Alfa Yayınevi, 2015), 47.

[5]　İlhan İnan, *Dil Felsefesi* (Eskişehir: Anadolu Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2023), 57.

most of the subjects on which he had an opinion. In many of his works on language, he exhibited an understanding of language that can be described as "Behaviorist"[6] on the one hand, and on the other hand, he made evaluations that can be included in the "Referentialist"[7] doctrine of meaning. Russell's evaluations of language were especially shaped around the problems of logic and epistemology. Russell's understanding of language, which is an extension of his empiricism, lies at the intersection of the doctrine of "Logical Atomism" and the theory of "Specific Descriptions".

Russell first discussed the doctrine of logical atomism in a series of lectures in London in 1918. In his Philosophy of Logical Atomism, he placed his doctrine in a detailed theoretical framework. In fact, Russell's logical atomism, which was a doctrine aimed at eliminating some epistemological problems, was accepted as a common methodical framework by almost all logical positivist thinkers.[8]

The clarity and precision of a language, a normal language, depends on the correct use of words in sentences, on it being concretely clear what each word indicates. Analytic philosophers subjected idealist philosophy to this kind of analysis. They did not stop there, they started to look for the problems of philosophy in language. They developed new theories. The most important of these was logical atomism, a theory of meaning.[9] The important representative of this theory is Bertrand Russell.

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[6]   Behaviorist Theory: The doctrine of meaning advocated by authors such as Bloomfield and Morris, which attempts to explain meaning in terms of the reactions and behaviors that individuals in a conversation evoke in each other through the sentences they utter. This doctrine is also known as stimulus-response theory. Behaviorist theory paved the way for the production of utilitarian solutions by associating the problem of meaning with the behaviors of the parties involved in the communication activity. Atakan Altınörs, *Dil Felsefesi Sözlüğü* (İstanbul: Paradigma Yayınları, 2000), 20.

[7]   Referentialist Theory: The doctrine that attempts to explain the meaning of a sentence by its reference. This view, first articulated by Frege, has been adopted and defended by all neo-positivists. Altınörs, *Dil Felsefesi Sözlüğü*, 36.

[8]   Atakan Altınörs, *50 Soruda Dil Felsefesi* (İstanbul: Bilim ve Gelecek Kitaplığı, 2014), 169.

[9]   İhsan Turgut, *B. Russell, L. Wittgenstein ve Mantıksal Atomculuk* (İzmir: Karınca

According to Russell, logical atomism, in theory, if not in practice, is to get down to the last parts that make up the external world (reality) and to find the relationship between them through language. For this, it is necessary to create an ideal and perfect language. That is, there must be such a language that it is isomorphic to the external world. Each unit in the language must correspond exactly to what it represents. This is the language of the mathematician. Russell, originally a mathematician, is trying to show that the external world has a mathematical logic structure. This language is not vague like normal language, but clear and precise like mathematics. Every object in the external world will be called by a name. There will be no paradoxes in this language.[10] In this respect, Russell clarifies both the doctrine of knowledge and the issue of meaning by using logical language while putting forward the doctrine of atomism. In this way, Russell's views on the theory of logical atomism also reveal his views on language.

For Russell, language can be used to express emotions; or to influence the behavior of others. Both of these functions can be realized in pre-linguistic ways, though not necessarily in the most appropriate way. Animals, for example, can make cries of anguish, and babies, before they learn to speak, can express anger, discomfort, desire, happiness and many other emotions by crying and making different sounds. A sheepdog gives orders to its flock that are not very different from the orders given to it by the shepherd. There is no clear boundary between these sounds and speech. When a dentist hurts you, you may involuntarily moan; this reaction is not considered speech. But if the dentist says, "Let me know if I hurt you" and you make the same moaning sound afterward, this is now speech, and it is the kind of speech that is intended to convey information.[11]

Matbaası, 1989), 2.

10 Turgut, *B. Russell L. Wittgenstein ve Mantıksal Atomculuk,* 27-28.

11 Bertrand Russell, *İnsan Bilgisi: Kapsamı ve Sınırları,* Tr. trans. Dilek Kadıoğlu (İstanbul: Say Yayınları, 2021), 81-82.

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Russell calls the sound that expresses an emotion an "excla-mation". Orders and exclamations can be distinguished by the sounds animals make. When a hen tickles her chicks, she is giving them an order. But your moan at the dentist's examination sug-gests that it may be conveying an exclamation, and an outside ob-server cannot tell whether the exclamation is intended to convey information. Animals living in herds make certain noises when they find food and attract other members of the herd to it, but we cannot know whether these noises are merely expressions of joy or whether they are intended to indicate that 'the food is here.'"[12] Russell therefore speaks of two functions of language:

1. To express,

2. Ensure communication.

There is not much difference between the most primitive forms of language and other forms of behavior. One can express one's grief by sighing, saying "aah!" or "woe is me!". One can com-municate simply by pointing or saying "look". There is no neces-sary distinction between expression and communication; if we say "look" because we have seen a ghost, you can say it in a tone of voice that expresses fear. We don't only encounter this in the basic forms of language. In poetry and especially in songs, emo-tion and information are conveyed in the same way. Music can be thought of as a language in which emotion is separated from in-formation. A telephone directory provides information free of emotion. In everyday speech, however, both of these elements are often present."[13]

According to Russell, language has two intrinsically linked characteristics: First, it is social; second, it enables the expression of "thoughts" that make a person special. If language did not exist, our knowledge of the environment would be limited to what our senses show us and what our innate constitution offers us. But thanks to speech, we know what others are interested in, and we

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[12] Russell, *İnsan Bilgisi,* 82.

[13] Russell, *İnsan Bilgisi,* 83.

can also relate to things that are not accessible to the senses but only remembered. For example, when we see or hear something that the person next to us has not seen or heard, we can make them aware of it by saying "look" or "listen" or by making some gestures. But we cannot make another person aware that we saw a fox half an hour ago without using language. This is because the word "fox" is used for both a fox seen and a fox remembered. Our memories, which are private in themselves, are communicated to others through public sounds. Without language, communication would only be possible in the part of our lives that involves common sensations, and we would only be able to communicate with those who are in a position to share those sensations with us.[14]

At the same time, according to Russell, language is a means of expressing and communalizing our own experiences. A dog, for example, cannot relate to its own autobiography; no matter how effectively it barks, it cannot tell you that its family was poor but moral. But a human being can, by connecting "thoughts" with common sensations.[15] For Russell, then, language serves three purposes:

1. State the facts,

2. To express the speaker's position,

3. Change the state of the listener.

All these three goals are not always present. If I am alone and I get a thorn in my finger and I say "ah", only (2) is present. Sentences with commands, questions and requests have (2) and (3), but not (1). Lies contain (3) and in some sense (1) but not (2). In exclamatory expressions, where there is no listener or the listener is ignored, (1) and (2) are present, but (3) is absent. Words on their own can contain all three, as would happen if I found a dead body in the street and shouted "murder!".[16]

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[14] Russell, *İnsan Bilgisi,* 83-84.
[15] Russell, *İnsan Bilgisi,* 84.
[16] Bertrand Russell, *Anlam ve Doğruluk Üzerine,* Tr. trans. Ezgi Ovat (Ankara: İtalik Yayınevi, 2014), 239.

Language can fail in (1) and (3): the corpse I saw may have died a natural death, or my audience may be skeptical. In what way can language fail about (2)? The lies mentioned earlier cannot fail in this respect, because their purpose is not to express the speaker's position. But lies belong to the intellectual use of language; when language is spontaneous it does not lie and cannot fail to express the speaker's position. It may fail to convey what it expresses because of the differences between the speaker's and the listener's use of language, but from the speaker's point of view, it must express the spontaneous speech situation.[17]

Finally, it should be noted that Russell did not formulate a definitive philosophy of language. Although linguistic analysis is an integral part of his philosophical method, he did not develop anything approaching a comprehensive theory to explain how language works and how linguistic analysis should proceed. Of course, implicit in his writings are some basic assumptions and presuppositions about language and the way it functions, which can be regarded as the foundations of a philosophy of language. But Russell did not develop a theory of language in the sense that, for example, Wittgenstein did. For the most part, he merely left the basic assumptions underlying the practice of linguistic analysis unarticulated and apparently unexamined.[18]

2. Russell's Views on Reference and Meaning

From a semantic point of view, there are three types of theories in the philosophy of language. Referentialist, mentalist (idealist) and behaviorist theories. The basic assumption on which referentialist theories are based is that language is used for non-linguistic things. Language can only gain meaning by representing the existence of an ordered world. Mentalist / Idealist theories aim to ground meaning as mental content, while behavioral approaches, on the other hand, the effect of a linguistic acquisition

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[17]   Russell, *Anlam ve Doğruluk Üzerine,* 239.
[18]   Robert J. Clack, *Bertrand Russell's Philosophy of Language* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), 2.

on the interlocutor(s) and the reactions/behaviors given accordingly constitute the criterion of meaningfulness.[19] Among these theories, we can say that the referentialist approach is similar to Russell's concept of reference. In this sense, Russell, one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century, expresses his views on reference in his work "On Denoting".

By "submission idiom" Russell means such linguistic expressions as: A man, any man, all men, the present King of England, the present King of France, the rotation of the Earth around the Sun, the rotation of the Sun around the Earth, the center of mass of the Solar System at the First Moment of the Twentieth Century, etc. Accordingly, an idiom refers only through its form. Russell distinguishes this situation in three ways:

1. A phrase may refer. But it may still not refer to anything; for example, "The present King of France is bald."

2. A phrase may refer to a particular object, e.g. "The present King of England" refers to a particular man.

3. An expression can be used indefinitely, e.g. "one man" or "many men". As shown in the example, indefinite expressions can refer to an indefinite man or many men.[20]

While interpreting the above statements, Russell says that the second statement has both meaning and reference. However, he states that the first statement has meaning but no reference. As a matter of fact, Russell's aim in putting forward the theory of determinate descriptions is to show that statements or propositions like this one (1) which have no reference, instead of being considered meaningless, are formed in an obviously false form and never have a reference, in other words, are obviously false.[21] In

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[19] William P. Alston, *Philosophy of Language* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 16-20. Also see Bor, *Analitik Dil Felsefesinde Dil, Düşünce ve Anlam*, 10.

[20] Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting," *Mind, New Series* 56 (1905), 1. For Turkish translation, see, Bertrand Russell, "Gönderim Üzerine," Tr. trans. Alper Yavuz, *Felsefe Tartışmaları* 49 (2015), 55.

[21] Ebru Çimen, "Analitik Felsefe Açısından Anlam," *IX. Mantık Çalıştayı Kitabı*, ed. Vedat Kamer (İstanbul: Mantık Derneği Yayınları, 2019), 164.

this context, Russell, in his essay "On Denoting", resolves the example of "The King of France is bald", which has no reference, as follows.

When we adopt the view that referential expressions mean something and indicate a reference, the first difficulties we face are related to the cases in which the reference appears. In this sense, the expression "the King of England" refers to a real-life reference, the actual king of England. In other words, the reference of this expression refers to a person who exists. However, if we use the expression "The King of France is bald", we must be talking about a person who points to the "King of France" in form, and we must say that this expression has a reference. In reality, however, there is no king of France and France is not a kingly country. However, if "the King of England" has a meaning, it is conceivable that the French version of this phrase (the King of France) also has a meaning. But this proposition obviously has no reference. So, one might suppose that "The King of France is bald" must be absurd, but this proposition is not absurd; on the contrary, this proposition form, taken together with its reference, shows a self-evident falsehood. Therefore, it would be consistent to give this proposition a false valuation instead of an absurd valuation. Therefore, the proposition "The King of France is bald" is false.[22]

To explain terms without references, such as "the King of France is bald", Russell cites the following proposition: "If u is a class with only one member, then that one member is a member of u." We can also say: "If u is a unit class, then u is a u." This proposition must always be true because the conclusion is true whenever the hypothesis is true. However, "u" is a referential expression, and it is the reference, not the meaning, that is said to be a u. Accordingly, if u is not a unit class, "u" appears to refer to nothing. So, when u is not a unit class, our proposition starts to look absurd."[23]

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[22] Russell, "On Denoting," 483.
[23] Russell, "On Denoting," 483-84.

Later, Russell, in "On Denoting", in the proposition "The present King of France is bald", states that since the state of France is not ruled by a kingdom;

1) The sentence "The current King of France is bald" does not correspond to a true proposition. Because the subject of this sentence, the term "the current king of France", does not refer to a human being. From Russell's point of view, this statement follows from the laws of logic;

2) The negation "The current king of France is not bald" should have expressed a true proposition.[24]

For Russell, by the law of the impossibility of the third state, either "A is B" or "A is not B" must be true. Therefore, either "The current king of France is bald" or "The current king of France is not bald" must be true. But if we count bald things and then non-bald things, we cannot find the current king of France in either list.[25] As we will remember, according to Frege, the meaningfulness of a sentence did not require that the sentence be meaningful. In Frege's theory, since the reference of a sentence is one of two truth values, either true or false, there could be sentences that have meaning but are neither true nor false. In other words, according to Frege, although both sentences (1) and sentence (2) are meaningful, they do not express a true or false proposition. But Russell does not accept the solution of Frege. According to Russell, the meaning of a sentence and its reference are identical. Therefore, he concludes that all meaningful sentences must be either true or false. However, this leads to the problem we tried to explain above. In his theory of the solution of this problem, Russell expresses sentence (1) as follows:

 (1A) There is such an x that x is the only current king of France and x is bald. We can also explain this more as follows:

(1B) France currently has only one king and he is bald.

Since France does not currently have a king, the claim in the

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[24] İnan, *Dil Felsefesi*, 67.
[25] Russell, "On Denoting," 485.

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first part of this sentence that France currently has only one king is false. Therefore, the whole sentence is also false. Now let us analyze sentence (2), which seems to be the logical opposite of this sentence. Regarding the semantic analysis of such sentences, Russell identifies the issue of "double meaning", which no philosopher in the history of philosophy has ever addressed before. Syntactically, this sentence can be interpreted in two different ways:

(2A) There is such an x such that x is the only current king of France and x is not bald. More naturally, this sentence can be expressed as follows:

(2B) France currently has only one king and he is not bald.

In this interpretation, we first claim that France currently has a king and then say that he is not bald. That is, logically, we have not applied the omission conjunction to the whole sentence, but only to the predicate baldness. On the other hand, we can apply the omission conjunction to the whole sentence:

(2C) It is not that: The current king of France is bald.

Finally, if we analyze sentence (2C), we will obtain the following sentence (2D).

(2D) There is no x such that x is the only current king of France and x is bald.

The formal representation of (2D) given below is expressed as follows: $\exists x$ ((x is the current king of France & $\forall y$ (yy is the current king of France $\rightarrow yy = x$)) & x is bald).[26]

Thus, sentence (2D) would express a judgment that takes the value true. However, the other interpretation (2B) expresses a false judgment. In short, a true proposition will be true if the omission conjunction excludes the whole clause, and a false proposition will be false if it excludes only the predicate. In this way, we are able to explain how both (1) and (2) can be false without violating any laws of logic. The reason why (2) is double-meaningful

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[26] Hans-Johann Glock, *Analitik Felsefe Nedir?*, Tr. trans. Osman Baran Kaplan (İstanbul: Albaraka Yayınları, 2008), 69.

is purely syntactic: it has to do with how we interpret the sentence structure. Based on the syntactic polysemy he detected in sentence (2), Russell solves the problem of non-referential terms with the help of the Theory of Descriptions. According to him, sentence (1) expresses a false proposition, whereas sentence (2) expresses a true proposition when we put the omission at the beginning of the sentence. In this way, no logical law is violated. On the other hand, we do not compromise the principle that every meaningful sentence says something true or false.[27]

According to Russell, meaning can be determined by the reference relation established with an extra-linguistic reality. Because the main function of language is to organize our relations with the world. We establish our first relationship with reality through language. We penetrate the world of being and the structure of the world through language. Thus, every sentence we construct has a proposition. There is a reference pointed to by the language that will describe the phenomena in the external world. According to Russell, the meaning of sentences depends on the existence of propositions. A sentence is meaningful if the proposition points to a reference, that is, a state of fact. Propositions are what try to reflect reality. The situation that determines the emergence of meaning is that propositions and facts correspond to each other.

According to Russell, every statement that has meaning has a reference. According to him, words, namely nouns, demonstrative pronouns, adjectives, general concepts, and verbs also have a reference. Words with references are not ideas, but terms; they are an extra-linguistic reality. The reason why words, i.e. terms, all have a meaning is that they are symbols that point to something other than themselves.[28]

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[27] Russell, "On Denoting," 490. Also see, İnan, *Dil Felsefesi,* 67-68.
[28] Zeki Özcan, *Dil Felsefesi I: Mantıkçı Paradigma* (Bursa: Sentez Yayıncılık, 2014), 171-82.

Conclusion

There is a connection between the reality of language and the reality of facts in Russell's world of thought. The indicator of language and logic points to what is real. Language represents the reality of facts while determining the boundaries of the world. Russell has analyzed some misuses that seem to be in the context of facts within the framework of his own logical method. He especially does not accept propositions that do not have a reference, that is, do not correspond to a factual situation, such as "The Present King of France is Bald" as true. He has drawn attention to the fact that such propositions or sentences have no meaning. Such expressions may be a situation that the other person or addressee can accept in everyday language. However, for Russell, such propositions are meaningless and absurd. According to Russell, logic reveals such situations, that is, the handicaps or fallacies of language. He analyzes the resolution of these paradoxes. He tries to improve and cure propositions that do not have a reference through logic. According to him, if logic is going to say something is true or false, it should look at whether it is a representation of language. Otherwise, the thing that has no representation should not be understood as the subject of logic but as a situation that exceeds this logic.

According to Russell, what expresses factual reality is a reference. Propositions, on the other hand, are related to facts and reveal meaning. What Russell and twentieth-century philosophers drew attention to is this: In the Classical and Middle Ages, logic was used more on theological, that is, purely mental concepts that had no representation, and they constructed a language accordingly. However, according to Russell, this situation distanced us from the real function of logic. According to him, logic is a discipline that has its own representation and can be proven on a factual level. At the same time, logic is a science that presents itself to experimentation in a scientific sense. Therefore, he saw logic as a tool for understanding the world and resolving the paradoxes of language.

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