

# An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth

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November 13–25, 2012

What relation does language have to reality? To the naive man in the street, there is no real problem, but to a philosopher there is a major one. In fact the closer he scrutinizes the relationship the more likely he is to conclude that there is language and that we cannot go beyond language, and reality is something that is ultimately defined by language, and does not make sense without it. This is the trap that logical positivism fell into, and Russell remarks sarcastically that it is ironic that a movement that set out to be ultra-empiristic eventually found itself in a fruitless idealistic 'cul de sac', far worse than the provocative idealism of Berkeley, a standpoint which we may reject but cannot ignore. Modern post-modernists also tend to think of reality as a social construct, and thus ultimately grounded in language, which provides a kind of collective unconsciousness in the sense of Jung. Of this Russell will have nothing. He believes, naively or not, in an outside reality that impinges on us. This does not mean that the world is simply as it appears, but only that the world is outside us and it consists of facts and events (Russell does not want to use the word 'things', but that seems more a linguistic idiosyncrasy than a deep ideological stand). As to language there are two kinds of words, according to Russell, there are basic words given by ostensive definitions, and words given by dictionary definitions. The latter are in a sense superfluous, although of course, like all 'macros' very convenient. The argument for this division is very simple, as in a dictionary there can be no infinite regress unless it is circular. Some words simply have direct relations to events in the real world and the association between word and event is a matter of habit. Other words only occur once there is a language. Such words are 'not' and the usual logic connectives, which mean nothing by themselves but are forced upon us once we have a language and formulate thoughts and expressions in it. Thus language itself is part of reality, and as such it furnishes material for empirical study. To assert otherwise would be absurd. Thus Russell claims that there is a hierarchy of language. The most basic one consists only of ostensively defined words. But such a language is limited, it cannot speak about itself, in particular it cannot speak about its sentences being meaningful or true, this can only be done in a metalanguage. Thus to every language there is a metalanguage, giving us an infinite hierarchy, reminiscent of Russell's theory of types. He is very pleased with this conception of language, connections as it has with Tarski's definition of truth. However, he does not go one step further. What about the union of all the languages? Will this language not be its own meta-language? Given any sentence, it will only contain a finite number of words, hence belong to a language of finite degree, and hence we can talk about any such sentence, using the one higher degree. Maybe this is what ordinary human language is all about, the union of all possible formal languages. Ordinary human language is very flexible and very imprecise, and thus it can talk about itself with no obvious logical pitfalls. Maybe this very vagueness is a consequence of the infinite union, in which sentences lie at very many different levels, and thus allow a multiplicity of interpretations, which is the source

of all wordplay, delightful as well as tiresome. But let us leave this digression aside as a mere distraction.

Russell wants to anchor language into reality. To do so he proposes that language should be analyzed into its constituents parts, and hence he proposes the theory of atomicity, in which sentences are in general molecular. To go from the atomic parts to the whole is a purely syntactic task, the crux of the matter is how to relate the atomic bits. Now, Russell makes a distinction between sentences and propositions. Sentences are different from words, although single words can serve as sentences. A sentence is on the face of it only a succession of words, and as such it is an inert object, no different from a thing, although Russell does not use that terminology. But a sentence has a meaning, in other words there is a thought behind it. Russell speaks about significance. The significance of a sentence he refers to as the proposition. A proposition can be phrased in many different ways, what matters is not the particular form, but the underlying meaning. This is of course very Platonic. We cannot codify a proposition, we are forced to present it as a sentence. There is in particular no particular sentence which is the real prototype for the proposition. Propositions are not sentences, they are more abstract. They cannot be identified with marks on papers, as sentences can. Many people misunderstand Platonism, and believe that Platon thought of canonical representatives. (Maybe Platon misunderstood himself, but that is a historical question of little principal interest.) Thus unlike sentences they are not material things, but dwell in some Platonic realm. What is this realm? Most philosophers would say in the minds of men. But this brings problems of its own, how can we speak about a common mind, as indicated above, apart from a collection of individual minds? Now propositions may be true or false, and they may express and indicate. The problem is that there are meaningless sentences to which we cannot assign any significance, and hence no proposition. It is easy to concoct sentences that satisfy all the grammatical constraints which we have formulated, but make no sense at all. Russell gives an example, and Chomsky has given another notorious one for similar if different purposes later on. Is there some kind of syntax which would rule out non-significant sentences just as the codified rules of grammar does away with the ungrammatical? The logical positivists, such as Carnap, with whom Russell seems to feel the greatest affinity and sympathy among the members of the group, propose that the meaning of a sentence lies in the ways it can be verified. Russell is not at all happy with such a stratagem pointing out various problems it leads to. There are of course many meaningful statements which we cannot in any way verify, such as historical events which have not left any traces. One may weaken the condition to verifiable in principle, but where to draw the line? Can we imagine traveling into the past and inspect an event? We can of course, but if given enough latitude would be not be able to make even meaningless sentences meaningful if we are not careful. Popper, who to his lasting dismay was thought of as a logical positivist, famously took a different tack. A sentence is scientific if it can be falsified. If not, it does not mean that it is meaningless, only that it does not belong to science. It also means that science grows, and with it, procedures of falsification may appear, which were not originally available. Thus some questions may be premature for a scientific investigation. This is truly a pragmatic point of view, in the spirit maybe of what the logical positivists sought, but did not find.

Russell makes, as to be expected, a distinction between 'proper names' and more

general words. A proper name pertains to something very specific and unique and to which one points. 'This' is of course a proper name, when you point to something. There are so many things that require proper names that we need to recycle them, but the assignment of a proper name is always clear by the context, which often transcends the linguistic situation. We have no problem with proper names such as John, we know that there is no such thing as Johnness, and although we can group together all the people assigned the proper name John in one big (but finite set), we understand that this is a rather artificial construction. Words on the other hand are universals. The word 'dog' does not specify any specific dog, but dogs 'in general'. It refers to 'dogness' or should we write 'caninity'? In other words a universal. Do universals exist outside language? Russell thinks so, he considers himself logically forced to do believe so. However, from a biological point of view there is no such thing as a well-defined notion of dog, at least not as an equivalence class closed under parental relation. This is the essence of evolution. Yet, of course, if we leave the realm of strict logic, there is no real problem. People tend to recognize a dog when they encounter one. There are a variety of predicates that allows you to make the classification. But once again, there is no prototype of a dog, just as there is no prototype of a sentence. If you start to look closer into the meaning of a sentence, you will discover a similar vagueness. Once you enter the real non-linguistic world, things simply gets messy. Thus mathematics offers a haven. But once again this is a distraction from the main thrust of the book.

Russell makes a lot out of percepts. Here he sees a point where the real world interfaces with the word. Percepts are formed from perceptions. They form facts, directly known to you by your perceptions. They are unique events and as such different percepts do not interact with each other, in particular they do not contradict each other. The belief in a percept may sound naive, on the other hand without some similar concepts, there is no way of making a sensible and logical connection between language and empirical reality. Percepts are empirical pieces, and as such they are only known to individuals. There is no such thing as a collective percept. When you talk about connecting percepts, you go beyond the notion of percepts. Connections between percepts cannot be perceived, they can only be hypothesized. Such notions belong to scientific knowledge, and those can only be confirmed or contradicted by individual percepts. General proposition using variables, bound either by 'some' or 'all' go beyond percepts. The existential ones can be verified by suitable individual percepts, but those verifiers are not unique. They cannot be perceived as such, except in memory. In memory there is a vagueness, which is absent in a direct perception. In memory you can remember that the book will be somewhere in the room, without being able to pinpoint its exact location. A perception would not be capable of claiming such a state of affairs, without being specific of the location. Memories are different than perceptions, not as direct, not as reliable, yet without memory there will be no epistemology. Just as we in practice need to rely on testimony, at least provisionally, we also have to rely on our memories, as well as principles of inference, which furthermore cannot be perceptually verified.

Truth is compliance with the facts. As Popper notes, Tarski's definition of truth is not a criterion for truth, such criteria do simply not exist. Thus truth is beyond belief, as Popper emphasizes, just as Russell does, if not as explicitly. Truth is independent of the

believer, belief is not. Knowledge is tied up with belief, but knowledge is not the same as truth. You may claim that something is true for irrelevant reasons, such as pure caprice. But this does not mean that you know it. Knowledge has to do with a knower, truth is independent of a knower. Verification and knowledge are very much related. Verification is different from truth. Something may very well be true, even if you have no way of verifying it, or its negation. Thus when it comes to verification, there is no excluded middle, in other words, there is the middle ground. In terms of verifications double negations are not positives. Just because you cannot verify the negation of a statement, does not mean that the statement is verifiable. However, when it comes to truth, a more metaphysical notion than verifiability, which is more technical and pragmatic, there is no middle ground. The excluded middle holds, as Russell is adamant to point out. Things are true or not, there is nothing in between. This is because truth is objective, it exists outside us. Belief does not, nor does verification,

Knowledge is ultimately individual. There may be inert knowledge floating around in a collective, but it only comes to life, when becoming individualized. Just as Art only comes to the fore when it is individually experienced. Russell is fond of the mathematical inductive argument leading to infinite regresses. If knowledge would be only social, there would be no way knowledge could be individually assessed, because if you ask people about what is up, what they say you cannot judge, but need to ask other people to interpret, and their interpretations cannot reach you without more social intermediaries. And so *ad infinitum*. And Russell pokes malicious fun at logical positivists as Neurath. One may argue that he makes things a little bit too easy for himself, because any logical discourse on language when taken literally becomes absurd. Ultimately any reason by language is through metaphors, and metaphors should never be taken literally, then they simply become silly.

Russell travels a long and systematic way to put the relation between language and reality on a firm basis. This is in accordance with his basic instincts. However, as one can set out at the beginning. There are no water-tight arguments against solipsism, the unreality of the external world, the non-existence of other minds, the belief that our reality is just a dream, out of which we will wake up into another reality, which in its turn is a dream of the same provisional kind<sup>1</sup>. All of those fantastic hypothesis can never be refuted, thus in particular an ambition such as that of Russell will be riddled with holes, and liable to be ridiculed and parodied, just as he ridicules and parodies the arguments of his own opponents. (It is another matter that we may route for him in his efforts to do so, grateful as we are for such a clever ally.) But this does not make the journey pointless, on the road we do encounter a lot of interesting observations, which provide food for thought.

Russell's exposition is initially rather tedious. Systematic to the point of pedantic, only at the end does it pick up momentum and quickens its pace, finally becoming interesting.

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<sup>1</sup> The Swedish writer Hjalmar Söderberg wrote a short story on that theme at the turn of century. It was called 'The dream of eternity'