Notes on Reference and the Theory of Descriptions

I. The quantifier notation

Some students had a problem understanding the quantifier notation. It is in fact very easy. There are two quantifiers called the existential quantifier (\(\exists x\)), read “there is an x such that…” and the universal quantifier (\(\forall x\)), read “for every x, x is such that…” The advantage to this notation is that it is more precise than ordinary language and eliminates both ambiguities of scope and reference. So for example, the sentence “Every boy loves some girl” is ambiguous between, roughly, “There is one girl who is very popular because everybody loves her” and “Each boy loves a some girl or other.” This is made clear as follows:

\((\exists x)(Gx \& (\forall y)(By \rightarrow Lyx))\)

In English: there exists an x such that x is a girl and for every y that is a boy, that y loves x.

\((\forall y)(By \rightarrow (\exists x)(Gx \& Lyx))\)

In English: for all y such that y is a boy, there exists an x such that x is a girl and y loves x.

I don’t want you to have any problems with Russell. The theory of definite descriptions says:

\((\exists x)(Kx \& (\forall y)(Ky \rightarrow y=x) \& Bx)\)

In English: There is an x such that x is king of France and for all y, if y is king of France, then y is identical with x and x is bald.

Notice that the expression “the king of France” simply disappears. There is no sense-reference distinction as in Frege.

II. External and internal negation.

We have to distinguish between “It is not the case that the King of France is bald” and “The King of France is not bald” Between:

\(\neg(\exists x)(Kx \& (\forall y)(Ky \rightarrow y=x) \& Bx)\)

And

\((\exists x)(Kx \& (\forall y)(Ky \rightarrow y=x) \& \neg Bx)\)

This is a special case of the distinction between primary and secondary occurrence of the definite description. Why?
III. Strawson's objections.

Russell confuses *presupposing* the existence of an object with *asserting* its existence. He does this because he fails to distinguish between properties of the sentence and properties of the use of the sentence to make a statement. The sentence is meaningful but it makes no sense to say of the sentence that it is true or false. It is only of the statement that one can say that it is true or false, but in this case the statement is not successfully made because one of its presuppositions fails. So we should say, like Frege fact that statement is neither true nor false.

IV. Extending the objection.

You can see the power of Strawson’s objection if you extend the analysis to speech acts other than assertions. What can we say about an utterance of "take this book to the King of France"? We either have to say that they hearer is being ordered to bring the King of France into existence (secondary occurrence) or that the speaker performs two speech acts: he asserts the unique existence of the King of France (primary occurrence) and then orders the hearer to take the book to him. Neither of these seems plausible. If someone says to me "take this book to the King of France" I don't say "what you say is false" but rather that no order has been successfully given because one of the presuppositions of a successful order failed.

V. Troubles with Strawson’s account.

Strawson makes it look as if reference failure is just a condition on a type of speech act. But then he defines “presupposition” in a way that makes it look truth functional:

A proposition p presupposes a proposition q just in case for p to be either true or false q must be true. But that leads to trouble:

1. It is neither true nor false that the King of France is bald

But that is equivalent to

2. It is not true that the King of France is bald and it is not false that the King of France is bald.

But that immediately implies

3. It is not true that the King of France is bald.

And on Strawson's account, 3. is a true statement. But not for Frege. For Frege, 3 lacks the truth value. Why? Strawson can't have it both ways. Treat the presupposition all as a condition on the successful performance of the speech act or treat it as a truth functional feature of propositional content.

IV. What is going on here? What is the way out?