Russellians can have a no proposition view of empty names[*]

Thomas Hodgson[†]

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Abstract

Russellians can have a no proposition view of empty names. I will defend this theory against the problem of meaningfulness, and show that the theory is in general well motivated. My solution to the problem of meaningfulness is that speakers' judgements about meaningfulness are tracking grammaticality, and not propositional content.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Russellianism

Some names denote objects, and some don't; the latter are *empty names*. This is a familiar observation, but it has deep philosophical consequences. Some otherwise attractive theories of mental and linguistic content seem to cope badly with empty names. The family of views I have in mind is *Russellianism.* My project in this paper is to articulate and defend a view about empty names that is consistent with Russellianism in its most austere form. Because I am trying to neutralise a particular objection to Russellianism, that it cannot cope with empty names, I won't be arguing directly for Russellianism. I don't think that empty names are the only important objection to Russellianism, but here I won't be concerned with any others.[1]

The austere form of Russellianism that I endorse can be defined by the following two theses.[2]

Mill The content of a proper name, if it has one, is its referent.

Russell The content of a declarative sentence, if it has one, is a structured proposition; its constituents are the contents of the constituents of the sentence.

I will assume that there are such things as propositions, and that they can in principle be the contents of sentences. I will also assume that the claim that propositions have constituents can be made sense of, although I won't give a theory of what that amounts to; see Keller (2013) for the problems that this idea brings with it. For simplicity I will assume that a proposition can be perspicuously represented as an ordered sequence of objects and properties: the proposition that Neptune is a planet can be represented as ⟨Neptune, being-a-planet⟩. This is orthodox Russellianism, as developed in e.g. Soames (1987).[3]

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[1]Contemporary Russellianism has been inspired by ideas from Bertrand Russell Russell (1938); the principle I label *Russell* is closest to these ideas, the one I label *Mill* reflects a view of names inspired by John Stuart Mill (Mill 1889).

[2]These formulations are very similar to those in Braun (1993, 450).

[3]Problems about the metaphysics of propositions will need to be resolved eventually; for a theory that is Russellian see King (2007), and for related views and discussion see Soames

1.2 Empty names

I will now describe the problem for Russellian theories, following David M. Braun's presentation (Braun 1993, 2005). I will assume that there are in fact empty names, and I will use one of the standard examples: 'Vulcan'. I take it that 'Vulcan' is an empty name but nothing turns on this choice of example. The fundamental problem is that according to Mill the content of 'Vulcan' must be an object that is the referent of 'Vulcan'. But there isn't such an object: 'Vulcan' doesn't have a referent. So, by Mill, 'Vulcan' doesn't have a content. By Russell, sentence (1) has as its content a proposition with the content of 'Vulcan' as one of its constituents.

(1) Vulcan is a planet.

But, by Mill, there is nothing that is the content of 'Vulcan', so there is no proposition that has the content of 'Vulcan' as one of its constituents. So, by Russell (1) cannot have a content.

This is not in itself a refutation of Russellianism: Mill and Russell do not entail that 'Vulcan' or (1) have contents. Russellianism is a view about the sorts of contents they would have if they had them. A stronger view, which omitted the qualification, is possible and would be directly refuted by the existence of empty names. But this is not the view I am defending, nor is it the one that Braun formulates. I don't recommend that Russellians adopt the stronger view, for obvious reasons.

If the problem of empty names doesn't refute Russellianism why is it a problem at all? Why not simply endorse the consequence that 'Vulcan' and (1) lack contents? That, essentially, is the response I advocate in this paper. I propose that the Russellian can and should endorse what Braun calls the 'no proposition view' (Braun 1993, 456). It is, after all, a consequence of the core Russellian position. The view I advocate is influenced by Evans (1982) and Kripke (2013); it is intended as a way to frame a core insight of these works in a modern neo-Russellian setting.

As will emerge in section 2 and section 3, the two most pressing problems for the view I want to defend are to do with the truth or otherwise of sentences such as (1) and their meaningfulness. I will argue that the Russellian can and should accept that no sentence containing an empty name has a truth value; although that of course does not prevent that sentence being used to convey something true. The main substance of this paper is my original response to the second issue. I will accept that speakers do judge sentences such as (1) to be meaningful. I conclude from this that such speakers' judgements are tracking some property other than having a propositional semantic content. The property I identify as the target of these speakers' judgements is grammaticality in a syntactician's sense. Adopting this view makes the way clear for the Russellian to adopt the no proposition response to the problem of empty names.

(2010); Hanks (2011); King, Soames, and Speaks (2014); Hanks (2015); Soames (2015).

2 The no proposition view

2.1 Doing without propositions

I claim that Russellians ought to accept that sentences containing empty names do not express propositions. There are some things that a theory of this sort cannot do. My response will be to argue that a good theory does not need to do those things. The problem of meaningfulness is my main focus in this paper, because I think it is a problem that requires a substantive solution and that the Russellian can provide one.

Braun introduces the problem like this:

> Suppose 'Vulcan does not exist' fails to express a proposition. Then it seems to follow that it is meaningless. And therefore it is nonsense. (Braun 1993, 451)

Braun uses the terms 'nonsense' and 'meaningfulness' here, but I don't think that he is trying to mark an important distinction with them. In Braun (2005) he uses different terminology, and makes it clear with his use of the example 'Sherlock Holmes is a detective' that negative existentials are an inessential part of the problem.[4]

> The next objection is *The Problem of Meaningfulness for Sentences.* If Millianism is true, then the names 'Vulcan' and 'Sherlock Holmes' have no semantic content. If a name lacks semantic content, then sentences in which the name appears also lack semantic content. Therefore, if Millianism is true, then sentences containing 'Vulcan' or 'Sherlock Holmes' have no semantic content. If a sentence has no semantic content, then ordinary speakers will judge that it is not meaningful. But ordinary speakers think that many sentences containing these names are meaningful, for instance, the sentences 'Vulcan does not exist' and 'Sherlock Holmes is a detective'. So it seems, once again, that Millianism is incorrect. (Braun 2005, 597) (emphasis in original)

An important feature of this formulation is that the judgements of ordinary speakers are a key part of the objection to Russellianism. The objection is not that these sentences must have propositions as semantic contents but that, if they do not, then the judgements of speakers that they are meaningful will be left unexplained. This way of putting the problem, described there as 'The Intuition Problem', is also found in Reimer (2001b, 491).[5] That speakers do make these judgements is, of course, an empirical claim which could be investigated by psychologists and might turn out to be mistaken or at least incomplete. I share Braun and Marga Reimer's assessment that these are the judgements speakers make and that they ought to be accommodated.

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[4] Braun uses 'Millianism' to refer to Russellianism (Mill & Russell).

[5] I use the term 'judgement' rather than 'intuition' in my own presentation.

2.2 Meaningfulness

2.2.1 Names

I propose that the Russellian should accept the claim that 'Vulcan' does not have a content. On the Russellian theory this follows immediately from the fact that 'Vulcan' is empty. So, the issue that arises is whether there is any reason to think that this is an objectionable result.

The idea would be that 'Vulcan' must have a content because only then can something that the theory needs to explain be explained. The task for someone developing this objection is to identify this missing explanandum. For the moment I will consider only properties that the name might have in isolation; properties of sentences containing the name will be discussed in subsubsection 2.2.2.

One possibility is that names cannot be individuated except in terms of referents. This might be thought to follow from some theories of the identity of names. For example, those theories that appeal to chains of transmission going back to the initial baptism of some object, see Cumming (2016) for a survey and references. Names would then be individuated by the object (and chain of transmission), but this principle of individuation cannot be applied to an empty name.

Whatever the merits of such a view it cannot be used as the basis of an objection to Russellianism because it effectively rejects the possibility of empty names; it does so in a way that is reminiscent of Russell's own solution to the problem i.e. by denying that a name can enter the language without a form of acquaintance with a referent (Russell 1911). The theoretical role of acquaintance in Russell's theory and its neo-Russellian descendants, who are more liberal about what is needed for acquaintance, is complex. Furthermore, some philosophers who are attracted to the idea of individuating names in terms of chains of transmission have developed accounts that allow for empty names, e.g. Donnellan (1974); Kaplan (1990); Cappelen (1999); Hawthorne and Lepore (2011).

Another set of properties of names can be accounted for without content. The properties I have in mind are those that might be called *grammatical*. An example would be the data that motivates binding theory such as the observation that in (2) the two occurrences of 'Conor' may not corefer.

(2) Conor likes Conor.

These are properties that might be considered part of the meaning of a name. But, they are typically explained as part of a theory that is explicitly internalistic: standard syntax textbooks, e.g. Carnie (2013), do not assign contents to names in order to explain the observation. This internalism is explicit in Noam Chomsky's engagement with philosophical issues connected to the project of generative grammar (Chomsky 2000), see also Stainton (2006); Lassiter (2008); Lassiter (2010); Lohndal and Narita (2009); Collins (2010). Syntactic theory is internalist, so, anything that syntactic theory explains has an internalist explanation. These patterns of coreference are paradigmatic cases of what syntactic theory explains, so there is no need to appeal to content.

One complication for the Russellian is that it might turn out that not all properties of this sort are grammatical in the strict sense needed to allow for the

invocation of internalism as a key feature of syntax. For example, Ángel Pinillos has argued that what he calls *de jure coreference* is a *sui generis* property that cannot be reduced to grammar (Pinillos 2011), see also Fine (2007). However, Pinillos's view does not invoke content either, so it could not be the basis of an objection to the no proposition view.

2.2.2 Sentences

What about sentence level properties? Do they require content? Standard grammatical properties won't provide an objection against the Russellian. One candidate property is truth. However, for the Russellian, and for at least their Fregean opponents, truth is not a primarily a property of sentences. I will therefore postpone discussion of truth until subsection 2.3. The other candidate property for an explanation in terms of content is meaningfulness. The guiding thought is that a sentence such as (1) is meaningful, but, sentence meanings are contents i.e. propositions. So, there is a proposition that is the meaning of (1) i.e. its content; otherwise, there is no explanation of the meaningfulness of (1). So, the objection goes, Russellianism is refuted because it is committed to the no proposition view.

I propose the following response to this objection. There is a property, meaningfulness, that (1) has, but this does not entail that there is some proposition that is its meaning. To make the response I am suggesting convincingly it will be necessary to give an account of what meaningfulness is. The position I will defend is that it is grammaticality in the syntacticians' sense. An entity is meaningful just in case it is grammatical. Grammaticality is specified internalistically, i.e. without reference to content, so meaningfulness is too. That is an advantage of making this identification from the Russellian's point of view.

In a response to the problem of meaningfulness as Braun and Reimer formulate it, what needs to be explained is speakers' judgements about meaningfulness. My solution is that these judgements track grammaticality: there is no separate property of meaningfulness that these judgements respond to. I will term this proposal an identification of meaningfulness and grammaticality because I am claiming that there is really only the second property at work in the relevant cases. I do not intend this as a criticism of other uses of the term 'meaningful' or to rule out other theories of what meaning is; my proposal is limited to the context of the argument presented by Braun and Reimer.

It is legitimate to restrict the domain of things which are meaningful in this way because that is the context created by Braun's (and Reimer's) presentation of the argument. In that argument, sentences such as (1) are exhibited and a judgement about them is reported. That judgement, that they are meaningful, is then explained by attributing to those sentences another property, having a propositional semantic content. I identify another property as an alternative explanation. The property I pick, grammaticality, is a property of sentences just like the one Braun identifies.[6]

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[6]Things other than sentences might be grammatical e.g. noun phrases, although this is a delicate issue (Ludlow 2005; Stainton 2005). All my view is committed to is that grammaticality is a property of the sorts of things that are meaningful in the sense at issue in Braun's argument.

Grammaticality is not an absolute property of strings: it is relative to a grammar. So, the best way to put the view is that speakers judge a string to be meaningful when according to their own grammar it is grammatical. This view predicts that two speakers with different grammars might differ on whether a string is meaningful. This seems to me to be a correct prediction.

I will fill in the details of the proposed identification in section 3. For the moment I want to stress the advantages that the identification offers to the Russellian in the context of the debate over empty names. These advantages justify the Russellian's pursuit of this strategy, and make the details worth working out. The first advantage is that it solves the Russellian's problem with empty names. If meaningfulness is grammaticality then content is not required for meaningfulness. So, the no proposition view is tenable. Any property that doesn't require content would do some of the work that the Russellian needs doing. Grammaticality is a particularly good choice because it is a property that philosophers of language and linguists have a sophisticated and, crucially, independent grip on.

2.3 Truth

The standard Russellian view, which I endorse, is that propositions are the primary bearers of truth, and that sentences are true or false because their semantic contents are true or false. A sentence with no semantic content is neither true nor false, so, on the no proposition view, sentences containing empty names are neither true nor false. I will argue that this is the right result: given Russellian principles we would expect these sentences to be neither true nor false. This motivates the no proposition view against its main Russellian rival, the *gappy proposition* view.

The gappy proposition view, defended by Braun and Nathan Salmon among others, is that when a sentence contains an empty name its semantic content is a Russellian structured proposition with a 'gap' where the name's content would be (Braun 1993, 2005; Salmon 1998).[7] The content of (1) might then be represented as $\langle \_, \text{being-a-planet} \rangle$.

How do the two views compare? Defenders of the gappy proposition view take different positions about the truth values of simple gappy propositions. One view is that they are neither true nor false. This will carry the same commitments about sentence truth as the no proposition view. So, the question of truth cannot provide a reason to prefer this version of the gappy proposition view over the no proposition view.

The alternative version of the gappy proposition view is that gappy propositions are false, and therefore so are the sentences that express them. This is Braun's favoured version of the view. In Braun (1993, 459–60) he argues in favour of this version of the gappy proposition view by appealing to negative existentials.[8] He

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[7]Braun uses 'unfilled' in the earlier paper and 'gappy' in the second; the notation I use for gaps follows Braun's second paper. The origins of the idea can be found in Kaplan (1989, 496, footnote 23). Almog (1991); Salmon (1998); Everett (2003) report that David Kaplan was responding to ideas of Saul Kripke's which were presented in lectures eventually published in Kripke (2013). The idea has been criticised in Everett (2003); Mousavian (2011).

[8]Braun (1993, 451–52) cites Russell (2010) and Quine (1980).

argues that these sentences are true, and that this result cannot be accommodated by the no proposition view. He then points out that it can be accommodated by taking their contents to be the (true) negations of false gappy propositions (Braun 1993, 464).

However, the status of negative existentials such as (3) is an extremely tricky problem.

   (3) Vulcan does not exist.

Many find it plausible that (3) is true, and if it is not true then the worry arises that (4) should be instead.

   (4) Vulcan exists.

But surely (4) isn't true. However, (3) by itself is a rather strange sentence. It seems to be saying of something, the referent of 'Vulcan', that that thing doesn't exist. But if it's possible to refer to something in this way then it seems reasonable to think that it must exist.[9]

It is just not clear that we ought to say, as philosophers pursuing the project of understanding truth and existence, that negative existentials are true. The real problem with negative existentials is not that they are intuitively true, a judgement that arises for some other sentences containing empty names, but that, taken at face value, they seem to say of something that it lacks a certain property, namely existence. But, if this is right, then the thing they say lacks existence must exist. Assigning a gappy proposition as the content of such sentences does not remove this problem. The problem is that if they are true it is hard to see how the name could be empty, and if it is not empty then the negative existential would not be true. A theory on which negative existentials are true but the names are empty is not a solution to this problem; the sense of puzzlement remains. So the gappy proposition view is not really a solution to the problem of negative existentials, there is therefore no reason for the no proposition Russellian to give up their view.

I conclude from this that it is at least as plausible as any option currently on offer to accept that neither (4) nor (3) have truth values because neither of them have propositions as their contents.

Leaving aside negative existentials, I see no reason to prefer the claim that sentences containing empty names are false rather than lacking truth value. Someone who insists on falsity for a specific case or range of cases, fiction, for example, would be better off with a view according to which the names are not empty.[10]

Independently of the gappy proposition view, it might be objected that the no

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[9]The strange properties of (3) might be taken as evidence that names like 'Vulcan' are not in fact empty, and really denote nonexistent objects. This is the *noneist* view defended in Priest (2005); the term is adopted from Routley (1980) and the view is related to but distinct from that of Meinong (1960). Apart from such a view it seems that (3) raises problems for everybody, it is not a special problem for Russellians; see e.g. Crane (2013, 71–75). This is because the odd interaction between negation and 'exists' will arise even on views in which (3) might have a proposition as its content.

[10]The same point would apply to someone who thought that some sentences containing empty names are true.

proposition view abandons bivalence. The no proposition Russellian should reply that their view can accept bivalence for propositions, which are the primary bearers of truth, and denies it merely for sentences. At this point the objector might insist that while sentences are not the primary bearers of truth they must be either true or false derivatively. This, however, is just what the no proposition Russellian denies, and they do this on the basis of what by their lights are plausible principles i.e. Mill and Russell.

Finally, I would like to make a general point in support of the no proposition Russellian's position on the truth values of sentences containing empty names. The following two claims, which are not framed in terms particular to Russellians, strike me as extremely plausible.

1. ⌜a is F⌝ is true if and only if ⌜a⌝ refers to something which has the property ⌜F⌝ denotes.
2. ⌜a is F⌝ is false if and only if ⌜a⌝ refers to something which does not have the property ⌜F⌝ denotes.

If 1 and 2 govern our understanding of sentence truth, then it will be very reasonable to think that sentences containing empty names will not be true, and nor will they be false. These claims about sentence truth don't rely on any Russellian claims. But the no proposition Russellian view (as well as the no truth value gappy Russellian view) are in perfect accordance with them. I conclude that the no proposition Russellian has no problems with truth, other than those based on negative existentials. And there is no way to deal with the problem of negative existentials that actually addresses what is puzzling about them, therefore, they are not a good source of evidence against the no proposition view.

In this section I have been concerned only with the metaphysical issue of whether sentences containing empty names have truth values. I have not addressed the question of whether speakers judge that they do, and, if so, what the explanation for that might be. I will leave that issue for subsubsection 2.4.3.

2.4 Judgements

2.4.1 Methodology

Speakers' judgements do matter, but they are not inviolable. Philosophers of language frequently defend theories that contradict some judgements of ordinary speakers. This is rarely taken as a knockdown objection, especially when competing theories also have unintuitive consequences.

The more technical a notion is, the less relevant the judgements of ordinary speakers are. Also, it is extremely important to be sure that the judgements that speakers report are really about the question that is in dispute. In the remainder of this subsection I will use these points to assess the evidential weight that we should attach to judgements about meaningfulness, and about truth.

2.4.2 Judgements about meaningfulness

How does the no proposition view do when confronted with speakers' judgements, bearing the two points above in mind? The first point suggests that we should discount any judgements speakers report about the content of either words or sentences. Content is a highly technical notion embedded in various philosophical theories. One might as well try to directly elicit judgements about the relationships between sentences and Russellian structured propositions. The exercise will almost immediately become that of doing more philosophy of language, rather than getting some sort of independent evidence to adjudicate the dispute.

Asking speakers for judgements about meaningfulness will be more illuminating. But, it will become very important to be sure that the judgements being reported are in fact relevant to the question at hand. For example, someone who claims that (1) is meaningful might be reporting one of the following judgements (I don't claim this list is exhaustive):

1. There is something that is the meaning of the sentence.
2. The string is an acceptable sentence rather than word salad.
3. It is easy to imagine a situation in which the sentence is uttered and thereby used to assert something.

1 would be evidence that Russellianism is counterintuitive. 2 would support the view I am developing here because it would suggest that judgements about meaningfulness are at least closely connected to judgements about acceptability, which is in turn closely connected to grammaticality. 3 would be neutral in the current context, because both the Russellian and their opponent can accept that (1) might be used to assert something. The two positions will be committed to different sorts of story about how this works, and the issue will turn on subtle questions about the semantics–pragmatics distinction. So, even if speakers' judgements do carry evidential weight in this debate it is unclear which view they count in favour of.

It is also possible to elicit judgements about the meaning of individual words. It is equally unclear which view such judgements will favour, however. The problem with these judgements is that they could be taken to favour the view that 'Vulcan' isn't empty just as reasonably as to favour the view that Russellianism is false. Alternatively, it could also be that ordinary speakers have 'Meinongian' views, as Reimer has proposed as part of an alternative solution to the problem of empty names (Reimer 2001a). I think that we should be reluctant to attribute metaphysical beliefs to speakers that we take to be false, and I suggest that it is an advantage of the Russellian view I propose that speakers' judgements are tracking something true.

When a speaker reports that a sentence is meaningful they are reporting that they find it acceptable. Acceptability is a consequence of judging a string to be grammatical; this is the property that the judgements of meaningfulness track. When a speaker reports that a word is meaningful they are reporting that it is a word in common use (as well as being an acceptable phonetic string). I don't suggest that this is the only possible interpretation of the judgements speakers make. Rather, I suggest that it is consistent with those judgements and a neat fit with the no proposition Russellian view I favour.

2.4.3 Judgements about truth

Judgements about truth will do better with the first point because, arguably, truth is a less theoretical notion than either content or meaningfulness. At least, the Russellian can concede that point. The problem for judgements about truth is making sure that they pass the second test i.e. making sure that they are tracking the question under discussion. As I have argued that sentences containing empty names lack truth values, this response is one that I have to make when facing alleged cases where speakers judge that they do.

Suppose a speaker says 'that's true' when confronted with a sentence containing an empty name such as (1), or, perhaps more plausibly, (3). The judgements that has been elicited is a *relevant* judgements only if the following two conditions are met. (i) The speaker also thinks that the name is empty; some speakers will be (tacit) fictional realists or (tacit) Meinongians. (ii) The speaker really does judge that the sentence is literally true rather than just used to convey something true, either about a fiction or in some other way. It will be very hard to be sure that the judgements elicited are relevant, and therefore very hard to be sure that they are evidence against Russellianism.

This is an error theory: ordinary speakers, or philosophers, who think that sentences containing empty names are true are making a mistake. For a range of simple sentences this is not particularly controversial. Russellians will think this, but so will Fregeans because the truth of such sentences depends on the referents of their constituents. Proponents of gappy propositions will agree about the simple cases, although they will claim that it is an advantage of their view that some complex sentences containing empty names are true.

The gappy proposition view, whatever it entails about the truth values of gappy propositions, violates some standardly reported judgements about the truth values of some sentences. For example, some speakers think that some simple sentences containing empty names are true. But no Russellian, neither a defender of a no proposition or a gappy proposition view, can give anything but an error theory about those judgements. I think that the right thing to do is to get truth right, and accept an error theory about any judgements which conflict with the right view of truth.

A final point to bear in mind is that the literature on empty names is full of purported explanations of why speakers make the (false) judgements that they do. Clapp (2009) proposes a presuppositional account. Everett (2013), drawing on Walton (1990); Richard (2000), argues that speakers can use sentences that are without truth value to convey truths about the world. Pragmatic accounts of various sorts are discussed in Adams, Fuller, and Stecker (1993); Adams, Fuller, and Stecker (1997); Adams and Stecker (1994); Taylor (2000); Everett (2003); Adams and Dietrich (2004); Caplan (2006); Adams and Fuller (2007); Wyatt (2007); Piccinini and Scott (2010); Mousavian (2015). Some of these views posit a confusion between semantics and pragmatics to explain the error; such confusions are certainly possible.

3 Meaningfulness as grammaticality

3.1 The role of meaningfulness

In order to support the strategy for defending Russellianism sketched in section 2 it is now necessary to give an account of meaningfulness. The account must meet the following criteria in order to support that strategy.

1. *Plausibility*: it should be reasonable to believe that the account is true
2. *Connectedness*: it should be that the property that meaningfulness is identified with is suitably connected to commonsense conceptions of meaningfulness
3. *Intuitiveness*: it should be reasonable to believe that speakers' judgements about meaningfulness are tracking the property that it is identified with
4. *Veridicality*: it should be reasonable to hold that speakers' judgements are largely true

If grammaticality can meet these requirements then it can be used to support the argument in defence of Russellianism that I have been developing. I will argue in this section that grammaticality does meet these requirements. I won't argue that no other property does, although I am not aware of any other candidates. I will present the main argument in subsection 3.3 after saying what I mean by 'grammar' in subsection 3.2.

To briefly summarise what follows: I will claim that my account does well on plausibility because the property of grammaticality is one posited by our best science of language. My account does well on connectedness because grammaticality and judgements about meaning are intimately related. My account does well on intuitiveness because speakers judge grammatical sentences to be meaningful, and *vice versa*. And, my account does well on veridicality because speakers are correct when they judge grammatical sentences to be meaningful, which they generally do.

3.2 Grammar

What notion of grammaticality does the argument require? In order to meet the four criteria from subsection 3.1 the best approach is to borrow the notions of both grammar and grammaticality from generative syntax.

The notion the Russellian needs is that of a *grammar* which is a formal system for generating representations of sentences. *Grammaticality* can then be defined in terms of the representations generated by the grammar. If the grammar generates a representation for a string, then that string is grammatical (relative to that grammar). Examples of grammars can be found in standard textbooks such as Carnie (2013).

The Russellian will also need to claim that speakers' judgements, for example about meaningfulness, are responsive to this property. That some judgements of speakers, those of acceptability, are responsive to formal properties of grammars which are actually represented in the brain in a standard view in generative syntax. The connection of formal grammars to the linguistic competences of

speakers is a project strongly associated with the work of Chomsky; see e.g. the papers collected in Chomsky (2000). The Russellian does not need to take a stand on the details of this programme.

What the Russellian requires from this programme is that it is plausible that when a speaker is confronted with sentences such as (1) and (5) part of the machinery that facilitates their understanding is the generation of a syntactic representation.

(5) Neptune is a planet.

This, crucially, does not happen when they engage in other activities. And, part of this process can be correctly described as (tacit) knowledge on the part of the speaker that the sentence they are confronting is grammatical. In other words, judgements of grammaticality track real properties of the strings; this is because judgements of grammaticality are based on the tacit representation of these properties.

3.3 Why meaningfulness is grammaticality

What I have proposed, on the Russellian's behalf, is a theoretical identification between a technical notion (grammaticality) and a term of 'folk linguistics' (meaningfulness). I doubt if there could be a completely decisive argument for such a conclusion. What can be given are reasons to think that the two notions have a high degree of convergence. This will show that the identification is a live option, which is what the Russellian needs to pursue the line of response to the problem of empty names I have been advocating. I will present two pieces of evidence.

Firstly, it seems that grammaticality and meaningfulness are at least coextensional. Grammatical sentences, such as (1) and (5), are judged to be meaningful. There are however limitations on the complexity of sentences that can be parsed, for example (6).[11]

(6) The rat the cat the dog chased killed ate the malt.

This is grammatical but confusing and might be denied to be meaningful by someone who was confused by it. What this shows is that recognising both grammaticality and meaningfulness is not trivial. The specific ways that recognising grammaticality is difficult might be explained by the way the human mind implements its sentence parser (Phillips, Wagers, and Lau 2011). There are also false positives: sentences that are prone to be judged to be grammatical when they are not such as (7) (Phillips, Wagers, and Lau 2011).[12]

(7) More people have been to Russia than I have.

However, on reflection, (6) is accepted by speakers as grammatical and (7) is rejected. Furthermore, once the question of grammaticality has been resolved the standard judgement is that (6) is meaningful and (7) is not.

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[11]The example is from Karlsson (2007), following an example from Miller and Chomsky (1963).

[12]David Pereplyotchik first drew my attention to these cases; Pereplyotchik (2011) discusses recent debates about the representation of syntactic structures.

Ungrammatical 'word salad' such as (8) is not taken to be meaningful.

(8) planet a is Neptune

The possibility of both false positives and negatives for grammaticality is in fact a point in favour of the Russellian view. It shows that there is something more to grammaticality than mere acceptability judgements. Speakers are tracking, albeit imperfectly, a substantial property of sentences.

At this point the objection might be raised that there are sentences that are not grammatical, but which are meaningful in at least the sense that it is possible to work out what the speaker meant in uttering them. This objection relies on conflating the property we are interested in, meaningfulness, which is a property of sentences, with something else that could usefully be called *speaker meaning*. A speaker may intend to communicate something when they utter an ungrammatical string and the audience may easily identify what that is. It does not follow that the string is meaningful in the sense at issue.

Another sort of case that might be offered as a counterexample is that of 'category mistakes' such as (9).

(9) Colourless green ideas sleep furiously.

Someone might hold that (9) is (i) grammatical, but (ii) meaningless. If so, there would be a problem for my defence of no proposition Russellianism. However, I see no reason why the Russellian is compelled to accept these claims. For example, Ofra Magidor has argued at length that category mistakes are meaningful (Magidor 2009, 2013, 2017), see also Camp (2004). Magidor's view is that any grammatical sentence is meaningful. Note also that, as Magidor (2009, 554, footnote 6) points out, Chomsky (2015, 80–85, 159–76) at one stage claimed (9) is not (fully) grammatical. Taking this line seems less plausible to me, but it is another way that the Russellian could respond to the worry. In either case there is a precedent for denying that these cases constitute counterexamples.

A further objection that could be raised here is that (9) gives rise to a distinct problematic judgement by ordinary speakers. The alleged judgement is that (9) is (i) grammatical and (ii) meaningless; even if that judgement is indeed false the Russellian will need to explain why speakers make it. I claim that this judgement is false, and I am happy to rely on the philosophical arguments in the works cited above to defend that claim, but if speakers' have a contrary judgement then my view is committed to an error theory of their judgements. My response is that speakers who report such judgements are in fact simply registering the fact that such sentences are category mistakes. Such speakers have correctly identified (9) as grammatical. This is the property that their judgements of meaningfulness ordinarily track, however, when confronted by a category mistake speakers correctly identify it as such. I need not endorse any theory of category mistakes to make the present point: any such theory will allow that category mistakes are in some sense anomalous. The view in Magidor (2013), for example, is that category mistakes are a certain type of presupposition failure. Given that category mistakes are anomalous in a particular way, it is to be expected that speakers notice this fact. The way to test whether a speaker is really taking the sentence to be meaningless in the sense relevant to Braun's argument would be to present a scenario of the sort that Magidor uses in her arguments that such

sentences are meaningful. These scenarios are designed to make the category mistake sentence appear true given a certain background. The background for (10) might be:

> John is a philosopher. He recently developed a new theory in the philosophy of mathematics according to which numbers are coloured, and the colour of the number two is green. For example, John may hold some naturalist position according to which the number two is the set of all pairs of physical objects in the word. In addition John might hold that if most such pairs have a certain colour, then the set — and therefore the corresponding number — have this colour. (Magidor 2009, 567)

(10) The number two is green.

If a speaker reports (10) to be grammatical but not meaningful, but then in response to the scenario accepts that against the background of the theory described in the scenario (10) would be true, that speaker does not regard (10) to be meaningless in the sense relevant to this paper.

Finally, there are good reasons to think that meaningfulness and grammaticality are more closely connected than merely being coextensional properties. It is not just a terminological point that e.g. Paul M. Pietroski use 'meaningfulness' (or 'meaning') for a property so closely connected to grammaticality (Pietroski 2003, 2005, 2008). Rather, there is supposed to be a deep link between being grammatical and constraining what can be said. It is certainly right that these constraints exist as the following example from Pietroski (2005, 257) illustrates.

(11) The millionaire called the senator from Texas.

The relevant point, which might sound obvious but is important, is that there are two possible readings of (11): (i) The millionaire called the senator, and the senator is from Texas; (ii) The millionaire called the senator, and the call was from Texas. There is no reading: (iii) The millionaire called the senator, and the millionaire is from Texas. But (iii) expresses a perfectly coherent thought; the constraint here is imposed by grammar. A fact about sentence meaning is then explained by a fact about which strings are generated by a grammar.

Here is the use that the Russellian can put an observation of this sort. Grammaticality and meaningfulness are coextensional. That does not show that they can be identified. The observation about grammar constraining meaning suggests that they should be, because it provides a point of contact between the property of grammaticality and meaning. This is, of course, the orthodox view among linguists influenced by Chomsky.

3.4 Meaning and character

One alternative view that I have heard suggested is that meaningfulness should be identified with another property: having a (complex) character in something like Kaplan's sense (Kaplan 1989). This would allow for a response with the same structure as mine: speakers are tracking the real property of having a character. However, this view cannot be defended if the standard notion of

character is what the proponents of such a view have in mind. This is because the standard notion of character takes the character of a name such as 'Vulcan' or 'Neptune' to be a constant function from contexts to objects, or rather object: the name's referent.[13] An empty name, lacking a content, will lack a referent and therefore a character.

The lack of character for an empty name will lead to a lack of (complex) character for the sentence as a whole. So, sentences containing empty names will not really have the property that the proponent of the character no proposition view claims that speakers are tracking. This view is therefore an error theory about these speaker judgements. A view which appealed to something like Fregean sense would be able to avoid this problem for the character view, but this view would no longer be Russellian.

A second problem for the character based view is that it will have to overcome the arguments in King and Stanley (2005) against treating the meanings of sentences as complex characters. I find these arguments convincing.

4   Conclusion

I have presented the problem of empty names as it applies to Russellianism. I have argued that the Russellian can and should adopt a no proposition view in response to the problem. Sentences containing empty names are meaningful because they are grammatical, but they do not have contents.

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[13]Braun (1995) discusses the complexity of Kaplan's view; Braun argues that it differs between the informal and formal presentations of the view.

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