

Frege's puzzle(s) and Fregeanism

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1	Two versions of Frege's puzzle: cognitive significance & substitution failures . . .	1
2	How promising are Fregean solutions to Frege's puzzles?	2
2.1	Kripke's puzzle	2
2.2	Frege's puzzle: the revenge	3
2.3	Exporting and importing	4

1 Two versions of Frege's puzzle: cognitive significance & substitution failures

Frege's puzzle is usually thought of as the most serious problem for any Millian, or more generally any non-Fregean, view of meaning. This problem can be thought of as breaking down into two sub-problems.

The first is one which Frege introduces in a famous passage at the beginning of 'On Sense and Reference':

Equality^A gives rise to challenging questions which are not altogether easy to answer. Is it a relation? A relation between objects, or between names or signs of objects? In my *Begriffsschrift* I assumed the latter.² The reasons which seem to favour this are the following: $a = a$ and $a = b$ are obviously statements of differing cognitive value [*Erkenntniswert*]; $a = a$ holds *a priori* and, according to Kant, is to be labelled analytic, while statements of the form $a = b$ often contain very valuable extensions of our knowledge and cannot always be established *a priori*. The discovery that the rising sun is not new every morning, but always the same, was one of the most fertile astronomical discoveries. Even today the reidentification of a small planet or a comet is not always a matter of course. Now if we were to regard equality as a relation between that which the names '*a*' and '*b*' designate [*bedeuten*], it would seem that $a = b$ could not differ from $a = a$, i.e. provided $a = b$ is true. A relation would thereby be expressed of a thing to itself, and indeed one in which each thing stands to itself but to no other thing. What we apparently

Frege here points out that a pair of sentences — in the most striking cases, simple identity sentences — can differ only with respect to the substitution of coreferential simple proper names, and yet be such that one sentence seems trivial and a priori, whereas the other seems informative and a priori. Sometimes ‘Frege’s puzzle’ is used as a name for the problem of explaining how sentences can be related in this way.

Other times, the title is used for a puzzle which Frege also discusses in the same article. This is problem of explaining how a pair of propositional attitude ascriptions can differ in truth value — rather than just informativeness — despite differing only in the substitution of coreferential names in the complement clause of the ascription.

The two puzzles are clearly related. If you take an instance of the first sort of Frege’s puzzle, then you can generate an instance of the second by embedding the relevant sentences in the complement clauses of an ascription of an agent who thinks that one of the sentences is true, and the other false.

Either sort of version can be used in a direct argument for Frege’s criterion for difference in sense.

2 How promising are Fregean solutions to Frege’s puzzles?

A Fregean solution to Frege’s puzzle finds a genuine difference in meaning to correspond to apparent differences in cognitive significance and apparent differences in truth value between the corresponding attitude ascriptions. This seems to most people to be the sort of solution that the two puzzles demand. However, there are real questions about whether solutions of this sort can work.

2.1 Kripke’s puzzle

One of the most important challenges to Fregean solutions to instances of Frege’s puzzle comes from Kripke’s paper, ‘A Puzzle About Belief.’ Kripke develops two different sorts of paradoxes involving the following collection of intuitively plausible principles:

1. *Weak disquotation*: If a competent speaker on reflection sincerely assents to ‘ S ’, then that speaker believes that S . (Think of this as a schema, every instance of which is claimed to be true.)
2. *Reverse disquotation*: If a speaker believes that S then, on reflection, that speaker will sincerely assents to ‘ S .’ (Kripke never quite states this principle; instead he combined this with weak disquotation to get the biconditional which he calls ‘the strengthened disquotational principle.’ For our purposes it will be more convenient to separate the two parts of the biconditional in this way.)
3. *Translation*: if a sentence expresses a truth in one language, then its translation into another language also expresses a truth (in that language).
4. *Contradiction*: if you have a pair of contradictory beliefs, it is always possible to discover this a priori.

Kripke argues, in effect, that (2)-(4) are inconsistent, and that (1)-(3) are inconsistent. The example of puzzling Pierre; how we can generate a puzzle using just (1) and (2) in the case of Peter and Paderewski.

Kripke does not himself take a stand on how to resolve these paradoxes. I suggest (unoriginally) that the most plausible reply to the puzzles is to reject (2) and (4). But if we reject (2) and (4), that undermines at least some versions of ‘Frege’s puzzle’ style arguments against Millianism.

For example, one might argue as follows: ‘Lois believes that Clark cannot fly but that Superman can. But, if Millianism is true, then Lois believes that Clark can fly, and that Clark cannot fly. But Lois can’t have contradictory beliefs; she is not irrational, couldn’t discover the conflict a priori, etc.’ This argument against Millianism explicitly employs *Translation*.

Or one might argue as follows: ‘Lois accepts the sentence ‘Superman flies’, and so believes that Superman flies. But of course (after as much reflection as you like) she explicitly rejects ‘Clark flies’, so she does not believe that Clark flies. But then if Millianism is true, it both is and is not the case that she believes that Clark flies. This argument against Millianism employs the conjunction of *Weak* and *Reverse Disquotation*.

2.2 Frege’s puzzle: the revenge

Catsup and ketchup!

Possible responses for the Fregean:

- *The subject means different things by ‘catsup’ and ‘ketchup’ — and so does everyone else!* Since the argument seems to generalize, this line of response makes synonymy in natural languages impossible.
- *The subject means different things by ‘catsup’ and ‘ketchup’, but not everyone does.* Then it is impossible for us to report the the beliefs and assertions the subject expresses using these words. This seems wildly implausible.
- *The subject means different things by ‘catsup’ and ‘ketchup’, but not everyone does. And propositional attitude ascriptions are true iff the content of the complement of the ascription is ‘close enough’ even if not identical to the content of the state of the subject of the ascription.* This is something that the Fregean might want to say anyway, to make plausible my attribution of beliefs to people quite different than me, like historical figures. However, this undermines the Fregean’s central argument against the Millian, unless we say (implausibly) that, for example, the sense I attach to ‘Fritz Warfield’ and the sense I attached to ‘Ted Warfield’ are not close enough to license substitution.

Since the catsup/ketchup cases are, like the Kripke cases, instances of Frege’s puzzle, this again counts against the idea that the Fregean response to Frege’s puzzle has general application.

2.3 Exporting and importing

The following two plausible principles can also be used as part of an argument to license the sorts of ‘Millian’ substitutions in attitude ascriptions which Fregeans find objectionable:

Exportation

$$\frac{A \text{ believes that } n \text{ is } F.}{\text{There is an } x \text{ such that } x=n \text{ and } A \text{ believes that } x \text{ is } F.}$$

Importation

$$\frac{\text{There is an } x \text{ such that } x=n \text{ and } A \text{ believes that } x \text{ is } F.}{A \text{ believes that } n \text{ is } F.}$$

The Fregean can, of course, reject these inferences. However, these show that there are some intuitions on the side of the Millian here.