

The theory of reference

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A good way to begin getting a handle on different sorts of semantic theories is by thinking about a theory of reference. As we'll see, a theory of reference is not a theory of meaning, but one can think about different sorts of theories of meaning as different ways of supplementing the theory of reference.

Frege's theory of reference began as a theory of logic: it was an attempt to explain the truth-involving relations between sentences in terms of the structural features of sentences which explain their truth or falsity. The reference of an expression is, to a first approximation, *its power to affect the truth-value of sentences in which it occurs*.

The foundation of Frege's theory of reference is the idea that the reference of a proper name is an object.

We can combine a proper name with a monadic predicate to get a sentence. Since sentences are true or false, and reference is contribution to determination of truth value, we know that the reference of a monadic predicate must be something which combines with an object to yield a truth-value — so (though this was not quite Frege's view) we can think of the reference of a predicate as a function from objects to truth-values. The reference of 'is red', for example, would be the function which delivers the value 'true' when given as argument an object which is red, and delivers the value 'false' when given as argument an object which is not red. Equivalently, you can think of the reference of a predicate as a set of objects — the set of objects for which the aforementioned function delivers the value 'true.'

Given these two core ideas — that reference is power to affect truth value, and that the reference of a name is an object — what would you assign as the reference of the following sorts of expressions:

- A relational predicate, like 'loves'.
- An adverb, like 'quickly'.
- A sentential connective, like 'and'.
- A quantifier, like 'everyone.'
- An article, like 'the.'

Other terms for reference include 'extension' and (more rarely) 'denotation.'