

Objections to Frege's theories of sense and reference

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1. THE PARADOX OF THE CONCEPT *HORSE*

A paradox seems to arise from Frege's approach to the theory of reference. It should be clear from the discussion of that theory that (i) the reference of a name is a different sort of thing than the reference of a monadic predicate, and (ii) if something is the reference of a monadic predicate, then it cannot also be the reference of a name — for, if it could, we could combine that name with another name to form a sentence. But we can't.

Frege used the word “concept” to refer to the sort of thing which is the reference of a predicate, and “object” to refer to the sort of thing which is the reference of a name. The problem is that there are named which seem to refer to concepts — for example, “the concept *horse*”. By (i) and (ii) it follows that this must refer to an object and not a concept; from which it follows that the sentence

The concept *horse* is not a concept.

is true. But this seems plainly mistaken.

Nor do we have to rely on examples of this sort. Consider a sentence like

Some things can be the reference of a name, whereas other things can be the reference of a predicate.

Why the most natural interpretation of this sentence contradicts (i) and (ii).

For Frege's discussion of this sort of problem, see “On Concept and Object,” which is on the web site.

2. INDEXICALITY AND GUSTAV LAUBEN

In “The Thought,” Frege considers the sense of the first person pronoun:

The occurrence of the word “I” in a sentence gives rise to some questions.

Consider the following case. Dr. Gustav Lauben says, “I have been wounded”. Leo Peter hears this and remarks some days later, “Dr. Gustav Lauben has been wounded”. Does this sentence express the same thought as the one Dr. Lauben uttered himself? Suppose that Rudolph Lingens were present when Dr. Lauben spoke and now hears what is related by Leo Peter. If the same thought is uttered by Dr. Lauben and Leo Peter then Rudolph Lingens, who is fully master of the language and remembers what Dr. Lauben has said in his presence, must now know at once from Leo Peter’s report that the same thing is under discussion. But knowledge of the language is a separate thing when it is a matter of proper names. It may well be the case that only a few people associate a particular thought with the sentence “Dr. Lauben has been wounded”. In this case one needs for complete understanding a knowledge of the expression “Dr. Lauben”. Now if both Leo Peter and Rudolph Lingens understand by “Dr. Lauben” the doctor who lives as the only doctor in a house known to both of them, then they both understand the sentence “Dr. Gustav Lauben has been wounded” in the same way, they associate the same thought with it. But it is also possible that Rudolph Lingens does not know Dr. Lauben personally and does not know that he is the very Dr. Lauben who recently said “I have been wounded”. In this case Rudolph Lingens cannot know that the same thing is in question. I say, therefore, in this case: the thought which Leo Peter expresses is not the same as that which Dr. Lauben uttered.

Why this seems to make it too hard to report the contents of beliefs, or utterances, which someone else makes with the first-person pronoun. (Parallel points could be made about Fregean views about “now,” “here,” and other context-sensitive expressions.)

Here’s a different sort of worry about Frege’s view here. Consider the senses that two different people, A and B, attach to “I”. Is it possible that these should be identical? It’s a bit hard to see why this should not be possible; it seems that one person’s mode of presentation of himself could be identical to someone else’s mode of presentation of himself. (If it matters, we can imagine that this is only true “across worlds” — that the sense which A attaches to “I” in w is the same as the sense which B attaches to “I” in a distinct world w^* .)

Now suppose that A says: “Possibly, I am A.” This is trivially true, since the thought expressed by “I am A” out of his mouth is not just possible, but necessary. But now suppose that B says: “Possibly, I am A.” By hypothesis, this expresses the same thought as this sentence out of A’s mouth. So it must also be true. But it isn’t; it’s a necessary falsehood.

So the Fregean has got to say not just that each of us may attach a different sense to “I” but that, if JS attaches a certain sense S to “I” then, necessarily, $\forall x (x \neq JS \rightarrow x$ does not attach S to “I”). But it’s hard from a Fregean point of view to see why this should be true.

3. UNDERSTANDING SYNONYMS WITHOUT KNOWING THAT THEY ARE SYNONYMOUS

The “catsup”/ “ketchup” example; why this is a prima facie counterexample to Frege’s criterion.

4. TOO MANY DISTINCTIONS IN MEANING?

Suppose that I say:

Aristotle believed that Plato was pretty smart.

Then I am attributing to Aristotle a belief whose content includes some mode of presentation of Plato, along with whatever sense is expressed by ‘pretty smart.’ Let’s suppose that what I say is true. Then it must be the case that Aristotle had thoughts about Plato under some mode of presentation which is identical to the mode of presentation corresponding to my term ‘Plato.’ But what are the odds of that?

The Fregean can respond by relaxing the conditions on reporting the thoughts of others — maybe it is enough for the truth of the ascription if the sense expressed by ‘Plato’ out of my mouth is ‘close enough’ to one of Aristotle’s modes of presentation of Plato. But this is a dangerous move for the Fregean to make.

Are the senses I attach to ‘Fritz Warfield’ and ‘Ted Warfield’ also close enough? If so, then imagine that someone says to me ‘I didn’t know that Ted Warfield was Fritz Warfield’. Presumably I can report what they say by saying to someone else:

So-and-so didn’t know that Ted Warfield was Fritz Warfield.

but then, if the senses I attach to these two names are ‘close enough’, it is also true for me to say

So-and-so didn't know that Fritz Warfield was Fritz Warfield.

The problem is that we want the sentence about Aristotle's beliefs to come out true, and this last sentence to come out false. But it seems that to get this result, we need to suppose to believe that 'Plato', out of my mouth, is more similar in sense to some mode of presentation under which Aristotle thought about Plato than are the modes of presentation that I associate with the names 'Fritz Warfield' and 'Ted Warfield'. And seems crazy. (This is related to the worries about indexicality sketched above.)

I think that Frege's response would have been to deny that our sentence about Aristotle's beliefs could be true, and also to deny that, strictly speaking, I can truly report the beliefs about the person confused about Fritz/Ted. (See his discussion of Herbert Garner's use of the names "Dr. Lauben" and "Gustav Lauben" in "The Thought", p. 298.) But this seems to me very difficult to accept.

A possible reply: incorporate context-sensitive standards of closeness of sense into the semantics of attitude ascriptions.