Philosophy of Language // Spring 2020

Handout 2

Sense and reference: Frege II

Remark 1. We omit the discussion of indirect speech in pages 58–59.

Meaningless sentences. So far, if you have noticed, we have talked of the expressions referring to objects. Frege groups them under the heading of 'proper names' (another term often used is 'singular terms'). But what about other kinds of expressions? You might think that Frege would now turn to general names (e.g., 'dogs') that appear to function similar to proper names, or to predicates ('ξ is funny') that are another central element of the language. Instead, he proposes to examine sentences. 62

We often speak of the meaning of sentences. We do that, for the most part, to say which sentences are meaningful, and which are not; and then also to say what the meaning of a particular sentence is. Thus we say that the sentence:

(2-1) Kissed Lenin long Stalin very

has no meaning, but that the sentence

(2-2) Lenin kissed Stalin

does have a meaning. This pair of examples may be easy to deal with. For the sentence (2-1) violates grammatical rules of English, while the sentence (2-2) does not. But what of the sentence:

(2-3) Lenin kissed the number six?

It is grammatically correct, but still meaningless. Another way of putting this: (2-3) is syntactically correct, but semantically meaningless. The sentence (2-3) is a legitimate sentence in English, since it complies with the syntactic rules of English. It is nevertheless meaningless. (By contrast, we now say that (2-1) is not an English sentence to begin with, but rather a mere collection of words.)

Remark 2. If I utter the sentence (2-1), you may guess what I am *trying* to say. Perhaps my English grammar isn't good. Or perhaps I am a spy trying to convey to you information about Lenin and Stalin's secret affair, but for security reasons, unable to do this with a regular English sentence. In all such cases we may distinguish between speaker's meaning and sentence's meaning. The latter, in this case, is still empty: the *sentence* does not say anything.

Question 3. Why is the sentence (2-3) syntactically correct?

Question 4. Could one still insist that (2-3) is meaningful? What about (2-1)?

Sense of sentences. So what makes (2-3) (semantically) meaningless? Here is one proposal: the sentence (2-3) fails to express any thought. Someone who utters it does not (and cannot) express any thought, and someone who hears it cannot receive any thought. You might think that we are back in the psychologistic playground. Thoughts are *someone's* thoughts, and I can convey to you my thought no more than I can convey to you my images. But this is in conflict with the usual practice. We speak of understanding other people's thoughts, as well of assessing them.

That is the line Frege now takes. The meaning of a sentence is the thought it conveys. But we have seen that, in the case of proper names, meaning split into two parts, sense and reference. Hence Frege now asks whether thought should be considered a sense or a reference of the sentence.

A sentence is composed by its constituent terms. Since the only terms analysed are proper names, we have to restrict our attention to them and ignore other terms. So we will say that the putative reference of the sentence is determined by the references of the names occurring in it. Thus when we replace a name with with another name having the same reference as the former, the reference of the sentential whole should not change. Now, when we do that, it turns out that the thought associated with the sentence *has* changed.

Example 5 (Lenin on the grass). Suppose that Lenin sat on the grass. So in the sentence:

(2-4) Lenin is sitting on the grass

we can replace 'Lenin' with an expression that has the same reference. We get:

(2-5) The bearded man is sitting on the grass.

The resulting sentence has a different thought. This is because one can take different epistemic attitudes towards each: one may believe (2-5) and disbelieve (2-4).

Based on such considerations, we conclude that thought cannot be the sentence's reference. Because we have already agreed that it is either its sense of reference, thought must be the sentence's sense.

Incomplete sentences? There is a further question, examined by later writers, whether a sentence such as (2-2) is not too general to express a thought. One worry is time (tense). Suppose Lenin first kissed Stalin in 1920, and that you utter the sentence in 1917. I might be unable to decide whether it is true or false before you tell me when the kiss happened. If you tell me that it happened sometime in the past, then the statement is false. Presumably the true statement should be, 'Lenin will kiss Stalin.' But this means that the statement changes its truth value as time passes: the last statement is true in 1917, but false in 1925. To avoid this dubious view we have to think of the occurrence of 'kiss' as tenseless. It should mean that Lenin kissed Stalin at some time in the history

of the world. This is fine, but of course there were times when Lenin was not kissing Stalin. Hence 'Lenin did not kiss Stalin' is also true. To avoid a contradiction every true or false sentence, in its complete version, must be dated.

But what of kissing itself? Lenin could be kissing on the lips, on the cheeks, on the forehead, or even kissing Stalin's hands or feet. These are all different forms of kissing. There is a sense, we are apt to say, in which Lenin *was* kissing Stalin (as a comrade, say, on the cheeks), and there is a sense in which he *was not* (as a lover, on the lips). And before I tell you all these sundry details about Lenin's kiss, you cannot grasp what I am trying to say, that he kissed *as* a lover or as a comrade.

Frege's general inclination would be to dismiss these worries. These further details belong to pragmatics, to the theory of utterances of different sentences. On different occasions the same sentence can be used to say different things. Its semantic meaning (sense) remains invariant on all of these occasions.

Reference of sentences. What then could be the sentence's reference? Well, should a sentence have *any* reference? The whole issue whether sentences have references may be viewed as spurious. After all, we have begun with a familiar feature of proper names, namely, that they pick out individual objects in the world. Indeed, this is why names are used at all, to refer to individuals. Why should sentences have reference by analogy with names? Should we say that every linguistic unit has both sense and reference? Adverbs too? And even the logical connectives, such as 'and' and 'not'? On the other hand, what about collections of sentences? If we hold that sentences have sense and reference, why cannot their collections have sense and reference either?

All of these are good questions to ask. Answering them can elucidate deeper features of Frege's account. In our text, however, he does not pause to reflect on these issues—other than noting that sense can be divorced from reference, and that it can fail to determine any reference. This is he case with fiction sentences. Such sentences have sense: we understand what they mean. But they have no reference, since (some of) the proper names occurring in them have no reference. 62

Example 6. Frege's own example is:

(2-6) Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep.

Odysseus is a fictional character (we assume!). Hence the name 'Odysseus' has no reference, though it has a sense. One part of its sense presumably is, 'the King of Ithaca'. This sense fails to pick out an individual if there was no Ithaca, or if Ithaca had no king—i.e. in the case where the Homeric poems were, in the relevant aspects, wholly an artistic invention. Things get much more complicated if there were in fact Ithaca and there were a king, roughly at the same time as Odysseus, who, moreover, led roughly the same life as Odysseus. He may even have been called 'Odysseus', to complete the confusion. This issue should be postponed until our discussion of Kripke.

There is a powerful intuition to think of it as a 'situation', a 'fact', or a 'state of affairs'. In using proper names we identify items in the external world—people, cities, rivers, pets, and more controversially, natural numbers. With sentences we similarly identify items in the external world, only more complex ones. We use names to talk about individuals, and we use sentences to talk about facts.

Frege shows no inclination to use any such reasoning at all. Instead he proposes to see truth-values as sentence's reference. The reason he gives is that, if one thinks that every component of a sentence has reference, then one can be concerned with the reference of the whole sentence. But what in fact one is concerned with is the sentence's truth value. Hence the reference of the sentence is its truth value. 63 mid

Perhaps the opponent could say:

> One can equally be concerned with the *state of affairs* described by the sentence. Supposing that the name 'Odysseus' refers, I can then be concerned with whether there was a state of affairs such that Odysseus was set ashore etc. Hence the reference should be a state of affairs.

The answer is that one cannot be concerned merely with a state of affairs. One should be concerned with whether that state of affairs 'obtained', whether it was actual, rather than merely possible. Of course Odysseus could be set ashore; we are wondering whether he *actually* was set ashore. This form of concern, we now say, is nothing but a concern with truth.

Another argument Frege gives appeals to the ancient principle of substitution *salva veritate* (i.e. substitution preserving truth). When a sentence contains a term t, replacing that term with a term t' that has the same reference does not change the truth of the sentence. 64 bottom

Example 7. If the original sentence is our (2-2), then the sentence:

(2-7) The first Soviet dictator kissed the second Soviet dictator,

will have the same truth value as the original one. As in the Example 5, the sense of the sentence has changed.