

FREGE ON SENTENCE-MEANING vs. WORD-MEANING

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Any one who has thought about language from a philosophical point of view has encountered the problem of characterizing "meaning," and without doubt he has noticed that, as a matter of fact, a *sentence*¹ is, or appears to be meaningful in a different way in which a *word* is meaningful.

In this paper, I shall take it for granted that the reader is aware of this obvious difference: that although words like 'man,' 'foolish,' 'very,' and 'is' are recognizable meaningful words (of English), sentences like 'that man is very foolish' possess a certain unity, a certain completeness which one or more arbitrarily juxtaposed words usually do not (e.g., 'foolish that very is man') and that therefore the meaning of a sentence is in some sense not just the meaning of its constituent parts.

In this paper I shall *not* try to analyze this puzzling difference between an arbitrary collection of words and a sentence. The purpose of this paper is to concentrate on the following question: *Which is logically prior, sentence-meaning or word-meaning?* A reasonably complete answer to this question it seems to me, would have to be part of a fairly complete exposition of an acceptable theory of linguistic meaning, and such a theory has yet to be written. There are many respectable theories of linguistic meaning and from each of these the question of logical priority of meaning would receive a different treatment. It is not my purpose therefore to present in this short paper anything like an acceptable formulation of an answer to the above question on logical priority of meaning.

I have opted, instead, for giving some consideration to what seems to me the most subtle, interesting, and perhaps the most influential of all views expressed on the subject matter of sentence-meaning vs. word-meaning: the views of Gottlob Frege. Before Frege, everyone—with the possible exception of Bentham a hundred years earlier—took it for granted that word-meaning is more fundamental than sentence-meaning. It was assumed unquestioningly that a sentence takes the meaning it does from the meanings of the words that make it up. Frege, on the contrary, for subtle and hardly transparent reasons, took up the opposite position: that sentence-meaning is more fundamental than word-meaning. Since then, many philosophers have taken the same position, but usually for very different reasons. The purpose of this paper is to try to fathom Frege's reasons for holding this position. But before beginning this task it might be well to give a superficial though not misleading presentation of Frege's conception of meaning.

It is well known that Frege's theory of meaning is a *referential* theory. In a referential theory of meaning each word and each expression of the language refers to something, and the "meaning" of the word or expression is either (a) that to which it refers, or (b) the relation between the expression and that to which it refers. Some well-known philosophers who, at some time or another, have held referential theories of meaning are Russell, Wittgenstein, Alonso Church, C. I. Lewis, Rudolph Carnap, and Morris R. Cohen.

In Frege's theory of meaning,² each word (almost) and each declarative sentence has a *reference* and a *sense*. The reference of a declarative sentence is its truth-value: the Truth if the sentence is true or the False if the sentence is false. The sense of a declarative sentence is the *thought* expressed by the sentence. The reference of a descriptive word or phrase depends on the particular sentence in which it occurs. In simple cases, it is either an *object* or a *concept* depending on whether the word or phrase is a "*name*" or a *predicate* respectively. The *sense* of a word or phrase is very difficult to characterize. It also depends on the sentence in which it occurs; in simple cases it is something like the set of properties associated with the reference of the word or phrase. But this characterization is obviously inadequate in many cases (e.g., "dragon" has no referent but it has sense); nevertheless, this characterization of word sense serves the purpose of giving some idea of what is intended. For the purpose of this paper, it is unnecessary to say anything else about Frege's theory of meaning. In particular, I will say nothing about "indirect reference" (or "referential opacity," in Quine's expression).

With these introductory paragraphs behind us, we return to the problem of word-meaning vs. sentence-meaning. In the introduction to *Grundlagen der Arithmetik*, Frege asserts that in the writing of that work he has always kept in mind three fundamental principles:

A- "Always to separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective."

B- "Never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition."

C- "Never to lose sight of the distinction between concept and object."

It is obviously with the second principle that I shall be mainly concerned, and throughout this essay I shall refer to it as "Principle B."³ But I should say a few words about the others. Principle A is fundamental to Frege's thought. He wishes to distinguish between the particular (psychological) "idea" present in the mind of a certain individual at a given time, from the objective, logical notion which is common to many minds. Thus for example, he holds that one must distinguish between the psychological

idea that arises in the mind of a given individual when the word 'four' is heard, and the number four, an objective entity that has always existed and that is the same for all minds. Principle A is so important to him, that his only comment with respect to Principle B in the introduction to "Grundlagen" is that unless B is observed, Principle A will be violated: "If the second principle is not observed, one is almost forced to take as the meanings of words mental pictures or acts of the individual mind." He says nothing else with respect to this principle at this time. Principle C, fundamental as it is to his logical theory, would probably have never been discovered without assuming principle B. I shall not be directly concerned with C in what follows.

It is quite surprising that Frege hardly ever mentioned Principle B throughout the whole of his writings. Besides the explicit reference that he makes to that principle in the introduction to the "Grundlagen," he mentions it again in Sections 60 and 62 of the same work, and it seems in no other place. Nevertheless, his use of it is pervasive: his analysis of the concept of number could never have been achieved without the closest attention to the use of number words in complete sentences. Page after page of the "Grundlagen" is studded with examples in which number words are used, and his meticulous analysis of the sentences in which they occur is what allows him to arrive to his famous definitions of numbers.

What becomes evident upon reading Frege's "Grundlagen" is that Principle B is among other things, a methodological principle for the study of meaning. Actually, this principle could easily be interpreted as the precursor of Wittgenstein's advice to look for the "use" rather than for the "meaning." Frege himself betrays this attitude in Section 46 of "Grundlagen" where he finally decides to present his solution to the problem of the content of a statement of number. He says (emphasis added), "It should throw some light on the matter to consider number in the context of a judgement which brings out its basic use."

Principle B as a methodological principle has had enormous influence in the manner in which philosophers analyze basic philosophical problems. Whereas previously, philosophers would attempt to analyze directly the *concept of cause* or the *nature of cause* (for example), today one finds them analyzing sentences in which the word 'cause' appears.

It is commonplace among critics of the reference theory of meaning to suppose that questions like, "What could 'if' or 'although' or 'only' refer to?" make it obvious that the reference theory is completely untenable. Frege, however, was not convinced at all that the inability to conceive or imagine an object or concept upon hearing a word which referred to it was in any way a good reason to deny an objective meaning to that word. After all, he says,⁴

Even so concrete a thing as the Earth we are unable to imagine as we know it to be; instead we content ourselves with a ball of moderate size, which serves us as a symbol for the Earth, though we know quite well it is very different from it. . . . That we can form no idea of its content is therefore no reason for denying all meaning to a word, or for excluding it from our vocabulary. We are indeed only imposed on by the opposite view because we will, when asking for the meaning of a word, consider it in isolation, which leads us to accept an idea as the meaning. Accordingly, any word for which we can find no corresponding mental picture appears to have no content. But we ought always to keep before our eyes a complete proposition. Only in the proposition have the words really a meaning. . . . It is enough if the proposition taken as a whole has a sense; it is this that confers on its parts also their content.

This is the second time that Frege ever mentions the Principle; and this time he uses it for two purposes. On the one hand, he shows how, in his view, words like the logical particles, of which we can form no idea, still have an objective meaning. On the other hand, immediately following the above paragraph, he specifies precisely how Principle B is to be used as a methodological principle:

This observation is destined, I believe, to throw light on quite a number of difficult concepts, among them that of the infinitesimal, and its scope is not restricted to mathematics either.

Frege seems to be saying that principle B acquires fundamental importance with philosophically difficult concepts. Only then can you see its most urgent need. One could argue whether "blue" has meaning in isolation or not. But there is no doubt that if one wants to be clear about "number" or "meaning" or "infinitesimal," for example, there is no other means but to follow Frege's Principle.

In Section 62 of "Grundlagen" Frege addresses himself to the definition of numbers. He again—for the last time in all of his work I believe—explicitly mentions the principle and makes use of it: "Since it is only in the context of a proposition that words have any meaning, our problem becomes this: To define the sense of a proposition in which a number word occurs." This he does by choosing identity *statements* as having the appropriate logical form for these definitions.

Among Frege's critics, we find for example P. T. Geach. In his essay, "Subject and Predicate,"⁵ Geach argues that proper names express a complete thought, that they have some sort of independent sense; and that common names "also admit of this independent use no less than proper names. A common noun standing by itself may be used to refer to any individual of a given sort." From this he concludes that "the view put forward by Frege and Wittgenstein that it is only in the context of a sentence that a name stands for something, seems to [Geach] to be certainly wrong."⁶

This conclusion, as put forth by Geach, is a bit rash. As grammarians and philosophers (e.g., Russell,⁷ Wittgenstein,⁸ and Quine⁹) have pointed

out, in the appropriate circumstances, a single word may express a complete proposition. It seems likely that Geach has overlooked this possibility, particularly since in the essay to which I referred, he argues that all sentences can be given a subject-predicate analysis. But let us suppose for the sake of argument that what he is actually suggesting is that within a sentence like 'Peter struck Malchus,' the proper name 'Peter' has a completely independent meaning. Frege has to deny this.

One possible argument that Frege could give would be this: in certain occasions a proper name may express a complete thought. For example, Peter's little brother may be calling Peter: "Peter!" he might yell. Or Peter's mother, finding him downtown when he should be in school may express her disapproval by simply uttering his name: "Peter." Is there any reason to suppose that what is expressed by the proper names 'Peter' in either of these two occasions is the same as what is expressed by this proper name in the sentence 'Peter struck Malchus'? In the previous two occasions there is nothing to be added to the proper name, except perhaps another complete sentence. It does therefore seem that in the three word sentence the proper name 'Peter,' as used there, does not perform a complete act; there is something lacking, something unresolved about it.

What is lacking and unresolved in a proper name within a sentence becomes quite clear in Wittgenstein's analysis of Frege's Principle B. It is best to go to the *Philosophical Investigations* where we find a remarkably deep interpretation of Principle B.¹⁰

Naming is . . . not a move in the language-game—any more than putting a piece in its place on the board is a move in chess. We may say: *nothing* has so far been done when a thing has been named. It has not even got a name in the language-game. This was what Frege meant too, when he said that a word had meaning only as part of a sentence.

We see that Wittgenstein agrees completely with Frege. They both hold that no word, not even proper names have any meaning except in a proposition. Wittgenstein's explanation, however, is impregnated with his "use" conception of meaning, and this was not Frege's view. Is there any reason to suppose that Wittgenstein is accurately describing Frege's views, as he claims? Or is this explanation of Principle B just Wittgenstein's? And what is Wittgenstein saying, anyway? As we shall now see, it is very reasonable to suppose that Wittgenstein has correctly interpreted what Frege meant.

The clue to the answer to these questions, I believe, can be grasped by considering Frege's *content-stroke* (or assertion sign, as it is often called), which he defines in his *Begriffsschrift* (Section 2) work which he wrote five years before his *Grundlagen*. Frege thinks that one should distinguish an asserted sentence from one whose content is merely being considered. Thus, for example, the sentence 'Michael brought a car' should be

distinguished from 'the circumstance that Michael brought a car' which "occurs" in the sentence 'Michael brought a car.' In the sentence, something is being asserted; in the phrase, the same thing is merely being considered. Frege believes that the phrase logically precedes the sentence, and that in a correct logical language this precedence should be manifest.

As I understand Wittgenstein, he claims that Frege regards words in a similar manner as he regards 'Michael brought a car' and 'the circumstance that Michael brought a car.' Thus in the case of proper names, for example, the proper name, if not *used* in a proposition, passively *presents* its meaning. Only when *used* in a proposition does it actually perform its linguistic function (naming and whatever-else it does).

Thus, in this manner, have Wittgenstein and Frege presented us with a magnificent insight into the nature of our query!

NOTES

¹ More often than not, when we talk about sentences we shall have in mind a *statement* (a declarative sentence which is either true or false).

² See, if particular P. Geach and M. Black, *Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966).

³ R. Sternfeld, in his book *Frege's Logical Theory* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1966) has called the above principle, "The Philosophical Principle of Unity," but I shall not follow his lead, as the name seems too pretentious for my taste. Sternfeld also points out that Hempel, in "On the Logical Positivists' Theory of Truth" (*Analysis* II, 1935) treats Frege's Principle B. However, I was unable to get a copy of this issue and am in no position to react to it.

⁴ Gottlob Frege, *Grundlagen der Arithmetik* (New York: Harper Torchbooks 1884-1953) p. xxii, Section 60.

⁵ P. T. Geach, "Subject and Predicate," *Mind* Vol. 59 (1950) pp. 461-482.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 462.

⁷ Bertrand Russell, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1940-1962) p. 23.

⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *ibid.* Sec. 19.

⁹ Willard V. O. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press 1960) Sec. 2 and Sec. 3.

¹⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1953) Sec. 49.

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