

# Frege's Theory of Proper Names

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## ABSTRACT

Gottlob Frege, in order to explain the relationship between language and reality, believes that in addition to the subjective meaning and external reference of words, related to the words and signs in their entirety, there is also a third thing that expresses how the words designate or stand for external references. Frege calls this third phenomenon the sense of words. Sense is the mode of presentation of reference which is designated by a proper name. Sense contrary to meaning, which is subjective and personal, is an objective and external matter that everyone can enjoy or access to it. Frege's theory will be examined in this article with the aim of showing how the theory is incomplete. Besides the fact that there is an inconsistency in his view concerning the nature of meaning (Frege considers sense sometimes objective and on other occasions something imaginary.), his argument to prove the objectivity of sense is unsuccessful. Even if we accept his assumption of the objectivity of sense, Frege cannot drive the problem of psychologism out of the path of human knowledge. That is, Frege fails to achieve its original objective; proving that psychologism is wrong.

**Keywords:** *language, sense, proper name, reference, theory of meaning, idea, psychologism*

## Introduction

Today, however, analytic philosophy as independent and different from continual philosophies is disputed, but if we want to get acquainted with this kind of philosophy, it is necessary and inevitable to know its pioneers. According to many philosophers, Frege is the founder of analytic philosophy. Even if, like some others, Russel is the founder, Frege's importance is not diminished. Russell was deeply influenced by Frege. Of course, Frege's reputation is owed to Russell, for he was the one who brought Frege out of isolation and introduced him to the philosophical community of that time. One who believes in the privileged position of Frege is French philosopher Jean Lacoste. According to Lacoste, not

only analytic philosophy but contemporary philosophy in its entirety begins with Frege's logic book "Concept Script". Lacoste compares Frege to Descartes and says that Frege is at the beginning of our age and all starts with him (Lacoste, 1996: 8-27).

If we accept that the characteristic feature of analytic philosophy is the centrality of philosophy of language and new logic, then without a doubt, Frege is its founder. "Although philosophers have long speculated about language, it wasn't until the late nineteenth century that the philosophy of language emerged as a self-conscious and systematic area of study. Four publications by Gottlob Frege marked this emergence (Scott, 2010: 21). Despite the fact that logic and mathematics were the main 8 of Frege, his philosophy of language has a significant place in his system of philosophy and analytic tradition overall. "His work has shaped everything which has been written in the philosophy of language in the analytic tradition. I think there are two principal reasons for this. First, his philosophy of language presents a way of accepting what seems most natural and intuitive about the kind of approach to language found in Lock, while decisively rejecting what seems most questionable about it. And, secondly, his work offers the prospect of a thoroughly systematic approach to meaning" (Morris, 2022: 21).

Frege had a profound influence on all subsequent analytic philosophers, especially Russell, Wittgenstein, Moore and Carnap. "I will only mention that I am indebted to Frege's great works and of the writings of my friend Mr. Bertrand Russell for much of the stimulation of my thoughts" writes Wittgenstein in the preface of his book "*Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*" (Wittgenstein, 2021: 23). Outside of the field of analytic philosophy, Frege had lasting effects too. As an example, his critique of psychologism prompted Husserl to reconsider his philosophy, the result of this revision is the establishment of the phenomenological method, in which we clearly see Frege's influence (Smith and Smith, 2006: 39-48). Aside from Frege's own original achievements, it is his influence on analytic philosophers that arouse a strong desire to pay attention to his philosophy (Dummett, 1967: V.3:225).

Among the many issues that Frege has raised on philosophical logic and philosophy of mathematic, his theory of meaning has a special place. As Hans Sluga says: "his logical works have been absorbed into contemporary philosophy, with the discovery of Russell's contradiction, his mathematical philosophy is cluttered, but what remains prominent is his philosophical logic, at the center of which is the theory of meaning and reference"(Sluga, 1999:153) or "in terms of contemporary analytic philosophy, this theory is Frege's most interesting theory" (Sluga, 1999: 154).

Frege concerned with the relation of language to reality, believes that in addition to the meaning of word that exist in the mind and the reference of words (something or the entity the word or expression designates) that exist in the external world, there is a third thing related to the words that expresses how words relate its external references or how they represent their references. Frege calls it the sense of words which is unlike to meaning of words which is subjective and personal, it is objective and all humans can share it. Frege doesn't just think only word have sense, but he also believes that common noun and sentence, generally speaking, all well-formed expression also have it. For the first time, he made the distinction between sense and reference in his article "Function and Concept". In fact, this differentiation is his own inventions and then in 189, he extended this distinction, defended it and responded to possible objections in another article "*On Sense and Reference*" (Kenny, 2000:126).

In this paper, it is tried to show that the theory of meaning of Frege is an incomplete theory. That is, it is not possible to establish a fourth thing besides the word, the sense and the reference. For Frege's argument to prove the existence of meaning is incomplete. His view, in reality, is plagued by the same problem that plagued the theory he was wary of.

### **Frege's main problem in the theory of meaning**

Equality or identity statement is the main problem of Frege in the theory of meaning. In fact, his main motivation to address this issue is to find a solution for the problem of identity statements. In the beginning, in his book "*Concept Script*", he offers a solution to this problem, but later in the article "On Sense and Reference" he deviates from that solution and chooses another view that is his particular theory of meaning. This is how Frege begins his article: "equality gives rise to challenging questions which are not altogether easy to answer. Is it a relation? A relation between objects, or between names or sings of objects? In my Begriffsschrift [Concept Script] I assumed the later". As mentioned, Frege abandons his first idea, which results that sense is objective and something other than reference so that everyone can access it. Before we got into the Frege's solution, let's take a look at the problem.

As is evident in the quote we have just made from Frege, the question that occupied him was that what are the two sides of the relation that exist in the identity statements or equality? In another words, what are the two sides of the equation in identity statements? An identity statement according to Frege is a statement in which an identity is decreed between two proper names. A proper name is a word, sing or phrase that denotes a certain object. Like Aristotle who refers or denotes to Aristotle, Plato's most famous pupil and the author of Nicomaches Ethics. "I call anything a name that is a sign of a certain object" Frege writes in "*On Concept and Object*" (Frege, 1977, A: 47).

In identity statements or propositions like "A is B", the point is that in every sense we consider A is B or in other words, A and B are one and the same. The relationship between the two sides are identity (Frege, 1977, A: 175) to clarify the meaning of Frege's identity, it is better to see his analysis of "is" in his article "On Concept and Object". Frege explains that "is" has two types of uses: 1) sometimes "is" is used as a copular verb and it just links the subject to predicate. For this reason, it can be replaced with other appropriate words. For example, the statement "leaf is green" or "Ali is smiling" are examples of this first use which can be said "Ali laughs" instead of the previous statement. Frege holds that the meaning of these statements is to put an object under a concept or it attributes the subject to predicate. For example, the true intent of the statement "leaf is green" is to put the subject, leaf, under the predicate "green" which is in fact a concept. The word "is" indicates the predicate, namely, it shows that the predicate encompasses the subject. 2) Sometimes the word "is" is used for identity. In this case "is" is equal to identity and it works as equal in mathematical equations. In this position, "is" is no longer the predicate sign and for this reason it is not replaceable&; for it is part of predicate. For instant, in "the morning star is Venus" the morning star and Venus are both proper names and both of them designate the same object. In this example, "Venus" alone is not the predicate but "is Venus" is.

Considering the particular analysis of categorical or attributed propositions he makes and his idea that the meaning of an attributed proposition is nothing but to insert the subject under the predicate, so the propositions that are of the second kind, they won't be attributed proposition. For, in these propositions we have two proper names that both imply or refer to

one and the same object. Therefore, the second proper name cannot be considered as the predicate of the proposition; because, according to Frege, the predicate should always be a universal concept, whereas in the example in question, we are faced a proper name not a universal concept. Now, when the second name was not predicate, the word “is” is no longer the sign of attribute but part of the predicate. Frege calls such propositions, identity statements which both side of them are proper names (Frege, 1977, A: 43-44).

Now, given the description of what identity statements are, Frege faces the question what are the two sides of these types of propositions? In the language of Aristotelian logic, what are the subject and predicate of identity statements which are united with each other? Frege believes there are two possibilities: first, identity is between the two words which are both sign of one and the same thing. Secondly, identity is between referents of these two words. These referents are, in fact, objects in external world that the two words refer to (Frege, 2001, B: 23).

In his book “Concept Script”, Frege chooses the first possibility, believes the proposition “A is B” means that two words, A and B, refer to one thing, and in fact, the topic discussed in the statement is these linguistic signs, not their objective referents. Frege’s argument in the book is like below.

If we treat the identical relation in the proposition “A is B” as a relation between referents that A and B as proper names refer to it, then the proposition “A is B” is no different from the proposition “A is A” or “B is B”. for it is clear that the referent of A is the same as B. thus in this case, proposition “A is B” expresses the relation that object in question has with itself. That is, this proposition will be the same as the previous one (A is A).

Consequent of hypothetical proposition is invalid. For proposition “A is B”, in terms of epistemological value or cognitive significance, has two major differences with proposition “A is A”: firstly, proposition “A is A” is analytic and do not tender any new knowledge. In total, all analytical propositions do not produce new knowledge. On the opposite side, synthetic propositions, in the form of “A is B”, expand our knowledge. These kinds of propositions create and render new knowledge. For instance, “the sun that rose today is yesterday’s sun” is an example of synthetic proposition which is one of the most valuable discoveries in astronomy. Secondly, the proposition “A is A” is valid in a prior way. Whilst synthetic propositions in form of “A is B” are not possible to be proved in a prior way. The last type of propositions has posterior validity, that is, their truth value (true or falsity) can only be discovered after perceptual observation and practical experience.

As a result, Frege concludes that of the two possibilities, the second one is false. Therefore, we have to say that the two words have the identical relation among themselves, and their referents lack this relationship. So “A is B” means that A and B as two proper names refer to one object and the forging proposition expresses the relation between the two names and this relationship is the product of the relation that each name has with the object (Frege, 2001, B: 23).

In this article “On Sense and Reference”, Frege chooses a view against his former opinion and holds that identity is directed towards a third thing other than names and their referents. In fact, Frege here defends his former stance that equality or identity statements are not about referents, but he admits that he is incapable of proving that identity statements refer to names or words. For the problem is not like a contradiction between two things, if one is true, the other is necessarily false. There is also a third option. He, in “On concept and

Reference” focuses on the third possibility. His argument in defense of the third option can be expressed in this way:

Based on the arguments in the book *“Concept Script”*, it became clear that the meaning of identity statement, in the form of “A is B” is that A and B as linguistic signs refer to a single object. That is, identity statement signifies a particular relation among signs, not objects.

It is obvious that only as long as this relation is maintained that A and B as signs refer to a single and unique object. In other words, these two names must designate one and only one object. The mediation of the relation between these two signs is their relation to the single object. That is to say, identity among A and B is the effect of the relation that they have with a unique object; because they are both sign or name of the same object, we can establish between them the identity relation. On other hand, what human being uses as a sign for an object is his own choice. Namely, signs are contractual and humans can change the signs and their meaning. Therefore, signs are artificial and are under the will of humans who made them. What was said so far can be concluded that identity in propositions like “A is B” means that some of human made signs appointed for single objects. Identity statements just refer to things that are arranged by humans. Therefore, identity statement says nothing about the actual objects which are the referents of those signs or names. For this reason, these kinds of statements or propositions contain no new knowledge about the world. Form the above points it becomes necessary to endorse once again Frege’s previous view in *“Concept Script”*. In fact, Frege, through these points, wanted to show that his first position was correct. As a result, it can be repeated again that these are the signs that have identity relation among themselves and just for this reason they lack to render new knowledge about the world.

But it is obvious that in many cases, when we speak of identity statements, our aim is to express now knowledge about the world and the referents of signs which we use. As an example, which belongs to Frege himself, the proposition “the morning star is the evening star” contains new knowledge about the real world. So far, in the form of hypothetical syllogism, Frege argues that if the two sides of identity statement be two words, which are a sing or a name of something, then this statement does not provide any new knowledge about that thing, while in many cases, the purpose of using these types of propositions is to state now knowledge about the real world. Therefore, the two sides of these statement or propositions are not words. Now that Frege with this argument had refuted his previous idea and makes it clear that identity relation is not established between words, we have to see which two things or objects have this relation among themselves.

As we have said so far, if in the proposition “A is B”, the difference between A and B as signs is simply that they are two symbols for an object, and their differences are only in their form and they do not have any differences in the way of denoting or referring to the object, in this case, the epistemological value of “A is B” will be the same as the epistemological value of “A is A”; and therefore the proposition “A is B” and proposition “A is B” will be as analytic as “A is A”, consequently, “A is B” is not giving any new knowledge about the world.

The epistemological value of “A is B” will only be different from the value of “A is A” if they would be different from one another in their way of referring to their referents. In other words, the two propositions have different epistemological value if there be a different in the way they display the object. So, to say that “A is b” is of epistemological value other

than “A is A”, we have to say that A and B are different in their way of referring to their referent. Then besides the thing that proper name refers to, there is a third thing that is the way of displaying the referent (Frege, 2001, B: 23-24). The referent of both “morning star” and “evening star” is the same which is the star of Venus, but the meaning of “morning star” is different from the meaning of “evening star”. The first means a star that is visible in the early morning, but the second means a star that can be seen at night. Therefore, it can be concluded that in identity statements that decrees identity between proper names, the identity is neither between the proper names nor between their referents, but it is a relation established between the two meanings each of these words denotes to.

### **Proper Name, Sense, Reference and Idea**

What is the connection between proper name, sense and reference? According to Frege, the relationship is kind of correspondence. That means that there is a correspondence between a certain sense and a sign and also a correspondence between a certain sense and an object. “The regular connection between a sign, its sense, and its reference is of such a kind that to the sign.

There corresponds a definite sense and to that, in turn a definite reference, while to a given reference (an object) there does not belong only a single sign” (1977: 58). The referent of every proper name is a thing which we designate it by the proper name in question. A referent is something that is in outer world, proper name designates it or refer to it, so in this respect, referent is objective thing and name is linguistic thing. Besides these two, there are two other things, namely, sense and idea. We have an idea of every objects in our mind, so idea is something imaginary and only exist in our minds. But sense is not mental and subjective; rather it is objective like the referent but something other than object itself. “The reference of a proper name is the object itself which we designate by its meaning; the idea, which we have in that case, is wholly subjective; in between lies the sense, which is indeed no longer subjective like the idea, but is yet not the object itself” (Frege, 2001, B: 25).

Let us imagine someone is looking at the moon through a telescope. The moon is the referent which is being observed. But in observation, there are two other elements: a real image that falls on the lens inside the telescope and an image that falls in the retina of the viewer. Frege likens sense to lens image and idea or imagination to the retina image. Image reflected in the telescope is something objective which everyone can see it, but each observer has his or her own mental image which subjective and out of the reach of others. This is the example Frege gave to explain the point in question (Frege, 2001, B: 26).

Frege believes that everyone understands the meaning of proper name if they are familiar with the language; but he reminds us that understanding of sense only illuminates one aspect of the referent. The comprehensive knowledge of referent comes when we could tell if any meaning belongs to that referent or not and “comprehensive knowledge of the reference would require us to be able to say immediately whether any given sense belongs to it” (Frege, 2001, B: 24). To sum up his opinion, we must say that a proper name expresses its meaning and refers to its reference or stand for it. By using a sign, we express its meaning and show its referent. “A proper name (word, sign, sign combination, expression) expresses its sense, stands for or designates its reference. By means of a sign, we express its sense and designate its reference” (Frege, 2001, B: 27). Therefore, according to Frege, there are four different things, word, concept or idea, sense and referent. Names express the sense, senses determinate referents. So, names through sense point to outer referents and for this reason although language connects us to the outside world, there is always an intermediary which is sense.

In classic logic and philosophy, there is a belief that mental ideas can also have identity relation among themselves. Frege doesn't mention that much, for he believes that this

theory leads to psychologism which he strongly disagrees with it. To avoid the fallacy of psychologism, he introduces a new theory. In his article, "On Sense and Reference", Frege explains that we need to distinguish the sense and reference of words or signs from the idea that comes with the word and should not confuse the idea that comes to mind when we hear a word with its sense or reference. "The reference and sense of a sign are to be distinguished from the associated idea. If the reference of a sign is an object perceivable by the senses, my idea of it is an internal image, arising from memories of sense impressions which I have had and acts, both internal and external, which I have performed." As he himself writes (Frege, 2001, B: 24-25). Elsewhere, he has pointed out that in order to avoid prolongation, he simply uses the word idea instead of sense impressions, imaginations, sensations, feelings, moods, inclinations and wishes. Therefore, we must be aware that the word "idea" has a broad meaning within the framework of Frege's theory of meaning. Frege believes that such ideas people have in mind differ, in two senses, from the ideas other people have of the same words in mind. Firstly, different people have different imaginations of a word; secondly, a single word implants different idea. "Idea is often saturated with feeling; the clarity of its separate parts varies and oscillates. The same sense is not always connected, even in the same man, with the same idea. The idea is subjective: one man's idea is not that of another. There result, as a matter of course, a variety of differences in the ideas associated with the same sense" (Frege, 2001, B: 26). Consider this example: the name "Aristotle" evokes different ideas for same and different people. The name associates with "the pupils of Plato", "the teacher of Alexander the great" and "the author of Nicomachean Ethics". For other it may associate with one of these or more than it.

### **Critique of Frege's theory**

Frege is not only an advocate of the idea that sense and reference are two aspects of every proper names but actually he is the establisher of it. Yet his theory on the relationship between sense and reference is ambiguous. If as Frege says, proper names have an objective sense, he must make it clear how is the relationship between these senses and a single reference that is designated by a name? Aristotle, the pupil of Plato and the founder of logic are all different proper names for an individual. According to Frege each of these names has its own independent and external senses and quite distinct form senses of others; then he clearly explains what the relation is between different senses and a unique reference. Without an obvious and distinct explanation, Frege will fail to achieve his important aim which was an explanation of knowledge and knowing of external world. Knowledge is knowledge of external world not words, whereas Frege only explain our knowledge of the words.

Frege believes that sense is objective and out of people's minds as it does not depend on any person or mind. Now Frege must answer how do we get to sense which locates outside of our minds? Knowing something beyond oneself requires a kind of unity and an existential relationship with that thing. Until such a connection is made, the person is not the knower and the object is not the subject of knowing.

Frege does not pose any argument in favor of the external existence of sense. He has correctly pointed out that the cognitive value of "A is B" is only different form. "A is B" is that A and B be different in the manner of representing their reference. That is, since their reference is one and the same, alteration and duality of these two propositions are only possible if A and B be different in their way of referring to their reference. If they were like each other in their way of referring or denoting, then the difference between two propositions also disappeared. Frege concludes the aforementioned point: "It is natural, now, to think of there being connected with a sign (name, combination of words, letter), besides that, to which the sign refers, which may be called the reference of the sign, also what I should like to call the sense of the sign, wherein the mode of presentation is contained" (1977: 24). Consequently, there are two different things in the world; reference and sense, both of them are objective and independent of mind. But this conclusion seems incomplete. Even if the two

names are different “in the mode of presentation of that which is designated”, it is not reasonable to infer that besides that reference there is a third objective things Frege calls it sense.

## Conclusion

Frege established his theory of meaning in search of a solution for equality or identity statements puzzle and came to the conclusion that besides the reference which is objective there is also sense which is objective too. Hence in language, according to Frege we are faced with four things: sign, reference, sense and idea or metal conception; among them, reference and sense are objective and independent of mind. That is, the two are common among all humans and everyone could access to them. Unlike reference and sense, idea is not so. Therefore, idea is personal and out of the reach of others. Not only does proper names have objective sense, but declarative sentences also have it which he calls it thought. Whereas the reference of a name is an object, the reference of proposition or declarative sentence is its truth value.

There seems to be some problems with Frege’s theory of meaning. Obviously, problems arise from Frege’s belief that the sense is objective and external. This belief leads to several problems: contradictory (in his works, sense is sometimes objective and other times subjective) and incompleteness (does not provide strong argument in defense of his belief). The overall result that can be taken is that Frege does not succeed to override psychologism which was his main project.

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