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Informativeness and multiple senses

Resumen: *Stavroula Glezakos (2009) argumenta que Frege mismo no podía plantear el puzzle de Frege sin apoyarse en la distinción sentido y referencia, una distinción que se suponía motivada por el puzzle, mas no presupuesta por este. En este artículo argumento que aún hay algunas preguntas problemáticas sobre la informatividad de las oraciones de identidad, y discuto el problema generado por la aseveración fregeana de que uno y el mismo nombre propio puede tener diferentes sentidos para distintos hablantes, un tema acerca del cual, en mi opinión, Frege habría debido problematizar más.*

Palabras claves: *Nombres. Identidades informativas. Múltiples sentidos. Referencia. Frege.*

Abstract: *Stavroula Glezakos (2009) argues that Frege himself could not pose Frege's puzzle without relying on the distinction between sense and reference, a distinction that the puzzle was supposed to motivate, not presuppose. In this paper I argue that there are still some puzzling questions about the informativeness of identity sentences, and I discuss a problem generated by the Fregean contention that one and the same proper name can have different senses for different speakers, an issue that, in my view, Frege should have puzzled more about.*

Key words: *Names. Informative Identities. Multiple Senses. Reference. Frege.*

Identity, Frege tells us, “gives rise to challenging questions” (1892, 57). One of those challenges, known as *Frege's Puzzle*, consists

in explaining the difference in cognitive value between sentences of the form $a=a$ and sentences of the form $a=b$. Thus presented the puzzle does not seem to have much of an intuitive purchase, at least when we compare it to other puzzles and challenges philosophers have pondered about throughout history. Tell your children and friends about Zeno's Arrow, Theseus' Ship or Russell's paradox and they will immediately recognize the tension. Frege's Puzzle, to the untrained ear, simply does not feel like a problem.

Some philosophers have argued that Frege's Puzzle is not pre-theoretical, that in order to generate the puzzle one needs to rely on substantial assumptions. Among them: that utterances of sentences express propositions, abstract entities that speakers are cognitively in touch with when they understand an utterance of a sentence, and that those propositions are transparent to the agent that grasps them.

Wittgenstein (1922) thought that no puzzle involving identity and identity sentences should arise in the conceptual notation which, after all, was the language of demonstrative science envisaged by Frege, and he devoted several propositions of the *Tractatus* to argue against Frege on this matter:

5.53 Identity of object I express by identity of sign, and not by using a sign for identity. Difference of objects I express by difference of signs.

5.531 Thus, I do not write 'f (a, b). a =b' but 'f (a, a)' (or 'f (b, b)'); and not 'f (a, b) . ~ a = b' , but 'f (a, b)'.

So, directly contradicting Frege's verdict in section 8 of the *Begriffsschrift*, entitled 'Need for

a sign for identity of content, introduction of such a sign', Wittgenstein concludes:

5.533 The identity-sign, therefore, is not an essential constituent of the conceptual notation (1922, 52).

On Frege's view the conceptual notation is the *lingua philosophica* created to represent thoughts, perspicuously and without ambiguity. If we are creating a perfect language, why make the mistake of giving two simple, unstructured names to the same object? Of course, Frege would insist on the need for an identity symbol to express identities such as 'c is the point of intersection of line A and line B' or '15 is the result of multiplying 3 and 5', but for Wittgenstein those sentences do not state the identity of an object with itself.

In any case, the position Frege endorses, whatever that is, is meant to extend also to natural language and it is undeniable that as users of natural language we often deal with things that have more than one name. So, whatever problem identity sentences raise, if any, is not to be solved or dissolved by appeal to the conceptual notation.

More recently, Howard Wettstein has argued that if we reflect on the conditions required for speakers of a language to become competent with the use of names, the alleged puzzle simply dissolves:

The mere possession of a name for an item [...] provides a crucial kind of contact with it. One can now [...] ask questions, make assertions, and so on that are about that very item. Names, from an epistemic point of view, ask very little of us, but generously provide for our needs [...] If one can refer to something without anything like a substantive cognitive fix on the referent, if the use of a name can be virtually blind epistemically, then why should it be the slightest bit surprising that a speaker might be competent with two co-referring names but have no inkling that they co-refer? (1989, 175).

There is no reason why a speaker should even suspect that two names are co-referential, so it is

not puzzling that a sentence such as "Hesperus is Phosphorus" can be informative. In fact, Wettstein argues, if anything is puzzling is that Frege was so confident that "Hesperus is Hesperus" would seem uninformative and a priori. Given that we know about so many different things that are called by the same name, the potential informativeness of "Hesperus is Hesperus" is the same as that of "Hesperus is Phosphorus". Uses of sentences such as "Paderewski is Paderewski" or "London is London" can be cognitively significant even if true.¹

Stavroula Glezakos' 2009 paper is another turn of the screw. In her view it is not just that there is no puzzle in Frege's puzzle; she argues that Frege himself could not pose the puzzle without relying on the distinction between sense and reference, a distinction that the puzzle was supposed to motivate, not presuppose.

My purpose here is not to discuss the details of Glezakos' argument and her conclusions. I will instead focus on two issues that her discussion touches upon. The first one has to do with general questions raised by the informativeness of identity statements. The appeal to the distinction between sense and reference appears to be motivated by them, but the role that Frege affords to senses is not required to meet the challenges. The second issue is one that, I will argue, Frege should have puzzled about more than he in fact did, for it is an issue raised by the distinction between sense and reference.

1. Some questions about identity

In spite of Glezakos' and Wettstein's negative conclusions, it seems to me that Frege is right about the pronouncement that opens "On Sense and Reference". Identity, indeed, gives rise to some challenging questions. I do not think that what has come to be known as Frege's Puzzle is a puzzle, for the reasons Wettstein (1989) has brought to the fore, nor that, as it is posed, it is even one of the most interesting questions one can raise about statements of identity.

But, for instance, it seems to me that a legitimate question, and one that arguably

preoccupied Frege, is the following: if statements of identity express just the identity of an object with itself, how can they ever be informative?² This question is entirely independent of the forms of statements, and of the claims about a priority and a posteriority that figure in the first paragraphs of “On Sense and Reference”. Let us grant that some utterances of “Hesperus is Phosphorus” or “Paderewski is Paderewski” are informative. If all the utterances express is the identity of a planet, or a man, with themselves, what is it that we learn? What do they add to what we already know? Why can they provoke the ‘aha!’ reaction? These are not, I think, questions that generate puzzles, but they deserve some reflection.

In Fregean orthodoxy identity sentences can be informative just in case the signs around the identity symbol express different senses. A non-informative identity sentence expresses a thought or proposition that contains or is determined by two identical senses, whereas an informative identity sentence expresses a thought or proposition determined by two different senses. In order to get the ‘aha!’ reaction, the proposition that the speaker grasps has got to be different from a proposition that simply captures the identity of an object with itself. And this leads to the conclusion that “Hesperus is Hesperus” and “Hesperus is Phosphorus” express different propositions, if it is possible for a speaker to find the second one informative after having accepted the first one. The orthodoxy extends beyond identity sentences: if it is possible to find that the sentence “Phosphorus is a planet” is informative, after having accepted “Hesperus is a planet”, the propositions that utterances of these two sentences express have got to be different. An appeal to Fregean senses seems to provide exactly what is required.

Thoughts, or propositions, are, in Frege’s view, the bearers of truth, the truth-conditional content of utterances of sentences. They are also the bearers of cognitive significance and are what speakers grasp when they understand an utterance of a sentence. Fregean thoughts are meant to be too many things.

What makes it tempting to reject that identity sentences express the identity of an object

with itself is just a theoretical assumption: the insistence that what is responsible for the cognitive significance of uses of sentences has to be also encapsulated in their truth-conditional content.

But after years of discussion of these questions, it seems to me that a case has been made for the separation of these two issues. If whatever accounts for informativeness and cognitive significance is different from the truth-conditional content, there is no reason to postulate that “Hesperus is Hesperus” and “Hesperus is Phosphorus” express different truth-conditional contents.

What do we learn when we are told “Hesperus is Phosphorus”? We learn a lot of things: that there is just one thing when we thought there were two, that we can now use the names ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ to talk about the same thing, that everything we associated to the name ‘Hesperus’ applies also to the thing we have been calling ‘Phosphorus’, that the information, images and connotations associated with ‘Hesperus’ and those associated with ‘Phosphorus’ can now be integrated, that the thing we thought was the planet that appeared in the morning sky is also the planet that appears in the evening sky ... all those are things we learn, and they explain why “Hesperus is Phosphorus” is significant. They do not have to be part of the truth-conditional content. If we accept something like John Perry’s multi-propositional stance³ we may even want to encapsulate them as propositions associated with the utterance of “Hesperus is Phosphorus”. It is nevertheless an extra step, and a substantial and, I deem, unnecessary one, to pack everything into a unit and to continue to think of *the* proposition expressed as playing all the roles Frege envisaged for it.

2. Multi-sense names

As Glezakov points out, Frege “notes that the name ‘Aristotle’ may be assigned different *Sinne* by different users, which is a very short step away from recognizing that the *same* user could assign different *Sinne* to a single name” (2009, 205).

Let us look at what Frege says in the famous footnote (1892, 58):

In the case of an actual proper name such as 'Aristotle' opinions as to the sense may differ. It might, for instance, be taken to be the following: the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great. Anybody who does this will attach another sense to the sentence 'Aristotle was born in Stagira' than will a man who takes as the sense of the name: the teacher of Alexander the Great who was born in Stagira. So long as the reference remains the same, such variations in sense may be tolerated, although they are to be avoided in the theoretical structure of a demonstrative science and ought not to occur in a perfect language.

In the first part of the note, Frege seems to be endorsing the view that a given person's name has just one sense, and that different people may have different opinions as to what that sense is. In so far as the doctrine of sense and reference is supposed to apply also to natural language and to natural language speakers, this would not be a good way to interpret what Frege meant. Senses are supposed to capture the cognitive significance of expressions. Proposing that speakers have just opinions about what the real sense of an expression is, would leave differences in cognitive significance unexplained, and it would amount to the postulation of an almost-hidden, non-transparent sense.

Frege's footnote has traditionally been interpreted as claiming that different speakers may attach different senses to the name of one and the same referent, and as Glezakos points out, the claim should be extended to individual speakers. It is very natural from a Fregean point of view, to accept that one and the same speaker may associate different senses to one and the same proper name. This would explain why "Paderewski is Paderewski" can be significant, and why a visitor who emerges in Hackney Downs may utter "London is not pretty" not realizing she is in the same city she was years before when she proclaimed "London is pretty!" from the top of the London Eye. In fact, for reasons that will emerge below, it seems to me

it is less problematic, from a Fregean standpoint, to recognize that the same speaker may associate different senses to different uses of a proper name than to recognize that different speakers engaged in a conversation may be associating such different senses.

The recognition of multiple-sense association creates some problems for the Fregean doctrine of sense and reference. Mark Richard (1989) pointed out that it poses problems for the Fregean doctrine of attitude ascription, for it is not clear what sense is being ascribed when a speaker utters, for instance "John believes that Aristotle was a great philosopher". But the problems arise even before we deal with indirect senses. If a group of speakers are engaged in a philosophical discussion, all using the name 'Aristotle', agreeing and disagreeing among themselves, we may ask: what are they communicating to one another? What are they agreeing or disagreeing about? If speaker A utters "Aristotle was the greatest Greek philosopher" attaching one sense to 'Aristotle' and speaker B attaches to 'Aristotle' a different sense, the thought that B grasps is not the thought that A expressed. That the two senses of 'Aristotle' determine the same referent does not make them any more similar.⁴ From a strictly Fregean perspective, A and B are just miscommunicating.⁵

The conceptual material associated with a name that provides an explanation of the cognitive significance of the name, is part of the asserted content, part of what is communicated and grasped. It would seem then an entirely accidental question whether the different senses associated to 'Aristotle' co-refer, and hence an accident if speakers do communicate.

Frege's note suggests that he does recognize the potential for trouble and hence the demand that this not occur in a demonstrative science nor in a perfect language. But for an imperfect language, like any natural language, Frege thinks that the variations in sense are tolerable, as long as the referent of the multiplicity of senses different speakers attach is one and the same. But this is close to a Millian intuition: as long as we are talking about the same thing, as long as we are all properly connected to the same individual, we are asserting propositions about

him, and thus we are properly communicating, agreeing or disagreeing, for it does not matter that we have different perspectives, different information, different mental files about the thing itself. All that is not part of what we are asserting, communicating, agreeing or disagreeing about.

A Millian who, like Ruth Marcus (1985/86), thinks that names are ‘the long finger of ostension’, tags bestowed on objects that refer without the mediation of any semantic mechanism, can easily take that position. It is not clear that Frege can.⁶

On the one hand the possibility of multiple senses seems to be an advantage, as it provides an explanation of the cognitive significance of different uses of one and the same name by a given speaker in different occasions. On the other hand, the fact that speakers can entertain different senses when they engage in conversation would make it seem that miscommunication is rampant. This is a puzzling situation generated by the distinction between sense and reference, and it is somewhat surprising that Frege did not puzzle more about it.⁷

dependent, what all those senses have in common is their dependence on the same object. So they have more in common than the kind of senses that traditional interpretations of Frege would recognize, and what they have in common is precisely the object they depend on. So it would not be surprising that Frege did not have any qualms about finding the existence of different co-referential senses tolerable. Here I have considered only the traditional reading of Frege, among other things because the neo-Fregean stance is, in my view, shaky on exegetical grounds, for it ignores Frege’s own acknowledgment of the existence of senses of names that fail to determine a reference and the commitment to the view that senses determine reference.

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Notes

1. Part of the argument in Stavroula Glezakos’ 2009 relies on a similar claim, that “Frege himself should not hold that there are in-principle epistemic differences between true identity sentences of different forms” (207).
2. Like Wittgenstein, I only count as identity sentences those in which the ‘is’ is flanked by unstructured referential devices. ‘Hesperus is the brightest body to appear in the evening sky’ does not express the identity of an object with itself.
3. See Perry (1988) for a very early version of the multi-propositional proposal.
4. Neo-Fregeans will disagree on this issue. More below.
5. This is why, in my view, the recognition that a speaker may associate different senses to a name on different occasions of use is less problematic. For there is something akin to miscommunication to her former self, when the speaker asserts ‘London is pretty’ and then ‘London is not pretty’.
6. Neo-Fregeans can identify the source of the intuition: if the senses of names are object

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