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Cognitive Value and Natural Language Proper Names

Resumen: En “¿Puede Frege formular el puzzle de Frege?”, Stavroula Glezakos argumenta que Frege no puede formular su puzzle sin apelar a algo como la noción teórica de Sinn y, así, el denominado puzzle no afecta a los no-fregeanos, y los fregeanos no deberían desconcertarse por este, puesto que es su marco de referencia el que lo genera y explica. Sin embargo, contrariamente a lo que Glezakos piensa, en este artículo argumento que tanto los fregeanos como los no-fregeanos por igual enfrentan un puzzle acerca de los enunciados verdaderos de identidad concernientes a los nombres propios que puede y debería formularse dadas algunas idiosincrasias de los lenguajes naturales. En efecto, parece que una teoría exitosa de los nombres propios del lenguaje natural debe apelar a entidades como el Sinn para capturar las diferencias cognitivas en los enunciados verdaderos de identidad.

Palabras claves: Frege. Enunciados de identidad. Valor cognitivo. Nombres propios. Lenguaje natural.

Abstract: In her “Can Frege Pose Frege’s Puzzle?”, Stavroula Glezakos claims that Frege cannot pose his puzzle without appealing to something like the theoretical notion of Sinn and so the so-called puzzle does not affect non-Fregeans and Fregeans should not be puzzled by it since it is their framework that both generates and explains it. But contrary to what Glezakos thinks, I argue in this paper that both Fregeans and non-Fregeans alike face a puzzle about true identity statements concerning proper

names that can and should be posed given some idiosyncrasies of natural languages. Indeed, it seems that a successful theory of natural language proper names must appeal to Sinn-like entities to capture cognitive differences in true identity statements.

Key words: Frege. Identity statements. Cognitive value. Proper names. Natural language.

Stavroula Glezakos opens her article, “Can Frege Pose Frege’s Puzzle?”, by seconding Kaplan’s assertion that “the commitment at the heart of [Frege’s] theory [of proper names is that] “[...] it is indisputable that distinct proper names have distinct cognitive values”” (2009, 202, footnote removed). Now whether there are good reasons to think that Frege’s theory is committed to this, an adequate theory of natural language proper names should not. This in turn partly allows us to appreciate that Glezakos’ interpretation of the puzzle as there being “in-principle epistemic differences between true identity sentences of different forms” (2009, 207) is not forced upon us and so that there being no such difference should not affect the motivation for some notion of Sinn.

Before fleshing out the above, let me make clear something. I think that if we are interested in accounting for phenomena in natural languages, then the solution lies in the direction to which Frege pointed us. Of course Frege did not seem to have much interest in natural languages (most of the time), as opposed to a logically perfect one

(*Begriffsschrift*).¹ Still it seems that a successful theory of natural language proper names, and more generally of speaker knowledge, must appeal to *Sinn*-like entities to capture (among other things) cognitive differences in true identity statements.

Frege's distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* is motivated by a series of puzzles. The one that will concern us here is the puzzle about true identity statements. Identity sentences of the form "a=a" are, in general, uninformative, analytic truths knowable a priori, whereas sentences of the form "a=b" are often informative and cannot always be known to be true a priori (Frege, 1984, 157-8, 176-7). The challenge is to explain how these statements (often) "differ in epistemic profiles" (Glezakos, 2009, 202). Frege's well-known solution is that, given the truth of the statements, the proper names, 'a' and 'b', have the same semantic value or *Bedeutung* (reference) but different *Sinne* that explain the difference in cognitive value. But Glezakos thinks that Frege cannot pose his puzzle without appealing to something like the theoretical notion of *Sinn* and so the so-called puzzle does not affect non-Fregeans and Fregeans should not be puzzled by it since it is their framework that both generates and explains it (2009, 203, 207).

Glezakos arrives at that conclusion because she understands the puzzle as suggesting that there is an in-principle epistemic difference between different types of identity statements, which she cannot find unless one posits the very same theoretical entities that the puzzle is meant to motivate. Now, Glezakos is right, as we shall soon see, that there is "no in-principle epistemic divide between sentences of the form a=a and a=b" (2009, 204). But neither a Fregean nor a non-Fregean about natural language proper names should understand the challenge as concerning an in-principle epistemic divide between identity sentences of distinct forms. The puzzle arises regardless of the form of the sentence and an explanation is required by Fregeans and non-Fregeans alike.

First, however, let us note that the difference in cognitive value cannot be due to differences in analyticity or a prioricity (or both). After all, consider the following pair of identity statements:

" $(2 \times 2^3) + 2 = 18$ " and " $18 = 18$ ".² While the former seems informative for most of us (since, although we understand it, we need to do some maths to judge the statement true), the latter does not. Anyhow, it is very plausible that both statements are a priori and analytic. So if we are not to adopt some controversial position regarding these issues in order to characterize the epistemic difference between these co-extensive expressions, we should not explain the informativeness of some identity statements over others in terms of analyticity or a prioricity.

Second, the puzzle need not be understood as concerning an "in-principle epistemic divide between sentences of the form a=a and a=b" (Glezakos, 2009, 204). After all, we all know that it is possible for the names 'Ateb' and 'Aphla' to be synonymous, in which case 'Ateb is Aphla' is not informative for someone who grasps this synonymy (cf. "IX is nine").³ So, given synonymy in natural languages, it seems pretheoretically that distinct proper names need not have distinct cognitive values. But surely it is also possible to find "Ateb is Aphla" informative, and so too "Ateb is Ateb". After all, natural languages have deficiencies (if compared to logically perfect ones) and one of those deficiencies is ambiguity: when a sign has more than one content.⁴ A language that can be used to conduct proofs must be unambiguous. Natural languages, on the other hand, are not designed for this purpose, but to promote communication of (roughly) the same thoughts with the same sentences (Frege, 1980, 115). Examples of ambiguous words are 'list', 'club', 'bank', 'bear' and 'match'. But proper names can be ambiguous too: they can have different bearers (e.g. 'London', 'Cambridge'). And one might wrongly take 'Ateb' to be one such name. That is, one might mistakenly think that a name, 'Ateb', names two things (after all, it might not be self-evident that the same object is being referred to).⁵ Somehow one might have got the idea that the name refers to two distinct things: say, the snow-capped mountain one saw on the northern horizon and the mountain on the southern horizon that the tribe were speaking of.⁶ If that scenario is possible (cf. Glezakos, 2009, 204-5, esp. fn. 9), "Ateb is Ateb" can be informative. So, given ambiguity in natural

languages, it seems pretheoretically that tokens of the same proper name need not have the same cognitive value either.

It seems then that the form of the identity statement does nothing to determine some epistemic difference between any pair of such statements. Given the above, we can have pairs of identity statements of the form (i) “a=a” and (ii) “a=b”, where both (i) and (ii) are informative or uninformative and where one but not the other is informative (i. e., (i) is informative but not (ii), and vice versa).

To illustrate all of these possibilities consider the following. We can imagine cases in which the identity statement (1) “Batman is Bruce Wayne” is not informative. For Alfred, for example, it is not. But for others, such as Batman’s enemies, (1) represents, as Frege (1984, 157) would put it, a very valuable extension of knowledge. We can, moreover, imagine cases in which (2) “Bruce Wayne is Bruce Wayne” is informative. For example, a person P might not realize that “Bruce Wayne is Bruce Wayne” is true because in one instance heard the name in connection with a superficial, dim-witted playboy and in another in connection with a charity-giving, business owner.⁷ And of course we can also imagine cases in which (2) is not informative at all. Now, we can easily then maintain that for Alfred neither (1) nor (2) are informative, while for P, when ignorant about the identity of Batman, both (1) and (2) are informative. Also, we can easily hold that for Batman’s enemies (1) is informative but not (2), while for P, when knowledgeable that Batman is the charity-giving, business owner, (2) is informative but not (1).⁸

The observed intuitive difference in cognitive value in these pairs of cases has nothing to do then with the form of the identity statements, neither does it have to do with one being analytic or a priori and the other synthetic or a posteriori. Frege might sometimes seem guilty of misleading us in that respect given the pairs of identity statements by which he illustrates the difference in cognitive value, but the puzzle does not rest on either of those features. Importantly, there is no principled epistemic difference between identity statements of the form “a=a” and “a=b”. Instances of expressions of either form can

be both uninformative and informative, given the right combination of co-referring names: i. e. names with the same or different ways of referring to the same thing (as Frege would say, of presenting the reference). And the difference in informativeness is reflected in the fact that, say, Batman’s enemies and person P (when knowledgeable that Batman is the charity-giving, business owner) can understand both (1) and (2) without thinking that they have the same truth-value: in other words, while taking different attitudes towards them (in the case of P, accepting (1) but rejecting, or remaining agnostic about, (2), and *vice versa* in the case of Batman’s enemies).⁹

The puzzle then should be understood as the challenge to explain how a true identity statement of either form can be informative in the above sense, as opposed to explain the difference in informativeness “between true identity sentences that contain a single name twice, and those that contain two names” (Glezakos, 2009, 204). And it is a challenge because if the identity statement picked out a relation between objects, then it is difficult to see how “a=a” and “a=b” could differ at all in cognitive value since ‘a’ and ‘b’ refer to the same object. If, on the other hand, it picked out a relation between signs, then it is difficult to see how the difference in cognitive value between “a=a” and “a=b” could be regarded as a very valuable extension of our knowledge (not merely verbal knowledge, as J. S. Mill would say) since we “cannot be forbidden to use any arbitrarily producible event or object as a sign for something” (Frege, 1984, 157).¹⁰

Reference then cannot explain the difference in cognitive value; and neither can signs. So the motivation to introduce some *Sinn*-like entity, as some sort of mode of presentation or determination of the *Bedeutung*: a way of thinking about something (e. g. of thinking of Bruce Wayne *as* Batman). It is in terms of a difference in the entities that we can explain such difference in cognitive value.¹¹ The Fregean then thinks that some distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* is required to resolve the puzzle that an identity statement can be both true and informative, since it can be understood without being known to be true. She suggests that the identity statement is true if the signs (whether

the same or not) on either side of the identity sign have the same *Bedeutung*, and that it is informative if those signs have different *Sinne*.

That is then what the Fregean resolution to the above neutrally and pretheoretically posed puzzle about true identity statements looks like, and how *Sinn*-like entities, which are concerned with the manner they designate things, can be motivated. But no substantive account of the notion of *Sinn* has been argued for. It has simply been argued that a puzzle about true identity statements can still be exploited to motivate a general Fregean approach to natural language proper names. Indeed, when the details are filled in and the substantive notion applied to a larger context, we might find out that no such notion is in fact viable. More importantly and contrary to what Glezakos claims, it is clear that both Fregeans and non-Fregeans alike face a puzzle about true identity statements concerning natural language proper names that can and should be posed.

Notes

1. But his “Über Sinn und Bedeutung” (a paper of key interest regarding the puzzle that concerns us here) can be understood as dealing with natural languages (given that he motivates his notion of *Sinn* by means of a second puzzle concerned with propositional attitude reports) and so too other writings, such as “Der Gedanke”; see Frege 1984.
2. Cf. Frege, 1984, 138.
3. Cf. Frege, 1980, 80.
4. Yet another deficiency concerns empty names (Frege, 1984, 168-9), and of course Frege uses his technical notion of *Sinn* to explain the meaningfulness of these expressions.
5. Cf. Frege, 1984, 80: “An object can be determined in different ways, and every one of these ways of determining it can give rise to a distinct name, and these distinct names then have different senses; for it is not self-evident that it is the same object which is determined in different ways”.
6. Although Frege (1984, 359) would probably demand that “for every proper name there shall be just one associated manner of presentation of the object so designated” (but cf. Frege, 1984, 158, fn. 4).
7. Since they are, after all, very different characterizations, one might naturally think that

they are not describing the same object. Just as one would do if one learnt the name ‘London’ from a conversation where the place (say, London, Arkansas) is described as unexciting and uninspiring, and then heard the name when referring to a vibrant and diverse place (say, London, England). This does not however entail that a Fregean is committed to saying that *Sinne* are descriptions provided by speakers.

8. Assuming that Bruce Wayne in (1) is understood by P as the charity-giving, business owner.
9. Cf. Evans, 1982, 19.
10. After all, if I wanted to, I could easily name object *a* simultaneously both ‘a’ and ‘b’, in which case someone cannot learn from “a=b” some valuable (astronomical, geographical, or otherwise) insight (as when we discover that Hesperus is Phosphorus) but only that ‘a’ and ‘b’ are different signs for the same object.
11. In other words, the informativeness is accounted for by the fact that one might not know that an object thought of as, say, Bruce Wayne is the same as an object thought of as, say, Batman.

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