

## ‘Sense and Reference’

The intention of this essay is to describe these two Fregean terms.

Frege identified two elements in the meaning of a sentence, ‘Sense and Tone’, the former and what I will be focusing on in the essay along with ‘Reference’, is what is relevant to a sentence’s meaning in determining its truth or falsity, the latter, ‘Tone’ is the attitude or feeling expressed by differing degrees of force during an utterance.

Sense is contrasted to ‘reference’ (*bedeutung*), in as much as the latter is the relation between the name of something and what it is that name points to or refers to in the real world. So it is the name or description (i.e. the general terms used) that has the property of standing for something definite that is designated by its sense. Which is all very well if there is a necessary connection between a certain word and a certain object so that (a) always = (a), i.e. Venus = a certain planet (that can be identified and picked out at will with the right tools and appropriate information) and anyway Venus = Venus is not very informative as it is, it doesn’t really tell us anything interesting or new. Whilst identity statements of the type (a) = (b) and as an example ‘the morning star’ = Phosphorous, as Frege stated contain valuable extensions of our knowledge but can’t always be known a priori. After all nobody can be forbidden in using different terms to describe or pick out a certain thing, we also have to take account in descriptions on how something may have been discovered and this relates to ancestral, regional or perspectival labelling.

To grasp the ‘sense’ (*sinn*) of a word or a sentence is to know the conditions under which that word or sentence is true or false, so in the case of the ‘morning star’ (that being its mode of presentation) there is a route to reference which that description points at, it provides the rules and requires some practical ability to find the object that is known as ‘Phosphorus’. This requires a capacity for practical knowledge and learning, because to grasp a sentence is to be able to grasp how individual words are used and to understand the varying associations of how words go together to make sentences. So, back to our example, it is an astronomical fact that the morning star and the evening star picked out the same object (Phosphorous: Hesperus = Venus), and whilst they shared the same reference (Venus), the sense or mode of presentations (‘morning star’: ‘evening star’) are different.

Some objects can have many senses for example Tony Blair = ‘ex-Prime Minister of Britain’, ‘ex British Labour Party Leader’, ‘Husband of Cherie Blair’, ‘current Envoy of the Quartet on the Middle East’ these terms all provide clues as to how to pick out and are said to be true about the reference concerned. Whilst the sentence ‘the heavenly body which is the greatest distance from the earth’ has a sense but is something we cannot give a reference to for the obvious reasons.

For Frege, apart from people’s interests in works of art (where any particular real world reference maybe missing, but we are still able to enjoy the various combinations of words) it is the striving for the ‘true’ and the ‘false’ that drives us to advance from sense to reference. It is moving from the thought and the information that is expressed within it to where the truth can be found and verified by reference to the object concerned out in the public domain. ‘By combining subject and predicate, one reaches only a thought, never passes from sense to reference, never from a thought to its truth value. (Frege Writings (Geach and Black), Sense and Reference pg 64)

So now it is confirmed that the truth value of a sentence is its reference, the truth value will remain the same (following the application of the metalinguistic version of Leibniz’s Law of substitutability of co-referring single terms) when an expression (sense) is substituted for one with the same reference, as in the example with ‘the morning star’ and ‘the evening star’ because it is the thought together with its reference that yields knowledge. Senses are public, not private inner mental objects or ideas although ‘senses’ are what thoughts do express. The sense of an object is not the object itself, but is still objective in as much as that standpoint can be shared by others, a mode of presentation can be determined by a particular point of view and is dependent on amongst other things, the environmental factors at the time of the informational episode and the degree of linguistic skill at hand.

Sense and reference function differently in cases of indirect discourse, in particular, singular terms (propositional attitudes) that fall inside ‘that’ clauses. These are relevant when people come across or think about objects in various ways, so it is not just about the thing that they refer to. So if ‘David believed that the

morning star is Phosphorous' and as a separate thought 'David believed that the evening star is Hesperus' it is not obvious from their respective appearances to 'David' that they are one and the same object being referred to. So if any substitution of terms (relating to the customary or actual reference) was to take place it would change the truth value of the sentence. In this situation we are characterising thinkers, the mode of presentation is not tied to a direct reference but one that is indirect and what was expressed; the thought in this case refers to its own sense. Substitution can only be made with an expression sharing the same sense, so for example 'the morning star' with the 'the point of light in the sky that appears every day at 5am'. The utterer is related to the term that occurs in the reported sentence, not what the term could be objectively known to typically refer to. Modes of presentations are the ways the world impinge on an individual, the sum total of these is someone's map of the world, but the map is not the territory, because this map is only a one sided view of reality. One of the objections against Frege was that he had invented a third realm where thoughts and senses subsist, although his intention was good in as much as he wanted to safeguard their objectivity and guard against subjective tendencies, it made them sound a lot like Platonic forms. If you ask a question like, Just how does one grasp an abstract object like a sense? Or what is a sense? Then you are likely to be led down some mystical paths, but if you move away from ontological questions and focus on 'use' and 'what a sense does', you will find something informative and interesting. So in summary, quite simply a sense is a mode of presentation of a reference, a perspective on something normally quite definite in the world, something that has gone from the level of thought, to the level of reference where it has been judged to be true or false out in the open under the public gaze. To grasp the sense of a thought is to understand the language in which it has been uttered, so there is a distinction between the subjective (thought or sense expressed) and the objective (verified as true or false). As already stated to grasp a sense is to understand what has been said, the goal of communication is shared meaning.