Frege, “On Sense and Reference

1. Some More Philosophical Jargon

Analytic truth: roughly, true just in virtue of the meaning of the component words.
A priori knowledge: roughly, knowledge that is gained independent of experience.
A posteriori knowledge: roughly, knowledge that is gained on the basis of experience
Propositional attitude: those sorts of mental states the content of which (the ‘aboutness’ of which) has truth conditions (or accuracy conditions)—e.g., beliefs, desires, hoping, etc.

2. Frege and Locke

Frege rejects any Simple View of Meaning—i.e., any theory according to which the meaning of a word or expression just is the object that expression refers to. Locke’s Simple Psychological View of Meaning (or Psychologism) is one such view. So, Frege rejects Locke’s theory of meaning.

Frege shares with Locke:
(L1) The nature of language is its function.
(L2) The function of language is to communicate.
(L3) What language is meant to communicate is thought.

Frege accepts a version of:
(L4) Words signify or mean the components of what language is meant to communicate.

So, he must reject:
(L5) The components of thought are ideas.

(F4) Words signify or mean ideas.

In doing so, Frege claims:
(F1) It is not true that words and expressions mean (or refer to) their associated ideas.

Against the Simple Psychological View of Meaning (and for (F1)):
1. The meaning of a word (or expression) is what is known by someone who understands that word (or expression). (F2)
2. Two people may understand a word (or expression), although they associate different ideas with the word (or expression).
3. So, the meaning of a word (or expression) is not its associated idea. (F1)

So much for Locke’s view. What about the modified Lockean view according to which the meanings of words or expressions are the things in the world that they refer to (i.e., objects and properties)? Let’s just call that the Simple Referential View of Meaning.

3. Three Puzzles

a. Frege’s Puzzle About Identity

Sameness, or identity, appears to be a kind of relation. But a relation between what?

Consider some identity sentences:
1. Mark Twain = Samuel Clemens
2. Samuel Clemens = Samuel Clemens
3. The morning star = the evening star
4. The morning star = the morning star.
Two proposals:

First Proposal: Sameness is a relation between objects.
Consider (i) and (ii). The Simple Referential View would have it that these two sentences mean the same thing.
It looks like (i) and (ii) say the same thing if (i) is true (and it is). They both express that a certain object is identical to itself.
However, (i) and (ii) differ in cognitive significance. (ii) looks like the sort of thing that is analytic and knowable a priori. But (i) looks neither analytic nor a priori. It looks substantive and cognitively significant. That is, (ii) is informative (i.e. its truth was a discovery) while (i) is not.

Second Proposal: Sameness is a relation between signs of objects, i.e., the relation that two signs have when they denote the same object.
“What is intended to be said by ‘a = b’ seems to be that the signs or names ‘a’ and ‘b’ designate the same thing.” (7) — Is that right?
“If the sign ‘a’ is distinguished from the sign ‘b’ only as object (here, by means of its shape), not as a sign, (i.e. not by the manner in which it designates something), then the cognitive value of ‘a = a’ becomes essentially equal to that of ‘a = b’, provided ‘a = b’ is true. A difference can arise only if the difference between the signs corresponds to a difference in the mode of presentation of that which is designated.” (7)
This is the proposal that Frege goes for. But more needs to be said about this way in which the designated objects are given…. But, first, let's get to the other two puzzles.

b. Substitutivity

Principle of Substitution: in a sentence, if you substitute for an expression an expression with the same meaning, you preserve the truth-value of that sentence.
If the Simple Referential View is true, then ‘Samuel Clemens’ and ‘Mark Twain’ have the same meaning.
Now consider propositional attitude reports: X believes that..., X hopes that..., X fears that....
If the Simple Referential View is true, then if
i. ‘Clare believes that Mark Twain wrote Huckleberry Finn’; is true, then
ii. ‘Clare believes that Samuel Clemens wrote Huckleberry Finn’ is true.

c. Apparent Reference to Non-Existents

There is no actual person to which ‘Superman’ refers.
According to the Simple Referential View, then, ‘Superman’ has no meaning.
So, any sentence containing ‘Superman’ will be meaningless.
But, intuitively, we want to say that such sentences do have meaning.

4. Sense and Nominatum

Signs, or expressions in a language, have two things:

1. nominatum (also, referent): the object that an expression refers to, picks out, designates
2. sense: what someone who understands the expression grasps; contains the mode of presentation of the reference.
Expressions stand for, or designate, their reference; they express their senses.

Different kinds of expressions:
a. Singular terms (e.g. proper names, definite descriptions)
b. Predicates
c. Sentences.
A. Sense and Nominatum for Singular Terms

Potentially important distinction that Frege is going to ignore: proper names vs. definite descriptions. As we will see, Russell deals with both individually.

*nominatum*: the object that an expression refers to, picks out, designates

*sense*: what someone who understands the expression grasps; contains the *mode of presentation* of the nominatum.

B. Sense and Nominatum for Predicates?

All that Frege has given to us so far is a theory about names of objects.

Consider the sentence ‘Bob is tall’. Frege has told us what to do with ‘Bob’, but not what to do with ‘is tall’.

The sense of ‘is tall’ is a function. Frege thinks of functions as unsaturated or incomplete entities.

*sense*: a function which maps the senses of referring terms onto propositions. E.g., the concept is tall maps the sense of ‘Bob’ onto the thought or proposition that Bob is tall.

The nominatum of a predicate is also going to be a function. This time the function is what Frege calls a concept.

*nominatum*: a function from nominata (or objects, like Bob) onto truth-values (True or False). E.g. when an object, say Bob, is mapped onto the value True by a concept, say the concept is tall, we say that Bob “falls under the concept is tall”.

C. Sense and Nominatum for Sentences?

*sense*: the thought or proposition expressed by the sentence. It is a function of the senses of the component expressions that make up the sentence.

*nominatum*: a truth value, either True or False. It is a function of the nominata of the expressions that make up the sentence.