Frege, “On Sense and Nominatum”

1. Recap

Frege is responding to the Reference Theory of Meaning (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.

According to Frege, the Reference Theory of Meaning is not true. The meaning of an expression has to be something more than the object the expression refers to.

2. Sense and Reference

Signs, or expressions in a language, (typically) have two things: sense and nominatum. 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

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.

3. For Discussion: Frege’s Response to the Puzzles

Frege responds directly to three of the four puzzles. What are his responses to:

a. The Puzzle About Identity?

1 The word which is translated in our version of the text as ‘nominatum’ is sometimes translated as ‘reference’ and sometimes left untranslated as ‘Bedeutung’. I will stick to the translation in our version.
b. The Apparent Reference to Non-Existents?
c. Substitutivity?