The Referential Theory of Meaning

1. The Simple Referential Theory of Meaning

Two claims:  
(a) the meaning of an expression just is the thing that expression refers to.
(b) we understand the meanings of sentences by understanding the meanings of its parts.

For now, we are going to concentrate on (a).
The Simple Referential Theory applies to all words/expressions.

2. Objections to the Simple Referential Theory

i. Non-existents
ii. Predicates and Bradley’s regress
iii. Nouns that do not name
iv. Other words that do not name.

Even if we don’t think that the Simple Referential Theory gets it right, there is something to say for the claim that the meanings of singular terms are the objects that they refer to.

*Singular term*: an expression that purports to designate an individual person, place or other object. (What is a general term, then? Example?)

Let’s, then, think about the Referential Theory as applied to singular terms. (From now on, ‘Referential Theory’ will denote this particular version of the theory.) That’s what Frege and Russell were thinking about.

3. Four Puzzles for the Referential Theory

A. Apparent Reference to Non-Existents

There is no actual person to which ‘Superman’ refers.
According to the Referential Theory, 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.

B. Negative Existentials

Consider the following sentence:
Pegasus never existed
This sentence certainly seems to be true. But if it is true, then it can’t be about Pegasus—because there is no such creature. But if the sentence is about Pegasus, then the sentence must be false—for Pegasus must then in some sense exist (at least according to the Referential Theory).

C. Frege’s Puzzle About Identity

Consider two identity sentences:
i. Mark Twain = Samuel Clemens
ii. The morning star = the evening star

Both (i) and (ii) are informative sentences—one could learn something significant when that (i) or (ii).
Compare with (i) ‘Samuel Clemens = Samuel Clemens’, and (ii) ‘The morning star = the morning star’. Sentences (i) and (ii) are trivially true; we learn nothing significant from them.
The Referential Theory must say that (i) and (i) and (ii) and (ii) have the same meanings. But this can’t be right. So, the Referential Theory is false.
D. **Substitutivity**

*Principle of Substitution:* if you substitute for an expression an expression with the same meaning, you preserve its truth value.

**If the Referential Theory 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 Referential Theory is true,** then if

a. ‘Clare believes that Mark Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*’; is true, then
b. ‘Clare believes that Samuel Clemens wrote *Huckleberry Finn*’ is true.

But this doesn’t seem right. (Does it?)