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Frege’s Ingredients of Meaning

Although Frege spent his entire working life at the University of Jena teaching mathematics, he once remarked, “Every good mathematician is at least half a philosopher.”¹ If he had done nothing else besides inventing modern predicate logic with the introduction of quantifiers and variables into his function-and-argument approach to analyzing sentences, Frege’s elevated place in the history of both logic and the philosophy of logic would be assured and his genius stamped and sealed for all time. His contributions, however, are not confined to philosophical logic and mathematical logic; on the contrary, they are of immense importance to the philosophy of language. Frege wrote his first published paper, ‘Funktion und Begriff’, 122 years ago, and his last, ‘Nebengedanke’, 90 years ago.² Despite the passage of time and the many developments that have shaped the course of semantics since, Frege’s ideas loom large today. Dummett not long ago observed, “There is scarcely a live question in contemporary philosophy of language for whose examination Frege’s views do not form at least the best starting point.” So it is with the topic of tone and the issues that it involves.

It is, in my opinion, a great misfortune that Frege’s views on language, as on other matters of logic and mathematics, were not known for some time outside a small circle, a circumstance that was the source of increasing distress and ultimately of considerable bitterness on his part toward the end of his life. It was not until 1949, some two dozen years after his death, that the first English translation of ‘Über Sinn und Bedeutung’ appeared.³ However, once his work became known outside Germany, the influence of his thought spread rapidly. It soon became the central focus of the discipline (of semantics), the dominant influence on many new lines of thinking which it spawned in ensuing decades,
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whether in favor or in opposition – including that coming from the likes of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell, originally, followed swiftly by Peter Strawson, John Austin, Paul Grice, and Willard van Orman Quine in the 1950s and 1960s, and prominently by Donald Davidson and Michael Dummett from the 1960s through the 1980s and 1990s, to name but a small handful.

While Frege's distinction between sense and reference has long since achieved a kind of legendary status, it remains hotly debated; and his function–argument analysis of sentences and his concept–object distinction continue to be carefully worked over. The distinction between sense and force, no less crucial than the one between sense and reference, has also become something of a fixture in semantic theory, as has his celebrated articulation of a thesis of compositionality and the fundamental context principle. These latter two, especially, along with Frege's anti-psychologistic approach to explaining truth and meaning – an approach motivated in large part by a desire to make these two notions scientifically respectable by rescuing them from the realm of psychology – naturally play an important role in the study of tone.

As a beginning, then, one thing that can usefully be said, although it comes as near as may be to a platitude, is exemplified by the following observation: the sentence 'Barack Obama is a leading candidate' differs in meaning from the sentence 'Barack Obama is a leading suspect', and differs, specifically, according to the difference in meaning between the words 'suspect' and 'candidate'. Or, to take another equally obvious example, where the addition of a single word makes for a difference in meaning between 'I have ten dollars in my wallet' and 'I have exactly ten dollars in my wallet'. This is just to say that the meanings of sentences are sensitive to even minute differences at the level of individual words and other components. Compare 'Gates is wealthy and generous' with 'Gates is wealthy yet generous'. The overall meaning of a sentence is sensitive not only to different words, but to their arrangement, too: cf. 'Michael Jordan has officially retired from basketball' and 'Has Michael Jordan officially retired from basketball?'

This confirms Frege's celebrated compositionality thesis concerning sentence meanings, expressive by the equally trite (but nevertheless crucially important) observation that the meaning of a sentence is a function of the meanings of its individual words together with the way in which they are arranged. Although not every difference corresponds