

# Mind, Matter, and Language

## Lecture 5: More on Frege on Sense and Reference

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**Tomorrow (11:10): “How to read philosophy”**

<https://writingcentre.ppls.ed.ac.uk/philskills/>

# Review

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Our current target is to explain how language can be used to convey information about the world.

- I can warn you about quicksand by uttering 'وَعَثَ رَمْلٌ سَيَّارٌ'.
- I can inform you that we'll have pizza for dinner by uttering 'we'll have pizza'.

This is possible because there is a conventional link between sentences and relevant states of affairs.

- 'وَعَثَ رَمْلٌ سَيَّارٌ' is linked to the presence of quicksand.
- 'We'll have pizza' is linked to pizza consumption in the near future.

These states of affairs are the **truth-conditions** of the sentence.

Truth-conditions are **one aspect of** sentence meaning.

There are other aspects.

- Compare 'uncle Bob passed away' and 'uncle Bob kicked the bucket'.
- Compare 'it is raining' and 'it is either raining or snowing, but it isn't snowing'.
- Compare 'it is raining' and 'it is true that it is raining'.

Hypothesis: We don't need the other aspects of meaning to explain how language helps us to communicate facts about the world.

So we temporarily set aside the other aspects.

What's the explanation?

Roughly: I can communicate to you that it is raining by uttering 'it's raining' because there is a convention in our community to utter those sounds only if it is raining. So you'll expect me to utter the sounds only if it is raining, and I know that you have this expectation.

Some think this is entirely misguided, and that truth-conditions are not useful for explaining communication.

They would highlight a different aspect of meaning.

If we identify truth-conditions as important aspects of meaning, the next question is how a sentence's truth-conditions determined by the sentence's parts and their arrangement.

- What is the truth-conditionally relevant meaning of sentence parts?
- How do these meanings combine to give us the truth-conditions of a sentence?

The referential approach: The (relevant) meaning of an expression is something in the world to which the expression refers.

### Problems:

- The problem of empty names: 'Vulcan' and 'Santa Claus' don't refer to anything.
- The identity problem: replacing co-referring expressions can turn uninformative statements into informative statements.
- The attitude problem: replacing co-referring expressions can affect the truth-value of a statement.
- The truth-value problem: not all true sentences have the same meaning.



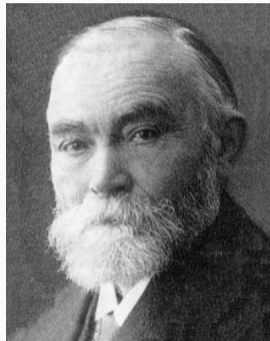
# Sense

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Frege: Reference is one aspect of meaning. To explain facts about informativeness, attitude reports, communication, etc., we need to pay attention to another aspect.

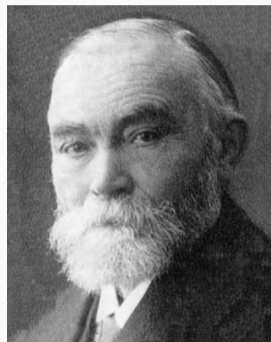
*Now it is plausible to connect with a sign not only the designated object, which may be called the **reference** of the sign, but also the **sense** of the sign, in which is contained the manner and context of presentation.*

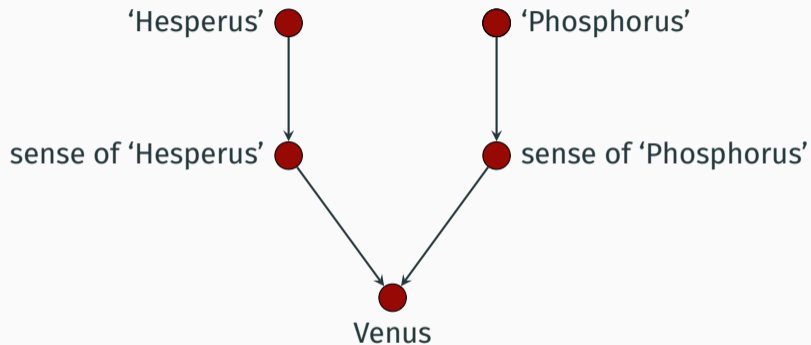
Frege, "On Sense and Reference" (1892)



*The regular connection between a sign, its sense and its referent is of such a kind that to the sign there corresponds a definite sense and to that in turn a definite referent, while to a given referent (an object) there does not belong only a single sign.*

Frege, "On Sense and Reference" (1892)

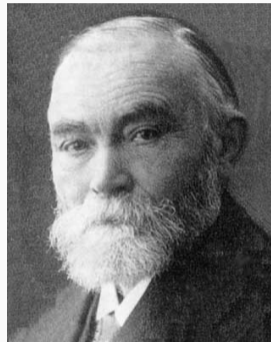




The sense of an expression is not an idea.

*The same sense is not always connected, even in the same man, with the same idea. The idea is subjective: one man's idea is not that of another [...] A painter, a horseman, and a zoologist will probably connect different ideas with the name 'Bucephalus'. This constitutes an essential distinction between the idea and the sign's sense.*

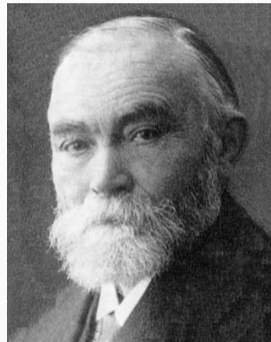
Frege, "On Sense and Reference" (1892)



Sense is an aspect of meaning that competent speakers must know.

*The sense of a [word] is grasped by everyone who is sufficiently familiar with the language.*

Frege, "On Sense and Reference" (1892)



Informativeness is a matter of sense:

**Two expressions have different sense iff a rational agent who fully understands them could doubt that they co-refer.**

- 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus'
- 'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Walter Scott'
- 'the inventor of bifocals' and 'the first postmaster general'
- not: 'Hesperus' and 'the evening star'

The sense of an expression is a **mode of presentation** of the referent.

Benjamin Franklin can be presented in many ways:

- the inventor of bifocals
- the first postmaster general
- ...

Different expressions that refer to Benjamin Franklin are associated with different modes of presentation.



The sense of an expression is a **mode of presentation** of the referent.

Venus can be presented in many ways:

- the brightest heavenly body in the evening sky
- the brightest heavenly body in the morning sky
- ...

What kind of thing is a mode of presentation?

Some views:

- It's a **method** for determining the referent: a procedure that could in principle be applied in any possible situation to determine the referent (in that situation).  
*“Look at the sky after sunset and identify the brightest object apart from the moon”.*
- It's a **condition** for being the referent: a property that distinguishes the referent in any possible situation from everything else.  
*“The brightest object in the sky after sunset apart from the moon”.*

Not just names, but every meaningful expression has a sense.

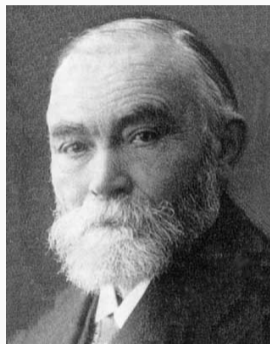
The sense of a sentence Frege calls a **thought**.

Fregean thoughts are not mental objects.

*By a thought I understand not the subjective performance of thinking but its objective content.  
[...]*

*Thoughts are neither things in the external world nor ideas. A third realm must be recognized.*

Frege, "The Thought" (1919)



Informativeness is a matter of sense:

**Two expressions have different sense iff a rational agent who fully understands them could doubt that they co-refer.**

Two sentences have different sense iff a rational agent who fully understands them could doubt that they have the same truth-value.

- 'Grass is green' and 'Glasgow is in Scotland'
- 'Hesperus is visible in the evening sky' and 'Phosphorus is visible in the evening sky'

## Summary:

- Every meaningful expression has a sense.
- The sense of an expression is not an idea.
- It is a mode of presentation of the referent.
- Informativeness is a matter of sense.
- Competent speakers grasp the sense of an expression.

## Sense at work

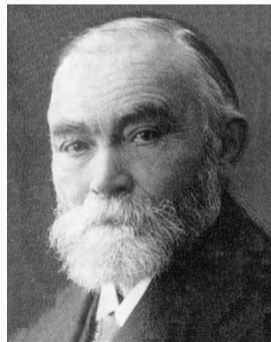
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The problem of empty names: 'Vulcan' and 'Santa Claus' don't refer to anything.

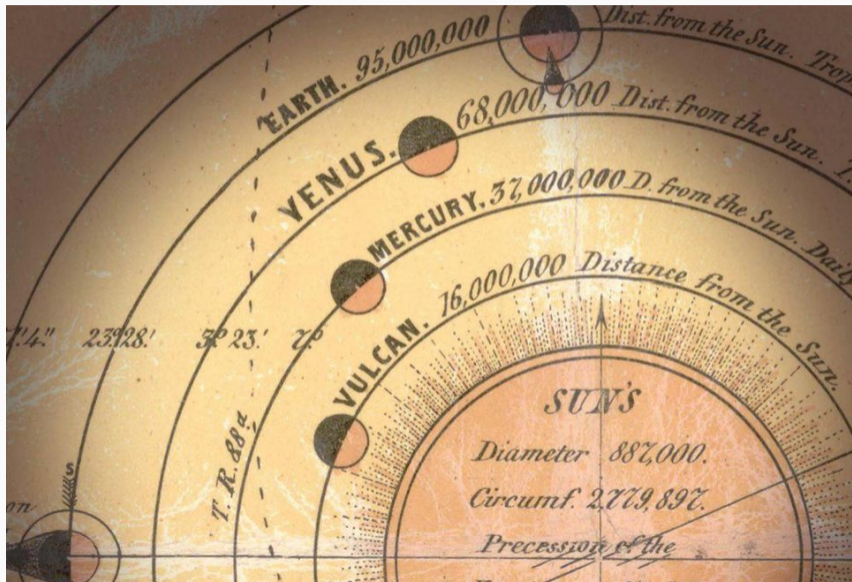
We can now allow for empty names: these don't refer, but still have sense.

*Every grammatically well-formed expression figuring as a proper name always has a sense. But this is not to say that to the sense there also corresponds a referent.*

Frege, "On Sense and Reference" (1892)



# Sense at work





- ‘Vulcan is smaller than Mercury.’

The “thought” expressed is (roughly) that **the planet between Mercury and the Sun that explains the shift in Mercury’s orbit** is smaller than Mercury.

Is the sentence true? Or false?

Frege: neither!

The sentence **presupposes** that Vulcan exists.

**The identity problem: replacing co-referring expressions can turn uninformative statements into informative statements.**

Answer:  $A = B$  is informative whenever  $A$  and  $B$  have different sense.

**The truth-value problem: not all true sentences have the same meaning.**

Answer: The slingshot argument shows a sentence's **referent** is a truth-value.  
But there is more to meaning than reference.

**The attitude problem: replacing co-referring expressions can affect the truth-value of a statement.**

Answer: wait for tomorrow!