Lecture 3: From Frege to Russell (on definite descriptions)

Frege’s theory of meaning – summary:

- All meaningful expressions have a sense
- The sense of an expression determines its reference (if any)
- Sentence meaning is compositional, i.e. a sentence means what it does because the words it contains mean what they do and because of the way those words are put together
- Compositionality applies to both sense and reference
- Proper names, definite descriptions, etc. refer to individuals
- The reference of a sentence is a truth value
- The sense of a sentence is a proposition

Frege’s theory and identity statements:

1. The director of Annie Hall is the director of Annie Hall.
2. The director of Annie Hall is the husband of Soon-Yi Previn.

Sentences 1 and 2 have the same reference but different senses.

The problem of belief contexts:

3. Mary believes that the smallest kid in class 3B plays the clarinet.
4. Mary believes that the director of Annie Hall plays the clarinet.

Sentences 3 and 4 have different truth values, i.e. different references.

But each of the expressions in 3 has the same reference as each of the expressions in 4 and the two sentences have identical syntax, so by the Principle of Compositionality they should have the same reference, i.e. the same truth value.

Frege’s important move: in certain linguistic contexts (e.g. belief reports), expressions in that context no longer refer to their usual reference, but rather to their usual sense.

5. ‘the smallest kid in class 3B plays the clarinet’
6. ‘the director of Annie Hall plays the clarinet’

Oblique contexts, opaque contexts, intensional contexts, propositional-attitude contexts e.g. believes that, hopes that, wants that, intends that, …

Bertrand Russell’s objections to Frege’s theory:

A. The problem of definite descriptions that pick out (refer to) nothing (so-called empty descriptions).
7. The astronaut who landed on Mars last week lives in Arizona.

Frege: The sentence as a whole has no reference, i.e. no truth value.
Russell: The sentence is clearly false.

8. The astronaut who landed on Mars last week is called ‘Mike Sanders’.
9. The astronaut who landed on Mars last week isn’t called ‘Mike Sanders’.

*A foundation law of logic: The Law of Excluded Middle*
For any proposition, either that proposition or the negation of that proposition is true.

B. Against the Fregean notion of ‘sense’.

**Russell’s theory of meaning:**
‘Russell held what might be called a “realist” theory of meaning: every meaningful item of language stands for something real. The meaning of an expression is simply that entity for which it stands. In the case of an utterance of a sentence this entity is a *proposition*. In the case of an utterance of a genuine referring expression, it is the expression’s *referent.*’


Frege: We can only think of a thing via one or other of its properties (modes of presentation).

Russell: No, there are some things that we can have direct thoughts about.

Knowing a thing through *acquaintance* (versus knowing a thing via a description).

10. This is white.

*The issue of definite descriptions (again)*

11. The man who lives next door makes a lot of noise.

12. Bob makes a lot of noise
13. He makes a lot of noise.
14. That guy makes a lot of noise.

15. All astronauts living in Pittsburgh are tall.
16. An astronaut living in Pittsburgh is tall.
17. The astronaut living in Pittsburgh is tall.
18. Bob is tall.
19. He is tall.

**Homework:**


**Question:** Consider the Law of Excluded Middle. Is it a sound law? How does Frege’s account of definite descriptions violate it? How does Russell’s account of definite descriptions preserve it? Make sure you are clear about Russell’s view of what a genuine referring expression is and why definite descriptions are not in that category.