

Class Two: Frege and Wittgenstein on the Uses of Language

Doing Things with Words - Ryan Simonelli

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1 Frege on Thoughts, Assertions, and Everything Else

- **The Thought:** A few characterizations from Frege:
 - **Primary Bearer of Truth and Falsity:** A thought is, in the first instance, “something for which the question of truth arises.” While things other than thoughts—sentences, assertions, beliefs, and so on—can be true or false, these things are true or false in virtue of bearing relations to thoughts.
 - **Expressed by Sentences:** Frege says that a thought is “the sense of a sentence” or “expressed by a sentence.” For instance, the sentence “The Sun has risen” expresses the thought that the Sun has risen.
 - **Abstract Entities:** Thoughts are “immaterial” rather than “material and perceptible.” Though we might say that we “See that the Sun has risen,” we don’t literally see this thought; what we mean is that we can conclude that this thought is true on the basis of what we see.
 - **Isolating the Declarative Sentence as that which Expresses a Thought:**
 - **Imperatives:** Sentences like “Shut the door,” are neither true nor false, so they don’t count as expressing thoughts, in Frege’s sense.
 - * **Note:** Such sentences will generally *implicate* declarative sentences that express thoughts (such as “The door is open”) but they don’t express such thoughts themselves.
 - **Sentences that Express Desires:** Consider the sentence “Oooh, Yum!” in response to being shown a picture of a donut. This might be thought as expressing the desire to eat the donut, but it’s not the expression of a thought in Frege’s since, since it can’t be true or false.
 - **Exclamations:** Sentences like “Yayy!” after a touchdown or “Let’s go bears!” don’t count as expressing thoughts.
 - **Questions:** Consider two different kinds of questions:
 - * **Word Questions:** “What is the capital of Spain?”
 - **Answer:** Madrid.
 - * **Sentence Questions:** “Is Madrid the capital of Spain?”
 - **Answer:** Yes.
- The sentence question “Is Madrid the capital of Spain?” has the same sense as the sentence “Madrid is the capital of Spain,” expressing the same thought, but with a different force. The former has interrogative force—functioning to a request information—and the latter has assertoric force—functioning to make an assertion.

- * Performed when we (inwardly) answer our sentence question.
 - **Assertion:** The manifestation of this judgment.
 - * Performed when we (outwardly) express this answer.
- **Question:** Is Frege's conception of thought/judgment/assertion overly intellectualized? What would Frege say about the cognitive abilities of young children?
- **Mock Assertions:** Sometimes, we utter a declarative sentence and appear to be making an assertion but in fact are not:
 - **Acting:** "As stage thunder is only apparent thunder and a stage fight is
 - **Poetry:** According to Frege, when, for instance, Whitman says "I sing the body electric," he appears to be making an assertion, but there really is no determinate thought of which he's manifesting the judgment.
- **Isolating the Thought from Its Linguistic Trappings:** Different declarative sentences can express the same thought, suggesting different things or conjuring different images or feelings, while still having the same truth values.
 - **Implication:** "He's attractive and smart, but he's a Republican" vs. "He's attractive and smart, and he's a Republican"
 - **Active vs. Passive:** "The dog bit the man" vs. "The man was bit by the dog"
 - **Switch of Subject and Indirect Object with Corresponding Verb Switch:** "Ann gave the money to Jim" vs. "Jim received the money from Ann"
- **The Point of All This:** For Frege, logic and philosophy proper is principally concerned with *thoughts*, expressed by declarative sentences. Other kinds of sentences, and the speech acts performed in uttering them, are of at best secondary philosophical importance, if not to be put to the side altogether, as are the different ways in which the same thought can be linguistically expressed.

2 Wittgenstein on the Augustinian Picture

- **The Augustinian Picture:** The basic function of language is *to signify*. Words stand for things in the world, be they objects, properties, or relations, and we string these words together to communicate thoughts so that we can satisfy our desires.
 - On this picture, communication is possible only through words signifying things through which they are capable of being strung together to express thoughts. This conception of language gives primacy to the expression of thoughts.
- **A Series of Puzzling Questions Concerning Meaning:** The Augustinian picture gives rise to a number of puzzling philosophical questions about language. For instance:
 - How can words function to signify things in the world?
 - What is the connection between a word and the thing that it signifies?
 - In the sentence "The ball is red," the phrase "The ball" signifies the ball, but what does "is red" signify? The property of being red?
 - * What is that?
 - * How can words come to signify such a thing?
 - * How can speakers grasp such a thing so as to designate it with one of their words?
 - * How can speakers know that they've designated the same thing with their respective uses of the word "red"?
- **Considering the Functioing Words in Simple "Language Games":** "If we look at the example in §1, we may perhaps get an inkling how much this general notion of the meaning of a word surrounds the working of language with a haze which makes clear vision impossible. It disperses the fog to study the phenomena of language in primitive kinds of application in which one can command a clear view of the aim and functioning of the words," (§5).

- **Wittgenstein's Builders:** "The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words "block", "pillar", "slab", "beam". A calls them out;—B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call.—Conceive this as a complete primitive language," (§2)
 - **Question:** Is "block" shorthand for "Give me a block," or "May I please have a block?" or "I would like a block," or something else?
 - * **Answer:** Insofar as Wittgenstein has described the whole of the primitive language, this question doesn't get any traction. We just talk of the use of "block" by A to get B to hand him a block, and there is nothing more we need to say.

"We say that we use the command in contrast with other sentences because our language contains the possibility of those other sentences. Someone who did not understand our language, a foreigner, who had fairly often heard someone giving the order: "Bring me a slab!", might believe that this whole series of sounds was one word corresponding perhaps to the word for "building-stone" in his language," (§20)
- **The Use of "Signification" Talk:** We can say, for instance, that "slab" signifies *slabs*, but this just a way to "abbreviate the description of the use of the word 'slab,'" (§10).
- **The Point of These Early Sections:** Get us to shift gears from thinking of meaning principally in terms of *signification* to thinking of meaning principally in terms of *use*, and thinking of talk of "signification" as just a way of abbreviating description of use. This will free us from an overly restrictive conception of language and enable us to see language as it actually is, displayed in all the different uses that it actually has.

3 Against the Fregean (and Tractarian) Impulse

- **The Varieties of Language Use:** But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command?—There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call "symbols", "words", "sentences". And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. [. . .]

Here the term "language-game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.

Review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others:

- Giving orders, and obeying them—
- Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements—
- Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)—
- Reporting an event—
- Speculating about an event—
- Forming and testing a hypothesis—
- Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams—
- Making up a story; and reading it—
- Play-acting—
- Singing rounds—
- Guessing riddles—
- Making a joke; telling it—
- Solving a problem in practical arithmetic—
- Translating from one language into another—
- Requesting, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.

—It is interesting to compare the multiplicity of the tools in language and of the ways they are used, the multiplicity of kinds of word and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (Including the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.)

- **The Search for the “Hidden Essence of Language”:** Frege (and early Wittgenstein) took it that language, at its core, fundamentally involved the expression of thought. The essence of language is to express true or false thoughts, and everything else is periferal.

“ ‘*The essence is hidden from us:*’ this is the form our problem now assumes. We ask: ‘*What is language?*’, ‘*What is a proposition?*’ And the answer to these questions is to be given once for all; and independently of any future experience,” (§92).

- **The Illusion of Logico-Philosophical Theorizing:** Wittgenstein describes the conception of language common to Frege and his early work as being under a kind of illusion of crystaline purity:

“Thinking is surrounded by a nimbus. Its essence, logic, presents an order: namely, the a priori order of the world; that is, the order of possibilities, which the world and thinking must have in common. But this order, it seems, must be utterly simple. It is prior to all experience, must run through all experience; no empirical cloudiness or uncertainty may attach to it.— It must rather be of the purest crystal. [...]

We are under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound, essential, in our investigation, resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable *essence* of language. That is, the order existing between the concepts of proposition, word, inference, truth, experience, and so on,” (§97)

This illusion of purity is a result of considering language as in abstraction from the myriad ways in which is actually used, as something whose essence consists in its ability to express propositions or thoughts which stand in logical relations to other thoughts, and so on.

- **Back to Rough Ground:** “The more closely we examine actual language, the greater becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not something I had discovered: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming vacuous. We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction, and so, in a certain sense, the conditions are ideal; but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!” (§107)