Frege on Direct Quotation

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Abstract

In a single short passage in "On Sense and Reference" Frege outlines his conception of direct quotation wherein words must not be taken as having their customary reference, but rather refer to the words themselves or the words of another speaker. What unifies these uses? What is the logical form of direct quotation sentences, and what is their analysis? How does this view fit in with Frege's general semantics? How far can it be extended? What problems does it face? We explore, if not completely answer, each of these questions.

"It can also happen, however, that one wishes to talk about the words themselves or their sense. This happens, for instance, when the words of another are quoted. One's own words then first designate words of the other speaker, and only the latter have their usual reference. We then have signs of signs. In writing, the words are in this case enclosed in quotation marks. Accordingly, a word standing between quotation marks must not be taken as having its ordinary reference," ("On Sense and Reference", 144)

The above quotation contains virtually everything Frege has to say about quotation and it raises a number of issues --some terminological, some substantive. First, note that in the passage cited, Frege opens with a discussion of quotation in general ("talk about"), then ends with the specific case of quotation marks in writing. Most discussions of Frege have concentrated on quotation marks in writing, and we shall do so here, but ultimately a Fregean account will have to be more general, a point we will return to later. Second, Frege speaks of words enclosed in quotation marks as about "the words themselves" and also as about "words of another speaker". But as we will see, these need not be the same. However, because Frege moved so easily between them he may have thought that referring to the words themselves is involved in reporting the words of another speaker. At least this is an idea we will exploit later, but first some terminology.

Terminology

We will distinguish the various linguistic constituents Frege is working with as follows. We will call the quotation marks plus the quoted material the quotation unit e.g. the material displayed in (1):

(1) "I'm a fool"

We will call just the pair of quotation marks with a gap in between the quotation marks e.g.:

(2) " "

We will call what occurs within the quotation marks the *quoted material* e.g. in (1) it would be:

(3) I'm a fool

We will call the complete sentence reporting what someone uttered the (direct) *quotation report* e.g.:

(4) John said "I'm a fool"

Finally, since Frege also uses quotation marks elsewhere just to mention linguistic material without attributing it to a speaker, we will call these *mention reports* which contain *mention uses* of quotation marks e.g.:

(5) 'Boston' has six letters

Since mention reports may not be the same as quotation reports, (though as we noted, Frege did not distinguished them in the above passage), we adopt the convention of using single quotes for mention reports. Let's look first at mention reports.

**Mention Reports**

How do mention reports work? We know that according to Frege, in e.g. (5) the quoted material refers to itself, rather than to a city, and that the quotation marks signal this fact. According to Frege's general semantic theory, every sign (linguistic expression) is either a function name or an object name (*Eigennname*: literally 'proper name', better 'singular term'). Even if quotation marks signal the fact that the quoted material (the words between them) is being used to refer to itself, they must either constitute a new category of expression (which we should avoid if possible) or be of one of the above two categories (object or function name). Since the *quoted material* names itself it would appear its category is an object name. Since the *quotation unit* (1) is the name of an object, the quotation marks must name something that combines with an object name to yield an object name, and this in Frege's semantics can only be a (level-1) function name. But what function? The whole mention report is functional in structure:

(6) ( ) has six letters

Whatever is named by the term occupying the position of the parentheses falls under the concept referred to by 'has six letters', and this requires that an object name occupy the ( ) position --a singular term that in effect mentions the quoted material. Since the quoted material does *that*, the quotation marks must take the reference of the quoted material into the quoted material i.e. the quotation marks must leave the reference alone. So quotation marks in mention reports must name the identity function! Quotation marks, in mention reports (i) *name the identity function* and (ii) *signal that the words occurring within them refer to themselves*. We can diagram mention reports as follows:

**Figure 1. Mention Report**

' Boston' has six letters
The sentence is true iff the expression referred to falls under the concept(s) referred to.

\[ \quad \]

How do quotation marks signal this shift in reference? Frege never says. He may have thought it was just a brute fact about them, one that must be learned while learning the written language. It would be preferable, of course, to find an interpretation that would (i) give quotation marks the appropriate semantics --as names of the identity function --and, (ii) account for their use to induce self-reference, as related facts. We have noted they go together, but we have not predicted or explained the one in terms of the other, nor both in terms of some third feature. But before counting this against the theory, we need some reason to suppose these are related facts, since many linguistic facts about a given expression are not relevantly related e.g. spelling and grammatical category. Notice finally that they are called quotation marks, like question marks or exclamation marks. This suggests that they are like bits of punctuation conventionally signalling how to take the material in their scope. But quotation marks on the above analysis are unlike punctuation marks in that '?' and '!' do not refer to anything, and our problem is to bridge these two functions.

**Quotation Reports: Logical Form**

To give the (Fregean) logical form of a sentence is to represent its structure in begriffsschrift --its function-argument structure upon which valid inferences turn. How about quotation reports such as (4) --can we represent their logical form in such a way as to relate them to mention reports. Nothing could be easier. If 'say' names a two place relation relating a sayer and what is said, then the (Fregean) logical structure of quotation reports can be depicted as in the following figure:

**Figure 2. Quotation Report**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>John</th>
<th>said</th>
<th>&quot; Damn &quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>R(J,)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sentence is true iff John bears the relation R (say) to the word(s) referred to.

\[ \quad \]

This of course does not give us an analysis of what it is to report a saying, and it is not clear Frege thought analysis was always possible. However, his work on number statements in the Grundlagen make clear that he regards it as sometimes appropriate, and we will assume this is one such case.
Quotation Reports: Analysis What is this saying relation? It relates the original speaker to what the original speaker said, but it does this via an utterance by the current speaker:

\[(7)\]
\[a. \text{Original speaker, John: I'm a fool}\]
\[b. \text{Current speaker: John said "I am a fool"}\]

How are the two utterances (7a,b) related when the quotation report is true? There are at least the following options:

**Token Accounts**

1. The current utterance refers to *just the current utterance token*, 'say' amounts to 'produce', and relates the original speaker to the current utterance token.

*Problem.* This cannot be correct because the original speaker did not produce this token --the original speaker produced the distinct original utterance token (which may be specially related to the current utterance, but that is another matter).

2. The current utterance refers to *just the original utterance token* and it is true if the original speaker produced the original utterance token.

*Problem.* This cannot be correct because if the original utterance did not occur, there would be nothing to refer to, so it would fail of reference. For Frege that means that the current utterance would fail to have a truth value. Intuitively, however, if the original speaker did not produce the requisite token, we want to call the current utterance false, not truth valueless.\(^5\)

**Type Account**

3. The current utterance refers to *just the utterance type* and is true if the original speaker produced that type.

*Problem.* This cannot be the complete correct story because types are abstract entities (third realm?) and are not produced on any occasion. So qua type they are no more related to the original speaker than to the current speaker, or to any other speaker for that matter. Now on Frege's general semantic theory there is no reason to suppose that the occurrence of the quoted material changes from its usual type interpretation in mention use to a token occurrence in quotation reports. So we want to maintain reference to utterance type, but we also want to implicate the original utterance token somehow. Here is how to do that.

**Mixed Account**

4. The current utterance *refers to the utterance type and quantifies over the original utterance token*. We propose that the construction 'said " "' is a three place relation with one place bound by an existential quantifier.\(^6\)

\[(8)\]
a. S said "": (Ex) S produced a token x of ( )
b. John said "Damn"

The result of filling in the gap with the quoted material produces an expression (8b) which is true if and only if the speaker S produces a token of the type the quoted material refers to ('Damn').

This proposal has the virtue that if the original speaker fails to produce the utterance token, then what the current speaker asserts is false rather than neither true nor false, as intuition delivers. It also makes sense of both ways of construing the original passage from Frege. First, quoted material is about itself in the sense that it is about the types they 'contain' (by 'containing' token of those types). Second, quotation reports containing quotation units are about the words of others in virtue of the semantics of the construction: said " ", it is just that the 'about' here is quantificational, not referential. This analysis also relates direct and indirect quotation. Both constructions have the same structure i.e. words occurring in certain contexts can shift from their customary reference to another reference. In the case of direct quotation, the reference is to the words themselves, as in figure 2. In the case of indirect quotation (saying that, believing that) the reference is to the word's customary sense, as in figure 3: Finally, note that this analysis avoids the 'paradox' of names --one can be given somebody's name, and not just the name of their name (as on say Tarski's official view), by scanning the sentence from left to right one first encounters the left quotation mark, then the name itself, then the right quotation mark.

Figure 3. Generic 'Indirect Quotation' Construction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Relational Expression</th>
<th>Sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>sense</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>object: x</td>
<td>relation: R(x,P)</td>
<td>object: Thought P</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This sentence is true iff x bears the relation R (say, believe) to the object: the Thought P.

Two Objections

Davidson

Davidson (1984) objects that:

"the references attributed to words or expressions in their special contexts are not functions of their references in ordinary contexts, and so the special context-creating expressions (like quotation marks or the words 'said that') cannot be viewed as functional expressions." (ibid, 85 emphasis added)
It is not clear exactly what this objection amounts to, since the quotation marks are literally function names --names of the identity function. Perhaps Davidson is reminding us that Frege's theory is not 'semantically innocent' (expressions take on different senses and/or references in different linguistic contexts), and that we should, other things being equal, prefer a theory that is semantically innocent. That may be true, but it puts a heavy burden on other things being equal. For Frege, the reference of a semantically complex name simply needs to be compositionally determined, i.e. a function of the constituent expressions, their semantic values, and their grammatical relations. The above proposal conforms to this condition.

Garcia-Carpintero (1994, 260-1) contends that Frege's theory is inflexible in that two references to the same expression (word, phrase, sentence) might be involved in two identical mention reports, one of which is true, the other false:9

(9)
   a. 'Madrid' is not in capitals (T)10
   b. 'MADRID' is not in capitals (F)

In such a case, Garcia-Carpintero says:

"the quotations ['Madrid', 'MADRID'] ... would have different contents ... the Fregean could do that too, but only in a convoluted, ugly way (for instance, positing an implicit 'the [capital] version of the expression ...' before the first quotation, in those contexts in which the content is different)."

These are interesting examples, but this is not the "only" way to handle them.

We might try a two-component approach. First, we assume linguistic types are referred to via their tokens (we will return to this). Second, which type is referred to can depend on the properties of the token. Since the above two tokens have different properties, different types can be referred to. Of course, every token has an unlimited number of properties, and so can be the token of many types. The trick in constructing this kind of theory would be to get the right type referred to on each occasion. A variant of this approach would be to claim that the appropriate type may not always be a word type, though it can be. What determines the type referred to would be a combination of information including: the word type of the quoted material and essential features of the type invoked by the semantic context of the quoted material --such as the predicate 'is in capitals'. On this kind of theory:11

   c. 'MADRID' is in capitals (true: refers to a subtype of the word type)
   d. 'madrid' is in capitals (false: refers to a subtype of the word type)
   e. 'Madrid' has six letters (true: refers to the word type)

**Conclusion**

This proposal has the virtue of satisfying a number of intuitive conditions of adequacy on a Fregean
theory of (direct) quotation. First, it is consistent with Frege's general semantic theory --his theory of sense and reference, function and argument. Second, it is consistent with Frege's (few) remarks on quotation, in particular it relates mention and (direct) quotation reports: (i) quoted material is about itself in the sense that it is about the types they 'contain' (by 'containing' token of those types), (ii) quotation reports containing quotation units are about the words of others in virtue of the semantics of the construction: said " ", it is just that the 'about' here is quantificational, not referential. Third, it shows how (direct) quotation reports can be false; if the original speaker fails to produce the utterance token, then what the current speaker asserts is false, as intuition delivers. Fourth, it relates direct and indirect quotation. Fifth, it avoids certain 'paradoxes' of names.

Further Issues

There are numerous issues this reconstruction of Frege does not address. Some of these issues must be faced by any complete explication of Frege's theory of direct quotation:

1. Referring to linguistic types. How do quoted material tokens refer to linguistic types? The short answer is that I don't know, but a first step might be to regard reference to linguistic types as a special case of indirect or 'deferred' reference. Quine coined the term 'deferred ostension' for the special case where the speaker ostends one thing and thereby refers to something else that bears a special relation to it, as when one says "It is half empty" pointing at a gas gage but referring to the gas tank. Kaplan imagines saying "It would be nice to stay here" pointing to a point on a map, but referring to the city it represents. And modifying Kaplan, we can imagine saying "That is a great philosopher" pointing to a picture of Carnap, but referring to Carnap himself. Now, it might be objected that these all involve some 'representation' relation between the primary and secondary referent, but that linguistic tokens do not 'represent' their type --they are instances of it. However, the special relation need not be representation. One might say "Murdock just bought that" pointing to a newspaper token but referring to the company that produced it. Or one might say "This was delivered all over the city" pointing to a newspaper token, but referring to all tokens of that type. So it is not unreasonable to propose that the token to type relation can also mediate deferred reference.12

2. The sense of quotation marks. if reference is always determined by sense, as Frege contends, then quotation marks and the quoted material must each have a sense --what is it?

3. Complex quoted material What is the structure of complex quotation, where the quoted material has internal grammatical structure as in (4)? Does each word refer to itself? If so, what preserves linear order? And what would be the polyadicity of the says-relation? And does each word then become an object name, and so does the expression become a string of object names? If so, how can the quoted material function also as a grammatical linguistic expression as in (10a) vs (10b):

   (10)  
   a. "I am", he said, "a fool"
   b. Albert, Betty, he noticed, Claire, Dorothy.

Or does the whole sequence of words, as a grammatical unit, refer to the whole sequence of words, as a grammatical unit, and if so how does it do this?
4. **Other uses of written quotation marks.** There are other uses of written quotation marks -- can Frege's theory be extended to cover them? For instance, there are the dual uses Quine made famous "Giorgione was so called because of his name", and Davidson's "He climbed Anapurna and wrote a book of the same name". Following Frege's discussion of 'fancies' at the end of "On Sense and Reference" he might want to take 'Giorgione' "twice over" -- on the first pass it would refer to the man, and on the second pass, signalled by 'so called' (= called so = called 'Giorgione'), it would refer to itself.\(^{13}\)

5. **Other written quotation devices.** Can Frege's theory be extended from written quotation marks to other types of 'written' quotation such as the use of italics (linguistics) and display.\(^{14}\)

6. **Other quotation devices.** And can Frege's theory be extended from written quotation marks to other types of quotation such as gestural ('finger dance') quotation and verbal quotation? Notice that spoken quotation of spoken words can have properties in common with the words quoted that written quotation of spoken words cannot (and vice versa of course): loudness, pitch, accent, intonation, tone of voice, speed etc.. On the above sketch of a theory, these could all lead to distinct but overlapping types. Also, spoken quotation does not require quotation marks in order to be grammatically correct: *Ca va is French* spoken is fine, but not written. The spoken version with spoken quotes or pauses can clear up potential ambiguities:

   He said QUOTE I'm a fool CLOSE QUOTE  
   He said (pause) I'm a fool.

7. **Post-analysis logical form.** Should we postulate another level of logical form to capture the structure of quotation reports after analysis i.e. a representation which would reveal the 'hidden' quantifier?

8. **The identities.** How are we to read the identities in these reports? It does not seem that we are saying that e.g. 'Damn' is identical with itself. But saying that lies at the level of sense, on Frege's theory, not at the level of reference. Logical form, it might be contended, represents the referential structure of the sentence, the structure that determines truth and falsity and logical relations.

9. **Embedded quotation.** It is possible to embed quotations within quotations:

   (11) John said "'Boston' has six letters"

   How should these be analyzed?

10. **Related devices.** Garcia-Carpintero (ibid) complains that Frege's theory leaves un-unified phenomena that should be unified e.g. reports such as:

    (11)
    
    a. pronounce the word: ...
    b. repeat the sound: ...
    c. reproduce the color: ...
These are all good topics for further work.

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References


D. Truncellito (2000),"Which Type is Tokened by a Token of a Word Type?", Philosophical Studies, 97(3): 251-266.

Notes

1. As 'say (that)' or 'believes (that)' may signal the fact that the words that follow them are being used to refer to their customary senses).

2. As Parsons (1982, 323) notes, Frege sometimes talks as if linguistic expressions that name functions are also 'incomplete' and so might be treated as themselves functions. But this is probably just shorthand for saying that they name incomplete entities. When Frege considers this question explicitly ("Compound Thoughts"), he denies that the linguistic item is 'incomplete'.

3. We use parentheses in place of Frege's various roman, italian and gothic letters.

4. See especially Parsons (1982). I am indebted to this article for many points in this discussion.

5. See also Parsons (1982, 316).

6. This is reminiscent of Davidson's analysis of action sentences, with their hidden event variable.

7. Frege occasionally comments that a quantificational sentence such as 'All whales are mammals' is about whales.

8. In 1991 the Supreme Court (American) ruled that published quotations need not be verbatim.
Justice Kennedy (for the majority) wrote:

"deliberate alteration of the words uttered by a plaintiff does not equate with [sic] knowledge of falsity."

"If an author alters a speaker's words, but effects no material change in meaning, the speaker suffers no injury to reputation. We reject any special test of falsity for quotations, including one which would draw the line at correction of grammar or syntax."

It is hard to account for the aggressive stupidity of this decision. Perhaps the justices actually think that what the phrase 'says " "' means is a legal issue, or that the word changes its meaning when it occurs 'published'. Regardless, the justices seem to have gotten it doubly wrong. If 'said " "' is at issue then deliberate alteration IS knowledge of falsity. The justices just have confused this say with 'said that', which does often tolerate changes preserving meaning.

9. The list of different properties goes well beyond font to e.g.: (i) different types somehow related to the quoted material itself: 'gone' sounds nice, (ii) different tokens related to the quoted material itself: one of these words [the speaker demonstrates some large plastic words] is heavier than 'gone'.

10. He uses cursive where we have used capitals.


12. One says "Beethoven wrote that when he was 15" pointing to a copy of the score. Aren't we referring to the music as a type --aren't we saying that Beethoven penned a token of this (music) type when he was 15?

13. Compare: "It was about so [I demonstrate an interval with my hands] long."

14. Note that the convention in linguistics of quotation using italics converts some truths to falsehoods:

   a. 'Boston' is not in italics (True)
   b. Boston is not in italics (False)