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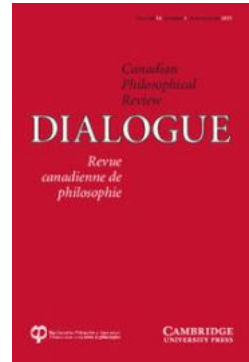
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Dialogue / Volume 54 / Issue 01 / March 2015, pp 121 - 138

DOI: 10.1017/S0012217314000857, Published online: 14 October 2014

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0012217314000857

How to cite this article:

PETER ALWARD (2015). Identity Statements and Conversationally Salient Content. Dialogue, 54, pp 121-138 doi:10.1017/S0012217314000857

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Identity Statements and Conversationally Salient Content

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I argue that viewing Frege's puzzle through a semantic lens results in the rejection of solutions to it on irrelevant grounds. As a result, I develop a solution to it that rests on a non-semantic sense of context-sensitivity. And I apply this picture to Frege's puzzle when it arises through the use of identity statements designed to establish that distinct speakers are talking about the same thing.

RÉSUMÉ : Dans cet article, je soutiens que considérer le puzzle de Frege à travers une lentille sémantique conduit à rejeter des solutions pour des motifs non pertinents. Par conséquent, je développe une solution à ce problème qui repose sur un sens non-sémantique de la sensibilité au contexte. J'applique cette solution à l'énigme de Frege lorsqu'elle surgit à travers l'utilisation d'énoncés d'identité visant à établir que des locuteurs distincts parlent de la même chose.

Frege's famous puzzle about identity has played a prominent role in theorizing about language ever since its discovery over 100 years ago.¹ Russell, for example, took a solution to it to be a criterion of an adequate account of definite descriptions.² And it has historically been offered in defense of descriptivist accounts of proper names.³ Even since the advent of the Millian orthodoxy that followed the publication of *Naming and Necessity*, it has

¹ Frege, 1997. Some think that its foundational role is misplaced (Wettstein, 1986).

² Russell, 1905.

³ See, e.g., Searle, 1958.

Dialogue 54 (2015), 121–138.

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doi:10.1017/S0012217314000857

endured as a puzzle that must at least be addressed by any adequate theory of language.⁴ Nevertheless, the discussion of Frege's puzzle has been obscured by the tendency to view the issue as largely a semantic one. A solution to Frege's puzzle is generally thought to require, among other things, an account of the semantics of identity statements. And putative solutions to the puzzle are assessed, at least in part, on the adequacy of the semantic theories they provide. Moreover, in addition to the tendency to view the puzzle through a semantic lens, there has been insufficient attention to the actual conversational role played by the identity statements for which the puzzle arises.

My goal in this paper is twofold. First, I will motivate and develop an approach to Frege's puzzle that might be termed 'semantically indifferent.' This will involve showing how a semantic approach to the problem results in the rejection of putative solutions to it on irrelevant grounds. In addition, a non-semantic notion of context-sensitivity—conversational salience—will be developed in terms of which a solution to Frege's puzzle can be fruitfully understood. And second, I will develop and defend a solution to Frege's puzzle in terms of the conversationally salient contents of identity statements when they are used to establish that the various participants in a conversation are talking about the same thing.

I. Frege's Puzzle about Identity

The concern of Frege's puzzle is with identity statements—statements of the form

a is b

in which 'is' is understood to have the sense of numerical identity. In particular, the puzzle arises as a result of a comparison of identity statements in which a designating device occurs twice and true identity statements in which that same expression occurs only once accompanied by another designating device. Examples of such pairs of statements include

George Eliot is George Eliot
George Eliot is Mary Anne Evans⁵

and

The current Canadian Prime Minister is the current Canadian Prime Minister
The current Canadian Prime Minister is Stephen Harper.

⁴ Kripke, 1980.

⁵ If one is tempted to think that these do not count as identity statements because 'George Eliot' is a pen name, then choose another example. Nothing in the argument hangs on this fact.

The puzzle that arises for such pairs of statements can be formulated as follows. On the one hand, an identity statement in which a designating device occurs twice and a true identity statement in which that same expression and another occur seem to say the same thing, namely that the object designated by the expressions in question is self-identical. Since, for example,

George Eliot is Mary Anne Evans

is true, this statement and

George Eliot is George Eliot

both say that a single person, Eliot/Evans, is numerically identical to herself.⁶ On the other hand, such pairs of statements seem to differ in their 'cognitive significance.' Cognitive significance is an epistemic notion and, in particular, concerns the means by which knowledge of a statement can be acquired.⁷ Identity statements in which a single referring expression occurs twice are *a priori* tautologies yielding no non-trivial extensions of our knowledge, whereas those in which different designating devices occur are (or, at least can be) *a posteriori* and, as such, can yield substantive extensions of knowledge. Someone who is told

George Eliot is George Eliot

learns nothing of substance new, whereas someone who is told

George Eliot is Mary Anne Evans

may thereby acquire valuable insight into the authorship of *Middlemarch*. But if the statements say the same thing, it is unclear how they can differ in

⁶ The puzzle seems to presuppose that what is said by means of a statement is a function of the objects picked out by the designating devices it contains and the properties and relations expressed by its predicates. So, for example, by means of a statement of the form 'a is F,' one says of the referent of 'a' and the property expressed by the predicate 'is F' that the former has the latter.

⁷ It might seem strained to some to talk of knowledge of statements rather than knowledge of the propositions expressed by them. But even if one concedes that propositions are the primary objects of knowledge, one could still allow that statements are derivative objects of knowledge, that subjects can have knowledge of statements in virtue of possessing knowledge of the propositions expressed by them.

their cognitive significance. An adequate solution to Frege's puzzle, therefore, requires finding a means of reconciling the apparent fact that the members of such pairs of identity statements differ in cognitive significance with the apparent fact that they say the same thing. This can involve either rejecting one or the other of the apparent facts (and explaining why it nevertheless appears to obtain) or preserving the appearances and showing that there is no actual contradiction between these facts. In the last section of this paper, a solution to Frege's puzzle of the latter type will be developed.

It is worth noting that, as it stands, the formulation of Frege's puzzle is not quite right. This is because the formulation assumes that true identity statements in which the same designating device occurs twice are inevitably *a priori* and those that contain two distinct designating devices are *a posteriori*. But there are well-known counter-examples to the former assumption. Consider Kripke's well-known Paderewski case.⁸ If a listener were unaware that Paderewski, the Polish statesman, is Paderewski, the famous pianist, then an utterance of

Paderewski is Paderewski

might be genuinely informative. And arguably the second assumption is suspect as well. Consider, for example, a context in which it is presupposed that 'George Eliot' and 'Mary Anne Evans' co-refer—perhaps a conversation involving the core members of the George Eliot Society. In such a context, an utterance of

George Eliot is Mary Anne Evans

would be *a priori* in the sense that, not only would it fail to yield an extension of the knowledge of the any of the conversational participants, it would be trivial for them.

If this is right, then the puzzle identified by Frege can be generated by a much wider range of pairs of identity statements than Frege himself explicitly considered in his discussion in "On Sense and Reference" (and not even all of these).⁹ Consider, for example, a context in which it is again presupposed that 'Mary Anne Evans' and 'George Eliot' co-refer but not that Mary Anne Evans, Robert Evans' third child who grew up in Warwickshire, is Mary Anne Evans, the onetime assistant editor of the *Westminster Review*. In such a context, an utterance of

Mary Anne Evans is George Eliot

⁸ This example comes from Kripke (1988).

⁹ Frege, 1997.

would again arguably count as *a priori* while an utterance of

Mary Anne Evans is Mary Anne Evans

might prove to be substantially informative. And this despite the fact that both utterances appear to say the same thing, namely that Evans/Eliot is self-identical. For simplicity, in what follows, I will use standard examples according to which identity statements in which a designating device occurs twice are *a priori* and those in which distinct designating devices occur are *a posteriori*.

II. Semantic Indifference

Broadly speaking, there are two central approaches to the semantics of identity statements: the Millian approach and the Fregean approach.¹⁰ Millians argue that what proper names and other singular referring expressions contribute to the semantic contents of the statements in which they occur are their referents.¹¹ Hence, since, for example, ‘George Eliot’ and ‘Mary Anne Evans’ co-refer, their semantic contribution in

Mary Anne Evans is George Eliot

is the same and, as a result, this statement has the same semantic content as

Mary Anne Evans is Mary Anne Evans.

Moreover, insofar as the semantic content of an utterance is identified with what is said by means of it, speakers of these two statements say the same thing.¹² Fregeans argue, in contrast, that what designating devices contribute to the semantic contents of the statements in which they occur are the *senses* they express rather than the objects they designate, where the sense expressed by a designating device corresponds (among other things) to one among many means of picking out this object. As a result, insofar as ‘Mary Anne Evans’ and ‘George Eliot’ express different senses, the semantic content of

¹⁰ Crimmins (1992) and Richard (1990) might be thought to be offering intermediate approaches.

¹¹ Most Millians exclude (attributively used) definite descriptions from this account of the semantic contents of singular referring expressions, and some even exclude proper names when they occur in propositional attitude contexts. See, e.g., Alward, (2009).

¹² Cappelen and Lepore (2005) are Millians who reject the identification of semantic content with what is said.

Mary Anne Evans is George Eliot

differs from that of

Mary Anne Evans is Mary Anne Evans.

And again if the semantic content of a statement is identified with what is said by means of it, then speakers who utter these two statements differ in what they say.

The Fregean solution to Frege's puzzle is quite straightforward. Rather than saying of the referents of the subject and object terms that they are numerically identical—or that the shared referent of these terms is self-identical—on the Fregean view identity statements instead are used to say of the means of picking out objects expressed by the subject and object terms that they pick out the same object. As a result, if the means of picking out objects expressed by 'Mary Anne Evans' differs from that expressed by 'George Eliot,' then, on the Fregean view, whereas

Mary Anne Evans is Mary Anne Evans

says of a single means of picking out an object that it picks what it picks out,

Mary Anne Evans is George Eliot

says of two distinct means that they pick out the same object. And while the former is a trivial *a priori* matter, the latter is a substantial empirical claim. Although the Millian account of the semantics of identity statements by itself yields no solution to Frege's puzzle, one prominent solution that has been adopted by Millians involves distinguishing between the semantic content of a statement—what is literally expressed by it—and other content pragmatically imparted (or otherwise conveyed) by it.¹³ On this view, even though the statements

Mary Anne Evans is George Eliot

and

Mary Anne Evans is Mary Anne Evans

have the same semantic content and, hence, say the same thing, they differ in what they pragmatically impart. In particular, what is pragmatically imparted by identity statements, on this view, is what their semantic content is on the Fregean view: that the means of picking out objects expressed by the subject and object

¹³ See, e.g., Salmon, 1986.

terms pick out the same object. As a result, while the content imparted by the former is *a posteriori*, the content imparted by the latter is *a priori*.¹⁴

What is important to note is that the Fregean and Millian solutions to Frege's puzzle considered here are essentially the same. Both views explain the appearance that each member of the problematic pair of identity statements says the same thing by appeal to the fact that the two designating devices that occur in them designate the same object. And both views explain the apparent difference in cognitive significance between the statements by appeal to the fact that the two designating devices express different means of picking out their shared designatum. The differences between the views are largely tangential to the solution to Frege's puzzle they offer—whether what the referring devices in question contribute to the semantic contents of the identity statements are their referents or the means of picking out those referents they express. And much of the discussion of these solutions to Frege's puzzle has been focused on this tangential issue. For example, descriptivist versions of Fregeanism—according to which names are equivalent to associated descriptions—have been largely rejected on semantic grounds, in particular because names are rigid designators—picking out the same object in every possible world in which that object exists—while descriptions are non-rigid.¹⁵ And objections have been raised against the Millian solution to Frege's puzzle considered here on the grounds that it entails that much of the conversational work for which identity (and other) statements are used can only be done by means of what speakers imply and not what they say.¹⁶ But neither sort of objection directly addresses the adequacy of the basic solution to Frege's puzzle both views share.

What I am trying to motivate here is an attitude of semantic indifference towards Frege's puzzle. A solution to Frege's puzzle will have to invoke various features of the problematic pair of identity statements—the referents of the designating devices, the means of picking out objects expressed by them, or what have you. And the features invoked in some such solution may count as semantically relevant according to some background semantic theory. To adopt an attitude of semantic indifference towards Frege's puzzle is to ignore any such background theory when developing or adjudicating a putative solution to it. This is not to say that a semantic theory is not interesting in its

¹⁴ Kripke (1980) suggested that the semantic content of an identity statement such as

Mary Anne Evans is George Eliot

could itself be *a posteriori* despite being necessary. But since it shares its semantic content with

Mary Anne Evans is Mary Anne Evans

this latter statement would presumably have to be *a posteriori* as well.

¹⁵ Kripke, 1980.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Alward, 2000.

own right; it is only to say that that it is beside the point. Whether a solution to Frege's puzzle adequately explains the appearances vis-à-vis the problematic pair of identity statements simply does not hang on whether the features of these statements invoked in the explanation are semantically relevant.

III. Conversationally Salient Content

The solution to Frege's puzzle on offer here is a contextualist one. In particular, it takes the contents of the problematic identity statements to vary with the contexts in which they are used. But since an attitude of semantic indifference is being adopted, it will have to be non-semantic kind of contextualism. In the background is the observation that linguistic utterances typically have a multitude of complex structured features.¹⁷ Among other things, they may have grammatical and logical structures or forms, they may consist of conventionally meaningful linguistic expressions which are themselves syntactically structured, and some of these expressions may stand in referential relations—or more generally, designating relations—to certain objects and properties, and may do so in virtue of expressing various means of picking out objects and properties. Many of these features are, of course, largely relational but that poses no bar to taking them to be features of the utterances that stand in the relations in question.

The central point here is that, in a given conversational context, certain of an utterance's features will be conversationally salient in the sense of being relevant to the conversational purposes that are in play. Moreover, different features of utterances of the same sentence can be salient in different conversational contexts. Consider, for example, two utterances of the sentence

Fred believes that Mary Anne Evans was illiterate.

Let us suppose that not only is the referent of 'Mary Anne Evans' the same in both utterances but also that the same means of picking out that referent is expressed by the name in both contexts. In a conversation in which the accuracy of Fred's views is at issue, the referent of 'Mary Anne Evans' would be salient. After all, in such a context an utterance of

Fred believes that George Eliot was illiterate

would serve as well. But in a conversation in which the subject's behaviour was being explained, the means by which the referent was picked out would be salient rather than the referent itself. In such a context, an utterance of

Fred believes that George Eliot was illiterate

¹⁷ I prefer to focus on utterances understood as sequences of sounds or inscriptions rather than the speech acts that produce them.

might well not serve exactly because ‘Mary Anne Evans’ and ‘George Eliot’ express different means of picking out the same referent. After all, if Fred failed to realize that George Eliot was Mary Anne Evans, then the former belief report might explain a pattern in Fred’s behaviour that the latter would not, such as the refusal to read anything authored under the name ‘Mary Anne Evans,’ while avidly reading anything authored under the name ‘George Eliot.’

Now since, on its face, a sentence such as

Fred believes that Mary Anne Evans was illiterate

lacks any context-sensitive expressions, it is natural to assume that its semantic content is the same when uttered in a context in which the accuracy of Fred’s beliefs is at stake as it is when uttered in a context in which his behaviour is being explained. Nevertheless, for the reasons adumbrated above, these two utterances could still differ in their conversationally salient contents. As a result, conversational salience is naturally understood as a non-semantic kind of contextualism. One might, of course, rejoin that such sentences—and, more generally, any sentences lacking explicit indexical or ambiguous expressions whose conversationally salient contents vary with context—are best understood to contain implicit or hidden indexicals of some kind. But not only is this notion problematic in its own right, it is insufficiently general to handle all cases of context-relative salience.¹⁸ After all, what is salient in some contexts is the literal meaning of an utterance—what is literally said by means of it—while what is salient in other contexts is its metaphorical, ironic, etc. meaning or what is pragmatically (or otherwise) implied by it. It would be scarcely intelligible to attempt to mark differences in salient content in all such cases by appeal to some kind of hidden indexical.¹⁹

Nevertheless one might still insist on a substantive connection between conversational salience and semantics, at least insofar as the semantic content of an utterance is identified with its literal meaning. In some contexts a sentence can be used literally, whereas in other contexts the same sentence can be used metaphorically, ironically, and the like. Moreover, in some literal contexts certain implications are made by means of the use of the sentence, whereas in other literal contexts no implications are made. On this view, (1) in a metaphorical

¹⁸ See, e.g., Schiffer, 1992.

¹⁹ It is worth emphasizing that it is utterance meaning—and not sentence meaning—that I am identifying with content here. One might also worry that the concession that utterances have literal meanings is incompatible with semantic indifference. The trouble with this worry, however, is that semantic indifference does not involve the denial that utterances have semantic contents. Rather it only consists in the denial that the semantic contents of utterances need to be invoked in the explanation of certain linguistic phenomena.

or ironic context, the conversationally salient content is metaphorical or ironic meaning, and (2) in a literal context in which an implication is made, the conversationally salient content is the implied content. But (3) in a literal context in which no implications are made, the conversationally salient content just is the semantic content of the utterance.

Although this yields a substantially looser connection between conversationally salient content and semantics than the previous suggestion, this connection nevertheless remains too strong. As above, the conversationally salient content of two semantically identical utterances can differ in literal contexts without pragmatic implications. But moreover, the conversationally salient content of an utterance of a sentence in one context could be its semantic content and in another context could be its metaphorical or ironic meaning even if it is used metaphorically or ironically in both contexts; and the salient content of an utterance of a sentence in one context could be its semantic content and in other context could be its implied content even if the same implication is made (by the same mechanisms) in both contexts. Consider, for example, two contexts in which Fred says

Mary is the sun.

The semantic content of Fred's utterance on both occasions is that Mary is numerically identical to the star at the centre of our solar system. Let us suppose, however, that again on both occasions the conditions are satisfied for this utterance having a metaphorical meaning to the effect that Mary is the most important person in Fred's life. Minimally, whatever the correct account of metaphor might be, this requires that Fred have the requisite communication intentions. Now suppose that in the first context, the conversation concerns Fred's feelings towards Mary. In such circumstances, the conversationally salient content of Fred's utterance would pretty clearly be its metaphorical content, that Mary is the most important person in his life. But suppose that in the second context the conversation concerns the mechanisms of metaphor and, in particular, how metaphorical meaning could be conveyed by false, or even ludicrous, statements.²⁰ In such circumstances, its conversationally salient content would be the literal semantic content of Fred's utterance—that Mary is numerically identical to the star at the centre of our solar system—rather than its metaphorical content. The upshot here is that there is no sense in which conversational salience is at bottom a kind of semantic contextualism.

²⁰ The conversation might have been initiated by Fred's sincere attempt to discuss his feelings for Mary by means of his utterance but followed by a discussion of metaphor he did not intend. Alternately, this topic of the conversation might have been established prior to Fred's contribution and he might have sincerely expressed his feelings for Mary via his utterance in order to illustrate the phenomenon at issue.

IV. Cognitive Relations as Fregean Senses

The solution to Frege's puzzle developed here is a contextualist variant of the basic Fregean solution. What this means is that it assumes that different Fregean senses are expressed by designating devices in different contexts of utterances. Whatever else a Fregean sense is, it is a means of picking out an object. Now on the view on offer here, speakers are able to pick out the objects they do in virtue of the cognitive relations they stand in to them. As a result, I am simply going to identify means of picking out objects with cognitive relations. By cognitive relations I mean the relations in which thinking subjects stand to potential objects of thought and talk in virtue of which they are able to think or talk about them. The paradigmatic example of a cognitive relation is an experiential relation in which one might stand to something, such as seeing or hearing it. In virtue of experiencing something, one can think or talk about it. Descriptivists of various stripes have, in addition, emphasized what might be called 'conceptual relations.' One stands in a conceptual relation to an object when one deploys concepts or descriptions which it (uniquely) satisfies. More recently, a lot of emphasis has been placed on what might be called 'reputational relations.' These include Kripkean causal-historical chains wherein a thinking subject stands at the end of a chain of appropriately causally linked events initiated when an object is named.²¹ But it also includes a broader range of causal relations that fall under the colloquial expression 'hearing about' (or 'reading about') something.²² Finally, it is worth noting that at any given time, the overwhelming majority of cognitive relations in which a thinking subject stands are memory relations. The things one experiences, hears about, and conceives of at a given time are vastly outnumbered by the things one (at least potentially) remembers experiencing, hearing about, and conceiving of at that time.

Now it is important to note that the cognitive relations in which a thinking subject stands at any given time fall into a number of collections or clusters.²³ Each collection corresponds to one of the subject's notional objects—the objects she believes to exist.²⁴ Such collections are generated by what I call 'shared-relatum' judgements—judgements to the effect that distinct cognitive relations in which one stands are relations to the same object.²⁵ So, for example, a subject might judge that the person she is currently being told about is the person she remembers seeing at a party the previous

²¹ Kripke, 1980.

²² I am neutral about whether such causal chains are intentional in Searle's (1983) sense.

²³ The view on offer here is reminiscent of Searle's (1958, 1983) cluster theory.

²⁴ Rather than being identified with notional objects, collections of cognitive relations should be understood to stand to them as sense stands to reference.

²⁵ It is because a subject might make erroneous shared-relatum judgements—or fail to make correct judgements—that these collections correspond to notional rather than actual objects.

evening. As a result, a subject's beliefs about the object of one of her cognitive relations will also apply to the objects of other cognitive relations in the same collection. After all, if I believe that the person I remember seeing at last night's party is dangerous or deceitful and I judge that this just is the person I am currently being told about, I will judge the latter to be dangerous or deceitful as well. Finally, it is worth noting that the collections at issue are best understood on the model of teams rather than sets. This is because, like teams and unlike sets, such collections can survive the changes in membership that occur when a subject comes to stand in a new cognitive relationship to something and judges this to constitute an encounter with something she has met before rather than something new. To so judge is to add this new cognitive relation to a previously existing collection of cognitive relations. But insofar as such collections correspond to the subject's notional objects, to suppose that the previous collections has been thereby displaced—which we would have to suppose were it a set—contradicts the assumption that she judges herself to be cognitively related to something she had previously believed to exist.

Since cognitive relations here are playing the role of Fregean senses, not only do they need to serve as means of picking out objects, they also need to be expressed by referring devices. On the view on offer, what it is for a referring expression to express a cognitive relation is for the speaker to be thinking about something by means of standing in this relation to it at the time of her utterance, and to intend to talk about what she thereby has in mind by means of her use of this expression. So, for example, if a speaker is thinking about Stephen Harper in virtue of remembering her experience of him at the previous evening's party and intends to talk about him by saying

Harpo was in fine form last night,

then her use of the designating device 'Harpo' expresses this memory relation in which she stands to him. But if she intends to talk about him by means of uttering that sentence while thinking about him as the current occupant of the role of Canadian Prime Minister, then it is this conceptual cognitive relation that her use of name expresses.²⁶ Of course, as part of a background semantic theory one might insist that a unique one of the cognitive relations in which a speaker stands is semantic-referent determining and, hence, that the relatum of this cognitive relation is the semantic content of the expression. Kripke, for example, has famously argued that the reputational cognitive relation consisting of a chain of appropriately causally linked events leading back to a naming ceremony is always

²⁶ It is worth noting that we have two sorts of context-sensitivity on the table at this point. Exactly which cognitive relation is expressed by a designating device varies with the context of utterance, but also whether the cognitive relation expressed, the referent, or something else is conversationally salient in a given context.

semantic-referent determining.²⁷ Nevertheless which cognitive relation is expressed by a designating device varies with context and, hence, which relational cognitive relation is of conversational interest may vary with context as well.²⁸

V. Frege's Puzzle

Whatever other uses of identity statements there might be, I want to focus here on what might be 'presupposition-generating' uses of them. In order to have a conversation about some object, the various participants need to presuppose that they are talking about the same object rather than talking past one another. And a fruitful way of generating such presuppositions is by means of the use of identity statements. Suppose, for example, someone begins a conversation by saying

Mary Anne Evans is one of the most important novelists of the Victorian era

and her conversational interlocutor responds by asking

Who is Mary Anne Evans?

In order to get her desired conversation—about Evans's status in the literary pantheon—off the ground the former speaker might offer an identity statement such as

Mary Anne Evans is George Eliot.

Normally such a presupposition-generating use of an identity statement would include a designating device with which the listener is familiar and which she herself might use to express one of her cognitive relations. Of course, the presupposition-generating use of an identity statement might fail, if the listener disputes the proffered identity. And if no acceptable substitute can be found, the conversation may be frustrated. But if the identity statement, or some alternative, is accepted, the conversation can proceed as intended. It is worth noting that under the heading 'presupposition-generating' uses of identity statements are included both what might be called 'conversation-starters' and 'game-changers.' While the former occur upfront at the beginning of conversations, the latter occur midstream after several conversational moves have already been made. Consider, for example, a conversation in which

Mary Anne Evans is George Eliot

²⁷ Kripke, 1980.

²⁸ This manoeuvre might generate something akin to Donnellan's (1966) referential-attributive distinction for proper names and not just definite descriptions.

is contributed only after a discussion of whether time spent as the assistant editor of the Westminster Review suffices to yield Evans a luminous position in the literary pantheon. If the identity statement is accepted at this point in the conversation, not only will the presuppositions of the ongoing conversation be altered, some of what has been said before might have to be rescinded.²⁹

Now the presupposition that is generated by some such use of an identity statement is that the conversational participants are talking about the same object. If such a presupposition is in place, then when one participant says, for example,

Mary Anne Evans is one of the most important novelists of the Victorian era

and the other responds by saying

Yes, she is

or

No, she isn't

they both will take it for granted that they are not talking past one another. But as a matter of fact they might be talking past one another: presupposing you are talking about the same thing is no guarantee that you are.³⁰ Nevertheless they jointly believe that they are. As a result, it will prove fruitful to formulate things in terms of inter-subjective notional objects—jointly believed to exist by the conversational participants at issue—which may prove to be distinct from any actual objects. And just as an individual subject's notional objects were taken above to correspond to a collection of her own cognitive relations, inter-subjective notional objects can be taken to correspond to inter-subjective collections of cognitive relations—collection whose members include cognitive relations in which distinct subjects stand.

Of particular interest here are conversationally generated inter-subjective collections: collections of cognitive relations that come into existence when

²⁹ I do not mean to make any claim here about the relative frequency of presupposition-generating uses of identity statements or to suggest that they are in some sense primary. I only claim that they are not an unusual use for which Frege's puzzle arises and to which an interesting solution can be offered.

³⁰ As a bit of salient but embarrassing autobiography, I might note that I carried on a conversation with a graduate school classmate about 'our mutual friend Mark' over the course of three years after which it turned out we were talking about different people.

the participants in a conversation jointly judge that some of the cognitive relations in which they individually stand share a relatum.³¹ As above, one means by which conversational participants come to jointly judge that their individual cognitive relations share a relatum is by means of the utterance and acceptance of presupposition-generating identity statements that express them. When, for example, in response to the query

Who is Mary Anne Evans?

a speaker says

Mary Anne Evans is George Eliot,

she thereby expresses two cognitive relations in which she stands. But if she chooses her designating devices carefully, at least one of them will be a term her listener would use to express one of his own cognitive relations. If the latter accepts this statement, these cognitive relations will come to jointly populate an inter-subjective collection of the same.

At any given point in a conversation about an inter-subjective notional object, there will be a corresponding collection of cognitive relations. If one of the conversational participants utters an identity statement at that point, one, both, or neither of the designators she uses might express cognitive relations that are members of this corresponding collection. If neither of the designators expresses a cognitive relation from this collection, then the speaker is no longer talking about the inter-subjective notional object and has, in effect, changed the subject. If both of the designators express cognitive relations from the collection, then the identity statement expresses a conversational presupposition and, as a result, would count as *a priori*. But if just one of the designators expresses a cognitive relation from the collection, then what the identity statement expresses is not a conversational presupposition but rather substantial information about the identity of the (notional) object of the conversation. As a result, the identity statement would count as *a posteriori* rather than *a priori*. Of course, if the conversational participants accept this *a posteriori* identity statement, then both of the expressed cognitive relations will from that point on be members of the collection corresponding to the inter-subjective notional object under discussion. Hence, any subsequent utterance of an identity statement

³¹ It is worth noting that although I endorse local 'meaning' conventions whose duration can be as short as a single conversation, this does not entail that there can be a solitary language. These conventions come into effect only when a second conversational interlocutor accepts the identity the first speaker has proffered and, hence, are essentially social.

that expresses those very same cognitive relations will count as *a priori* and not *a posteriori*.

Consider again a point in a conversation in which

Mary Anne Evans is George Eliot

occurs midstream as a potential game-changer and in which the cognitive relation expressed by ‘Mary Anne Evans’—but not that expressed by ‘George Eliot’—is a member of the collection corresponding to the inter-subjective notional object under discussion. Prior to its acceptance, this statement is *a posteriori* in the sense that it is an open question for the conversational participants whether or not it is true. But once it is accepted and the cognitive relation expressed by ‘George Eliot’ becomes of member of the collection in question, any subsequent utterance of an identity statement that expresses the same cognitive relations will be *a priori* in the sense that it is presupposed by the participants to be true.

Finally, the apparatus is now in place to offer a solution to Frege’s puzzle. Recall: the challenge is to reconcile the apparent fact that a pair of statements such as

Mary Anne Evans is Mary Anne Evans

and

Mary Anne Evans is George Eliot,

differ in cognitive significance with the apparent fact that they say the same thing. As above, this can involve denying either that the statements in fact say the same thing or that they differ in cognitive significance, and explaining why it nevertheless seems that they do. Alternately it can involve granting both that the statements say the same thing and that they differ in cognitive significance, and showing that any contradiction between these claims is merely apparent. The latter approach will be adopted here. Like all utterances, identity statements have a variety of complex structured features including consisting in part of designating devices that pick out objects and which express cognitive relations. In the presupposition-generating contexts of interest here, the cognitive relations expressed by the designators are conversationally salient. And insofar as the cognitive relation expressed by ‘George Eliot’ is not a member of the collection of cognitive relations corresponding to the inter-subjective notional object under discussion

Mary Anne Evans is George Eliot

will be *a posteriori* and

Mary Anne Evans is Mary Anne Evans

will be *a priori* for reasons adumbrated above. But even though the referents of the names are not salient, ‘Mary Anne Evans’ and ‘George Eliot’ nevertheless still corefer. And, as a result, the two identity statements in that sense still say the same thing. It is worth emphasizing the role that semantic indifference plays in facilitating this solution. Typically the semantic content of an utterance is identified with what is said by means of it, as well as being taken to be the bearer of cognitive significance.³² As a result, when seen through a semantic lens, Frege’s puzzle seems to suggest that one thing—the semantic content—is shared by both identity statements, but also must differ between these statements. But if one is indifferent to the semantics of identity statements, one is not forced to suppose that one feature of the identity statements is both the same and different. Instead, one is free to offer a solution according to which the statements are identical in one respect but different in another. And that is exactly the approach taken here.

VI. Is Semantics a Mistake?

The solution to Frege’s puzzle on offer here is at its core quite similar to the basic solution, discussed above, that is shared by both Fregeans and at least some Millians. The appearance that the identity statements say the same thing is explained by the fact that both designating devices pick out the same object; and the appearance that they differ in cognitive significance is explained by their expressing distinct cognitive relations. The solution offered here, however, differs from this alternative at the level of detail: not only does it include reputational and experiential relations to things in addition to descriptions, inter-subjective collections of cognitive relations, rather than just individual relations, play a central role. Moreover, the picture is contextualist in two distinct senses: not only do the cognitive relations expressed by designating devices vary with the context in which they are uttered, whether or not the cognitive relations expressed are conversationally salient at all varies with context as well. But the most important difference is the attitude of semantic indifference adopted by this solution. Not only does it rely on a non-semantic kind of context-sensitivity, it presupposes that viewing the issue through a semantic lens at all is a kind of mistake. One might even wonder whether the broader semantic project in the philosophy of language is itself misguided. But that is a question for another time.

³² But see Capellen and Lepore (2005) for a denial of the identification of semantic content and what is said.

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