

The ontology of meanings

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Abstract In part 4 of *Meaning, Expression, and Thought*, Davis rejects what he calls Fregean ideational theories, according to which the meaning of an expression is an idea; and then presents his own account, which states that, e.g., the meaning of ‘Primzahl’ in German is the property of meaning *prime number*. Before casting doubt on the latter ontology of meanings, I come to Frege’s defence by pointing out that he was not an advocate of the position Davis named after him because Fregean senses are not lexical meanings and Fregean thoughts are not types of mental events.

Keywords Frege · Meaning · Properties · Sense

At the beginning of part 4 of *Meaning, Expression, and Thought*, Wayne Davis addresses the ontology of meanings. He first rejects what he calls Fregean ideational theories, according to which the meaning of an expression is an *idea*; and then presents his own account, which states that meanings are *properties* of certain types. In the first section of my paper, I come to Frege’s defence by pointing out that he was not an advocate of the position Davis named after him; in the second section, I challenge Davis’s approach.

To avoid misunderstandings, some brief remarks on what Davis means by ‘meaning’ and ‘idea’ are necessary. When claiming that the meaning of an expression is not an idea but a property, Davis is concerned with *linguistic* (or *lexical*) meaning, viz., the conventional meaning an expression type has in a certain language. In this sense, synonymous expressions have the same meaning and equivocal expressions more than one meaning. Moreover, the linguistic meaning of a sentence must be distinguished from what is said by uttering it on a particular

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occasion, i.e., from the proposition literally expressed (cf. Cartwright 1962). Let Susan utter ‘Today is Friday’ on one day and Tom ‘Heute ist Freitag’ on the next day. These sentences are synonymous, but what Susan says differs from what Tom says because ‘today’ and ‘heute’ refer to different days in these contexts. And if Susan utters ‘Today is Friday’ on one day and ‘Yesterday was Friday’ on the day after, the same proposition is expressed although the sentences have different linguistic meanings. Whereas the lexical meaning of ‘Today is Friday’ is independent of the context of utterance and can thus be known without knowing when the sentence is uttered, one needs such extra-linguistic knowledge in order to grasp what is said.

As to the term ‘idea’, philosophers, psychologists and linguists have imposed numerous meanings on it. Davis (2003, Sects. 12, 15) stipulates that ideas are thoughts or cognitive parts thereof and thus *types of mental events*. When both Susan and Tom are judging that roses are red, there are numerically distinct mental event tokens having something in common: the same idea is occurring to these thinkers. This idea, the thought that roses are red, contains the idea of roses and the idea of redness. An idea in this sense is an abstract entity: it has no spatio-temporal location and cannot be perceived by the senses. Furthermore, ideas need not have instances: presumably, the thought that Neanderthals lived in blue cottages with rusty chimneys would not have occurred to anyone if I had chosen a different example.

1 The ‘Fregean’ ontology of meanings

According to what Davis (2003, p. 555) labels ‘Fregean ideational theories’, linguistic meanings are *ideas*. More specifically, the meaning of the German word ‘kalt’ is the idea *cold* because ‘kalt’ means *cold*; and since ‘17 ist eine Primzahl’ means *17 is a prime number* in German, the German meaning of this sentence is the idea (or thought) that 17 is a prime number. More generally:

The meaning of e in L is the idea μ iff e means μ in L .

As Davis (2003, pp. 555f.) observes, however, this claim is untenable because meanings and ideas have different properties. For example, the thought expressed by ‘17 ist eine Primzahl’ is true, but it hardly makes sense to say that the meaning of this sentence is true.

As the tag ‘Fregean ideational theories’ already indicates, Davis takes Frege to subscribe to such an implausible view. At first glance, this seems to be alright. In his famous ‘On Sense and Meaning’, Frege (1892b, pp. 57f.) distinguishes between the sense (*Sinn*) and the referent (*Bedeutung*) of an expression. ‘The morning star’ and ‘the evening star’ have the same referent, but they differ in sense because it is possible to understand both ‘The morning star may be seen in the morning’ and ‘The evening star may be seen in the morning’ but accept only the first one as true (cf. Frege 1891, p. 29). The crucial point, then, is that there are numerous places at

which Frege calls the sense of a declarative sentence a thought (*Gedanke*).¹ It is thus tempting to assume that Frege is in fact an exponent of Fregean ideational theories, at least with respect to such sentences.

However, for this claim to be true, two conditions have to be satisfied. First, what Frege refers to by ‘senses’ must be lexical meanings; and second, Fregean thoughts should be ideas in Davis’s sense. I try to show that both assumptions are wrong.

Identifying Fregean sense with linguistic meaning has a long tradition going back to Church and Carnap.² Nonetheless, as Burge and Kühne have argued, this interpretation is at odds with Frege’s remarks on indexical expressions.³ In ‘Thoughts’, Frege wrote:

If someone wants to say today what he expressed yesterday using the word ‘today’, he will replace this word with ‘yesterday’. Although the thought is the same its verbal expression must be different in order that the change of sense which would otherwise be effected by the differing times of utterance may be cancelled out. The case is the same with words like ‘here’ and ‘there’. In all such cases the mere wording [...] is not the complete expression of the thought; the knowledge of certain conditions accompanying the utterance, which are used as means of expressing the thought, is needed for us to grasp the thought correctly. Pointing the finger, hand gestures, glances may belong here too. The same verbal expression^[4] containing the word ‘I’ in the mouths of different men will express different thoughts, of which some may be true, others false. (Frege 1918, p. 10f.)

The same considerations can be found in *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik* (1893, pp. XVIf.) and in a preparatory manuscript for a textbook entitled ‘Logik’ from 1897 (1979, pp. 134f.). Frege suggests that ‘Today is Friday’, when used today, and ‘Yesterday was Friday’, when used tomorrow, express the same sense. But these sentences are not synonymous. Furthermore, ‘Today is Friday’, when used today, and ‘Today is Friday’, when used tomorrow, have different senses because ‘today’ refers to different days. But the linguistic meaning of this sentence does not shift every day at midnight. Similarly, although the linguistic meaning of ‘I am hungry’ does not vary from speaker to speaker, different thoughts (= senses) are expressed in the mouths of different persons.

Second, Frege also says that, if a sentence contains expressions like ‘today’ and ‘I’, we need knowledge about the utterance context in order to grasp the thought (= sense) expressed in the given context. When we hear a voice on an audiotape

¹ Cf. Frege (1891, pp. 29, 31, 1892a, pp. 46–48, 54, 1892b, pp. 62f., 1918, pp. 4–7, 1979, pp. 119, 129, 131, 167f., 192, 194, 200, 206, 216, 225, 231–234, 243, 255). Frege mentions a further class of sentences expressing thoughts, namely, interrogative sentences of the yes/no-type like ‘Is 17 a prime number?’ (cf. 1918, p. 7, 1979, pp. 138f.); and he says about subsentential expressions that their senses are parts of thoughts (cf. 1892b, p. 66, 1979, pp. 187, 190–193, 201, 207f., 225, 231–234, 243, 254f.).

² Cf. Church (1943, p. 301, 1956, p. 5), Carnap (1963, p. 897, 1964, p. 125).

³ Cf. Burge (1977, p. 357, 1979, pp. 399–401), Kühne (1982, pp. 50–52, 1983, pp. 198f., 1992, pp. 721–723). See also Baker and Hacker (1984, p. 131), Beaney (1996, pp. 208, 246), Recanati (1995, pp. 96f.), Segal (1995, pp. 22f.).

⁴ Geach wrongly translated ‘Wortlaut’ by ‘utterance’.

saying ‘I am hungry’, we can figure out the sense only if we know who made the utterance and when it was made. This does not hold for lexical meaning. We know what this sentence means in English even if we have no idea of who uttered it when.

Third, consider a later passage from ‘Thoughts’:

But are there not thoughts which are true today but false in six months’ time? The thought, for example, that the tree there is covered with green leaves, will surely be false in six months’ time. No, for it is not the same thought at all. The words ‘This tree is covered with green leaves’ are not sufficient by themselves to constitute the expression of a thought, for the time of utterance is involved as well. Without the time-specification thus given we have [...] no thought at all. Only a sentence with the time-specification filled out, a sentence complete in every respect, expresses a thought. (Frege 1918, pp. 27f., cf. 1979, p. 135)

The sentence ‘This tree is covered with green leaves’ on its own does not have a sense because it expresses a thought only through cooperation with a time-specification.⁵ But for this sentence to have a lexical meaning, no time-specification is needed. Again, this shows that Fregean sense should not be confused with lexical meaning.

Finally, if the equation ‘sense = lexical meaning’ were true, Frege would make an easily detectable mistake when holding that sense determines reference (cf. 1892b, p. 58). The sense of ‘I’ would then be the same in each utterance because this pronoun retains a constant linguistic meaning. Hence, given the Fregean doctrine that expressions with the same sense have the same referent, ‘I’ would refer to the same object independently of who utters it. Linsky (1967, pp. 36f.) argues along these lines against Frege’s theory, ignoring thereby that Frege avoids this patently absurd conclusion by emphasising that the sense of ‘I’ changes with the utterer.

All in all, the Fregean sense of a declarative sentence is not on a par with its lexical meaning but rather with what is literally said by uttering it (cf. Strawson 1985, pp. 69f.). ‘I am hungry’ has different senses in the mouths of different speakers because, by uttering this sentence, they talk about different persons and thus do not say the same thing. What is said is determined not only by the sentence’s linguistic meaning but also by the context of utterance. Hence, whereas the sentence type ‘I am hungry’ has a certain meaning in English, there is no such thing as *the* Fregean sense of this sentence because, in isolation from an utterance context, there is nothing said by it.

The second reason for not classifying Frege as a Fregean ideational theorist is that he does not mean the same by ‘thoughts’ as Davis does, that is, types of mental events. Here, however, the situation is more complicated than many Frege scholars think. There is a strong tendency among them to view as a platitude the notion that Fregean thoughts do not belong to the psychological realm. After all, Frege (1918, pp. 13) not only distinguishes them from “things in the external world”, things we may “perceive with the senses, such as trees, stones and houses”; he also takes great

⁵ Cf. Baker and Hacker (1984, p. 36), Dummett (1981, pp. 169, 367), Künne (1992), Segal (1995, pp. 22f.). Cf. also Künne (2003, pp. 277–279) on the ambiguity of the term ‘time-specification’.

pains to show that thoughts are not part of the “inner world”, the “world of sense-impressions, of creations of [the] imagination, of sensations, of feelings and moods, [...] of inclinations [and] wishes”. But a closer look at Frege’s argumentation reveals that it does not speak against the hypothesis that thoughts are mental event *types*.

The inhabitants of the inner world are called *Vorstellungen* by Frege, which translates ‘ideas’. On Frege’s (1918, pp. 14f.) conception, these entities differ from thoughts because they “need an owner” and because “every idea has only one owner”. That is, first, *Vorstellungen* do not exist autonomously but only if there is someone who has them. Second, they are individuated by their bearers: even if Susan and Tom both have a *Vorstellung* of the same object, and even if these *Vorstellungen* coincide in every other respect, they are still numerically distinct because their bearers are not identical. This does not hold for thoughts: “A thought does not have to be owned by anyone. The same thought can be grasped by several people.” (Frege 1979, p. 251)⁶

As Davis (2003, pp. 312–316, 569) makes clear, however, this is far from proving that Fregean thoughts cannot be ideas in Davis’s sense. For Frege is concerned with mental *tokens* when talking about ideas, i.e., with temporally locatable events, or in Frege’s (1979, pp. 135–137) own words, “act[s] of thinking”. Davis, in contrast, uses ‘ideas’ for mental *types*. Ideas in his sense are existentially independent of thinkers because they need not be tokened in the mind of a person; and they are shareable insofar as the same idea may be instantiated by the mental acts of different persons. Thus, Frege’s insistence on the difference between thoughts and *Vorstellungen* does not exclude that thoughts are *types* of mental events. Similarly, this is neither excluded by Frege’s (1979, 135) remark that “[i]t is of the essence of a thought to be non-temporal and non-spatial” nor by the fact that he takes thoughts to be imperceptible by the senses.⁷ Types have these features, too, so that the abstractness of Fregean thoughts does not provide a reason for distinguishing them from mental event types.

However, Frege (1892b, p. 62, fn.) also stresses that “[b]y a thought I understand not the subjective performance of thinking but its objective *content*” (my emph.).⁸ When it occurs to Susan and Tom that snow is white, there are numerically distinct acts of thinking, both having the thought that snow is white as their content. Initially, this does not indicate a difference between Fregean thoughts and ideas in Davis’s sense because Davis (2003, p. 426) also takes the thought that snow is white to be the content of these acts. But he overlooks that this judgement is inconsistent with his regulation that thoughts are mental event types.

Davis (2003, 296, 425f.) himself notices that the term ‘thought’ is subject to an act/object ambiguity: it can refer either to *acts of thinking* or to *what a person thinks*, i.e., the content of an act of thinking (in Davis’s words, its “relational

⁶ Cf. Frege (1918, pp. 13–18, 24–26, 1892b, pp. 59f., 1979, pp. 3f., 7, 130f., 133, 137, 143–145, 148, 167, 198).

⁷ Cf. Frege (1918, pp. 5, 13, 17, 26, 1979, pp. 167, 206, 259).

⁸ Cf. also Frege’s (1979, pp. 11, 47) distinction between judgements, i.e., acts of judging, and their contents; and Frege (1918, p. 7).

object”). A thought in the former sense is surely a mental event. If Susan is thinking the thought that snow is white, her act of thinking is a mental event token that belongs to diverse mental event types, among them thinking-of-snow and thinking-the-thought-that-snow-is-white. However, Fregean thoughts are thoughts in the latter sense; and it is far from clear that the *content* of Susan’s mental act is an event type, let alone a mental event type.

First, what could be the related token? Definitely not Susan’s act of thinking. For Susan’s thinking the thought that snow is white is not an exemplar of what Susan is thinking. Analogously, a word token is an exemplar of a certain word type, but it is not an exemplar of its meaning. More generally, whereas there is nothing to be said against taking Susan’s act of thinking to be an instance of the type thinking-the-thought-that-snow-is-white, it is hard to catch on the notion that there is a further mental event token that instantiates the *content* of her act.

Second, thoughts in Frege’s sense are entities that are grasped in thinking and accepted as true in judging (cf. Frege 1918, pp. 5, 7). When Susan judges that snow is white, she does not only grasp the thought that snow is white but also accepts it as true. But it hardly makes sense to say that what she grasps and accepts as true is a type of mental event. Moreover, if Susan asserts that snow is white, she presents as being true the same thought. The claim that what she presents as being true is a mental event type, however, sounds even odder to me. We can surely think *about* mental event types, make judgements or assertions *about* them. We are involved in these activities when we contemplate whether fallacious reasoning (a mental event type) can be much reduced by logic courses, and then judge and assert that it can. But what could it mean to think, judge or assert *a* mental event type?

Third, in contrast to many other abstract objects, such as numbers, event types may have causes and effects (cf. Davis 2003, 315). That applies to mental event types, too. Assume Susan cannot help thinking the thought that snow is white whenever she sees a white sheet. Then the type Susan’s-seeing-a-white-sheet causes the type Susan’s-thinking-the-thought-that-snow-is-white because tokens of the former type cause tokens of the latter type. In other words, Susan’s seeing a white sheet affects her thinking insofar as it produces in her an *act of thinking with a particular content*. But Susan’s seeing a white sheet does not bring about or affect the *content itself*. Unlike thoughts in the act sense, thoughts in the object sense appear to be on a par with numbers in being causally untouchable.

Hence, while the *abstractness* of Fregean thoughts can be reconciled with the supposition that they are types of mental events, their status as (potential) *contents* of mental acts contradicts it. Given that Davis adheres to using the term ‘idea’ for mental event types, a Fregean thought is thus not an idea in Davis’s sense.

To sum up, Fregean thoughts are not types of mental events, and Fregean senses are not lexical meanings, so that the fact that Frege takes the sense of a declarative sentence to be a thought does not entail that he was an advocate of what Davis calls Fregean ideational theories. Consequently, Frege’s view cannot be rejected by pointing out that lexical meanings and mental event types have different characteristics.

2 Davis's ontology of meanings

In Davis's (2003, p. 558) opinion, the linguistic meaning of an expression is not an idea but a *property*: it is "the property that it has of meaning whatever it means". For example, the meaning of '17 ist eine Primzahl' in German is the property of meaning *17 is a prime number* because this is what this sentence means in German. More generally:

The meaning of *e* in *L* is the property of meaning μ iff *e* means μ in *L*.⁹

At first glance, this seems to be false. I may learn and thus know the meaning of the German word 'kalt', then forget it and look it up in a dictionary where it is explained. But it makes no sense to say that I learn and hence know the property of meaning *cold*, then forget it and look it up in a dictionary that explains it. Apparently, although 'kalt' means *cold*, the property of meaning *cold* cannot be the meaning of 'kalt' because the former lacks many of the latter's features.

However, Davis (2003, pp. 558f.) points out that phrases of the type 'the meaning of *e*' have a referential and a nonreferential sense, and that "[t]he nonreferential sense is mandatory when the phrase follows 'knows', 'learned', 'forgot', 'look up', 'explain' or 'specify'". In such cases, we do not refer to the meaning of the given expression and ascribe a certain attribute to it (cf. Künne 1983, pp. 203f.). Hence, such cases do not admit of the conclusion that the meaning of *e* and the corresponding property of meaning μ have different characteristics. Analogously, suppose Susan knows the colour of Tom's hair without knowing the colour of Kim's hair. This does not imply that the colour of Tom's hair differs from the colour of Kim's hair because 'the colour of S's hair' has a nonreferential sense in this context: 'Susan knows the colour of Tom's hair' must not be symbolised 'Rab' in the predicate calculus because it does not express a relation between Susan and the colour of Tom's hair but states, roughly, that Susan can answer the question what colour Tom's hair has.

Nonetheless, there are some difficulties with Davis's identification of meanings and meaning-properties. First, there is an internal inconsistency. Davis (2003, p. 260) holds that an anomalous sentence like 'John frightens sincerity' does not lack a meaning; it is rather "meaningful, although its meaning is nonsensical or absurd". Hence, if the meaning of 'John frightens sincerity' were identical with the property of meaning *John frightens sincerity*, this property would also be nonsensical or absurd. But what could that mean? The property of being a round square might be called absurd insofar as nothing can possess it. But this cannot be what Davis means by 'absurd' because he takes the sentence 'John frightens sincerity' to have the property of meaning *John frightens sincerity*.

Second, a manifest explanation for the compositionality of natural languages is that the meaning of a complex expression is in general composed of the meanings of its parts. In this spirit, the meaning of 'even number' is a function of the meanings

⁹ Against the background of Davis's expression theory of meaning, this implies that the meaning of *e* in *L* is the property of expressing the idea μ iff *e* means μ in *L* (cf. Davis 2003, p. 561). But this move is irrelevant to the following considerations.

of ‘even’ and ‘number’ simply because the latter are *parts* of the former. But this explanation, which is accepted by Davis (2003, pp. 251–253, 387f.), throws a bad light on his identification of meanings with meaning properties. For, in contrast to ‘The meaning of “even number” contains the meaning of “number”’, ‘The property of meaning *even number* contains the meaning of “number”’ sounds profoundly odd. Moreover, to account for compositionality, the meaning of a compound expression cannot just be an assemblage of the meanings of its components but has to be assigned a *structure*. The meanings of ‘ $2 > 1$ ’ and ‘ $1 > 2$ ’ do not vary in their parts but in the way these parts are combined (cf. Davis 2003, p. 383). Hence, Davis should agree with the claim that the property of meaning $2 > 1$ is a structured entity. In a brief comparison of types with properties, however, he argues that “properties can be included in other properties. But while types with other types occurring in them thereby *have a structure*, [...] properties do not” (2003, p. 316).

Third, the meaning of ‘Primzahl’ is surely a meaning, but we would not classify the property of meaning *prime number* as a meaning. However, Davis maintains that this does not subvert his proposal:

I think it would be just as unwarranted to distinguish between meaning and meaning-properties on such grounds as it would be to distinguish between colors and color-properties on the grounds that the latter would not ordinarily be called colors. The color red is undeniably a property of objects, namely the property of being red. Nevertheless, while it is natural to classify the color red as a color, we would not ordinarily say that the property of being red is a color. (Davis 2003, p. 561, fn.)

In the light of Davis’s argumentation against Fregean ideational theories, this is too liberal. After all, his reason for distinguishing the thought expressed by a sentence from its meaning was exactly that there are predicates, such as ‘true’, which go with the former but not with the latter. In order not to apply double standards, Davis should thus conclude that meanings differ from meaning-properties because the latter can hardly be called meanings.

Furthermore, Davis’s comparison of meanings and meaning-properties with colours and colour-properties actually undermines his view on meanings because there are many reasons for separating colours from colour-properties. To expand Davis’s own observation, whereas red is a primary colour and may be Susan’s favourite colour, the property of being red is neither a primary nor Susan’s favourite colour. Crimson is darker than pink, but the property of being crimson is not darker than the property of being pink. While scarlet is a subspecies of red which is characterised by a certain hue, luminosity and saturation, the property of being scarlet does not have a hue, luminosity or saturation. When avering that the colour red is a property, Davis might overlook the subtle difference between (*the colour*) *red* and *redness*. If Susan blushes, the colour of her face is red (not redness) while the property her face has is redness (not red).

In an attempt at integrating such qualms without totally abandoning his account, Davis finally makes the following manoeuvre:

If it is insisted that there is a difference [...], then we could replace [my proposal] with something more complicated, such as: *the meaning of e is the feature standing in relation X to the property of meaning μ* , where X is the relation between red and the property of being red, between triangularity and the property of being triangular, and so on. (Davis 2003, p. 561, fn.)

But this seems to be an ad hoc repair without genuine information value. For there is no such thing as *the* relation between the entities Davis refers to. They rather stand in numerous relations, among them is-different-from, is-different-from-the-things-that-have, is-possessed-by-anything-that-has, is-easily-confused-with and is-something-Davis-tends-to-identify-with. In addition, since a feature is nothing but a (characteristic) property, Davis still takes the meaning of an expression to be a property. But what is the advantage the new property has over the earlier candidate? If not even the property of *meaning μ* deserves the epithet ‘meaning’, why should any other property perform better?

I therefore conclude that Davis’s ontology of meanings and his attack on Frege are on the wrong track. However, compared to the manifold insights provided by Davis’s book, this is a rather small fly in the ointment.¹⁰

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