Class #5 - Frege's Intensionalism

I. Meanings, Physical Objects and Ideas

'Intension' is another word for 'meaning'.
An intensionalist is someone who believes in the existence of meanings.
Extensionalists, in contrast, deny that there are meanings.
Extensions are identified strictly by their members.

CH Creature with a heart
CK Creature with a kidney

CH and CK have the same extension.
All creatures with hearts also have kidneys, and *vice versa*.
But the two phrases have different intensions.
Quine, as we will see later in the term, is an extensionalist.
Frege's "The Thought" is a classic statement of intensionalism.
He focuses on a certain kind of intension, the meaning of an assertion made with a sentence.

In "The Thought," Frege uses the unfortunate term 'thought' to refer to meanings of assertions.
He calls them senses (or meanings) of sentences.
Sentences can be used to express thoughts.
The contemporary term for the meanings of sentences, which I will use, is 'propositions'.
I will use 'proposition' where Frege used 'thought'.

According to Frege's Context Principle, the basic unit of meaning is the assertion.
The proposition, then, is the most fundamental unit of meaning, of language itself.
"The Thought" thus explores the nature of the fundamental unit of language.
Frege's central claim in the paper is that propositions are neither concrete, material objects nor psychological objects.

> A third realm must be recognized. What belongs to this corresponds with ideas, in that it cannot be perceived by the senses, but with things, in that it needs no bearer to the contents of whose consciousness to belong (302).

First, it seems clear that meanings are not to be identified with concrete objects ("things").
Meanings of sentences can be either true or false.
But, objects can't be true or false.

> Is a picture, then, as a mere visible and tangible thing, really true, and a stone, a leaf, not true? Obviously one would not call a picture true unless there were an intention behind it (290).

A more plausible option for meanings, though not Frege's view, is to identify them with something psychological.
Meanings might be ideas in our minds.
We see in the introduction to the *Grundlagen* that Frege wants to distinguish the psychological from the objective.

We see this goal here, too, when he identifies his inquiry into meaning with a logical inquiry.

> One might come to believe that logic deals with the mental process of thinking and the psychological laws in accordance with which it takes place. This would be a misunderstanding of the task of logic... In order to avoid this misunderstanding and to prevent the blurring of the boundary between psychology and logic, I assign to logic the task of discovering the laws of truth, not of assertion or thought (289-90).

In other words, for Frege, propositions are to be identified with their truth conditions.
They are not to be identified with any thinker or with any speech act.
They are essentially about truth and falsity.
Propositions are not psychological, not mental objects, at all.

II. The Third Realm

To characterize the nature of propositions more carefully, Frege distinguishes ideas from physical (or "external") objects.
He describes four characteristics of ideas (psychological) as opposed to external objects, pp 299-300.

> I1. Ideas are not available to the senses.
> I2. Ideas are available to consciousness.
> I3. Ideas are mind-dependent.
> I4. Ideas are private.

Propositions share I1 with ideas, which is mainly why people tend to confuse them with mental objects.
But, Frege argues, we shouldn't think that everything that is unavailable to our senses is psychological.

> Outside one's inner world one would have to distinguish the proper outer world of sensible, perceptible things from the realm of the non-sensibly perceptible (309).

Claims that there is a non-sensible, but objective, world might sound mystical or superstitious.
But, as with all of Frege's work, it is really just a mathematical view.
Mathematical objects are also ordinarily taken to be immaterial but non-mental objects.
We can not see or otherwise sense a perfect circle, for example.
We see the inscription '17', but that is just the name of the number, not the number itself.
Propositions, like circles or sets or numbers, now tend to be called abstract objects.
Abstract objects are things that are not located in space or time.
They lack causal powers, but have essential characteristics.

I2 is a characteristic that is easily, if errantly, ascribed to propositions.
We can be aware of a proposition, for example.
But it is the idea, not the proposition, that is available to consciousness.

> What is a content of my consciousness, my idea, should be sharply distinguished from what is an object of my thought (306).

Indeed, we can not apprehend the proposition directly.

> The thought, in itself immaterial, clothes itself in the material garment of a sentence and thereby becomes comprehensible to us (292).

Propositions are the contents of my thoughts, but they are not the thoughts themselves.

In contrast to I3, propositions are mind-independent.
In contrast to I4, people have different ideas concerning the same propositions.
Consider the case of the Pythagorean theorem.
Ideas, being the contents of independent consciousness, can not be shared.
But, we can all think about the same theorem.

> If the thought I express in the Pythagorean theorem can be recognized by others just as much as by me then it does not belong to the content of my consciousness, I am not its bearer; yet I can, nevertheless, recognize it to be true. However, if it is not the same thought at all which is taken to be the content of the Pythagorean theorem by me and by another person, one should not really say "the Pythagorean theorem" but "my Pythagorean theorem", "his Pythagorean theorem" and these would be different... Could the sense of my Pythagorean theorem be true while that of his was false? (301).

Frege's rhetorical question is supposed to show that while we each have our particular, private ideas, the content of those ideas, the propositions, may be shared among us.
Consider also the Lauben/Peter/Lingens case.
Lauben says, "I have been wounded."
Peter says, "Dr. Lauben has been wounded."
Lauben and Peter express the same proposition.
But, they do so with different sentences.
The ideas they have in their minds of the content of the sentence are different.
When Lauben expresses the proposition, he does so about himself.
When Peter expresses the proposition, he does so about another person.

> Everyone is presented to himself in a particular and primitive way, in which he is presented to no-one else. So, when Dr. Lauben thinks that he has been wounded, he will probably take as a basis this primitive way in which he is presented to himself. And only Dr. Lauben himself can grasp thoughts determined in this way. But now he may want to communicate with others. He cannot communicate a thought which he alone can grasp. Therefore, if he now says, "I have been wounded", he must use the "I" in a sense which can be grasped by others, perhaps in the sense of "he who is speaking to you at this moment", by doing which he makes the associated conditions of his utterance serve for the expression of his thought (298).

Lauben's ideas about the proposition differ from those of Peter.
They have what Frege calls different modes of presentation of the proposition.
But, the same proposition is communicated.
The claims have the same truth conditions: they are true in the same cases.
But they are apprehended in consciousness differently by Lauben and Peter.
Different people can think about and express the same proposition.

A problem arises from the claim that the same propositions are expressed by Lauben and Peter.
It may not be the case that everyone sees immediately that they are the same proposition.

If Lingens does not know that he is talking to Lauben, he will not know that 'I have been wounded' and 'Dr. Lauben has been wounded' are the same proposition.
The fact that we don't all see the identity of the two propositions makes Frege worry about their identity.
Frege deals directly with this problem (the problem of reference within opaque contexts) in "On Sense and Reference," which we will read for our next class.
This problem has been the source of a lot of spilled ink.

The standard objection to the traditional conception of mathematical (and linguistic) objects as abstract has to do with access.
If mathematical objects and propositions are neither mental objects nor accessible to our senses, then it seems that we could never get to know them.
For the case at hand, the question is how my idea can be of an abstract proposition.
Frege says that the relation between persons and propositions is one of apprehension.

> One sees a thing, one has an idea, one apprehends or thinks a thought. When one apprehends or thinks a thought, one does not create it but only comes to stand in a certain relation...to what already existed beforehand (302).

The proposition that snow is white is not something we create, by thinking of it.
It is much more like the whiteness of snow, which we can see.
But, it is not to be identified with the whiteness of snow.
It is closer to the fact that snow is white.

Under the influence of Frege, Wittgenstein correlates propositions and facts in the *Tractatus*.
Wittgenstein says that propositions are pictures of facts.
We can also see Frege's influence on the early Wittgenstein in the discussion of pictures in the early portion of the article.
We will look a little at the *Tractatus* at the beginning of the meaning portion of the course.

III. Propositions, Language and That-Clauses

I noted that propositions are mind-independent.
They are also language-independent.
That is, it is important to distinguish propositions from both ideas and the sentences we use to express propositions.
Sentences of different languages can express the same proposition.
'Snow is white' has the same meaning as 'la nieve es blanca'.
So, propositions, as meanings (or senses) of sentences, aren't essentially part of any given language.
Propositions, remember, are the bearers of truth-values.

> When we call a sentence true, we really mean its sense is (292).

Despite the fact that propositions are independent of language, we express them in language.
I mentioned that meaning theories contain a series of meaning clauses (one for each sentence) like MC.

> MC 'snow is white' means-in-English that snow is white

Propositions are thus expressible by the right side of theorems like MC.
The right side of MC contains what we call a that-clause.
Notice that a that-clause is not a complete sentence.

> that snow is white
> that 2+2=4
> that the door is closed
> that I am in Clinton NY

That-clauses are names of propositions.
Such propositions can be used as subordinate clauses in a variety of other complex sentences.
So, we can use a proposition in a question, a command, or in an expression of belief or desire.

> Is it the case that snow is white? (Or 'Is snow white?')
> Make it the case that the door is closed. (Or, 'Close the door'.)
> I believe that 2+2=4.
> I wish that I were in Puerto Rico.

In some cases, writing these complex sentences using that-clauses makes them more awkward.
But, it reveals their logical structure.
Questions, commands, exclamations, beliefs, desires, and other complex forms contain references to that-clauses as their basic components.
Even assertions of fact are analyzable into parts.

> Two things must be distinguished in an indicative sentence: the content, which it has in common with the corresponding sentence-question, and the assertion. The former is the thought, or at least contains the thought (294).

So, we are considering two things: the content of an utterance or sentence and its use.
The content is the sense, or the proposition.
The use we make of it contains other, pragmatic factors.

IV. Frege on Pragmatics

In addition to semantic theories and truth theories, philosophers are interested in the pragmatics of language use.
Pragmatics is what is left over after semantic and truth theories are settled.
The pragmatics of language have to do with how we use language, and what we communicate with it.
Frege's discussion of semantic questions in 'The Thought' involves pragmatic ones as well.

> It makes no difference to the thought whether I use the word 'horse', or 'steed' or 'carthorse' or 'mare'. The assertive force does not extend over that in which these words differ. What is called mood, fragrance, illumination in a poem, what is portrayed by cadence and rhythm, does not belong to the thought (295).

Questions about the use of pronouns and time may belong to pragmatics as well.
Consider the sentence ME which contains a first-person pronoun.

ME I am typing.

ME can be used to express lots of different propositions, depending on who asserts the sentence.
To determine whether ME is true or false, we have to specify to whom the 'I' in the sentence refers.
Let's say that it refers to me, Russell Marcus.
Still, we can not determine the truth-value of ME.
Sometimes I am typing; sometimes I am not typing.
In order to determine the truth-value of ME we have to specify a time of assertion.
There is no explicit reference to time in the sentence, but it does seem that there is an implicit reference.
There is a question whether the time-stamp is part of the proposition itself, or whether it is part of the pragmatics.
Frege seems to relegate questions about time to pragmatics, rather than semantics.

> The time of utterance is part of the expression of the thought. If someone wants to say the same today as he expressed yesterday using the world "today", he must replace this word with "yesterday". Although the thought is the same, its verbal expression must be different so that the sense, which would otherwise be affected by the differing times of utterance, is readjusted (296).

Later, Frege says that the time-stamp is essential for the expression of a complete thought, which makes it seem as if the completeness of the proposition requires the time index.

> The words 'this tree is covered with green leaves' are not sufficient by themselves for the utterance, the time of the utterance is involved as well. Without the time-indication this gives, we have no complete thought, *i.e.* no thought at all. Only a sentence supplemented by a time-indication and complete in every respect expresses a thought (309).

The line between semantics and pragmatics may thus look a little fuzzy.
Frege also discusses the hints that terms like 'still' and 'but' add to a sentence, without altering meaning.
Compare AND to BUT.

AND I am going to the movie and you are going to the concert
BUT I am going to the movie but you are going to the concert.

Is the difference between AND and BUT one of meaning or of pragmatics?
Are time-stamps semantic or pragmatic?
For Frege, the factors which determine meaning will be only those that affect truth value.

V. Frege on Truth

Frege calls truth a unique and indefinable property, p 291, but that seems to be a misleading rhetorical flourish.
In places, Frege claims that truth is just a redundant device for asserting a sentence.

> It is also worthy of notice that the sentence "I smell the scent of violets" has just the same content as the sentence "it is true that I smell the scent of violets". So it seems, then, that nothing is added to the thought by my ascribing to it the property of truth (293).

The claim that truth is merely a redundant device is one aspect of a complex view of truth called deflationism.
It is one option for the person who abandons correspondence theories of truth.
Deflationism was developed much later than Frege's work.

Frege was not a deflationist, though.
Deflationists tend to think of truth as a thin, uninteresting property.
In contrast, Frege defends a standard, inflationary correspondence theory.

> And yet is it not a great result when the scientist after much hesitation and careful inquiry, can finally say, "What I supposed is true"? (293).

Frege does present Berkeleyan worries about correspondence.

> It would only be possible to compare an idea with a thing if the thing were an idea too. And then, if the first did correspond perfectly with the second, they would coincide. But this is not at all what is wanted when truth is defined as the correspondence of an idea with something real. For it absolutely essential that the reality be distinct from the idea. But then there can be no complete correspondence, no complete truth (291).

But the point of Frege's worries about correspondence is to support his claim that truth is not the correspondence between ideas and the world.
Instead, the important correspondence is between propositions and the world.
In other words, truth is a property of propositions, not ideas or objects.

Our interest in Frege, at this point, has much more to do with his work on meaning than on truth.
We will explore truth, and deflationism about truth, in more detail later, when we look at the work of Tarski and Davidson.

VI. The Nature of Propositions

To summarize, propositions, for Frege, are the basic units of language.
They are abstract objects, located outside of space and time.
They are not psychological objects, but may be the contents of our ideas: we apprehend them.
Propositions are public; they may be shared among people.
They are mind-independent.
They are language-independent.
Propositions have truth conditions, and have them essentially.