Sense and Synonymy in Saussure and Frege

Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* details the key tenets of structuralism put forth by Saussure over the course of his life. In addition to defining linguistics as a discipline and delimiting the boundaries of synchronic and diachronic linguistics, in a departure from his Neogrammarian predecessors, Saussure situates the study of language as a subset of semiology.

Gottlob Frege came to the study of language from a mathematical and logical background. Believing an understanding of the philosophy of language would better ground his work in number theory, Frege penned the now seminal paper *On Sense and Reference* in 1892. Despite operating in distinct linguistic spheres, Frege and Saussure were contemporaries, and the content of Frege's work places him squarely in the semiotic tradition.

Saussure defines a linguistic sign as a mapping from signifier to signified, or sound-image to concept. More precisely, a sound-image is "not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses" while a concept is "generally more abstract" (66). This is the extent of Saussure's analysis of the two endpoints of the relation, and he goes on to specify the nature of the relation itself. The mapping from signifier to signified is totally arbitrary, arising from no inherent sound symbolism. Signifiers are also crucially linear, unfolding over time, which drives our understanding of combination to produce multi-word phrases.

Frege also takes words to be discrete signs consisting of sound or text-images that map to their meanings. Where he diverges from Saussure is in his fundamental conception of meaning and in how the sign-meaning mapping operates. Frege's theory can be summarized as follows:

"A proper name (word, sign, sign-compound, expression) expresses its sense, and designates or signifies its nominatum." (189)

If the reference, or nominatum, of a sign is its physical manifestation in the world, its sense is the manner in which this referent is designated. In this way, 'Clark Kent' and 'Superman' can be taken to have different meanings and senses, even though they refer to the same person, simply because they *need not* refer to the same person.

For Saussure, the correlate to sense might be in how he defines a word's value. Saussure explains that while the 'signification' of a word is its concept mapping when the word is taken in isolation, value is something that supersedes signification.

"In the same way a word can be exchanged for something dissimilar, an idea; besides, it can be compared with something of the same nature, another word. Its value is not fixed so long as one simply states that it can be 'exchanged' for a given concept, i.e that it has this or that signification…Its content is really fixed only by the concurrence of everything that exists outside it. Being part of a system, it is endowed not only with a signification but also and especially with a value, and this is something quite different." (115)

Much like ‘Clark Kent’ and ‘Superman’ under Frege, two words under Saussure can share a signification, yet derive differing values from the existence of the other. We understand the value of ‘Superman’ by considering the availability of alternative substitutions that can and cannot be made in different contexts. A treatment of language without value, Saussure writes, would “risk reducing language to a simple naming process” (114). On this, Frege seems to agree. He enriches the traditional view of semiotics by adding an axis along which words derive their meaning. Words are meaningful because there are multiple ways to say the same type of thing.

Frege and Saussure propose two differing accounts of what words are and two similar yet distinct accounts of synonymy. As contemporaries, it is clear that Frege and Saussure were ultimately trying to answer different questions and for different practical purposes. Frege’s project, initially kickstarted by *On Sense and Reference*, was to provide a convincing account of meaning. He was concerned with coreferential terms and their implications for a logically sound semantic theory of language. While both took a firmly synchronic approach, Saussure was primarily interested in studying language as a convention, with an internal architecture that can be scrutinized, deconstructed, and explained.

One issue with value as a means of separating sense and reference is that this task becomes difficult when language is treated as a convention entirely divorced from speech and isolated from the physical world. Ultimately, hidden in the differences and contrasts that Saussure ascribes to his language system is a real, non-arbitrary mechanism for pointing out the same things along different terms. When we use ‘Clark Kent,’ we use a human name and therefore seem to be picking out the human qualities of the referent. When we use ‘Superman’ or ‘strongest guy ever,’ we strategically pick out aspects from our knowledge of the referent that we want to make salient, shaping the sense via some mechanism that is easy to analyze beyond the level of Saussure’s shades of contrast. Frege makes this explicit. In using value, Saussure overextends the reach of his arbitrariness claim. “Illegal alien” and “undocumented person” may point out the same concept (and if they do not, then we have no way of grasping their coreference), but the manner in which they do so is clearly not arbitrary.

This concern is only partially resolved when we consider that Saussure treated language as having no connection to the physical world. For him, parole is what moves language from the psychological into the concrete.

> “Language is not a function of the speaker; it is a product that is passively assimilated by the individual…Speaking, on the contrary, is an individual act. It is willful and intellectual.” (14)

This allows us to say that the social meanings of coreferential terms are passively assimilated through speech communication, earning the stamp of collective approval necessary to be assimilated into the language user’s internal language system. However, this seems to oversimplify the relationship between sense and society, while also removing a great deal of agency from the speaker at any given communication instance following acquisition.

Particularly for socially charged terms, the notion of sense lends the speaker significant power: to uplift, to diminish, to uphold or challenge a status quo, to negotiate social status, or to subvert conversational norms. Speakers assess their society, and the conventionalized meanings of words, and leverage both to charge referential terms with additional cognitive information. Not only does sense give room for us to specify a mechanism that speakers use to give their utterances these different shades of meaning, it also acknowledges these meanings as fundamental to language and characteristic of every word.

Overall, Saussure's view of meaning is well suited to the structuralist, self-contained language system he aims to study, as it facilitates the definition of units, the binary oppositions they generate, and the negative features delineating their boundaries. However, it is difficult to argue that he fully avoids the pitfalls of encapsulating language as a 'simple naming process.' In order for words to have meanings that relate to each other, there must be reasons for which we execute the exchanges and comparisons that Saussure says constitute value. This means that some aspect of meaning must reside in the speaker and their intentions, a notion better reflected by Frege's sense.

References

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