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Ideas, indexicals, and the private language in Frege's philosophy

Představy, indexické výrazy a soukromý jazyk ve Fregeho filosofii

Pavel Matail

Abstract

The study concerns a possible private language in the philosophy of Gottlob Frege, particularly in his scarce investigation of indexicals such as 'I' and 'now'. The indexicals may be seen as private from the late-Wittgensteinian perspective because their sense (*Sinn*) cannot be repeated outside of a specific linguistic context of the expression. The study examines whether these indexicals presuppose a private language. If Frege's philosophy contains such privateness (for which only insufficient evidence can be found), it would be peculiar since a major part of his work implies that all thoughts are objective and publicly communicable. However, the privateness in Frege's remarks rather differs from Wittgenstein's, for the indexical's sense should be principally expressible at any time.

Keywords

Private language – indexicals – Frege – late Wittgenstein – *Sinn* – thoughts – ideas

Abstrakt

Studie pojednává o možné soukromosti jazyka ve filosofii Gottloba Fregeho, zejména v jeho drobných a epizodických zkoumáních indexických výrazů, jako jsou „já“ a „ted“. Tyto výrazy lze z perspektivy pozdního Wittgensteina považovat za soukromé, protože jejich smysl (*Sinn*) nelze zopakovat mimo určitý jazykový kontext promluvy. Studie zkoumá, jestli indexické výrazy předpokládají soukromý jazyk. Pokud by Fregeho filosofie obsahovala takovou soukromost (pro což nelze najít dostatečnou evidenci), bylo by to v kontrastu s tím, že zbytek jeho díla naznačuje, že veškeré jazykově sdílené myšlenky jsou objektivní, a proto veřejně sdílitelné.

Ovšem soukromost probíraná Fregem se zjevně odlišuje od té Wittgensteinovy, protože smysl indexů by měl být v principu vyjádřitelný vždy.

Klíčová slova

Soukromý jazyk – indexické výrazy – Frege – pozdní Wittgenstein – *Sinn* – myšlenky – představy

Introduction

The philosophy of Gottlob Frege is well known for its concern for creating logically pure language or, as Frege himself calls it, the *Begriffsschrift*. Surprisingly, although the current main use of Frege's philosophy applies to natural languages, it was not his main interest. He developed a scientific language devoid of ambiguities and immune to misunderstandings. Such language was, therefore, the opposite of any private language as conceived e.g. by the late Wittgenstein. Frege never mentioned the existence of such a language; in fact, he endorsed the opposite idea, namely that every thought is publicly accessible:

For one can hardly deny that mankind has a common store of thoughts which is transmitted from one generation to another.¹

This paper aims to introduce the notions of ideas and thoughts in Frege's philosophy and how they might appear private. Firstly, I will explain what private language means by providing a brief description of Wittgenstein's private language argument from *Philosophical Investigations*.² Secondly, I will present where the possible privateness of Fregean ideas might lie and whether it is truly there. Thirdly, I will examine the challenge that pure indexicals pose to the notion of objective thought. I will try to prove that although subject and time-related indexicals appear to create an inconsistency in Frege's otherwise public understanding of language, it might not be so.

1 FREGE, G. On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*..., p. 154.

2 Hereafter referred to as *PI*.

The Private Language Argument

Firstly, it is crucial to explain what I mean by private language because one will more likely find what he is looking for if he knows what it is. Wittgenstein begins his thought on the possibility of a private language in the *PI* with a definition:

PI §243

[...] The words of this language are to refer to what only the speaker can know – to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language.³

The interpretations of Wittgenstein's private language argument differ on whether the possibility of a private language is false or some kind of nonsense.⁴ The extensive debate of private language after Wittgenstein's introduction retains the idea that it is undesirable, the view which I generally follow in the paper too.

The simplified argument goes like this: We learn how to use language from our parents who teach us with what words to replace primitive expressions of sensations. Since we learn language from others, we do not describe our inner states with our own terminology. Therefore, if there was something like a private language, the person for whom it is private could not understand it too. Also, if there was something necessarily private, we could not link it to a truth-value because there would be nothing outside of us to which it could be compared.⁵

Privateness of Ideas

Frege famously distinguishes between sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*) of signs and sentences. Three of these four terms are thoroughly explained in Frege's 1892 seminal paper *On Sinn and Bedeutung*,⁶ while the sense of

3 WITTGENSTEIN, L. *PI...*, p. 95^c.

4 CANDLISH, S. – WRISLEY, G. *Private Language...*

5 *Ibidem*, §265, p. 100^c.

6 Hereafter referred to as S&B.

a proposition (i.e. a sentence) is the main concern of Frege's later 1918 paper – the *Thought*. It is mainly this article that I will deal with to find a possible private language in Frege's otherwise public understanding of language.

Before delving there, however, we may find yet another different notion of privateness in Frege's writings. This notion is what Frege calls the idea (*Vorstellung*):

If the *Bedeutung* of a sign is an object perceivable by the senses, my idea of it is an internal image, arising from memories of sense impressions which I have had and acts, both internal and external, which I have performed. [...] The same sense is not always connected, even in the same man with the same idea. The idea is subjective: one man's idea is not that of another.⁷

Thoughts are not ideas, for ideas are private. If they were, there would not be any criteria for their truthfulness because they would exist only in one's consciousness, incomparable with the outside world.⁸ But we speak about thought as true or false. Therefore, Frege assumes that a third world must exist, one where immaterial and eternal thoughts (like that of the Pythagorean theorem) reside.⁹ The objective world of everyday life, the physical world, would not be enough because there are no eternal truths if they are identified with some entity of the physical world. Unlike the truth of the Pythagorean theorem, truths of the everyday world essentially depend on several conditions that may change.

Ideas are private; that is undoubtable simply because everyone has his own ideas, however, the question is whether they are private in the sense of language privacy. Ideas somehow affect the language we use because we can share our inner sensations with others.

My companion and I are convinced that we both see the same field; but each of us has a particular sense impression of green. I glimpse a strawberry among the green strawberry leaves. My companion cannot find it, he is colour-blind. The colour impression he gets from the strawberry is not noticeably different from the one he gets from the leaf. Now does my companion see the green leaf as red,

7 FREGE, G. S&B..., p. 154.

8 FREGE, G. Thought..., p. 327.

9 Ibidem, p. 336–337.

or does he see the red berry as green, or does he see both with one colour which I am not acquainted with at all? These are unanswerable, indeed really nonsensical, questions. For when the word 'red' is meant not to state a property of things but to characterize sense impressions belonging to my consciousness, it is only applicable within the realm of my consciousness. For it is impossible to compare my sense impression with someone else's.¹⁰

Any time I would like to communicate anything about my ideas, I must presuppose that what I am talking about is graspable by others. In that way, I cannot communicate ideas because once articulated, they become thoughts.

However, what about my own understanding of ideas – does it not presuppose a language in which I understand my sensations? I do not think that Frege ever answered the question, not even indirectly. It is reasonable to stop here and move to the possible privateness of thoughts because ideas are subjective and private, but it cannot be determined whether that presupposes some private language. Thus, the first main conclusion of the paper is that it cannot be decided whether ideas presuppose a private language because there is simply not enough information to decide.

Privateness of Thoughts

Another place to look for possible privateness is Frege's notion of thought (*Gedanke*), particularly in Frege's scarce investigation of indexicals. As the Fregean sense is the cognitive significance of a sign, thought is a sense of sentence and only a thought can be true or false.

The thought, accordingly, cannot be the *Bedeutung* of the sentence, but must rather be considered as its sense.¹¹

Indexical is a linguistic expression whose reference significantly varies to a different individual, time, place, or modality depending on the context of the utterance. By context I mean specific circumstances and conditions in which an expression is used. Context-sensitive words such as indexicals vary

10 FREGE, G. Thought..., p. 334–335.

11 FREGE, G. S&B..., p. 156.

in their reference in different contexts. In this article, I am mostly concerned with what David Kaplan calls *pure indexicals*. Pure indexical is a sign that does not need to be completed by a demonstration (perhaps by pointing a finger). Such words in need of a demonstration are for example 'you', 'he', 'she', or 'there'. Opposed to them, pure indexicals are such words as 'I', 'here', 'now' and 'actually'. For example, the word 'now' always refers to the time when uttered.¹²

1. Subject-related Indexicals

Only synonymous words have the same sense (*Sinn*). Thought is the sense of a sentence. However, if thought is a sense of a sentence and every sentence is a complex of words, thought should be a complex of senses of individual words. The question is then whether for creating two identical thoughts the two corresponding sentences must be the same. In other words, whether the sentences must be combined in an adequate order with the same words or their synonyms.

Let me clarify the issue with an example:

Consider the following case. Dr Gustav Lauben says, 'I was wounded'. Leo Peter hears this and remarks some days later, 'Dr Gustav Lauben was wounded'. Does this sentence express the same thought as the one Dr Lauben uttered himself?¹³

Now, let's change the example to make it even clearer for my point:

(1) Dr Lauben says: 'I am wounded.'

(2) Leo Peter says to Dr Lauben: 'You are wounded.'

Both sentences in quotation marks have the same referent (Dr Lauben being wounded), however, the sense of 'I' and 'you' is different. Kaplan would say that they have different (semantic) *character*, but their (semantic) *content* is the same. Character in Kaplan's terminology is the part of the meaning of the word set by linguistic rules, which makes it possible to determine the referent in every context.¹⁴ The character of 'I' is what ensures that it always

12 BRAUN, D. Indexicals...

13 FREGE, G. Thought..., p. 332.

14 Character is thus a technical notion of his theory. Kaplan models it using his extended

refers to the speaker.¹⁵ In contrast, content varies in context, so the content of 'I' is the specific speaker that utters it, in the example Dr Lauben. Content is to which the character refers; however, it is not the extension of the expression but its intension.¹⁶

Frege never made the distinction between character and content, so it seems that the Fregean sense is a complex made from both linguistic rules determining the agent of the utterance and the context-dependent content.¹⁷ Thus, when the character of two words ('you' and 'I') differs, the individual senses differ, and the thoughts should differ. Although the two thoughts refer to the same content (Dr Lauben being wounded) and have the same truth-value, they have different cognitive significance because once it is said from the first-person perspective and the second time from the second-person perspective. Therefore, the sentences containing indexicals cannot have the same *cognitive significance* if not combined with synonymous words.¹⁸ However, that means that the thought Dr Lauben grasps (him being wounded) cannot be grasped by anyone other than him.

possible-worlds semantics; essentially, character is a function from contexts-as-indices to possible-worlds-intensions as contents.

15 KAPLAN, D. Demonstratives..., p. 505.

16 Ibidem, p. 500–501, 506. To establish identity and difference of cognitive contents was Frege's goal already in S&B (more precisely in 1879).

17 It is true that if we distinguished the character and the content in the Fregean sense, it would not be right because such distinction is tied to the direct-reference understanding of indexicals. In contrast, Frege would fall under the category of indirect-reference school. It is because the character of 'I' refers directly to the individual, and thus, it creates the content. Frege did not accept this, but undoubtedly, he was aware that there is such a linguistic rule that determines that when the agent uses the indexical 'I', it points to him. Therefore, we can think about the sense as a complex of something like a character and a content, but we cannot draw any conclusions about how direct the referring mechanism is. I will use the distinction between character and content in this sense.

18 The claim presented here is weaker than that the same thought cannot be attained without using synonymous words and adequate word order. The point is just that a thought from a sentence containing an indexical cannot be duplicated by a similar sentence containing a different indexical. The stronger claim would be directly against what Frege remarks in the *Thought* (p. 331).

2. Time-related Indexicals

The issue is not merely with the indexical 'I', but it is in an analogous way present when using time-related indexicals.¹⁹ Let me use another example:

(3) 'It rains in Brno today.'

Thoughts are a mode of presentation of truth-value, and one should also be able to grasp them at any time, according to Frege. However, if the sentence 'It rains in Brno today' is true today, then it would not hold to the truth on a sunny day. Frege maintains that we can return to the thought by saying 'yesterday' instead of 'today':

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 the sense which would otherwise be effected by the differing times of utterance may be cancelled out.²⁰

But 'yesterday' seems to have a different cognitive significance than 'today', implying that it has a different sense.²¹ Consequently, it cannot be the identical thought because thoughts are complexes of senses of individual words, and thus, the sentence containing 'yesterday' instead of 'today' has a different sense. Therefore, it seems that some thoughts can be grasped only at a specific point in time.

The second main conclusion of this paper is that some thoughts (such as those containing indexical 'I' and 'now') can be grasped only in one instance – either at one moment or from one person. That seems like a trivial contradiction with the idea that all thoughts are publicly accessible.²² This conclusion says at its core the same as what John Perry calls the *non-sufficiency of belief*, but I believe I have taken different steps to get there.²³

19 It does not seem to be such a problem for location-related indexicals. Even if the thought cannot be accessible from any place (e.g. 'here'), one can always return to the place where the indexical was uttered, which is not true about time when it was uttered.

20 FREGE, G. Thought..., p. 332.

21 PERRY, J. Frege on Demonstratives..., p. 491.

22 It is not really a contradiction because Frege never created a theory of indexicals, we can only construe it from rare remarks. If he did, he would certainly reconcile the tension explicitly.

23 Compare with PERRY, J. Frege on Demonstratives..., p. 487–488, 490–491.

However, in the paragraph quoted, it does not seem that Frege would accept that the thought would become different by substituting 'yesterday' for 'today', and therefore, it would stop being public. To explain this dissonance, it might be useful to adopt a new distinction.

3. Essential and Inessential Properties

In the last pages of the *Thought*, Frege briefly mentions that we should distinguish between essential and inessential properties of a thought:

It is possible that the same thought as is thought by me today was not thought by me yesterday. Of course this does away with strict timelessness. But we may be inclined to distinguish between essential and inessential properties and to regard something as timeless if the changes it undergoes involve only inessential properties. A property of a thought will be called inessential if it consists in, or follows from, the fact that this thought is grasped by a thinker.

[...]

When a thought is grasped, it at first only brings about changes in the inner world of the one who grasps it; yet it remains untouched in the core of its essence, for the changes it undergoes affect only inessential properties.²⁴

It seems intuitive to apply the distinction to the indexical 'I', since the inaccessibility of the thought containing it follows from the fact that 'I' changes its meaning (character) with the agent. Only the agent can grasp the thought where the character of the indexical refers to him. Therefore, the character of the thought is inessential to the thought because it follows from the fact that a specific thinker grasps it. Similarly, the character of the thought containing time-related indexical such as 'now' is inessential because it follows from the fact that a thinker grasps it at a specific moment. Thus, the third main conclusion is that there seems to exist something like a core of a thought that is always communicable. This core is something that endures through time and a change of person's perspectives (from first to second or third) and it may be meaningful to compare it with Kaplan's notion of content. But this idea must be investigated in some further paper.

²⁴ FREGE, G. *Thought...*, p. 344–345.

The goal of this paper is to search for a private language in Frege's philosophy, therefore, the rest of the paper will take a more speculative look at the inessential of Frege's thought. Also, it will develop only on the notion of subject-related indexicals because they are more in agreement with what we call private than time-related indexicals. Nevertheless, the result should be valid also for time-related indexicals.

4. Private Thoughts?

The inaccessible does not equal private, it is a wider notion than private. We can imagine thoughts that no one can ever think because they are just out of people's reach. Perhaps what Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* calls 'the mystical' are some of such thoughts. We talk about private thoughts only when referring to someone who grasps them but who cannot share them. But still, not every inaccessible thought grasped by only one person must be a private thought. Various factors make it impossible to share a thought. The question is then what is the factor that disables us from grasping thoughts comprising of first-person statements of other people?

Now everyone is presented to himself in a special and primitive way, in which he is presented to no one else. So, when Dr Lauben has the thought that he was wounded, he will probably be basing it on this primitive way in which he is presented to himself. And only Dr Lauben himself can grasp thoughts specified in this way. But now he may want to communicate with others. He cannot communicate a thought he alone can grasp. Therefore, if he now says 'I was wounded,' he must use '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 this he makes the conditions accompanying his utterance serve towards the expression of a thought.²⁵

According to David Kaplan, the example with Dr Lauben gives us two options for how to understand that which only Dr Lauben grasps when he utters 'I'. Kaplan calls a sloppy thinker the one who understands the example as an acknowledgment, first, that the agent has "a privileged picture of what

25 FREGE, G. Thought..., p. 333.

is seen (referred to), and second, that this picture is what is intended when one makes use of the privileged perspective (by saying 'I').²⁶

Kaplan introduces another way of how to interpret the quote: it is reducing what Frege calls the 'special and primitive way, in which he [the agent] is presented to no one else' to the notion of character. In this way, the content would not be private, since anyone can grasp the thought that someone was wounded.²⁷ The inaccessibility (or even privacy) of the thought would be irrelevant because it would depend only on the fact that no one else than Dr Lauben is Dr Lauben, and therefore, the sense of 'I' when grasped by anyone else can never refer to Dr Lauben.

However, since Frege did not make the distinction between character and content, the sloppy thinker might have understood the example correctly. But still, it does not necessarily follow that the sense of 'I' is private. Consider Castañeda's example with Quintus, the amnesiac war hero: During combat, he suffered severe injuries, and he lost the memory of his military chapter of life. Later, he studies the story of himself being a war hero, but he never identifies the war hero with himself. He becomes an expert on the life of the war hero and writes his biography. No one else has better knowledge about Quintus' life than Quintus himself.²⁸

Now, irrespectively to Castañeda's usage of this example, imagine Quintus found out that he is the war hero. Now his special and primitive way of self-presentation is from a large part composed of the information he learned in the military archive. But such information is principally accessible to anyone. In other words, it is not necessarily I alone who may have the information needed to have the primitive way of representing me as a person.

Let me explain it in other terms. What Frege calls a thought is always a proposition that is linked to a truth-value, so in principle, every thought is either true or false. Now, every first-personal thought (thought from the first-person perspective containing the indexical 'I') cannot be composed of anything else than that which is linked to a truth-value. However, if it is linked to a truth-value, it is qualitatively the same thought as any other and anyone should be principally able to grasp it. Therefore, even if first-personal thoughts are inaccessible, they are not private.

26 KAPLAN, D. *Demonstratives...*, p. 533–534.

27 *Ibidem*, p. 534.

28 CASTAÑEDA, H. N. *On the Logic of Attributions of Self-Knowledge to Others...*, p. 446.

What is then the condition that disables one from grasping the thoughts of others in the same primitive way? It may be appropriate to deal with what pure indexical is in a similar way as Frege treated proper names. After all, in the example with Dr Lauben, Frege talks both about the usage of a proper name as a description and the indexical 'I'.

Consider the following case. Dr Lauben says, 'I was wounded'. Leo Peter hears this and remarks some day later, 'Dr Gustav Lauben was wounded'. [...] It may well be the case that only a few people associate a definite thought with the sentence 'Dr Lauben was wounded'. For complete understanding one needs in this case to know the expression 'Dr Gustav Lauben'. Now if both Leo Peter and Rudolph Lingens understand by 'Dr Gustav Lauben' the doctor who is the only doctor living in a house known to both of them, then they both understand the sentence 'Dr Gustav Lauben was wounded' in the same way; they associate the same thought with it.²⁹

Suppose that how the agent understands the indexical 'I' when he utters it is something like a description. Then only the person who knows himself as a person the best has the most fitting and complete description of himself. Dr Lauben knows the most information about himself, and thus the description he would use for himself is something like an aggregate of various descriptions. He knows himself as the person who was born on 13th September 1875 in N.N., as the person who was wounded, as the person who is the only doctor in his house, and by many more descriptions. His friends and acquaintances know him under less descriptions. Thus, when he uses the indexical 'I', he understands by it all the descriptions under which he knows himself. However, if it is like that, these thoughts are not truly private, one must only have enough information about the individual to access them. And that is thinkable as the example with Quintus shows.

There might be an intuitive counterargument: But even if someone had the same amount of information about me as a person, he would not feel like being me when he thinks 'I'. Yes, this is undoubtedly true, but the first-personal thought is not composed of how I feel (that would be an idea, not a thought) but from what I can think. Thus, the fourth main conclusion of this paper is that the only thing that cannot be principally thought by others is what

29 FREGE, G. Thought..., p. 332.

Kaplan calls the character of 'I'; however, the character is not truly private, since it is a function that we all use.

Conclusion

While looking for a private language in Frege's system of thought, I found two possible candidates for what could be called 'private' in the context of language. One of them is ideas, which are subjective and private because only the individual can access them. But when someone tries to communicate them, they become thoughts, and thus objective. However, it does not necessarily follow that they presuppose some private language for their owner to understand them. Frege does not provide an answer to the question since it was not important to his interest and the notion of ideas was introduced by him only as an analogy to the objective thoughts.

The other candidate for privateness is thoughts containing subject or time-related pure indexicals such as 'I' or 'now'. They appear to be private because they can be grasped only by one thinker or at one moment. The sense of 'I' can be understood as having essential and inessential properties, while only the inessential might be private because they follow from the fact that a specific agent grasps the thought. Supposing that the inessential sense of 'I' is something like a description of that person, neither the inessential is private because the descriptions are accessible to anyone who has enough information about the person. With the help of David Kaplan's terminology, it can be shown that what appears to be private is what Kaplan would call the character – a linguistic rule that determines the content of the indexical. Nevertheless, not even this character presupposes a private language because it is merely a function to determine the indexical's content in the specific context. For these reasons, Frege cannot be criticized from late Wittgensteinian positions as needing a notion of a private language.

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