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‘The Nature of the Question Demands a Separation’: Frege on Distinguishing between Content and Force

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Abstract

Recently, the content/force distinction has had a bad press. It has been argued that the distinction is not properly motivated and that it makes the problem of the unity of the proposition intractable. I will argue that Frege’s version of the content/force distinction is immune to these objections. In order to do so I will reconstruct his argument that ‘the nature of a question’ requires a distinction between force and content. I will answer the concern about the unity of the proposition by outlining how the distinction can be combined with a Fregean account of the unity of thought.

Keywords: Frege, content/force distinction, propositional anaphora, propositional questions

1. Introduction

The distinction between content and force is ‘a corner-stone of 20-century philosophy of language’ [Recanati 2013: 622]. Yet, in recent years it has been argued that (a) the arguments for drawing the content/force distinction are flawed and (b) that the distinction bars us from solving the problem of the unity of the proposition (see [Hanks 2007: 156ff], [Hanks 2015: 2.1 and 2.2] and [Kimhi 2018: 44ff.]; for overviews see [Recanati 2013: sect. 6, 7] and [García-Carpintero & Jespersen 2019]).

In this paper I will go back to the source of the content/force distinction in Frege's work to see whether he can answer these objections. I will do four things:

First, I will outline Frege's motivation for making the distinction. The need for the content/force distinction, he argued, arises in our scientific practice. Scientific progress usually consists in first posing and then answering *propositional questions*. When one poses such a question, Frege holds, one puts forth its content without assertoric force; when one answers it one asserts this content. Hence, there is one kind of content that can be expressed with and without assertoric force.

Second, Frege used these considerations about propositional questions to provide an argument – the Argument from Propositional Questions – for the content/force distinction. I will develop this argument.

Third, interrogatives seem to lack truth-conditions [Friedman 2013: 150]. Formal semanticists take interrogative sentences, including propositional questions, and indicative sentences therefore to express *different* contents. As Hanks [2015: 19] points out, such views give up even a restricted content/force distinction. Frege did not anticipate this development. I will defend Frege's view by showing that it can give a simpler account of propositional anaphora than the opposing view.

Fourth, the distinction between force and content is supposed to make the problem of the unity of the proposition unsolvable. I will address this worry by outlining an abstractionist account of thoughts according to which propositional questions and indicative sentences can express the same thought.

The plan of the paper is as follows: I will expound Frege's motivation for the content/force distinction (section 2), discuss what kind of content/force distinction Frege motivated (section 3) and discuss alternative, more problematic, arguments for the distinction (section 4). In section 5 and 6 I will unpack Frege's Argument from

Propositional Questions. In section 7 I address the conflict between Frege's view and the contemporary semantics for interrogatives. The final section, section 8, outlines how Frege's content/force distinction can be combined with an abstractionist account of thoughts.

2. Propositional Questions in Science and the Content/Force Distinction

Frege distinguished between the propositional content of an indicative sentence, on the one hand, and the force with which this content is put forth, on the other. He [1879-91: 7-8 (8)] outlined a motivation for the content/force distinction in his early 'Logic' manuscript (see also [Stepanians 1998: 112]):¹

A judgement is often preceded by questions. A mathematician will formulate a theorem before he can prove it. A physicist will accept a law as a hypothesis in order to test it by experience. [...] Now whatever can be thus posed in a question, we wish to call a content of a possible judgement.

Frege added a helpful footnote:

Here, of course, we are only referring to sentence-questions [*Satzfrage*], not to word-questions [*Wortfrage*].

Frege called propositional questions, such as 'Is seawater salty?', 'Satzfragen'. A propositional question can be fully answered with 'Yes' or 'No' and he argued that they express truth-evaluable contents. In contrast, *wh*-question such as 'Who ate the

¹ References to the pagination of the German text in round brackets.

cookies?’ – Frege’s ‘Wortfragen’ – are incomplete sentences that don’t express such contents [Frege 1918: 293 (62)]. He sometimes leaves out the qualification that he is only concerned with propositional questions. For example, in his [1897: 129 (140)] he seems first to exclude interrogative sentences in general from expressing truth-evaluable contents only to give, ten pages later, an example of an indicative sentence that shares its content with a propositional question [1897: 138 (150)].² The ensuing confusion is dispelled if we bear the footnote above in mind. When Frege unguardedly says ‘Interrogative sentences are not truth-evaluable’, he should be more specific and say ‘*Wh*-questions are not truth-evaluable, propositional questions are’.

Propositional questions express, to use a non-committal term, a meaning. If the meaning of a propositional question is, as Frege says, ‘the content of a possible judgement’, this content can be put forth in propositional questions without and in indicative sentences with assertoric force. Hence, we have an intuitive basis for a distinction between content and force (more in section 3).

In his mature work Frege articulated this basic idea by using his notion of a thought. A thought is a sense for which the question of truth and falsity arises [Frege 1897: 138 (150), 1918: 292 (61-2)]. Some, but not all, indicative sentences express thoughts.³ Frege [1918: 294 (62)] describes the usual way of scientific progress in terms of forming, asking and answering propositional questions as follows:

² Frege [1892: 221 (39)] suggests that in addition to thoughts there are also non-truth-evaluable sentential senses which he calls ‘questions’. These ‘questions’ can be the senses of *wh*-questions, but not of propositional questions.

³ Indicative sentences with context-dependent expressions, for example, don’t express thoughts. I will set complication due to context-dependence aside because they are orthogonal to my topic.

We perform the first act [grasping a thought] when we form a sentence-question. An advance in science usually takes place in this way, first a thought is apprehended, such as can, for instance [*etwa*], be expressed in a sentence-question, and, after appropriate investigations, this thought is finally recognized to be true. (I have modified the translation.)

For example, when de Fermat formulated the propositional question ‘Is every positive integer a sum of at most n n -gonal numbers?’ in 1683, he grasped its meaning. When he posed this question he did not know its answer and therefore he put forth the meaning of the question without assertoric force. 148 years later, Cauchy answered the question posed: he judged on the basis of a proof that every positive integer is a sum of at most n n -gonal numbers.

The observation that Cauchy answered the question de Fermat raised suggests that asserting (judging) and asking a propositional question (wondering) are acts (attitudes) with the same content. Indeed, if the propositional question and the judgement that decided it differed in content, why would the latter decide this question? Since the content of Cauchy’s judgement that every positive integer is a sum of at most n n -gonal numbers is a truth-evaluable thought, the meaning of de Fermat’s propositional question is a truth-evaluable thought, too.

The example illustrates that mathematics and, more generally, science advance in important cases by answering propositional questions. Therefore science gives us reasons to acknowledge a distinction between propositional content and force. Frege [1919: 119 (144)] sums this up as follows (see also [1897: 138 (150)]):

The very nature of a question demands a separation between the acts of grasping a sense and of judging. And since the sense of an interrogative sentence is always also inherent in the assertoric sentence that gives an answer to the question, this separation must be carried out for assertoric sentences too.

If the same thought is expressed by a propositional question and the corresponding indicative sentence, the thought can be expressed with and without assertoric force and we need to distinguish between content and force.

The so motivated content/force distinction should be encoded in a language for scientific reasoning [Frege [1891: 34 (20-1)]. Frege therefore invented a special assertion sign. In his symbolism, writing down ' $2 + 3 = 5$ ' merely expresses a thought without asserting it. In order to make an assertion we need to write ' $\mid \text{--- } 2 = 3 = 5$ '. The question whether the introduction of the assertion sign is consistent with Frege's anti-psychologism has been widely discussed. For our purposes we can set this question aside and focus on the content/force distinction itself.⁴

3. Which Content/Force Distinction?

Hanks [2015: 9] distinguishes between the *taxonomic* and the *constitutive* version of the content/force distinction. According to the taxonomic version, speech acts with different forces can share the same propositional content. According to the constitutive version, 'there is nothing assertive about propositional contents' (ibid). Hanks rejects both versions.

⁴ For an overview of the discussion and a defense of Frege's view see Smith 2000 and Pedriali 2017.

What kind of content/force distinction is motivated by Frege's observation about the role of propositional questions in science? Frege gives us an initial reason to accept a *restricted taxonomic* content/force distinction. *Prima facie*, those speech and mental acts *that are important for scientific progress* – posing propositional questions and answering them – as well as the linguistic vehicles of these acts – propositional questions and indicative sentences – can express the same thought. When one poses a propositional question the thought is put forth without assertoric force; in answering the the question the same thought is put forth with assertoric force. Hence, there is one kind of propositional content – thoughts – that can be expressed in sentences with different moods and put forth in speech acts with different force.

From this version of the taxonomic content/force distinction it is a short step to a constitutive thesis. For there is 'nothing inherently assertive' [Hanks 2015: 19] about the meaning of a propositional question. Since the meaning of a propositional question is the thought expressed by the indicative sentence that can be used to answer it, there is nothing inherently assertive about thoughts.

Frege does not accept an *unrestricted* taxonomic content/force distinction: the same thought cannot be put forth in any available propositional speech act. For instance, when I issue an order by uttering an imperative sentence, I don't put forth a thought at all. An imperative sentence expresses a *command*; the sense of an optative is a *request* (Frege [1892: 220 (39)] and [1918: 293 (62)]). Hence, issuing an order is expressing a command, not a thought. Importantly, science gives us no reason to think that speech acts such as orders and requests express the same propositional content as assertions.

Hanks [2007: 143] takes the restricted taxonomic distinction to be *ad hoc*. He asks: '[If the content of] indicatives and interrogatives are force-less, why not

imperatives?’ implicating that Frege has no good answer. A partial response to Hanks is that science gives us no reason to treat imperatives as sharing contents with indicatives, while it gives us a reason to do so with respect to propositional questions. I will come back to this issue in section 5.

4. Thought Expression without Force?

Frege argues also that a thought can be expressed without any force. According to him [1918: 294 (63)], an actor who utters on stage an indicative sentence does not assert the thought expressed:

As stage thunder is only apparent thunder and a stage fight only an apparent fight, so stage assertion is only apparent assertion. It is only acting, only fancy. In his part the actor asserts nothing, nor does he lie, even if he says something of whose falsehood he is convinced.

The actor also does not issue a command or ask a question. He seems merely to express a thought (see also Frege [1915: 251 (271)]). Similarly, the utterance of ‘Grass is green’ that is part of the utterance of the conditional ‘If grass is green, it is the same colour as emeralds’, merely expresses the corresponding thought [Geach 1965: 451ff.].

In the literature, Frege’s examples are taken to be the reason why the content/force distinction was made in the first place or to provide a direct argument for the constitutive content/force distinction (see [Recanati 2013: 626, Bell 1979: 69, Hanks 2015: 90ff.]). If a thought can be expressed with no speech act force at all, it cannot be inherently assertive.

Hanks [2015: 10, 93; 2019: 1392] and recently Kimhi [2018: 44] object that the actor on stage makes an assertion, but the context – he is on stage performing a play – cancels the assertoric force. What is in effect an assertion does not count as one: because of the special non-linguistic context one's speech act is neither subject to the requirements, nor produces the normative consequences, that assertions standardly have. The linguistic contexts in which assertoric force is cancelled are complex sentences that contain a sentence *s* as part; the non-linguistic contexts are norms or conventions that are in force when someone utters a sentence. It is important to this description of the example that an assertion is made says Hanks [2019: 1392]:

[I]n a case of cancellation, features of the context block the act of predication from having its usual status as an assertion in the language game. [H]owever, the relevant act, i.e. tackling the quarterback or performing an act of predication, is intrinsically no different from those that occur in normal, uncanceled contexts.

He takes cancellation to be an intuitive notion that is, however, not precisely defined. For example, the norms that govern plays override the force that propositions expressed by assertoric sentences have.

I think these are valid criticisms. But even if Frege's examples of thought expression without any force are unconvincing, his observations about the role of propositional questions in science still motivate a restricted taxonomic content/force distinction and, indirectly, the view that thoughts are not inherently assertive. This content/force distinction is important because it is implicit in scientific progress. I will

therefore focus now on Frege's Argument from Propositional Questions that is inspired by his model of scientific progress.

5. The Argument from Propositional Questions I: The Basic Intuition

Frege argued for the content/force distinction on the basis of assumptions about the meaning of propositional questions (see sect. 2). In 'The Thought' he elaborated his argument. He [1918: 293-4 (62)] asks us to imagine that a propositional question ('Is seawater salty?') is uttered:

We expect to hear "yes" or "no". The answer "yes" says [*besagt*] the same as an indicative sentence, for in it the thought that was already completely contained in the interrogative sentence is laid down as true. So a sentence-question can be formed from every indicative sentence. [...] An interrogative sentence and an indicative one contain the same thought; but the indicative contains something else as well, namely, the assertion. The interrogative sentence contains something more too, namely a request. Therefore 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.

The fact that we expect to hear 'Yes' or 'No', or similar expressions such as 'It is so' or 'I believe so', is crucial for Frege's argument. He takes the expected audience response 'Yes'/'No' to be the assertion (denial) of a previously expressed thought and the only plausible candidate for expressing this thought is the propositional question.

We can get a good grip on the intuition that drives Frege's argument by

considering the following list of sentences:

(S1) Seawater is salty. Yes (I agree)/ I believe so, too.

(S2) Is seawater salty? Yes/I believe so.

(S3) Make seawater salty! Yes/I believe so. (?)

(S4) Seawater be salty. Yes/I believe so. (?)

A competent speaker will assess the responses ‘Yes’ and ‘I believe so’ to utterances of (S1) and (S2) as grammatically correct, conversationally appropriate and, if properly informed, true. The answer ‘I believe so’ to the propositional question (S2), especially, suggests that it expresses a thought that is the content of a belief – a truth-evaluable mental state – of the respondent. This thought is indirectly presented as true in the answer.

In contrast, a competent speaker will assess the response ‘Yes’ or ‘I believe so’ to (S3) and (S4) as ‘not OK’. Such a response is either a sign that one has not understood the utterance one is responding to or that one is not a competent speaker. This observation suggests that there is no thought to be re-expressed.

One can turn the direction of explanation around and respond with the question ‘Is that so?’ to utterances of sentences that express and assert thoughts, but not to utterances of imperative or optative sentences:

(S1) Seawater is salty. Is that so?

(S3) Make seawater salty! Is that so? (?)

(S4) Seawater be salty. Is that so? (?)

To anticipate: if ‘so’ is a propositional anaphor, it needs a sentence that expresses a thought as grammatical antecedent. The fact that (S3) and (S4) cannot serve as antecedents of ‘I believe so’ or ‘Is that so?’, suggests that they don’t express thoughts.

The fact that one cannot use ‘Yes’/‘No’ or ‘I believe so’ in response to utterances of imperatives and optatives suggests that they do not have truth-evaluable propositional contents. This observation helps Frege to further disarm Hanks’s criticism (see section 3) that drawing a distinction between indicatives and propositional questions on the one hand and imperatives and optatives on the other is *ad hoc*.

6. The Argument from Propositional Questions II: Pro-sentences and Propositional Anaphora

Why does Frege appeal to the use of ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ in response to propositional questions to make his point? The answer, in outline, is: Which thought an utterance of ‘Yes’ (‘No’) expresses is determined by an antecedent utterance: the utterance of the propositional question. The simplest explanation of this observation is that ‘Yes’ (in one of its meanings) is an anaphoric pro-sentence that expresses and asserts the sense expressed by the utterance of the propositional question it answers. This gives us a reason to accept that the utterance of the propositional question and the utterance of ‘Yes’ have the same sense. Since this sense is a thought, a propositional question expresses a thought.

Fiengo [2007: 9] disagrees with Frege on this point: one ‘can say *Yes* after an assertion (*It’s a fine day. Yes*), after a question (as Frege notes), but also after a command (*Go to bed! Yes, mommy*).’ Now, by Frege’s own lights, utterances of imperatives don’t express thoughts. So responding ‘Yes’ to such an utterance cannot

re-express a thought. Why, then, should the same response to a propositional question express a thought?

Fiengo's argument assumes that 'Yes' has the same meaning in the different utterances he considers. But the OED (2018 online edition) records several meanings of 'Yes'; *one* of them as:

Yes: expressing assent to a command, request, proposal or summons.

This 'Yes' of assent is the one used in response to the command 'Go to bed!'. For example, one can translate the 'Yes' in 'Yes, mommy' with the German 'Jawohl', a sign of assent. But this is not the right translation of the 'Yes' that answers a propositional question. Fiengo's criticism is off-target: considerations about the 'Yes' of assent don't bear on Frege's argument.⁵

After disarming this objection, let's motivate Frege's idea that 'Yes' ('No') (re-)express thoughts in more detail.

First, 'Yes' and 'No' cannot be used without linguistic context. There must be a prior utterance that expresses a content such that 'Yes' and 'No' can respond to the utterance. Standardly, 'Yes' and 'No' respond to propositional questions.

Second, 'Yes' and 'No' are indicative sentences: they can form complex sentences, when combined with sentential connectives. For example, 'and' connects two indicative sentences to form a complex sentence whose truth-value depends on the truth-value of its conjuncts. The word 'and' can also connect occurrences of 'Yes' to form complex indicative sentences:

⁵ Alternatively, one can run Frege's argument with 'I believe so'.

Will John come to the party? Will he bring beer?

Yes and Yes.

The same goes for the sentential connective ‘if, then’:

Is seawater salty?

(A) If Yes, we will need some freshwater.

(B) Yes!

(A) So we will need some freshwater.

Or sentence operators like ‘probably’ or ‘possibly’:

Will it snow this year?

Possibly, yes.

Third, ‘Yes’ expresses a sense for which the question of truth or falsity arises. For example, if you answer the question ‘Is seawater salty?’ with ‘No’, the question of truth arises for your answer. The response: ‘But your answer is false: seawater *is* salty!’ is correct. Hence, ‘Yes’ (‘No’) express truth-evaluable senses, that is, *thoughts*.

Brentano [1904: 65 (76)] introduced for ‘Yes’ (‘No’) the term ‘pro-sentence’ modeled on ‘pro-noun’: ‘Yes’ is like an anaphoric pronoun in that it inherits its meaning and reference (if any) from an antecedent expression. But ‘Yes’ (‘No’) is a sentence, not a noun: hence ‘pro-sentence’. Ramsey [1927-9: 10] used the same term and argues that ‘Yes’ (No’) are pro-sentences expressing ‘complete senses’.

Pro-sentences are not elliptical. For example, if an utterance of ‘Yes’ is an answer to the question ‘Is seawater salty?’, it is not elliptical for ‘Yes, seawater is salty’. In the conditional ‘If Yes, one should not drink seawater’, one cannot replace the ‘Yes’ with the allegedly non-elliptical version: the result is no longer a sentence (see [van Elswyk (forthcoming): sect. 4]). This observation is incompatible with the view that ‘Yes’ is elliptical.

Although, as a first stab, the meaning of an utterance of ‘Yes’ (‘No’) depends on the antecedent propositional question, it does not *designate* a thought.⁶ If ‘Yes’ designated a thought, the thought would not be asserted. Designations of propositions such as ‘the thought that $2 + 2 = 4$ ’ are singular terms. These terms cannot stand in for a complete indicative sentence in complex truth-functional sentences. In contrast, an utterance of ‘Yes’ expresses and asserts a thought: it is criticisable in the dimension of truth and falsity. Pro-sentences like ‘Yes’ don’t co-refer with their grammatical antecedents, but, as one might put it, they co-express: they express the sense of their grammatical antecedent.

We can sum up the last point as follows:

(Co-Expression) An utterance of ‘Yes’ expresses (and asserts) the sense of its grammatical antecedent; an utterance of ‘No’ expresses and asserts the negation of the sense of its grammatical antecedent.

⁶ Krifka [2014: 50] and van Elswyk [(forthcoming)] argue that ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ are pro-sentences *designating* propositions. But van Elswyk (personal communication) uses ‘designate’ and ‘express’ in special technical senses.

Now, the only available antecedent for ‘Yes’ (‘No’) in our case is the propositional question. So we can work backwards from the answer to the propositional question and conclude that the pro-sentence ‘Yes’ asserts the thought expressed by the propositional question it answers. In contrast, on the assumption that the interrogative sentence ‘Is seawater salty?’ does not express a thought, but a sense of a kind that is (like a command) not truth-evaluable, we have no answer how it is possible that the pro-sentence ‘Yes’ expresses a truth-evaluable thought and which thought is asserted when one utters ‘Yes’. The same goes for the response ‘I believe so’ to a propositional question.

With this in mind we can formulate the Argument from Propositional Questions as follows:

(P1) The utterance of a propositional question puts forth a meaning with interrogative force.

(P2) An utterance with interrogative force cannot have assertoric force.

(P3) An assertoric utterance of ‘Yes’ (‘No’) or ‘It is so’ (‘It is not so’) and an utterance of a propositional question can express the same meaning.

(P4) An utterance of ‘Yes’ (‘It is so’) expresses a thought when used to answer a propositional question.

Hence, (C1) The meaning expressed in an utterance of a propositional question is a thought.

Hence, (C2) The same thought can be expressed by an utterance of a propositional question and an assertoric utterance of ‘Yes’.

(C2) gives us the restricted taxonomic content/force distinction.

The Argument from Propositional Questions is only convincing if posing a question is not a form of cancelling assertoric force. Otherwise, the opponent of the content/force distinction can simply apply the cancellation response. Hence, we need to ask whether the grammatical transformation of ‘It is raining’ to ‘Is it raining?’, or the intonation distinctive of asking a question, create a cancellation context.

Hanks himself takes asking a propositional question such as ‘Is oxygen condensable?’ to be an interrogative action that combines the property of being condensable with oxygen [Hanks 2015: 109]. Whether such a form of combining properties is consistent with Hanks’s other commitments is not important for my purposes here. The main point is that by Hanks’s own lights asking a propositional question is not asserting a propositional content in a cancellation context, but a different action. Hence, he can’t respond to the argument by saying that one makes an assertion in a cancellation context when one asks a propositional question.

Such a move seems independently implausible. Fiengo [2007: 46] gives a good description of the point of asking a propositional question:

The point of using a sentence-type that meets the formal standard for completeness of assertion while presenting oneself as not having license for assertion is to display that very lack, inviting the interlocutor to provide that license, the grounds that would underwrite assertion.

In asking whether oxygen is condensable I present myself as not being licensed to assert that oxygen is condensable and invite the audience to provide the license. If the speaker in fact asserted that oxygen is condensable and only cancelled the assertoric force, the utterances would not have the intended effect of inviting the interlocutor to

provide the reasons the speaker is lacking. If the thought is put forth in a neutral way, why provide reasons for its truth?

7. Frege and Inquisitive Semantics on Propositional Anaphora

Contemporary semanticists have not followed Frege in holding that propositional questions express truth-evaluable thoughts. Interrogatives are supposed to have non-truth-evaluable content. If one uses the intension/extension framework, interrogatives are assigned as their intension a function from possible worlds to those propositions that answer them, while the intension of an indicative sentence is a function from possible worlds to truth-values [Groenendijk and Stokhof 1997: sect. 4.4]. In the structured propositions framework, the interrogative sentence ‘Is seawater salty?’ expresses the set of thoughts that together exhaust the possible true answers to the question posed by the uttering of the interrogative sentence: {seawater is salty, seawater is not salty}. If this semantics can accommodate propositional anaphora, Frege’s observations about propositional anaphors don’t make it plausible that propositional questions express thoughts.

Frege’s account of propositional anaphor relies on (Co-Expression). (Co-Expression) also covers the use of ‘Yes’ or ‘It is so’ to assert the content of an indicative sentence as in:

Seawater is salty. Yes, it is so.

Seawater is salty. If so, we can’t drink it.

But (Co-expression) requires that there is only one thought expressed by interrogative sentences. Since inquisitive semantics takes the meaning of a propositional question

to be the set of the possible answers, (Co-expression) cannot be used. For example, the answer ‘Yes’ above does not express a set of propositions, but only one.

Hence, Frege’s opponent needs an independently plausible explanation of how propositional anaphors manage to re-express only one of the propositions in the set. In contemporary inquisitive semantics the problem is solved by introducing a new property. Krifka [2014: sect. 2.2], following Farkas and Roelofson 2012, assumes that one of the propositions in the set of answers is *highlighted*.⁷ The highlighted proposition is the one that is explicitly mentioned. He goes on to represent the meaning of ‘Is seawater salty?’ therefore not as a mere set, but as a set with highlights (the underlined proposition is highlighted):

{ Seawater is salty/ Seawater is not salty }

In contrast, the meaning of ‘Is seawater not salty?’ is

{ Seawater is salty/ Seawater is not salty }

If one assumes further that propositional anaphoras can only ‘reach back’ to the highlighted proposition, inquisitive semantics has a good explanation of how one can assert that seawater is salty by answering the corresponding propositional question with ‘Yes’ (‘No’).

⁷ Formal semanticists model propositions as sets of possible worlds. I assume that the propositions under consideration are structured entities, in order to make this proposal bear on Frege’s view.

Contemporary inquisitive semantics of propositional questions can be combined with an account of propositional anaphora. But this account needs to introduce a new property ‘being highlighted’, one that is not used in a general account of propositional anaphora. Now, a proposition being highlighted either simply consists in its being the literal meaning of the interrogative sentence or it is a new property. In the second case the proposed explanation is not as parsimonious as Frege’s, according to which (Co-expression) explains how propositional anaphor works both in the case interrogative and indicative sentences. In the first case, being highlighted is a well-known property, but now the position outlined is no longer distinct from Frege’s. This is because the highlighted proposition is the propositional content expressed by the propositional question. Hence, the propositional question expresses a truth-evaluable thought. In fact, a remark in [Frege 1879-91: 7-8 (8)] suggests that this is Frege’s own position:

We grasp the content of a truth before we acknowledge [*anerkennen*] it as true, but we grasp not only this; we grasp the opposite as well. For in asking a question we vacillate between opposites. Although language usually only expresses one side, the other is still always present without further ado; for the sense of the question remains the same if we add ‘or not’. It is this very fact which makes possible such verbal economy.⁸

⁸ My translation. The original translation has ‘opposite *sentences*’. Frege himself just has ‘opposites’ (*Gegensätze*) between which one ‘vacillates’ (*schwankt*). The opposites can’t be sentences because in a judgement one does not acknowledge the truth of a sentence, but of a thought. Further, the opposite thought is not ‘implied’ but simply present without further ado (*von selbst immer da*).

Thoughts come in pairs of opposites like some properties – good and bad – do [Frege 1897: 149 (159)]. The opposites between which we vacillate when we ask, for instance, the propositional question ‘Is seawater salty?’ are the thoughts that seawater is salty and that seawater is not salty. The propositional question ‘Is seawater salty?’ expresses *only* the thought that seawater is salty. Therefore, it can unproblematically be re-expressed with ‘Yes’ and rejected with ‘No’. But in expressing one thought without assent, one automatically makes its negation salient.

An exegetical remark is in order here. Frege’s claim that ‘the sense of the question remains the same if we add ‘or not?’ is puzzling. For one cannot add ‘or not?’ to a propositional question like ‘Is seawater salty?’: ‘Is seawater salty, or not?’ is ungrammatical. However, one can add ‘or not?’ to the *indicative sentence* ‘Seawater is salty’ thereby turning it into a so-called ‘tag-question’: ‘Seawater is salty; or not?’. Frege might have in mind that indicative sentences and the corresponding tag-questions have the same sense. But this does not help his argument about propositional questions as it is, at best, unclear whether tag-questions express the same sense as propositional questions. A speaker can expect that the propositional question ‘Is seawater salty?’ is answered completely by saying ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. But ‘Yes’ (‘No’) are not complete answers to the tag-question ‘Seawater is salty; or not?’ [Künne 2010: 425]. Fortunately Frege’s main point is independent of these complications.

An anaphoric pronoun can pick up a referent, although this object is not the semantic referent of the grammatical antecedent. I can say ‘A man came to the shop. He went again soon’. The antecedent expression ‘a man’ can plausibly be construed as a quantifier that has no referent; it merely paves the way for reference by making an

object salient [Lewis 1979: 180]. If this is a possibility for *pro-nouns*, is it not also a possibility for *pro-sentences*? If it is, the propositional question could make a thought salient without expressing it. But, plausibly, a propositional question makes two thoughts salient: the thought literally expressed is salient in virtue of being expressed; its negation is equally salient for different reasons. But since ‘Yes’ (‘No’) express (reject) only one thought, the antecedent propositional question must express, and not only make salient, a thought: only the expressed thought is re-expressed or rejected.

In sum: Frege’s view that a propositional question expresses a thought can explain how one can assert that *p* when answering a propositional question with ‘Yes’ or ‘It is so’. The explanation is the same in the interrogative and the assertoric case and it does not posit a new property. Hence, it should be preferred over the explanation given by recent semantics for interrogatives. The conclusion is that propositional questions express thoughts.

But if the sentence ‘Is seawater salty?’ expresses a thought, why is it not true or false? An *utterance* of a propositional question expresses a thought, but the correctness of the utterance is independent of the truth or falsity of the thought expressed. Frege suggests that the form of an interrogative sentence signals that the audience should assert the thought expressed if and only if it is true; otherwise they should deny it. The correctness of this request is independent of the truth of the thought expressed. Hence, utterances of propositional questions express thoughts, but we don’t assess them in terms of the truth or falsity of the thought expressed and don’t ascribe truth conditions to these utterances.

8. The Content/Force Distinction and the Problem of Propositional Unity

Frege's Argument from Propositional Questions makes a good case for the restricted taxonomic version of the content/force distinction, independently of the observation that assertoric force can be canceled in some contexts. If there is a content/force distinction, we need to revisit the arguments against it. Hanks [2007: 157] outlines a reason against accepting a content/force distinction that has impressed many philosophers:

If we accept the content-force distinction then we are barred from solving the unity problem by appealing to what goes on in assertions or judgments. [...]
This means we have to account for the representational properties of a proposition solely by appeal to its constituents and their relations to one another. Both Frege and Russell faced this problem and neither could find a satisfactory solution.

The problem of the unity of the proposition is the question 'What makes some things, – for example, some Fregean senses – into one proposition for which the question of truth or falsity arises?' Why does the content/force distinction bar solutions to the problem of the unity of the proposition in terms of mental or speech acts? The argument suggested is that if some things are unified to a proposition by a mental or speech act, the proposition itself turns out to be a type of mental/speech act. For illustration consider an outline of the solution to the problem which Hanks [2015: 25ff.] takes to be satisfactory. The mental or linguistic action of predicating the property *F* to *a* (judging *a* to be *F*) is either true or false. Propositions are action-types and the types inherit truth conditions and truth-values from the actions that are their tokens. If propositional contents are action-types, there is no need to see them as

composed of prior and distinct constituents. But if they are action-types, even a weak form of the content/force distinction needs to be abandoned [ibid.]. The action-type predicating F to a cannot be identical, for instance, with the action-type of asking whether F holds of a . Hence, these action-types cannot be the contents (types) of acts with different force. If one wants to uphold the content/force distinction, one must give a different account of the unity of propositional content. Frege made remarks that suggested that the sense of a predicate and the sense of a proper name form a thought because the former is saturated by the later.⁹ But, Hanks [2007: 158f] argues, the notion of saturation is too metaphorical to be helpful.

I will not assess the independent plausibility of this proposal or whether the notion of saturation is helpful in this context. The question that is important for my purposes is whether it is right that the content/force distinction bars one from appealing to mental or speech acts in solving the problem of the unity of the proposition.

I take my cue from Hanks's characterization of propositional contents as action-types. If a propositional content is an action-type, different mental or linguistic actions cannot share the same propositional content. However, there are other ways of conceiving of propositional content as abstracted from mental or linguistic actions that don't take it to be an *action*-type. Frege himself gave a good example in *Begriffsschrift*. He [1879: 12 (2-3)] observed that

⁹ Frege's work contains also many passages in which he seems to take thoughts to be unities that are prior to concepts. The thought is not built up from building blocks, but its components are arrived at by decomposing the thought. For discussion see, for example, Heis [2014].

the contents of two judgements may differ in two ways: either [(a)] the consequences derivable from the first, when it is combined with certain other judgements, always also follow from the second, when it is combined with the same judgements, [and conversely] or [(b)] this is not the case. [...] Now I call that part of the content that is the *same* [in judgements/sentences that meet (a)] the *conceptual content*.

Frege explains the notion of conceptual content in terms of the prior notion of inference. An inference is a judgement made on the basis of previous judgements according to logical laws [Frege 1879-1891: 3 (3)]. Frege's explanation takes the form of an abstraction principle of the kind he will employ in *Foundations of Arithmetic* to introduce directions of lines and numbers of concepts. A direction is what parallel lines have in common. A conceptual content is what inferentially equivalent judgements share:

(Abstract1) The conceptual content of a judgement₁ = the conceptual content of a judgement₂ if, and only if,
 one can infer from the judgement₁ together with further judgements j_m to j_n all and only the judgements that one can infer from the judgement₂ together with the judgements j_m to j_n (and conversely).

The question of how conceptual contents are unified from prior building blocks does not arise if they are abstractions from inferentially equivalent judgements.

As the direction of a line is not itself a line or a type of line, the conceptual content of a judgement is not itself a judgement or a type of judgement. Hence,

(Abstract1) gives us no reason to think that conceptual contents can *only* be the contents of judgements. Unfortunately, neither does (Abstract1) give us a reason to hold that conceptual contents can be the contents of acts of other kind. But we can do better and show that conceptual or propositional contents can be introduced by abstraction in such a way that they can be shared by judgements (assertions) and interrogative attitudes (asking) propositional questions.

Frege [1906: 213 (197)] suggests a criterion by means of which one can recognize that different sentences express the same thought:

When I use the word ‘sentence’ in what follows, I do not mean [optative, imperative, interrogative sentences], but assertoric sentences. [...] Now two sentences *A* and *B* can stand in such a relation that anyone who acknowledges the content of *A* as true must straightaway [acknowledge] the content of *B* as true and, conversely, that anyone who [acknowledges] the content of *B* must immediately [acknowledge] that of *A*. (*Equipollence*). It is here being assumed that there is no difficulty in apprehending [*Auffassung*] the contents of *A* and *B*. The sentences need not be equivalent in all respects. [...].¹⁰

This criterion is based on the idea that someone who makes judgement j_1 must immediately and without reflection make other judgements (and *vice versa*). If I judge that Caesar was killed by Brutus, I must, if the occasion arises, immediately and

¹⁰ I have changed the translation because translating ‘Wunschsätze’ etc. as ‘sentences that serve to express a wish, or a command’. For Frege talks about sentence moods, not uses of sentences. Further, Frege’s ‘anerkennen’ is correctly translated as ‘accept’ and ‘Auffassung’ is not ‘grasping’ (fassen).

without further information also judge that Brutus killed Caesar (and *vice versa*). In this case the two judgements have the same content.

From this idea it is a short step to a more general abstraction principle that relates judgements and interrogative acts. Just as one can greet someone in different ways – lifting one’s hat, saying ‘Hello’ etc. – one can make a judgement in different ways. When I affirmatively answer the propositional question whether p , I judge that p . Responding ‘Yes’ to ‘Is seawater salty?’ is a particular way of, in Frege’s terminology, acknowledging the truth of the content expressed by ‘Is seawater salty?’. If I judge that seawater is salty, I must immediately assent to the question whether seawater is salty when the question arises (and *vice versa*). This observation suggests:

(Abstract 2) The thought acknowledged as true by judgement j_1 = the thought put forth by propositional question q_1 if, and only if,
One must, if one makes j_1 , immediately answer ‘Yes’ to q_1 (if the question arises).¹¹

According to (Abstract2), the thought acknowledged as true in the judgement that seawater is salty is the same as the thought whose acknowledgment or rejection is requested by asking whether seawater is salty.

There are still open questions. Directions don’t share all properties of parallel lines. Similarly, if thoughts are abstractions, they don’t share all properties of judgements and propositional questions. So why should the abstracted contents be

¹¹ Frege [1906: 213 (197)] points out that this abstraction principle does not allow us to introduce *obviously* true thoughts. Like Frege, I will leave this problem for another occasion.

true or false? (see [Caplan et al. 2014].) If they are, do they exist independently of mental and speech acts? How do we distinguish parts in the abstracted contents? But the philosophers who identify propositional content with types of mental acts face exactly parallel questions about types. Both views are in the same boat here.

9. Conclusion

Frege's Argument from Propositional Questions gives us a good reason to accept a restricted taxonomic version of the content/force distinction. Accepting this content/force distinction does not bar Fregeans from addressing the problem of the unity of the proposition by appealing to speech or mental acts. For Frege has an abstractionist account of thoughts that does exactly that. There may be other ways to address the problem of the unity of the proposition that maintain a force/content distinction, but Fregeans can offer one viable approach to the problem that is not only consistent with, but even underwrites Frege's conclusion that propositional questions and indicative sentences can express the same thought.¹²

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