

Frege's 'Bedeutung'

In the whole of philosophy, Frege's '*Bedeutung*' the *most* disputed word in translation (more than Aristotle's '*eudaimonia*', Kant's '*Anschauung*', Hegel's '*Geist*', etc.).

Some translations: reference (most common), meaning (the current favorite), nominatum, denotation, significance, indication, semantic value, semantic role, truth-value potential.

Some causes of the trouble. Frege holds that:

- (1) 'No men are mortal' has the same *Bedeutung* as ' $2 + 2 = 5$ ',
- (2) 'is a Christian' lacks a *Bedeutung* (because vague?),
- (3) 'is a round square' has a *Bedeutung* (because not vague?), and
- (4) sentences of fiction lack *Bedeutung*.

Also in Frege, '*Brot* bedeutet 'bread' ' is ok (word-word relation), but '*Brot* refers to 'bread' ' is not (word-object relation). Still, '*Obama* refers to Obama' (word-object) is most naturally translated as '*Obama* bedeutet Obama'.

Following Dummett, '**meaning**' is now the preferred translation, since:

- (1) as a general rule, the translation of the German '*Bedeutung*' is 'meaning',
- (2) it is the most neutral on the interpretive issues,
- (3) it maintains continuity with Frege's earlier work,
- (4) it maintains continuity with later writers, esp. Wittgenstein,
- (5) the main competitor, 'reference', is used by later writers (e.g., Strawson) to talk about something different than Fregean *Bedeutung*,
- (6) Frege's use of '*Bedeutung*' is sometimes awkward, yet translating it as 'meaning' often tones this down.

Main problems with 'meaning':

- (1) sometimes Frege clearly uses '*Bedeutung*' to mean reference, esp. in his later work,
- (2) given (1), 'reference' would create a continuity with Frege's later work,
- (3) at times Frege clearly uses '*Bedeutung*' to mean "significance." (Frege once said to Peano that '*Bedeutung*' translates as 'significazione' in Italian.)
- (4) Frege uses '*Bedeutung*' interchangeably with '*bezeichnen*' ("designate").
- (5) 'meaning' also translates 'Sinn'; indeed, Russell translates Frege this way,
- (6) also, Russell translates Fregean *Bedeutung* as "denotation" in 'On Denoting', (which is often taught immediately after 'On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*'),
- (7) claims about *Bedeutung* which sound awkward in German are sometimes *more* awkward if 'meaning' is used in translation, and
- (8) the word-object relation expressed by '*bedeuten*' (vs. the word-word relation) has priority in Frege's usage, suggesting 'refer' is more appropriate.

"In the end, then, the choice of a term to translate '*Bedeutung*' cannot be dissociated from the interpretation of Frege's philosophy." –Beaney, Intro to *The Frege Reader*