**On Frege’s Supposed Hierarchy of Senses**

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Many commentators hold that Frege is committed to the existence of an infinite hierarchy of independent indirect senses and we are left totally in the dark as to just what these are. (Carnap 1947/1956, Kripke 2008, e.g.). In consequence of this, some have held that Frege’s theory has the unfortunate result that languages that can express indirect discourse are unlearnable (Davidson 1968). I maintain that neither is the case.

Frege famously says:

(IS) In reported speech, words are used *indirectly* or have their *indirect reference*. We distinguish accordingly the *customary* from the *indirect* reference of a word; and its *customary* sense from its *indirect* sense. The indirect reference of a word is accordingly its customary sense. (1892/1952, 59, italics in the original)

Thus, according to Frege, while sense determines reference in direct contexts, there is a reference shift in indirect contexts. In the latter, the sense of the embedded that clause does not determine its usual or customary reference; instead, there is a reference shift away from the customary reference to the customary sense of the expression.

It is an understatement to say that this passage is often quoted and discussed, but it is remarkable to realize that important sentences immediately preceding and following the often-quoted passage are completely ignored, let alone discussed. These neglected sentences shed a radically different light on how Frege himself understood what he was doing in introducing the locution ‘indirect sense’, a light that makes the orthodox view that Frege is committed to a hierarchy of senses less tenable. In the widely neglected sentence that follows (IS), Frege describes the situations giving rise to indirect reference and sense as *exceptions*: [[1]](#endnote-1)

(\*) Such exceptions must always be borne in mind if the mode of the connexion between sign, sense, and reference in particular cases is to be correctly understood. (ibid.)

That Frege thinks of indirect contexts *as exceptions* is crucial. It is completely uncontroversial that exceptions imply departure from rules governing non-exceptional cases. Thus, since Frege explicitly tells us that indirect context is an exceptional case, we must depart from the ordinary rule, the customary “mode of the connexion between sign, sense, and reference”, if such cases are to be “correctly understood” (ibid.). In the customary mode of connection not only does sense determine reference, but an expression’s sense and the reference it determines are distinct. Importantly, for the exceptional case of indirect context, the sense of the embedded that clause *coincides* with its reference, as Frege explicitly tells us. Here, though the sign expresses its customary sense, sense and reference are not distinct, a departure from the customary mode of connection.

The failure to recognize that indirect context is an exception leads Fregean commentators to apply the customary mode to the cases of indirect context. It is then reasoned that since the referent of the embedded expression is different than its customary referent, a different sense must determine it. This is the fulcrum by means of which the hierarchy is hoisted. Consequently, with iteration of indirect contexts, they mistakenly think Frege is saddled with an infinite hierarchy of independent senses. For Frege there can be no doubt that senses exist and are objective entities. But by not heeding Frege’s warning regarding exceptions and instead applying the customary mode of connection between sign, sense and referent to indirect contexts, many commentators generate an independent hierarchy of objective senses. By doing so, I submit that they may well have failed to correctly understand the “mode of connexion between sign, sense and reference” in such exceptional cases, *exactly* as Frege warned in (\*).

1. *The hierarchy argument*.

Consider the alleged hierarchy: Kripke, among others, points out that though Frege apparently did not examine iterative indirect contexts (e.g., Sam believes that Sally fears that she has cancer), they pose a problem for Frege. Kripke says that given Frege’s view of indirect reference, he “… is committed to a hierarchy of doubly oblique indirect referents and senses, triply oblique, and so on” (though we will see that Kripke thinks this does not pose a problem for Frege). (Kripke, 2008, 183)

As best as I can tell, Kripke’s argument that allegedly leads the Fregean theory to this hierarchy is as follows, [[2]](#endnote-2) “The Hierarchy Argument”:

1. There are reference shifts in indirect contexts.
2. Such reference shifts must be determined in some way.
3. Reference is determined by sense.
4. Where there is indirect reference there must be indirect sense (which determines the indirect reference).
5. Therefore, where there is iteration of indirect contexts, there must be an iteration of indirect references and indirect senses.

Given what Frege tells us, Premises 1and 2 are uncontroversial. Unquestionably, Frege thought that reference shifts occurred in indirect contexts, as the sense expressed by a that-clause does not determine its customary referent. As premise 2 states, such shifts must be determined in some way, and given premise 3, it may seem plausible to suppose that another sense, an “indirect sense” must be involved in determining the new referent, the indirect referent, for if sense determines reference, different referent implies different sense. In this way, the hierarchy of senses is off and running.

Frege affirms premise 1. As to premise 2, yes, reference shift in indirect context must be determined *in some way,* but being *exceptional*, they require *different* treatment, and *Frege explicitly tells us exactly what the difference is*: The sense of an embedded expression in indirect contexts “determines”, as it were, *itself* as the referent of the expression. In such exceptional cases the sense of an expression and its reference are not distinct as is the case in direct context. (Scare quotes are used because the determination relation is not the customary one that applies in direct contexts.) Bear in mind that if the relation between sign, sense, and reference was not different when it is expressed by a linguistic expression embedded within a that-clause, it would *not* be an exception. But Frege explicitly tells us it *is* an exception. Importantly, we must, therefore, expect “the mode of the connexion of sign, sense, and reference” to be different than it is in the customary case of direct context. Thus, premise 3 must be understood in a more complicated way than it is by advocates of the hierarchy in order for Frege to accept it, viz.:

(3’) Reference is determined by sense *but differently in indirect contexts* *than it is*

*in direct contexts*.

A consequence of this difference is that while sense and reference are distinct in direct contexts, sense in indirect contexts coincides with the reference it determines, viz. itself, as Frege explicitly states.

Considering the above, the existential import of premise 4 must be denied. Thus, premise 4 is false and the Hierarchy Argument is unsound. Frege’s exception clause renders unnecessary an actual hierarchy of independent indirect senses to determine the different referents in indirect contexts. (IS) *and* (\*) do the job simply and do it admirably well.

Those who think that Frege is committed to a hierarchy of senses complain that Frege “does not give us any idea what they [indirect senses] are.” Kripke says as much (2008, 185), and he also notes that Carnap makes the same observation when he says, “Frege nowhere explains in more customary terms what this third entity is.” Carnap called indirect sense a “third entity”, customary sense and reference being the other two. (Carnap 1947/1956, as quoted in Kripke 2008, 185) In support of this, Carnap also states that since Frege “assumes that nominatum [reference] and sense must always be different, he had thus to introduce a third entity as an oblique sense.” (ibid.) If the two must always be different, then what Carnap claims here would be true, and Frege would be committed to a hierarchy of senses, but Carnap cites no text of Frege’s in support of the claim that Frege holds sense and nominatum *must always be different*.

Certainly, Frege held that sense and reference are different in direct contexts. Did he clearly maintain the same in indirect contexts? For reasons already given, I think not. Though I am not a Frege scholar, I know of no such explicit and unrestricted claim by Frege, viz., that sense and reference (nominatum) are always, or must be distinct. Importantly, we have direct evidence that Frege did *not* hold that sense and reference are *always* distinct, for any such assumption is incompatible with (\*). Something that Frege would certainly have noticed and would not allow.

If I am right here, Carnap’s reason for attributing a commitment to indirect sense in Frege’s theory is undermined. More generally, any argument that attempts to generate the hierarchy of senses based on the assumption that sense and reference of a sign are always distinct, regardless of context, is defeated from the onset.

Additionally, and contrary to what Kripke, Carnap, and others have said, there is no puzzle as to why Frege said nothing more about what indirect senses are or any alleged hierarchy of senses. On my interpretation, there is a simple explanation for this alleged lacuna in Frege’s exposition of his theory: *Frege simply did not think of indirect sense as an additional independent entity.* So, there was nothing further to explain on this point beyond what he already said in (\*). His silence on this, as well as his being mostly silent on the related issue of iterative indirect contexts is thus explained. [[3]](#endnote-3)

Frege’s virtual silence on both these issues provides circumstantial, but additional, evidence for my interpretation. It would be utterly inexplicable that such a careful and thorough thinker as Frege would not discuss these topics, topics which would be obvious and of such great consequence for his view *if*, in fact, he held that indirect sense exists as an additional sense. This point together with the recognition of Frege’s widely ignored exception clause, (\*), dissolves the mystery. There simply was no need for him to discuss these matters in any detail: On Frege’s theory there are no independently existing indirect senses.

To summarize, given (IS) and (\*), Frege did not view himself as introducing a new additional sense; instead, he explained how *sense functions differently in exceptional cases*. It is the stubborn application of the *customary principle*—a sign expresses a sense, and the sense of a sign determines the sign’s reference, together with the consequence that sense and reference of a sign are distinct—to the exceptional cases that generates the belief that there is some further sense, an indirect sense required. This is contrary to Frege’s explicit warning. Advocates of the hierarchy assume that since the referent of a sign is different in indirect contexts, there must be another sense that determines it. Once that mistake is made it follows that with iterated indirect contexts a hierarchy of independent senses obtains, and Kripke implicitly, makes that mistake, along with others who advocate for the hierarchy. We have seen that Carnap explicitly makes it. (One might wonder at this point that if what I have argued is correct: Why did Frege introduce the locution ‘indirect sense? I will address this below in my discussion of the other ignored passage.)

In short, I claim that Frege’s theory of sign, sense and reference has two parts: (I) As applied to direct contexts, which is in accord with the usual interpretation of his theory: a sign expresses a sense and the latter determines the sign’s reference; moreover, sense and reference are distinct in such cases. Consequently, different references of an expression imply different senses for it. (II) As applied to exceptional cases, indirect context, the customary mode of connection must be suspended: signs express senses but such expressed senses *are* the referents of the signs. This is a direct application of (\*), and it eliminates any need for a hierarchy of senses. The usual interpretation of Frege’s theory is restricted to (I).

2. *Kripke argues that there is a hierarchy, but it is harmless*.

Return to the problem with the alleged hierarchy to establish the point already made but differently. As already observed, some of those that think that Frege is committed to an infinite hierarchy of independent senses also think that this has very damaging consequences for his theory. Kripke, however, while accepting the existence of an independent hierarchy of senses, thinks the negative consequences can be avoided. [[4]](#endnote-4) For (1) the hierarchy of independent senses can be recursively specified and (2) there is no mystery as to just what are the indirect senses in the hierarchy, as many have worried. Kripke thinks that any alleged mystery regarding what these indirect senses are is dispelled once we recognize both that they are recursively generated and that there is a relevant doctrine of acquaintance, which he finds in Frege. I first turn to Kripke’s discussion of the recursive generation of the hierarchy.

The rule for recursive generation is:

(β) When words appear in indirect contexts, that is “says that,

“believes that”, and so on, they refer to their senses in the clause following the “that”. (2008, 196)

and

… the rule (β) itself, applied to each indirect case, gives the indirect sense. For we have conceded that it determines the reference in each particular case, and whatever determines a reference is a Fregean sense. This consideration can then be applied iteratively, and we appear to have a theory of the entire hierarchy. (ibid.)

Non-recursive infinite sets would pose serious problems but the rule (β), according to Kripke, recursively generates the infinite hierarchy of independent indirect senses and, thus, avoids any such problems.

Kripke gives two reasons as to why many still think, in spite of the recursive rule, there is still a feeling of mystery about such a hierarchy. The first pertains to quotation, which I ignore, as it is not under discussion here. The second is relevant to my discussion: Kripke states that (β) itself provides “little real idea what the indirect senses, doubly indirect, and so on, are.” (2008, 196). But Kripke thinks the issue of just what these senses are can be resolved. He relies on a doctrine of acquaintance to do so. Kripke argues that “Each level of the hierarchy is the acquaintance-sense of the previous level”. (2008, 199) Thus, we know what each higher-level indirect sense is because it is just the acquaintance-sense of the previous level. Of course, this assumes that we know what the sense is at the 0-level, direct context, which for Frege is true. Commentators agree that Frege holds that we directly grasp these. [[5]](#endnote-5)

So, for Kripke, there is a hierarchy, but it is recursively well grounded; importantly, as we progress up the hierarchy, we know what each sense is because of our direct acquaintance with the sense of the previous level. Thus, with these points in play, Kripke thinks that though Frege is committed to a hierarchy of indirect senses, this is acceptable since it is recursively generated and what these indirect senses are is clear, since we have direct acquaintance at the 0-level, direct context, and every succeeding level’s indirect sense is defined by the previous level. Thus, he thinks both of the aforementioned worries about the hierarchy are put to rest.

Kripke thinks that a hierarchy of distinct indirect senses is generated because he ignores (\*) and goes on to mistakenly reify indirect sense, doubly indirect sense, and so on, along with many others. Kripke’s error is manifested when he says, “*whatever* determines a reference is a Fregean sense”. (2008, 199, also embedded in quotation above, italics added.) In the ordinary or customary case (direct context) sense determines reference *and* sense and reference are *distinct*. Kripke implicitly, and Carnap explicitly, assume that the distinctness of sense and reference which obtains in direct context must obtain in indirect contexts as well, as they ignore Frege’s exception clause. It is the *indiscriminate* application of this principle to indirect contexts—despite Frege’s explicit warning against doing so—that mistakenly leads to the hierarchy of independent senses.

There is nothing in the rule (β) itself, nor is there in Frege’s (IS) that requires the introduction of independent entities distinct from the ordinary senses, and (\*) counts strongly against introducing such entities. (When we discuss the other neglected passage, (\*\*), we will have further reason to reject the idea that Frege is committed to indirect sense as distinct from and additional to customary sense.) Thus, while Kripke may have shown that a hierarchy of senses need not cause often cited problems for Frege’s theory, his recursive generation of a harmless hierarchy still depends on the (mistaken) assumption that Frege holds that sense and reference are *always* distinct. I have maintained that this assumption is false based on my interpretation of Frege’s theory, which incorporates (\*); moreover, to the best of my (less than complete) knowledge of Frege’s writings, there is no textual evidence in favor of any such assumption. As already noted, neither Kripke nor Carnap cite any Fregean passage that supports any such *unrestricted* assumption and, importantly, as also noted above, it is incompatible with (\*).

3. *An objection to my interpretation*.

One might argue against my interpretation by holding that I pay no particular attention to the sign itself; instead concentrating on the relation between sense and reference, but the exception clause is focused on what the sign designates, or so it may be argued. [[6]](#endnote-6)

Here is how the argument night go: Normally the sense and the reference of a (non-indexical) expression is fixed, e.g., ‘snow’ in ‘Snow is white’ and ‘Snow is cold’.[[7]](#endnote-7) But an expression, e.g., ‘snow’ has a different reference in direct and indirect contexts, e.g. in ‘Snow is white’ and in ‘John believes that snow is white’. We can agree that this is true according to Frege; moreover, Frege certainly endorsed the principle that sense determines reference. Therefore, one might conclude that the exception clause pertains to the reference of expressions: in indirect contexts the reference of an expression is not determined by the sense the word expresses in direct contexts; the exception applies here. But since the sense of an expression determines its reference—exception does not apply here, according to this argument—there must be some additional sense that the word expresses in indirect contexts. In this way, this argument would accommodate the exception clause, as it is interpreted on this argument, while leaving the hierarchy intact. Does this vitiate my interpretation? I think not.

The question now is: To what exactly does the exception clause apply? To be clear, I understand Frege in discussing indirect contexts to be taking exception to the *customary* *three-part* relation of sign, sense, and reference *in its entirety*. In the customary mode, signs express senses and those senses determine the references of signs, respectively. In consequence of the latter, and in accord with the customary mode, different references for a sign imply different senses. But the customary mode of connection does not apply in indirect contests, as Frege warns; they are exceptions. On my interpretation, the exception does not simply apply to the relation between sense and reference in different contexts but to the customary three-part relation.

To elaborate, for Frege, senses in direct contexts are grasped. [[8]](#endnote-8) The sense of ‘snow’ is grasped in ‘Snow is white’, but what is to be said about the sense of the word ‘snow’ in the indirect context, ‘John believes that snow is white’? Does the word ‘snow’ express some new sense in that context (since the word does not have its customary reference)? No. Frege *explicitly tells us* both that such cases are exceptions to the customary mode of connection *and* that the word’s customary sense *is* its reference in that context. He neither says nor implies that this different reference for the same sign is determined by some additional sense. Rather, he simply states that in reported speech (indirect contexts) we wish to talk about the senses of someone’s words, not their customary references. [[9]](#endnote-9) Thus, senses which we already grasp do the work. There is no need for him to speak of a new sense for the word, as he explicitly tells us what the reference of the word would be in those contexts, viz., the sense which we already grasp.

Frege does *not* *say* that a sign in indirect contexts has a *different* sense, one which we should appeal to *in order* to determine what it designates when it occurs in indirect contexts (even though he does state that it has a different reference). Quite the contrary, *he tells us straight out* what the sign designates in indirect contexts—it designates its customary sense—a sense which we already grasp from direct context. The exception clause does not apply simply to the sign’s having a different sense, which would then require a new sense to determine it.

What work would there be for an additional, indirect sense to determine what a sign designates in indirect context? None. For an *additional, indirect sense* could only yield a reference for the expression that we *already know*. *Any presumed additional sense to determine the different reference of a word would be redundant and entirely superfluous*—Frege *explicitly* told us what the reference of the word is without appealing to some imagined additional sense*.* We know what the reference of a sign is in indirect context because we grasp its sense in direct contexts, and it is this sense that is the reference of the sign in indirect context. If an additional, indirect sense were introduced it would only yield what is already determined. It would be idle. Thus, indirect senses, as independent abstract entities, are not only troublesome—they are pointless. [[10]](#endnote-10)

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that there seems to be no reason to think that Frege held that the sense expressed by a word in an indirect context is anything but its customary sense. The exception clause applies to the entire three-part relation of sign, sense, and reference.

The lynch pin for the hierarchal view is the application of the principle that since sense determines reference, different references imply different senses, as it is in the objection considered in this section. This principle coupled with its indiscriminate application to discussions of indirect contexts is what leads to the hierarchy. I say ‘indiscriminate’ because it ignores the fact that Frege warned us that not heeding the *departure* from the customary mode of connection would block us from correctly understanding the connection between the three relata in the exceptional cases. The hierarchy is (mistakenly) generated by applying the customary mode of connection between sign sense, and reference to indirect contexts, rather than recognizing that these contexts are exceptions to the customary mode.

As earlier stated, though I am not a Fregean scholar, I know of no passage in Frege where he maintains that *whenever* there is a difference in reference of a word, there *must* also be a difference in sense. Moreover, my argument above further endorses my interpretation that Frege did *not* hold that different references implies different senses in *all* contexts.

1. *The other widely ignored passage*.

No one would dispute that Frege held that senses are real and objective, but it does not follow that he also thought that indirect senses are additional, similarly real, and objective entities, as many have maintained. To further substantiate this point, consider what Frege says in a passage, *also widely ignored*, but which immediately precedes the passage where he introduces indirect sense, (IS). [[11]](#endnote-11) Here it is:

(\*\*) In reported speech one talks about the sense, e.g., of another person’s remarks. It is quite clear that in this way of speaking words do not have their customary reference but designate what is usually their sense. *In order to have a short expression***,** we will say: … (1892/1952, 59, italics added. What replaces the ellipsis is (IS))

This widely ignored passage makes it explicit that the locutions ‘indirect sense’ and ‘indirect reference’ are *merely* terminological stipulations “in order to have a short expression” to indicate a disruption of the customary “mode of connexion of sign, sense, and reference”. A terminological stipulation is in itself an uncontroversial and an inconsequential adjustment. It is introduced to facilitate the discussion of the exceptional cases. (Though Frege may have unwittingly introduced immense confusion with this terminology.) Frege’s reason for introducing the locution ‘indirect sense’ neither implies nor suggests that he thinks that it signifies an independently existing entity.Indeed, it would seem to rule it out. [[12]](#endnote-12)

In marked contrast to introducing a terminological stipulation, the introduction of an additional new sense for an expression in indirect contexts would be a radical modification of his theory, one that would require significant development (e.g., as Church and Kaplan undertook). If Frege so intended he would have certainly realized this and, at the very least, would indicate that fact, if he himself did not undertake the development. But he did neither. [[13]](#endnote-13) This just adds to the reasons already offered as to why I think my interpretation of Frege as not committed to a hierarchy of senses is to be preferred.

To be clear, nothing I have said contravenes the importance of the distinction between direct and indirect sense and reference. We should/must grant that the customary and indirect sense/reference of an expression be *distinguished*, but this in no way requires that the so-called ‘indirect sense’ is a *distinct entity* from the customary sense, an *additional* sense. Sense and indirect sense must be distinguished simply because the sense of an expression *functions* differently in different linguistic contexts, and reference and indirect reference must be distinguished simply because a sign’s reference is different in different linguistic contexts, as Frege explains. That functional difference is noted by the terminological specification ‘indirect’, as is the difference in reference. Frege gives neither reason nor indicates any need for so-called indirect senses to be *additional distinct entities*. To distinguish is not to reify.

In direct contexts the sense of an expression is grasped and determines its customary reference. In indirect contexts, these being exceptions to the customary three-part relation between sign, sense, and reference, the customary sense of an expression is—by Frege’s stipulation—itself the reference of an expression. In such exceptional cases sense “determines” itself as the reference as the (indirect) reference of a sign, determines, not in the customary way, but by stipulation.

5. *Further objections to and worries about my interpretation*.

Another author who argues against the hierarchy is Lukas Skiba. (2015) Unlike me, however, he argues for what he calls a *two-level view*:

When an expression follows *n* indirect context creating operators it expresses its singly indirect sense and refers to its direct sense (for n ≥ 1). (2015, 50)

He argues that though Frege does not require an infinite hierarchy of senses, he is committed to indirect sense—in addition to sense. He contrasts this view with what he calls the *one-level view*:

When an expression follows *n* indirect context creating operators it expresses its direct sense and refers to the same direct sense. (for *n* ≥ 1). (2015, 50)

My argument has been that Frege is committed to sense, and not to indirect sense as an additional entity, thus, to a one-level view. Skiba argues that the two-level view is preferable to the one-level view. Among other reasons for his preference is that he thinks that the one-level view cannot provide a truth theory for a language. On this point he agrees with Burge. (1979)

There Burge argues that a Fregean one-level theory cannot accommodate an acceptable truth theory for a language with iterated indirect contexts. (1979, 13) Skiba thinks that Burge’s argument against the one-level view is effective. [[14]](#endnote-14) (2015, 51) While this would count against the adequacy of Frege’s theory interpreted as a one-level view, it has no bearing on my maintaining that Frege himself held a one-level theory. It would have bearing on how Frege’s theory as I am interpreting it would need to be *extended* or *modified* if one wanted it to accommodate a truth theory for a language. Since I am and have been concerned to simply argue that Frege himself did not endorse indirect sense as additional to sense, I will not address this controversy.

Skiba has separate and independent concerns regarding the one-level view, other than whether it is adequate for a theory of truth. I address some of the objections to and worries about the one-level view that Skiba raises.

Skiba maintains that the one-level view, “… eliminates singly indirect senses by giving up the principle that sense determines reference”. (2015, 50) Not so. The one-level view is *not* committed to *giving up* the principle that sense determines reference. (If it did it would eviscerate Frege’s theory.) Instead, we are explicitly told by Frege that indirect contexts are *exceptions* to the customary rule of the relation between sign, sense, and reference, and includes the principle in question. Allowing for an exception to a rule/principle is *not* to give it up. [[15]](#endnote-15) It is to deny that the principle applies in all contexts, which I argued above *is* Frege’s position.

Skiba also claims that Frege makes statements that are incompatible with the one-level view. Here is what he says:

After saying that ‘we distinguish accordingly the *customary* from the *indirect* reference of a word’ (1892, p.59) he immediately adds ‘and its *customary* sense from its *indirect* sense’ thus contradicting the one-level view. (2015, 50)

Here, Skiba is ignoring the passage that precedes the quote from Frege, viz., (\*\*). What Frege says is *in accord* with the terminological distinction he just introduced, the one where Frege stipulates that he wants to use a “short expression” to indicate that in reported speech we “talk about the sense” of another’s remarks. This together with the exception clause (\*) eliminates the appearance that this passage contradicts the one-level view. The introduction of the terms ‘indirect sense’ and ‘indirect reference’ is in accord with Frege’s recognizing exceptions to the customary three-part relation between sign, sense, and reference, and his terminological stipulation, introduction of a “short expression”, to speak of these exceptions. To be clear, we must still *distinguish* direct sense and reference from indirect sense and reference, respectively, as Frege says in the quoted passage. We must do this because of the *difference in function* of sense in such contexts and the resulting difference in reference of an expression, as argued earlier. Again, to distinguish is not to reify.

Apart from whether the one-level theory can accommodate a truth theory for a language, Skiba recognizes that the one-level view has a number of advantages. (2015, 62-63) Still, he thinks it has problems of its own. It would be instructive to see how by taking (\*) and (\*\*) into account the three worries for the one-level theory, which Skiba raises, are avoided. (In what follows, Skiba (2015, 52) follows “Parsons (1981) in calling the relation that holds between the sense of an expression and the expression’s reference *presentation*.”) He says:

First, it requires us to come to terms with the idea of a sense presenting itself. Starting from singly indirect contexts onwards ‘Plato’ both refers to and expresses its direct sense. This sense thus presents itself. (2015, 62)

Coming to terms with the idea of sense presenting itself is no problem for the one-level view on my interpretation of Frege. For it is clear that Frege maintains that in direct context we “grasp” senses. Grasping a sense of an expression in direct contexts in no way contravenes the grasping of it, the very same sense of an expression, when it occurs in indirect contexts, no matter the number of iterations. The difference of course is in what is the reference of the expression in the different contexts. In direct contexts the customary rule is operative, sense of a sign determines the sign’s reference, whereas in indirect contexts the exception clause is invoked, which yields a different reference for the same expression. So, yes, as explained earlier, the customary and indirect sense of an expression must be *distinguished*, but this *no way requires that they be distinct entities*. This is closely related to Skiba’s next worry.

The second worry that Skiba raises is the claim that “… it forces us to give up the principle that sense determines reference.” (2015, 62). As pointed out earlier, given Frege’s exception clause (\*), the principle is not given up; rather, it is recognized that indirect contexts are exceptions to the principle. To repeat, the recognition that there are exceptions to a principle is *not* to give up the principle.

I state what Skiba takes to be the third worry in full:

[The one-level view] … requires us to give up the principle that sense determines the logical type of an expression, at least if we disagree with Frege’s assimilation of sentences to referring expressions. In a direct context ‘Plato is wise’ is a sentence. But in indirect contexts it refers to a thought. Yet, according to the one-level view, it has the same sense in both cases. So the one-level view allows expressions with the same sense to belong to different logical categories. [a footnote points out that Burge (1979) makes the same point.] As with reference, the most that can be said is that the sense of an expression determines the expression’s logical type in tandem with its linguistic context. (2015, 62-63)

If Frege is interpreted as I propose, would he see this as a problem? I think not. Recall that *Frege* *invokes the exception clause based on linguistic context*, *not by logico-syntactic category*. So Frege would endorse what Skiba says is “the most that can be said is that the sense of an expression determines the expression’s logical type in tandem with its linguistic context”. Moreover, this result is in accord with a famous dictum of Frege’s, “Never ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a sentence.” If this be seen as a serious short-coming of Frege’s general theory (on which I am silent) so be it but, again, it has no bearing on whether I’m correct in construing Frege as neither committed to nor endorsing indirect sense as ontologically distinct and additional to sense, not even at the first level of indirect context. [[16]](#endnote-16)

6. *Some comparisons of my interpretation to others: Dummett and Parsons*.

Michael Dummett (1973), holds that indirect sense is not necessary once an emendation is made to Frege’s theory of sign, sense, and reference. Dummett’s proposal is to incorporate Frege’s dictum that “only a particular occurrence of a word or expression in a sentence has a reference, and this reference is determined jointly by the sense of the word and the kind of context in which it occurs.” (1973, 268) This, of course, is a related variant of Frege’s famous claim that it is only in the context of a sentence that a word has meaning.

Dummett argues that the hierarchy and its associated difficulties arise, “… from the principle that the reference of an expression must be determined by its sense alone. (1973, 267) He continues, the principle appears correct,

… because we have been ‘asking after …[a word’s] reference in isolation’ from the contexts of the sentence in which it occurs, which Frege expressly forbids According to Frege, a word does not have reference *on its own*, ‘considered in isolation’: it has reference only in the context of a sentence. (1973, 268)

Dummett concludes:

With this emendation, there is no such thing as the indirect sense of a word: there is just sense, which determines it to have in transparent contexts a reference distinct from this sense, and in opaque contexts a referent which coincides with its sense. (ibid.)

My disagreement with Dummett is simply that the content of his proposed emendation already occurs in Frege’s theory; it is not an emendation. That Dummett thinks such an emendation is required to eliminate the idea that indirect sense is something different from sense results, I believe, from his neglect of the passage (\*). That exception clause makes it clear that reference of an expression depends on the context in which it occurs, direct or indirect, and shows the proffered emendation to be unnecessary.

Thus, while I agree with Dummett’s conclusion that indirect sense as an additional entity is not required, I come to it via a different route, by appealing to Frege’s exception clause, (\*). Dummett comes to it by appealing to Frege’s dictum that it is only in the context of a sentence that an expression has a reference and what Frege says in (IS). My route suggests that no emendation to Frege’s theory is required, as it is already implied when Frege introduced ‘indirect sense’, as a “short expression”, (\*\*), to signal that the exception clause, (\*), is in play. The important point, however, is that we have two independent arguments that deny that Frege’s theory needs indirect sense as an independent entity.

Parsons (1981) argues that a literal reading of “On Sense and Reference” does not commit Frege to a hierarchy of senses. But he maintains that it only commits him to a two-level theory: sense and indirect sense. In an Appendix he gives a detailed syntax and semantics for a formal system that expresses indirect contexts. Without discussing the details, some of the conclusions he draws from this regarding a two-level theory is of particular pertinence to what I have argued is Frege’s view, viz., a one-level view. One conclusion that Parsons draws comes close to the one-level view is as follows:

Indirect senses are *almost* just customary senses in disguise. They have to be literally different from customary senses because they have to present different references—but aside from this there is no difference in how they work in the theory. (Parsons 1981, 43)

I disagree with Parsons’s claim that indirect senses have to be “literally different from customary senses because they have to present different references”. While I hold that customary and indirect sense must be *distinguished*, this is not because they are literally different, and not simply because they present different references, which they do. Rather, it is because, as we are explicitly told by Frege, that senses *function* differently in the different contexts, with the specified result that they present different references. Indirect contexts are exceptional cases, (\*); the locution ‘indirect sense’ is itself merely a terminological stipulation, as (\*\*) informs us. (Compare my earlier discussion as to why customary and indirect sense must be distinguished without implying that they are distinct entities.)

Parsons draws another surprising conclusion, one which further strengthens my position that there is no need for indirect sense as an additional entity on Frege’s theory. Again, without getting into the intricate details, consider what Parsons says:

We can convert F2 [the two-level theory] into a quasi-Fregean theory with only one level of sense, F1, by making the following alterations [I retain Parsons’s numbering]:

(13) a word *always* expresses its customary sense,

(14) a word in indirect context refers to its customary sense; otherwise

it refers to the entity that its customary sense presents.

F1 is the theory that Dummett says Frege *should* have given. (Parsons 1981, 43)

I have already explained why I maintain that the theory that Dummett thinks Frege should have given is the one Frege gave, but I also disagree with Parsons’s claim that the alterations he proposes, (13) and (14), result in a “quasi-Fregean theory”. It *is* the Fregean theory.

Here’s why. Parsons, like so many others in discussing Frege, including Dummett, neglect the exception clause, (\*), and although (\*\*) is often included when (IS) is quoted, it is not given the attention it deserves. Once (\*) and (\*\*) are properly considered, Parsons’s (13) and (14) are direct consequences of Frege’ theory. For, (a) once it is recognized that the locution *indirect sense* is just Frege’s “short expression”, (\*\*), to indicate how *customary sense* functions differently in indirect contexts, (\*), an exception, item (13) follows directly, and (b) the “alteration” (14) follows directly from (IS) and what Frege explicitly told us regarding the exception of indirect contexts, (\*).

7. *No hierarchy—No unlearnability of the hierarchy*.

The interpretation of Frege that I have offered provides yet another advantage for his theory. It shuts down Davidson’s “unlearnability argument” (1968). The idea of Davidson’s argument is that to understand expressions in indirect contexts, one would need to learn not only customary senses, but additionally, one would have to learn the supposed infinite hierarchy of independent indirect senses, if one were to understand indirect speech. This would be true if each iteration of an indirect context necessitated an additional sense, as advocates of the hierarchy insist. Each would have to be separately learned, an impossible task.

Thinking that Frege’s use of the locution ‘indirect sense’ signified additional, independent entities from the ordinary senses leads to the bizarre view that the self-same linguistic expression would have different meanings in direct and indirect discourse. This is what drives Davidson’s “unlearnability argument”. For an expression would not only have its customary sense but—additionally—a different, independent, indirect sense, and it would seem correct to say that one and the same linguistic expression would have two meanings and more, as it occurs in direct, indirect, or multiply indirect contexts, if we identify sense with meaning. [[17]](#endnote-17) According to Davidson, this would be a violation of our “semantic innocence”, (1968, 214) which (for him) is to say that we would never have contemplated this possibility without what he sees as the corrupting influence of Frege’s theory.

If my interpretation of Frege’s view of indirect sense is correct, we see this argument to be a non-starter. [[18]](#endnote-18) A linguistic expression does not have multiple meanings (senses) according to whether it occurs in direct or indirect context. The expression at issue would express exactly one meaning or sense. What changes for an expression in going from direct to indirect context is not its meaning or sense but its referent, and this in consequence of its functioning differently in those contexts. Any supposed ambiguity, if any, is one of reference, not meaning or sense. The same sense may determine the customary reference of a sign in direct context, but in indirect context the reference of a sign is simply the sense the sign expresses. This is harmless because the fact that a different referent is in play is triggered by the indirect context. Linguistic expressions are not multiply ambiguous in meaning or sense depending on whether the context is direct or indirect, nor does Frege’s theory commit one to this. A linguistic expression expresses one and only one sense (ignoring ordinary ambiguous terms, e.g., ‘bank’). [[19]](#endnote-19) Of course, one must learn to identify indirect contexts, but this is an unproblematic and learnable task. [[20]](#endnote-20)

To understand indirect discourse, one must realize that it is the sense that is talked about rather than the customary referent determined by the sense.As Frege says, “If words are used in their ordinary way, what one intends to speak of is their reference. It can also happen, however, that one wishes to talk about … their senses [indirect contexts].” (Frege, 1892/1952, 58) So what the words are about may be either their reference or their sense for Frege, depending on the context.

The identification of theindirect context itself is what serves to indicate the deviation from the customary relation between sign, sense, and reference to that of the embedded linguistic expression having as its referent the sense it expresses— not its customary reference. Moreover, this shift in reference is in accord with our “semantic innocence”. For in reporting, say, someone’s belief, I am not reporting how things are with the world (apart from the person whose, say, belief I am reporting), I am reporting the sense of what a person believes, just as Frege says. No loss of semantic innocence.

*8. Concluding remarks.*

The interpretation I have offered is in accord with the widely ignored exception clause, (\*), and Frege wanting a “short expression”, (\*\*), to express the exceptional cases. This interpretation has the additional merits that it avoids the hierarchy altogether and its associated problems, while undermining the “unlearnability of language” objection. It also has the distinct advantage of explaining why such an acute and thorough thinker as Frege: (1) Never commented on just what these supposed indirect senses are, and (2) Why he did not consider in any detail the special problems the alleged iterated independent indirect senses would raise. The resolution to both of these issues is that Frege simply did not hold that there were independently existing indirect senses.

I do not claim that the usual move to an independent hierarchy of indirect senses is conclusively ruled out by what I have argued but, at the very least, it does raise a challenge to those who would maintain that Frege is so committed to produce a passage that shows he maintains or assumes that sense is *always* distinct from its reference—regardless of context. Absent such textual evidence, together with the incompatibility of such an alleged assumption with Frege’s exception clause, it is hard to see why we should think that Frege was committed to the existence of any sense other than customary sense.[[21]](#endnote-21)

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**NOTES**

1. For further examples where Frege characterizes indirect contexts as ‘exceptions’ see Frege (1892/1952, 65, 67). Variants on this occur in a letter to Russell, 28.12.1902 (Beaney 1997, 256), where he says indirect contexts require “special consideration”; Frege puts this aside because in this letter he is addressing the famous contradiction that Russell uncovered. In another letter to Russell, 13.11.1904, (Beaney, 1997, 292) he says, “indirect speech must here be disregarded; for we have seen that, in it, the thought is designated, not expressed”. Frege excludes indirect speech from consideration in these passages because what is under discussion is the *regular* mode of connection (see Frege 1892/1952, 58 for his use of ‘regular mode of connection’) between sign, sense, and reference and, therefore, what is said there does not apply to the exceptions. (Of course, quotation is another exceptional case for Frege, but I do not discuss that here.) Thanks to Terence Parsons for directing me to these letters. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Kripke (2008, 183). I have recast the argument slightly by numbering and slight rewording. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Of course, Frege is aware that indirect contexts can be iterated, and he is not completely silent about this. For example, in a letter to Russell of 28.12.1902, he speaks of indirect reference of the first- and second-degree, and he certainly could envision higher degrees; he also acknowledges that this “greatly complicates the matter”. (Gabriel, et.al 1980, 154) However, the complication is in the syntax and would apply to a formal language, not to a natural language. As already stated, Frege is here addressing the famous contradiction that Russell derived and trying to show how it may be avoided. I must leave it to others to find whether there is anything else in these letters that would commit him to indirect sense as an additional entity that determines the in reference, as I find nothing that supports it. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Kripke, we will see, is also guilty of ignoring (\*). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Kripke goes to great lengths to argue that Frege has a doctrine of acquaintance, one similar to Russell’s. I am not sure that he has established that it is similar to Russell’s, since to my mind any particular doctrine of acquaintance is constitutively defined in part by the kind of entity, property, or whatever, that is supposed to stand in the relation of acquaintance to the thinker, and these are in general different for Russell and Frege. But Russell aside, Kripke’s argument for a doctrine of acquaintance in Frege (Kripke 2008, 199-207, and 214-216) seems needlessly complicated to establish this particular point, as it is uncontroversial that Frege thought that we “grasped” senses, that we non-inferentially know them, which is to say that we can be directly acquainted with them. In fairness to Kripke, however, he is concerned to make a number of other complicated points in this discussion regarding indexicals, various authors’ interpretations of Frege regarding these, and their relation to acquaintance. Still, with those other issues aside, it is a rather straightforward point that Frege subscribed to some doctrine of acquaintance, particularly, we are directly acquainted with abstract senses in direct contexts, we grasp them. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. An earlier draft may have given the (mis)impression to an anonymous referee that what I have argued above may appear to be concentrating on the relation between sense and reference to the neglect of the sign; this was not my intent. I have tried to rectify that in this version, but lest it may still appear so, I explicitly address this concern here. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Parsons argues that even this might not be true, for the sense of a given expression may vary from occasion to occasion. (1981, 51-52) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. What Kripke referred to as ‘acquaintance-sense’. (2008, 199) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. (1892/1952, 59) I will have more to say about this passage of Frege’s later. See (\*\*) below. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. The contrary supposition has led to sophisticated logical systems designed to accommodate the supposed hierarchy of independent senses, see Church (1951) and Kaplan (1964) for outstanding examples of this. These systems may be valuable and of intrinsic interest; they may well be required if Frege’s theory is to be extended to accommodate a theory of truth. See below my discussion of Skiba (2015) on this latter point. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Though this passage is often included when (IS) is quoted, when it is, the subsequent discussion ignores it. See, e.g., Parsons (1981, 40). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. It is hard to know just why Frege chose the locution ‘indirect sense’ for this task, as it has led to a widespread mistake, if I am right. Rick Gallimore has made a very simple and plausible suggestion: Since sense operates differently in *indirect* contexts, call it ‘indirect sense’. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. But see n. 3 where in a 1902 letter to Russell, Frege recognizes that iterated direct contexts introduce complications. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Skiba denies it is effective against the 2-level theory. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Moreover, one might argue that the principle is (in a sense) maintained but applied differently, for as pointed out earlier, the sense of an expression in indirect context “determines” itself as its refence. Scare quotes being used to indicate that this not the customary way the sense of an expression determines its reference. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. I add that the worry itself is based on a disagreement with Frege as to whether sentences are referring expression. For that reason alone, this worry cannot be used against an interpretation of Frege himself. Clearly though, it would be relevant to a different question with which Skiba is concerned, viz., how one might best modify or extend Frege’s theory. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Tyler Burge (2004) argues that it is a mistake to identify sense with meaning, though this view is not widely shared. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Kripke’s account allows for a recursively generated hierarchy, but it would also disarm Davidson’s objection, though differently from me. Key to Kripke’s success in doing this is that the sense of an expression is grasped in direct contexts, what Kripke calls. “acquaintance-sense”, and the resulting hierarchy is recursively generated. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Of course, the case of ordinary language expressions that are ambiguous is another matter, one which involves somewhat different issues than those being discussed here; moreover, the issues concerning ordinary ambiguous expressions and their senses are easily resolvable within Frege’s theory, however. For it is within the context of the sentence in which it appears that determines which sense and, hence, which reference, that is at issue. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Compare Kripke’s rule (β), discussed earlier, for which the same is true. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. I am grateful to Terence Parsons for directing me to some of the relevant Frege-Russell correspondence and discussion when I presented an abbreviated version of this paper at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association, some years back. I also thank Junyeol Kim for some interesting correspondence and discussion of the abbreviated version. Many thanks to an anonymous referee who raised several interesting issues; addressing these has made this paper better and more convincing (as well as longer) than it otherwise would have been. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)