

Frege's Context Principle

Aaron Barth

The University of Western Ontario

My talk explores the role of linguistic analysis in Frege's philosophy. Specifically, I focus on the role of Frege's celebrated "context principle" in his philosophy of mathematics. The context principle states that a word has meaning only in the context of a sentence. Frege's reason for denying words meaning independently of their occurrence in sentences is that, for him, sentences are uncontroversial and canonical examples of linguistic expressions which express truths; the association of individual words with truth rests on their contribution to the truth value of sentences by the provision of a semantic value. This association of sentences with the concept of truth forms the basis of a philosophical methodology for Frege. In the first part of my talk I show how, in *Foundations of Arithmetic* (1884), this methodology enables Frege to systematically address fundamental questions about our knowledge of arithmetic. If a word has meaning only in the context of a sentence, a definition of number can be achieved by considering the contribution that numerical singular terms make to the truth of the sentences in which they occur. In the second part of my talk I defend the claim that this same assumption plays a key heuristic role in Frege's contributions to logic in his *Begriffsschrift* (1879). I show that Frege's key innovation, namely, his extension of function-argument notation to an analysis of logical form, is facilitated precisely by restricting one's attention to the semantic function of names as they occur within sentences.