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Vacuous quantification and free variables: historical and speculative reflections on LF

Frege provided fundamental insights into the design of logical reasoning, and so too into the design of natural language insofar as the latter realises or supports the former. For many theorists in both philosophy and linguistics the insight goes as deep as natural language realising structures akin to logical formulae with bound and free variables. Variables certainly appear to be an essential bit of kit for theorising about natural language, being generally appealed to in generative syntactic theory, semantic theory, and much of philosophy of language. My aim is to show, from quite conservative assumptions (without accepting CGG), that natural language syntax does not contain variables. Frege's insights are real but the linguistic mechanisms that realise the kind of logical structures that require variables are to be understood without variables.