PHIL 470: *Seminar: Metaphysics & Epistemology*
Truth and Reality

Handout (9)

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Donald Davidson: Truth and Meaning

§ Main Goals:
1. **To construct a theory of *meaning* (a semantics) as Tarski does with a theory of *truth*.**
2. **To argue that the meaning of a sentence is nothing but its *truth conditions*.**
3. **To argue that a characterization of a truth predicate describes the required kind of structure, and provides a clear and testable criterion of an adequate semantics for a natural language.**

I. Davidson's Criticism of Frege's Theory

Frege: The principle of composition:
___ The meaning of a sentence is derived from the meanings of its parts.

e.g. "Theaetetus flies."
___ We might assign Theaetetus to "Theaetetus" and the property of flying to "flies" in the sentence.... The problem then arises how the meaning of the sentence is generated from these meanings.

e.g. "the father of Annette"
___ It is obvious that no entity corresponding to "the father of" is, or needs to be, mentioned in stating this theory.

∴ **It is now evident that a satisfactory theory of the meanings of complex expressions may not require entities as meanings of all the parts.**

II. Davidson's Proposal: the Holistic View

1. **Parts of sentences have meanings only in the ontologically neutral sense of making a systematic contribution to the meaning of the sentences in which they occur.**
2. **If sentences depend for their meaning on their structure, and we understand the meaning of each item in the structure only as an abstraction from the totality of sentences in which it features, then we can give the meaning of any**

sentence (or word) only by given the meaning of every sentence (and word) in the language.

Note:

Holism:
___ the principle that a part is understandable only in its relation to the whole. In other words, no part can have a "locally defined" meaning.

Take the sign "$" for example, we cannot understand what it means unless we place it in the system of English and see that it is used as the dollar sign. "$" has a meaning because it is incorporated into a language which defines its meaning. Standing by itself, it is nothing but a random drawing.

This is the nature of any "sign," which can "signify" or "represent" anything only in accordance with its assigned role in a system of signs. In other words, the meaning of a sign is fixed in relation to its position in a whole system of signs.

By Fodor's definition, "Holistic properties are properties such that, if anything has them, then *lots* of other things must have them too."[1] In *modus tollens*, what it says is this: If it is not the case that many other things have this property, then the particular thing at issue cannot have that property either.

I shall summarize the two holistic claims as such:
(A) x is an x only if there are other things that constitute a system along with x.
(B) The meaning of x is determined by x's contribution to the whole system.
Furthermore, I shall call (A) *the ontological claim* and (B) *the epistemic claim*.

Now if one treats sentences, words, or even smaller linguistic units as "signs" with the holistic view, one is endorsing a form of holism that Putnam calls "meaning holism.":

[Meaning Holism]:
___ "Individual sentences are meaningful in the sense of making a systematic contribution to the functioning of the whole language; they don't have 'meaning,' in the form of isolable objects, properties, or processes, which are associated with them individually and which determine individual assertibility conditions."
___ That is to say, individual sentences or words cannot have any meaning unless they are parts of a system of language; furthermore, their meanings are determined by their contributions (or we may say, their assigned functions) to the whole language system.

Davidson is a holist.

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[1]Fodor, Jerry & Lepore, Ernest, *Holism; A Shopper's Guide*, p.2.

III. Davidson's Theory of Semantics

A theory of meaning is an empirical theory, and its ambition is to account for the workings of a natural language.

* The criteria for a successful semantics:
___ 1. An adequate theory of meaning must entail *all* sentences of the form **"s means m".**
___ 2. The theory will have done its work if it provides, for every sentence s in the language under study, a matching sentence (to replace 'p') that,... gives the meaning of s.
___ 3. The theory must have a finite stock of atomic elements and well as rules of combination.

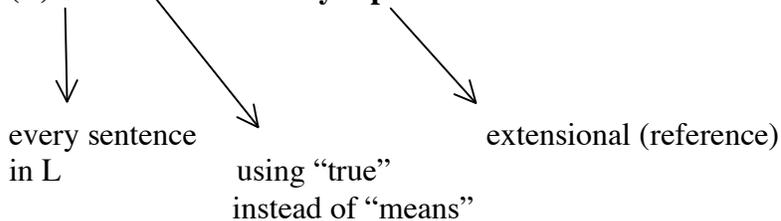*Q*: **How do we fill out _____ in "*S* (a sentence) means _____"?**

Difficulty:
___ how to analyze the logic of the nonextensional "means that"...

Davidson: The only way I know to deal with this difficulty is simple, and radical.

* [Convention T]

(T) *S* is True if and only if p.

every sentence
in L   using "true"
                              instead of "means"
                                                    extensional (reference)

IV. Davidson & Tarski:

the condition Davidson placed on satisfactory theories of meaning
= Tarski's Convention T that tests the adequacy of a formal semantical definition of truth

___   A theory of meaning for a language L shows "how the meanings of sentences depend upon the meanings of words" if it contains a (recursive) definition of truth-in-L.

Davidson: "Convention T invites us to use whatever devices we can to contrive appropriately to bridge the gap between sentence mentioned and sentence used."

* the connection between meaning and truth:
___ 1. the definition of truth works by giving necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of every sentence, and to give truth conditions is a way of giving the meaning of a sentence.
___ 2. To know the semantic concept of truth for a language is to know what it is for a sentence -- any sentence -- to be true, and this amounts, in one good sense we can give to the phrase, to understanding the language.

* Davidson's explanation:

1. What I call a theory of meaning has after all turned out to make no use of meanings, whether of sentences or of words. Indeed since a Tarski-type truth definition supplies all we have asked so far of a theory of meaning, it is clear that such a theory falls comfortably within what Quine terms the "theory of reference" as distinguished from what he terms the "theory of meaning."

2. The theory reveals nothing new about the conditions under which an individual sentence is true; it does not make those conditions any clearer than the sentence itself does. The work of the theory is in relating the known truth conditions of each sentence to those aspects ('words') of the sentence that recur in other sentences, and can be assigned identical roles in other sentences.

3. **when the object language = the metalanguage:**
   ___ The framer of a theory will as a matter of course avail himself when he can of the build-in convenience of a metalanguage with a sentence guaranteed equivalent to each sentence in the object language.

My (JeeLoo's) interpretation:
___ T-sentences are sentences of the following form: (T) 's' is true if and only if p, where s is a structural description of a sentence in a given language, call it object language; while p is just the sentence "restated" or "translated" in the language that is used to analyzed OL, call it the metalanguage.
___ What Davidson wants to establish here is not a relation between two sentences, for **p is not regarded as a sentence, it is used to describe a certain state of affairs.** So what T-sentences actually do is to state the truth conditions of one sentence, namely s, and the truth value is p is not at issue.
___ T-sentences are in themselves wholly uninformative because they do presuppose that we underhand the meaning of the left hand side of the T-sentence in virtue of first understanding the meaning of the right hand side.

___ So, T-sentences are uninformative whenever the metalanguage contains the object language. But the triviality of the generating theory doesn't follow from the triviality of T-sentences.

Q: Why can't the right-hand side be *any* true sentence (namely, why can't we just pair truth with truth and falsehood with falsehood)?

* the problem with (S)

(S) "Snow is white" is true if and only if grass is green.

(S) may not encourage the same confidence that a theory that entails it deserves to be called a theory of meaning.

(S) is acceptable, because we are independently sure of the true of "snow is while" and "grass is green"; but in cases where we are unsure of the truth of a sentence, we can have confidence in a characterization of the truth predicate only if it pairs that sentence with one we have good reason to believe equivalent.

V. Davidson's proposed project

1. **It is possible to form a formal semantical theory for natural languages.**
2. **The task of the theory of meaning is not to change, improve or reform a language, but to describe and understand it.**

The aim of theory will be an infinite correlation of sentences alike in truth.... What [the theory-builder] must do is to find out ... what sentences the alien holds true in his own tongue. The linguist then will attempt to construct a characterization of truth-for-the-alien which yields, so far as possible, a mapping of sentences held true (or false) by the alien onto sentences held true (or false) by the linguist.

We do not know what someone means unless we know what he believes; we do not know that someone believes unless we know what he means.   In radical translation we are able to break into this circle, if only incompletely, because we can sometimes tell that a person accedes to a sentence we do not understand.

We have recognized that a theory of the kind proposed leaves the whole matter of what individual words mean exactly where it was. Even when the metalanguage is different from the object language, the theory exerts no pressure for improvement, clarification or analysis of individual words, except when, by accident of vocabulary, straightforward translation fails. Just as synonymy, as between expressions, goes generally untreated, so also synonymy of sentences, and analyticity.

* demonstratives
___ The theory of meaning undergoes a systematic but no puzzling change: corresponding to each expression with a demonstrative element there must in the theory be a phrase that relates the truth conditions of sentences in which the expression occurs to changing times and speakers.

Examples:
"I am tired" is true (potentially) spoken by p at t if and only if p is tired at t.
"That book was stolen" is true as (potentially) spoken by p at t if and only if the book demonstrated by p at t is stolen prior to t.

The fact that demonstratives are amenable to formal treatment ought greatly to improve hopes for a serious semantics of natural language.

§ Conclusion

In this paper I have assumed that the speakers of a language can effectively determine the meaning or meanings of an arbitrary expression (if it has a meaning), and that it is the central task of a theory of meaning to show how this is possible. I have argued that a characterization of a truth predicate describes the required kind of structure, and provides a clear and testable criterion of an adequate semantics for a natural language. No doubt there are other reasonable demands that may be put on a theory of meaning. But a theory that does no more than define truth for a language comes far closer to constituting a complete theory of meaning than superficial analysis might suggest.

Remaining problems:
___ counterfactual ; subjunctive; sentences about probabilities and causal relations
___ we have no theory for mass terms like "fire," "water"
___ we have no good idea what the logical role of adverb is, nor the role of attributive adjectives
___ we have no theory for sentences about beliefs, perceptions and intention
___ sentences without truth values such as imperative, optatives, interrogatives, and a host more...