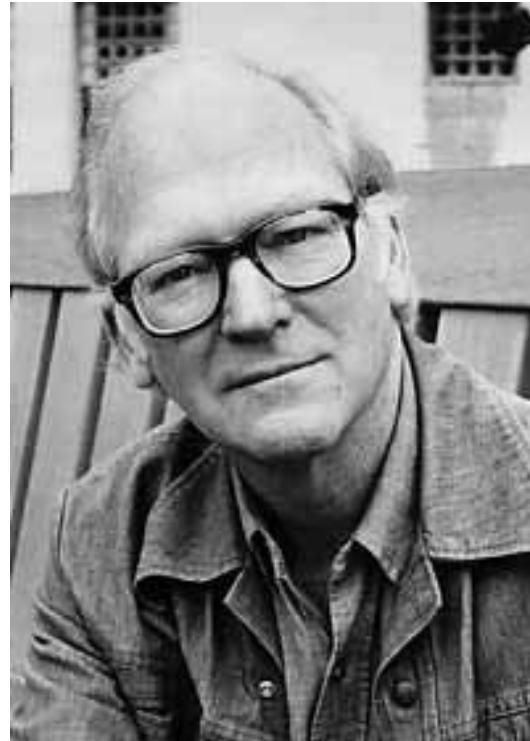


Donald Davidson:
Truth and Meaning



By Danny Lustberg

Compositional Semantics: A Refresher

- Compositionality
 - the meaning of a complex expression (sentence) is determined by meaning of constituent parts (words) & the rules used to combine them (syntax)
- Frege
 - Compositional Meaning Theory (CMT)
 - Intensionalist → atomic terms (words) have meaning, and there are rules for combining them in order to make meaningful sentences
 - With a dictionary and all the rules of a language, we could understand the meanings of all sentences in the language
 - But, these meanings for words exist in a 3rd realm (spooky!)



Compositional Truth Theory

- Donaldson is not a fan of intensionalist view of language; he thinks it is vacuous, and that “meanings” as Frege understands them are useless
- Believes a compositional truth theory (CTT) can do everything a CMT should, with less problems
 - “[CTT is] a *theory of meaning...and its ambition is to account for the workings of natural language.*” (95)
- Extensionalist stance, based on Tarski’s semantic conception of truth
 - “*...obvious connection between a definition of truth of the kind Tarski has shown how to construct, and the concept of meaning*” (95)



Tarski's Truth, and Its Conditions

- Truth = a property of sentences, T-schema
 - X is T iff p [where x = name given in meta-language for a sentence written in object language, and p = the truth conditions for that sentence]
 - “[Tarski’s] definition works by giving the necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of every sentence, and to give truth conditions is a way of giving meaning to a sentence” (95)
 - S is T iff p [where S = a sentence written in the object language, and p = the truth conditions for S in meta-language]
- Truth conditions
 - Circumstances under which a sentence S is correctly applied
 - Correspondence of language to facts, extension

An Example: “Snow is White”

- “‘Snow is white’ is T iff **snow is white**” (96)
 - Not very interesting, but difficult to deny
 - Underlined part is object language, bolded part is meta-language
- ‘Snow is white’ is T iff **the crystallized water molecules that accumulate on the ground during the winter months reflect light that stimulates all three types of cone cells in the human eye.**
 - Slightly more interesting, truth conditions are given more specifically
 - Meta-language is required to recognize truth, or to “pass semantic judgment” as Sam put it
- So...
 - If ‘snow is white’ is T iff **snow is white**, then the meaning of ‘snow is white’ is that **snow is white**



“Truth-for-the-alien”



- Radical translation
 - *“infinite correlation of sentences alike in truth”* (97)
- Map one language over another to determine what sentences in the alien language are true given meta-language truth conditions → will be able to understand the meaning of alien sentence in our own language, because they will be true in our language as well
- Davidson’s outlook on translation is based on a kind of semantic holism (Quinean)
 - Sentences only have meaning in the context of a language
 - *“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...to understanding the language”* (95)

Addressing the Question of Demonstratives

- “I am tired” (104)
 - Only true of a certain person, at a certain time
- So, Truth can be understood for demonstrative sentences as a relationship between sentences, times, and utterers
- ‘I am tired’ as spoken by person p at time t is T iff **p is tired at t**
 - Problem solved!



Belief Sentences

- Presented a problem for semantic concept of meaning ('believe that')
- "I believe that the Earth is flat."
- Davidson says this is not such a big deal for his CTT
 - The truth conditions for a belief sentence are just as real as those for "snow is white"
 - The mystery is placed on the translation of the word "believe" into **believe** in the meta-language
 - Not a problem for the truth of the sentence, leaves mystery in the implications of moral/evaluative statements
- "I believe that the Earth is flat" is *T* iff **I believe that the Earth is flat**



Anomalies

- Sentences without truth values at all
 - Imperatives: “Feel better.”
 - Interrogatives: “Are you feeling any better?”
- The role of adverbs
 - The truth conditions for “the snow is white” are no different than those for “the snow is extremely white”
- The role of attributive adjectives
 - “It is a beautiful house” is T iff **it is a beautiful house**
 - What is beautiful? Can this be judged true or false?
 - Problem of subjectivity of perception



Questions for Discussion

- Do you think that truth is equivalent to meaning?
- Is relating sentences to facts any different than relating words to objects?
- Is Tarski's definition of truth satisfactory? Does Davidson's use of it for his purpose of designing a CTT seem justified?
- Does the problem of adjectives and adverbs shoot a hole in Davidson's theory? Are there meanings of words?