

TRUTH AND MEANING: A CONTEXTUALIZATION OF TRUTH CONDITIONS

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ABSTRACT: *The relationship between truth and meaning has been for long one of the main subjects for investigation in philosophy of language and in philosophical logic. Two competing traditions have dominated philosophical explorations on the subject. On the one hand, there is a deflationist thesis which accesses the truth of truth-bearers (sentences and propositions) on the basis of an antecedent grasp of meaning; on the other hand, there is a Davidsonian or truth conditional thesis which seeks to explicate truth through meaning and defends that any theory of truth conditions is a theory of meaning. Both approaches, however, refer to Tarski's theory of truth in a radically different ways and conclude with two antithetical but non-contradictory positions. The aim of this paper is to analyze these two approaches to the relationship between truth and meaning in order to investigate and to contextualize their incompatibilities and see whether there is any approach between the two competing thesis which offers a better understanding of the relationship between truth and meaning.*

KEYWORDS: *Truth, meaning, deflationism, truth conditionals*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The analysis of the relationship between truth and meaning is the central goal of this paper. Two traditions will mainly be considered. The deflationist thesis and Davidsonian or truth conditional thesis. The analysis will structurally have three parts. The first part explores some theories of truth in the current literature especially Tarski's theory and correspondence theory in an effort to trace a contextual understanding of how truth-bearers such as sentences and propositions are generally accessed for truth in those theories. The second part of the paper moves to the relationship between truth and meaning to scrutinize the deflationist approach to relating truth and meaning (meaning then truth) and the Davidsonian approach (truth then meaning) and then try to contextualize their mutual criticism. A particular emphasis will be made in analyzing the incompatibility between deflationism and truth conditional or Davidsonian thesis in order to judge whether there is any approach which offers a better account of relationship between truth and meaning. The third part will provide my conclusion to the analysis that though both the deflationist and Davidsonian theses refer to Tarski's theory of truth in their account of the relationship between truth and meaning, this does not prevent their antithetical conclusions. But a close scrutiny of the two theses reveals that that truth conditional or Davidsonian account is weak and seems to collapse into deflationism even though this does not invalidate its conclusion. I conclusively support that the deflationist account offers a stronger understanding of the relationship between truth and meaning than Davidson's own account.

2. METHODOLOGY

The paper uses analytical contextualization method in order to investigate what would be regarded as an appropriate interpretation of the relationship between truth and meaning. Emphasis is put on the philosophical literature in the theoretical approach of deflationists and proponents of Davidson to investigate and contextualize mutual criticisms of the two theoretical approaches to the relation between truth and meaning.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

One of the most important philosophical themes in literature on truth is its connection with meaning, or more generally the connection between truth and language. For instance, whenever a speaker makes a statement, he is saying something about the world. Linguistic meaning is best captured on the basis of the relation between language and the world. In this regard, the truth-conditional picture assumes a

language-world relation. A statement, a sentence or a proposition can be said to bear the truth only when related to facts in the world. Therefore, truth as a concept plays a key role in the world, and truth or falsehood can be deduced only in relation to facts in the world(s) which support the statement, proposition or sentence.

Throughout history, the connection between truth and meaning was explored on the ground of what the primary bearers of truth are. According to competing theories of truth, truth-bearers include beliefs, propositions, sentences and utterances. All these bearers of truth rely upon the idea that they represent the world. The evaluation of theories of truth and possible judgments whether a given theory is viable or not often depend on what the bearers of truth are. For instance, according to the correspondence theory of truth, what we believe or say is true if it corresponds to the way things actually are. Suppose that we have a statement that “snow is white”. The statement is true only when facts in the world testified that snow is indeed white. In other words, “snow is white” is true if and only if snow is white (Corinne, 2005).

Modern correspondence theories of truth draw on ideas developed by Tarski. In his seminal works on truth (1935), Tarski developed ideas on truth which largely contributed in different domain of logic, especially mathematical logic. In the middle of competing views among different philosophers such as Russell and Moore on the subject of truth-bearers (in the 20th century), Tarski supported that sentences are in his own approach truth-bearers. It may be useful, however, to note that in Tarski’s understanding, sentences do not change their content across occasions of use. In his own approach, sentences display no context-dependence, but are taken in similar way to Quine (1960) as “eternal sentences” (Glanzberg online, 2006).

According to Tarski’s theory, when we have a language L whose sentences are fully interpreted, the adequacy of a given theory of truth for L would be embodied in what he calls the convention T (Tarski, 1944, 417). According to Tarski’s convention T , an adequate theory of truth for L must imply, for each sentence ϕ of L , $[\phi]$ is true if and only if ϕ (this is a simplified representation of Tarski’s condition of adequacy for theories of truth, and not a theory itself). Owing to the assumption that L is fully interpreted, we may assume that each sentence ϕ in fact has a true value. In this perspective, the role of Convention T is to guarantee that the truth predicate given in the theory will be correct in its extension. For instance truth predicate will have as its extension all and only the true sentences of L (Ibid).

In addition, Tarski does not only propose a condition of adequacy for theories of truth; he also shows how to meet such a condition. One of his approach is that if the language L displays the right structure, the truth of L can be defined in a recursive way. For example, suppose that L is a simple formal language which contains two atomic sentences “snow is white” and “grass is green”, and two sentential connectives \vee and \neg . Despite its simplicity, L contains an infinite number of distinct sentences. But, in Tarski’s own approach, truth can be defined for all of them by recursion.

- a) Base clauses:
 1. ‘Snow is white’ is true if and only if snow is white.
 2. ‘Grass is green’ is true if and only if grass is green.
 - b) Recursion clauses: for any sentences ϕ and ψ of L ,
 1. $[\phi \vee \psi]$ is true if and only if $[\phi]$ is true $[\psi]$ is true.
 2. $[\neg \phi]$ is true if and only if it is not the case that $[\phi]$ is true (Glanzberg online, 2006).
- The theory above satisfies the Convention T .

In Tarski’s theory, truth of each atomic sentence can be defined in terms of two related notions, namely, “reference” and “satisfaction” (Tarski, 1983). These two terms are closely related to the basic semantic of functions of names and predicates. For instance, if we have two sentences (1) “snow is green” and (2) “Grass is white”; “snow” refers to snow in (1) and “Grass” refers to grass in (2). “A” satisfies “is white” if and only if “A” is white; and “B” satisfied “is green” if and only if “B” is green. In different

words, for any atomic sentence $\lceil t \text{ is } P \rceil$: $\lceil t \text{ is } P \rceil$ is true if and only if the referent of $\lceil t \rceil$ satisfies $\lceil P \rceil$ (Glanzberg, 2006, online).

Tarski's theory shows how truth of a sentence can be deduced on the basis of its constituents, particularly, by the properties of the reference and satisfaction. As usually interpreted, reference is the preeminent word-to-world relation. Satisfaction is also understood as a word-to-world relation, but relates a predicate to things in the world that bear it. Tarski's recursive definition show how truth is determined by reference and satisfaction, by referring to things in the world and the properties they bear. The form of correspondence in Tarski's theory of truth is not a correspondence of sentences or propositions to facts; but it is correspondence of our expressions to objects and the properties they bear in the world(s). In other words, Tarski's theory of truth shows how truth might be worked out from basic word-to-world relations. Though Tarski's theory is largely lined with the correspondence theories of truth, it is also compatible with theories of truth which are not correspondence theories of truth¹.

Different theories of truth explain how truth of sentence or a proposition is drawn in reference to facts in the worlds. However, theories of truth are seen to be largely theories of meaning. Since the seminar work Davidson (1967), there has been a growing influence of the idea that different theories of truth, especially the Tarskian theory, are also theories of meaning. For instance, the Tarski's theory of truth as explored above explains how the truth conditions of a sentence are determined by the semantic properties of its corresponding parts. In the same line, Davidson supports that giving a theory of truth conditions can also be understood as a critical part of giving a theory of meaning (Davidson, 2001). Yet, this claim that Davidson raises enters into a larger debate in which he actively contributed, which focuses on the relationship between truth and meaning.

4. KEY OBSERVATIONS OF THE ANALYSIS

There are two competing traditions in philosophy of language which takes two antithetical positions on the questions of relating truth and meaning. On the one hand, there is a deflationist approach which seeks to explicate truth in terms of meaning; and on the other hand, there is a truth conditional conception of meaning or Davidsonian thesis which seeks to explicate meaning in terms of truth. The explanatory justification offered in these two traditions seem to run in opposite directions (but not contradictory) and thus entertaining a converse relationship. These are two competing approaches on relating truth and meaning on which we will now focus.

"Deflationism" in this analysis connotes the thesis that the content of truth is wholly specified by the instances of the schema of the form " P is true if and only if P ". It is important to note, however, that the predicate "is true" within a deflationist approach is not property ascribing, but designate certain logico-grammatical conveniences which are indispensable (Collins, 2002, 501). In other words, according to a deflationist theory of truth, the content of truth predicate is fixed by the instances of the schemata relating the predication to the content of that to which it applies (ibid).

For instance, for deflationists who favor sentences as primary truth-bearers such as Quine (1970, 1986); Leeds (1978) and Field (1994), the truth of a sentence is reflected in the schema,

(T): X is true (in L) if and only p ,

Where each instance is formed the substitution of " X " for a quotation of an L -sentence and " p " for a translation of the substitute of " X " (Collins, 2002). And, for deflationists who favor propositions as primary truth-bearers such as Horwich (1990, 1998) and Soames (1999), truth predicate is expressed by appeal to the schema (PT) as an analogue of (T):

(PT) The proposition that p is true if and only if p .

¹ See Field 1972.

Both the sentential and propositional deflationist versions² converge on a claim that there is no more to truth than the instances of their respective schemata. This means, both hold that “*P* is true” and “*P*” are definitionally equivalent, where the “*P*” is a dummy for the respective truth bearers appealed to. Therefore, the central claim of deflationism is that the concept of truth is wholly accounted for by the resources which do not go beyond the meaning or content the items (sentences or propositions) to which the concepts applies. It is important, however, to note that this claim does not imply that only things with meaning can have truth value; rather, it is that meaning is explanatorily antecedent to truth. It is, in different terms, a justification of *the truth from meaning principle* which can be summarized as follow:

(TM) If *S* means that *p* in *L*, then *S* is true if and only if *p*.

Another approach for relating truth and meaning is the truth conditional thesis which tries to draw truth from meaning. This approach which is largely seen as anti-deflationist is represented in this analysis by Donald Davidson. Davidson’s approach to meaning does not focus on investigating into the meaning of “meaning”, nor is it concerned with reducing meaning to a non-semantic constituting property. In his own approach, the object of a theory of meaning is a natural language *L*, and its task is to specify information about *L* in the way that, if one were to know the theory, then one would understand the speakers of *L* (Davidson, 1973, 125). In addition, in Davidson’s own approach, the general constraint that a theory of meaning should respect the speaker’s understanding of his language has an important consequence to the condition of adequacy of his theory of meaning. An adequate theory of meaning must be structure revealing. This means that, a theory of meaning must be able to show how each complex expression of the language is a syntactic function of the meaning of its constituent parts. In other words, meaning in Davidson’s own approach is compositional. Hence, a theory of meaning for *L* must tell us enough to understand every expression of *L* in a structure revealing way. In Davidson’s view, Tarski’s truth theory meets these desiderata (Davidson, 1973).

In other words, in Davidson’s theory of meaning, for a set of instances of the schema (M), where “*X*” is substituted for a name (or description) of an *L*-sentence, and “*p*” is substituted for a sentence that articulates what the named sentence says: (M) *X* means (in *L*) that *p*. The relation “*x* mean *y*” pairs a sentence description (identified in terms of its form) with the sentence which articulates the content of the described sentence. Davidson thus borrowed Tarski’s (1956) T-schema as the theorem form for his account of meaning. As has been already argued, it is Tarski who initially showed how for a formal language *L*, each instance of (T) is recursively derivable from an assignment of values to the primitive vocabulary of the language. Davidson borrowed Tarski’s procedure in constructing his theory of meaning.

Nevertheless, deflationist theory of meaning and truth conditional theory of meaning are based on incompatible but not contradictory theses. The incompatibility between the two approaches to the relationship between truth and meaning is understood on the basis that explanation offered by one theory cannot be employed to ground other’s explanation. In this regard, a deflationist cannot explain the notion of content in terms of truth conditions, and a Davidsonian cannot explain truth in terms of a deflationary schema. Therefore, on the assumption that an explanation of meaning involves truth, deflationism is as refuted as in the manner Davidson’s account is by the assumption that deflationism is correct.

Yet, both deflationist and Davidsonian approaches to the relationship between truth and meaning, refer to Tarski’s theory of truth. The dilemma is that, despite their reference to Tarski’s theory of truth, the two theses come to incompatible conclusions. For instance, sentential deflationists take the idea from Tarski’s (1956) method of defining truth predicates for formal languages and his answer to certain constraints to formulate their theory. For example, despite the fact that Tarskian definitions are not necessarily always intended as analysis of our concept of truth, Tarski did understand (T) as, in some sense, capturing our intuitive conception of truth, because the purpose of his *convention T* -(the

² In the analysis of the relation between truth and meaning provided in this paper, I will only focus of sentential deflationism.

stipulation that a materially adequate definition of a truth predicate for a language L would entail an instance of (T) for each sentence of L - is to guarantee that any definition satisfying it is one of truth and not some of other concept, such as derivability³ (John Collins, 2002). In other words, sentential deflationists find in Tarski's theory of truth, especially in his convention-T a support to their thesis that the content of truth does not go beyond that which is claimed to be true.

In addition, *truth from meaning principle* which is foundational to the deflationist idea that the content of truth does not go beyond that which is claimed to be true refers also to a Tarskian idea on truth. In fact, according to Tarski's central thought to truth, a truth predicate for a language L can be defined in terms of the concepts expressible in L (and, in his own view, any logico-set theoretical machinery need to satisfy Convention T). This, in Tarski's view, is reflected in the definition being constrained to entail instances of (T) as "partial definitions", where the conditions for the truth of a sentence are given in term of the very concepts expressed in the sentence, via a meta-linguistic translation. The meta-language contains a translation of the object-language and so can express the content of each of its sentences (Collins, 2002, 506). In Collin's interpretation, it is this feature which allows Tarski's definitions proper, in terms of recursive definitions of a *satisfaction* relation, to explicitly define truth predicates such that the definitions will be consistent just if their respective object-languages are consistent; for the *definiens* make use of no *conceptual* resources not to be found in the object-languages. It is in reference to this tarskian idea that sentential deflationism defends its principle that the content of truth does not go beyond that which is claimed to be true (ibid.).

Nonetheless, even though both deflationists and Davidsonians refers to Tarski's theory of truth, their conclusions are antithetical. At the center of such antithetic conclusions is their conceptual understanding and approaches to the relationship between truth and meaning. For deflationists, truth is constitutive of meaning; and in this regard, a deflationist cannot explain the notion of content in terms of truth conditions. As consequence, according to deflationism, truth cannot be deduced on the basis of truth conditions but solely on the basis of a theory of meaning. In other words, deflationist account of meaning is not truth conditional. Conversely, Davidson defends that "any theory of truth conditions is a theory of meaning" (Davidson, 2001, 87). The question then becomes whether there can be any possible common ground for reconciling the existing incompatibility between deflationist and truth conditional approaches to the relationship between truth and meaning.

5. POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIVE COMMON GROUND

On contextualizing the mutual criticism between deflationism and davidsonian theses, one realized that the davidsonian or truth conditional thesis falls into deflationism. One central criticism of deflationists to Davidson's truth conditional thesis lies on his compositional assignment of meaning. As has been argued, Davidson borrowed Tarski's (1956) T-schema as the theorem for his account of meaning. According to Davidson, when we have a sentence as truth-bearer, the form of the sentences must be structure revealing in a way which allows for a compositional assignment of meaning. This means that, a theory of meaning must be able to show how each complex expression of a language is a syntactic function of the meaning of its constituent parts. In other words, in Davidson's theory of meaning, the understanding of the meaning of sentences is delivered from the understanding of its compositional parts.

Deflationists, however, criticize Davidson's account meaning as appealing to a theory of truth which is question-begging. In fact, according to Collins (2002), the davidsonian account of truth appears to be involving an explanatory gap. For instance, in the first instance, Davidson's account of meaning appeals to homophonic instances of (T) to tell us what truth is, while extending truth to heterophonic instances to capture the idea that a truth theory can be genuinely revelatory about meaning. Yet, an understanding of homophonic (T) depends on an antecedent understanding of the sentences involved (Collins, 2002).

³ See Tarski 1969, pp. 102-04 and For Tarski's statement on Convention-T, see 1956, pp. 187-8.

Consequently, Davidson account of truth tends to fall into deflationism and his claim of defending a non-deflationist approach on the relationship between truth and meaning becomes question-begging.

The explanatory gap which is at the origin of criticisms of Davidson's account of his approach to the relationship between truth and meaning was generated from a methodological extrapolation linked with Davidson's reference to Tarski's theory of truth. Davidson (1967) appears to have assumed that the "theory of reference" –the concepts of truth, reference, and satisfaction– is much clearer than the "theory of meaning" –the concept of synonymy, translation, etc., and this was indeed true. In fact, the theory of reference admits to greater formal clarity, and this is principally due to Tarski. In Davidson's method for his theory of meaning, he assumed that Tarski had removed enough doubt about truth to enable it to ground an account of meaning⁴. Yet, the only clarity Tarski's theory of truth brings to our intuitive, primitive notions of truth, reference and the rest depends upon an explicated notion of *translation*. In this regard, the clarity Davidson sought is not necessarily oriented to shedding light on meaning (Collins, 2002, 514). Consequently, if Tarski is to help in the explication of meaning without begging the question, it needs to be clearly showed how. Davidson did not originally show how this would be possible. This can therefore be seen as a defect in Davidson's own account of the relationship between truth and meaning, even though it does not invalidate his arguments.

6. CONCLUSION

In brief, between the two competing traditions on the relationship between truth and meaning, it is the deflationist approach which offers a more comprehensive and non-question begging account on the issue. Davidson's truth conditional approach, however, has its merits of explaining how any theory of truth conditions can be interpreted as a theory of meaning. Yet, his approach to the relationship between truth and meaning which seeks to explicate truth through meaning begs a question and tends to fall into deflationism. The reasoning of deflationists and Davidsonians in their account on the relationship between truth and meaning reveals an incompatibility. But such an incompatibility does not constitute an argument *per se* against either deflationism or the truth conditional or Davidsonian accounts of meaning. Though the mutual criticism between the two approaches does not invalidate any of the two accounts on the relationship between truth and meaning, deflationists seem to offer a stronger and more reliable account of the relationship between truth and meaning.

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⁴ See Davidson (1990, pp.286, and fn.20) where he admits that this was indeed the case.

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