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!)
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?