

CAN WE TELL THE TRUTH?

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Recent philosophical efforts to give an account of language seem to fall roughly into two groups: those that draw upon the work being done in artificial intelligence and computer programming, and those that draw upon the more traditional sources of logical theory and formal semantics. The A.I. people, among whom I would number such writers as Daniel Dennett, Douglas Hofstadter, and John Haugeland, tend to be more concerned about the practical results of their efforts to duplicate linguistic behavior than they are about giving a theoretical account of the nature of language. The people who draw on logical theory and formal semantics are working a traditional vein, such well established figures as Hilary Putnam, Van Ormon Quine, and Nelson Goodman, and more recently scholars such as Richard Montague, David Lewis, Donald Davidson, Barbara Partee, and Saul Kripke.

The following paragraphs develop the cautionary idea that the successes of formal logic and formal semantics have led some commentators to extend the terminology of truth-functional logic to areas where its application is unclear and perhaps unwarranted. The catch-phrase, "To know the meaning of an expression is to know its truth-conditions" is the point at which the questionable extensions often begin. In one sense, the formal sense, the phrase is unexceptional. In more extended senses it is clearly wrong. The A.I. people, perhaps because they are more interested in counterfeiting language ability than in explaining it, seem less prone to go astray.

In 1966 Donald Davidson presented a paper on "Truth and Meaning" in which he argued that Tarski's account of "The Semantic Conception of Truth" given 20 years earlier could serve as the basis for "a formal semantics for significant part of natural language."¹ Tarski had warned of the difficulties of applying his criterion of truth to natural language, and in his polemical remarks he observed that "the semantic definition of truth implies nothing regarding the conditions under which a sentence like (1) snow is white, can be asserted. It implies only that, whenever we assert or reject this sentence we must be ready to assert or reject the correlated sentence (2) the sentence 'snow is white' is true."² Davidson is well aware of Tarski's reservations and provides a list of additional unresolved difficulties, first among them the semantic paradoxes. But Davidson sees no plausible alternative to exploiting Tarski's insight and concludes on an optimistic note.

In the 17 years since Davidson's essay appeared, a great deal of ingenious and sophisticated work had gone into carrying out the program he suggested, and into trying to solve the problems that he lists, as well as others unrecognized at the time. In the interim it has become a philosoph-

ical commonplace that to know the meaning of a statement is to know its truth conditions. It is this commonplace I wish to criticize.

The criticisms are not directed at the concept of a formalization of semantic theory along the lines suggested by Davidson, but rather at the failure of many advocates to distinguish carefully between the highly formal and restricted definition of truth provided by Tarski, and the various and much less rigorous conceptions of truth that operate in the ordinary uses of language. As Davidson notes "Philosophers have long been at the hard work of applying theory to ordinary language by the device of matching sentences in the vernacular with sentences for which they have a theory."³ The truth conditions that Tarski had in mind are those of a highly formalized logical system. Tarski's formula (T) "x is true if, and only if, p," provides a way for introducing sentences in ordinary language into a formal system which can then exhibit their "truth-conditions" within that system. Truth within a formal system is quite a different thing from truth in the rough and tumble of everyday existence. Truth in the latter sense has always been, and remains, problematic.

The first objection to the commonplace, i.e., to know the meaning of a sentence is to know its truth conditions, is that it assumes that truth is better understood than meaning. It would follow that we can use the more comprehensible concept of truth to explain the less well understood concept of meaning. However, it is not at all clear that Tarski's semantic conception of truth is more accessible or is better understood than, say, the various conceptions of meaning catalogued by Ogden and Richards⁴ which make no reference to formal systems or to truth-conditions.

Consider as limiting cases some uninterpreted formal system on the one hand, and on the other hand, some set of descriptive statements in a natural language. If the formal system is to be useful, there must be a way of translating back and forth between the formal system and the natural language. Two important goals of recent semantic theory are to provide a formal system adequate to the natural language and an effective method of translation. An adequate formal system would be one that accommodated all the possible natural language expressions. An effective method of translation would be one that provided exact rules for rendering sentences in one form into their equivalents in the other. Ideally, formal systems are entirely rigorous. Natural languages are anything but, at least on the surface.

At the level of formal systems, the most obvious constraints are logical consistency, generality, the avoidance of the *ad hoc*, and the maintenance of isomorphism with the natural language. The constraint at the level of natural language is conformity with the intuition of the native speaker. At the intermediate level of translation the constraints are equivalence and simplicity. That system is best which accurately designates the value of the original expression in one form or the other in the least number of steps.

Each of these levels invites inquiry into the criteria by which their adequacy or effectiveness is to be judged. In the case of formal systems the criteria for completeness and consistency seem to be fairly well established. The adequacy of translation techniques is not as well established, but one of the merits of Tarski's formula is that it circumvents the problem of equivalence by employing a method of unique designation. The most difficult level to evaluate is that of the sentences in the natural language itself. For example, there may be more than one way to say the same thing. If there is more than one way, presumably the two or more ways of saying it would be translated into a single formal expression.

But the problem here is not that there is more than one way to say the same thing in ordinary language. The problem is, rather, that no description (utterance or sentence) is determined by the circumstances in which it is produced. The intuitions of native speakers may vary widely concerning the appropriateness of an utterance in a given set of circumstances.

In a recent paper Davidson observes that:

People who utter a sentence do not usually want to speak true sentences. Sometimes they do, and very often they don't. Nor, in order to play the speech game do they have to represent themselves as intending or wanting to speak the truth; there is no general presumption that someone who utters a declarative sentence wants or intends to speak the truth, nor that if he does, he does it intentionally.⁵

If circumstances do not determine an utterance, and if intending to utter a true sentence is not a necessary condition for uttering a sentence, it seems questionable that knowing the truth-conditions of a sentence is essential to the native speaker's intuitive grasp of the meaning of a sentence. It may be objected that this criticism is based on a confusion of levels; that truth-conditional semantics is concerned with the logical truth-conditions at the level of theory, that is with the truth-conditions that obtain only after a sentence has been evaluated according to some version of Tarski's convention T, and not at the intuitive level of ordinary discourse.

But this confusion, if it is confusion, is grounded in the accounts of truth-conditional semantics offered by its defenders. For example, Barry Lower, in a discussion of Harmon's conceptual role semantics, describes the truth-conditional position in the following way:

One of the goals of a theory of meaning is to characterize linguistic competence. This problem has been construed by Dummet and Davidson as the problem of characterizing what someone must know to understand a language. Davidson's answer is, of course, that understanding a lan-

guage consists at least in part, in knowing the truth conditions of the sentences of the language.⁶

Lower goes on to describe a "communication episode" in support of the truth-conditional position. He asks us to imagine a group of three people, one a native speaker of German and one with no competence in German. Looking out the window the speaker of German observes "Es schneit." The non-German speaker in order to grasp the meaning of that expression would have to reason that "Es schneit" is an indicative sentence, that the German speaker is generally reliable, and that she has uttered a truth. But "Es schneit" is true if, and only if, it is snowing, and the non German speaker could conclude therefore it is snowing. At least some of the truth-conditions Lower introduces here are clearly empirical rather than theoretical. Introduction of knowledge of the empirical conditions which would render a statement true as a condition of knowing the meaning of that statement would seem to demand a level of awareness far beyond the capabilities of most native speakers since it presupposes answers to some of the fundamental problems of epistemology. (On such a view, what would become of the sceptic who is unable to specify any conditions as adequate to establish the truth or falsity of a statement?)

It might be argued that knowing the truth-conditions of a sentence is an instance of "knowing how" rather than "knowing that." After all, people speak grammatically without propositional knowledge of grammar and they are logical without propositional knowledge of logic. There are a number of reasons to be uncomfortable with such a claim. A person may know how to use restrictive clauses correctly without knowing that they are restrictive clauses, but what would be the parallel locution for truth values? One knows *how* to use a sentence, but one knows *that* its truth value is such-and-such. One can point to a restrictive clause, but not to a truth-condition. Truth conditions do not seem to be present "in" a sentence in the same way that grammar may be said to be present in a sentence, or logical form in an argument.

People do not ordinarily inquire about the grammar of sentences, nor about the logical form of arguments, but they often ask what sentences mean. Such inquiries are not usually satisfied by supplying the truth-conditions.

If I were to say "Witches were burned in Salem in 1660," you might well ask, "What do you mean?" There are a number of ways your question could be understood. One or another of the words in the sentence might be in doubt. You might be asking for a definition of "witch" or for a further specification of "Salem." Or, more likely, you have recognized the ambiguity of the sentence and want to know if it represents a general rule, and

in fact no witches were burned in Salem in that year, or whether some were. Or you might be asking if I believe there were witches in Salem.

Now none of these questions are on face value a request for the truth-conditions of the original assertion, and it is easy to imagine that each could be satisfied by a reply quite different from a specification of the truth conditions of the original assertion. Moreover, it is not obvious how we might specify the truth-conditions of the original assertion at either the level of ordinary use or at the level of semantic theory. Having the truth-conditions of a sentence may be a sufficient condition for knowing the meaning of a sentence, but knowing the truth conditions and knowing the meaning of a sentence seem to be quite different things.

Grice and others have suggested that in speaking we intend to utter true sentences, and that in hearing we attribute to the speaker such intention.⁷ Dummett claims that uttering true sentences is a necessary condition for communication.⁸ The argument implicit in these positions seems to be something to the effect that if communication occurs, then truth-conditions have been met, and communication does in fact occur. But, just as truth in a non-formal sense is not a more obvious concept than meaning, and therefore an explanation of the latter in terms of the former is not likely to be very helpful, so too an argument for nonformal truth-conditions based on the fact of communication is not persuasive, since communication is no less a problematic concept than non-formal truth.

Whatever communication is, it is by no means simple. There does not seem to be any easy or general way to tell when it occurs, or what, if anything, is communicated. This is not to deny that there is something going on, but in view of the great difficulty in saying what or how communication works, it seems at least questionable to say that uttering true sentences or intending to utter true sentences is a condition of the fact of communication.

At the practical level there is no generally agreed upon method for distinguishing true and false sentences, nor for distinguishing knowledge from opinion. It is at this level that the traditional theories of truth have their origin, and the difficulties surrounding those theories are still very much with us. Most of the time most speakers have no clear idea of whether their utterances are true or false, or whether they believe them or not. No doubt ordinary speakers do utter true sentences. It may even be the case that most assertions are true rather than false. But no neat general formula exists for deciding in the case of any given assertion which it is.

This is not to say that our ordinary assertions are foolish or misguided. The contention here is that at the practical level, at the level of the intuitions of a native speaker, the level at which language is more or less directly connected with the-world-as-experienced, semantics has more in common, say, with economics than it does with mathematics or physics. For example,

we rarely check *our* currency to see if it is counterfeit. Not because we reason that if there were much counterfeit currency trade would become impossible, or because the odds of our getting fake bills are slight, but simply because as long as our money works we don't worry about it. A really first-rate counterfeit may be as good as the real thing. In a sense we are engaged in a linguistic commerce in which sentences are the usual currency. Most of us have only the vaguest idea of the general condition of the economy that creates the meaning-value of the currency we use. (In this analogy, formal systems provide a kind of gold standard to which we may peg the value of our paper money.) Even though we do not know exactly how it works, trade for the most part flourishes, or at least our transactions go forward in more or less expected ways. We seem to use our language as we do our currency, non-reflectively. The non-reflective use of language indicates that knowledge of the truth conditions of an assertion is not a necessary condition for knowledge of the meaning of that assertion.

NOTES

1. Donald Davidson, "Truth and Meaning," *Synthese* 17, (1967) pp. 304-323, reprinted in *Logic and Grammar*.
2. Alfred Tarski, "The Semantic Conception of Truth," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 4, (1944) pp. 341-365.
3. Davidson, *op. cit.* p. 203.
4. C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1944.
5. Donald Davidson, "Communication and Convention," typescript, 1982.
6. Barry Lower, "The Role of 'Conceptual Role Semantic'," to appear N.D.J.F.L.
7. Paul Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in *Logic and Grammar*, pp. 64-75.
8. Michael Dummett, 1978.