DAVIDSON ON TRUTH

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ABSTRACT. Truth-conditional semantics is by far the best-known philosophical contribution of Donald Davidson. The main idea of this approach is to explain the concept of meaning by appeal to the concept of truth. Accordingly, we understand a sentence *s* of a natural language *L*, if and only if, we know its truth-conditions. Challenging in its nature, this proposal immediately caught the attention of the philosophical community, being equally appreciated and criticized.

The aim of this paper is to argue that Davidson's approach is too optimistic in its goals. In my view, truth-conditional semantics is unlikely to be the best way to shed light on the concept of meaning. By appealing to Tarski's semantic conception of truth and assuming a primitive concept of truth, this perspective leaves too many questions unanswered and thus proves its limits.

Key-words: Donald Davidson, meaning, truth, Truth-Conditional Semantics.

Preliminary remarks

The question "What is meaning?" is one of the central questions of philosophy of language, especially in the field of semantics. Likewise, this was one of the main questions for philosophers such as Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Rudolf Carnap, Willard Van Orman Quine and Donald Davidson. Some of them have tried to clarify the concept of meaning and how the language refers to the world, by focusing either on the principle of compositionality (Frege, 1960) or on definite descriptions (Russell, 1905). Others have tried to do it by focusing either on the analytic-synthetic distinction (Carnap, 1999) or on the way a community is using a language in the so called language games (Wittgenstein, 1958).

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Dissatisfied with the solutions provided by the aforementioned perspectives, in the middle of the XXth century, Quine and Davidson began to distrust the concept of meaning, taking the path of a purely extensional semantics. The first step was taken by Quine, who attempted to dismantle the analytic-synthetic distinction (Quine, 1961). The second and most challenging one was taken by Davidson, who tried to propose what nowadays is known as truth-conditional semantics (Davidson, 1991).

Starting with *Truth and Meaning*, the aim of Donald Davidson was to elucidate the concept of meaning by focusing on the concept of truth and avoiding any involvement of intensional terms. To reach this goal, he developed a philosophical program designed to include the following: the compositional trait of natural languages; the connection between the concept of meaning and the concept of truth; the connection between meaning, beliefs, and desires; the idea that when we want to interpret and understand a speaker whose language is totally unknown, we must assume the rationality and truth of her verbal behaviour – known as the Principle of charity, the driving principle of Davidson's philosophy. Therefore, to address the compositional trait of natural languages and the connection between the concept of meaning and the concept of truth, Davidson appealed to Tarski's semantic conception of truth. To address the connection between meaning, beliefs and desires and to be in accordance with the Principle of charity, he appealed to a unified theory of verbal behaviour interpretation and decision theory. The result was a Primitivist approach to the concept of truth, composed of two parts: the form of truth – inspired by Tarski's semantic conception of truth –, and the content of truth – inspired mainly by decision theory.

In the following sections I will briefly outline the Davidsonian project, and then I will critically analyze it. On the one hand, I will seek to show that extending Tarski's semantic conception of truth to natural languages and adopting a primitive concept of truth does not help too much to elucidate the concept of meaning. On the other hand, I will try to show that truth-conditional semantics fails to account for sentences whose truth-values are assigned by experience and, the most important, for those sentences that do not have truth values.

Davidson on the form of truth

The concept of truth plays a cardinal role in Davidson's philosophy, being extensively discussed in papers such as *Truth and Meaning*, *A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge*, *The Content of the Concept of Truth*, *The Folly of Trying to Define Truth* and *Truth Rehabilitated*. In each of these works, the influence of Gottlob Frege and Alfred Tarski is striking.

To Frege, Davidson owes the idea that understanding a sentence means knowing its truth-conditions: "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, 2001, pp. 50-51) At the same time, he is indebted to Frege for the Principle of compositionality (Davidson, 2001, p. 202). For Davidson, one of the most important traits of a natural language is compositionality, that is, the meaning of complex expressions depends on the meaning of the simple expressions which compose the complex ones. The ability to compose sentences such as "Hannibal crossed the Alps and defeated the Romans at Cannae in 216 BC." or "Hannibal crossed the Alps on elephants.", from a sentence like "Hannibal crossed the Alps." shows us that their meaning is a function of the meaning of their components.

To Tarski, Davidson owes the idea of language stratification, respectively, the Convention T, to which he assigns a pivotal role in the radical interpretation. However, despite the fact that Tarski's schema represents a central point for Davidson's theory, the two perspectives are quite different.

In order to avoid self-reference specific to natural languages and to block the possibility of paradoxes – such as the Liar paradox –, Tarski developed a semantic approach by which he defined truth in terms of denotation and satisfaction, thus providing a formally correct and materially adequate definition. If we take his own example, in the sentence "The sentence "snow is white" is true if, and only if, the snow is white." (Tarski, 1944, p. 343), on the right side of the equivalence we have the sentence itself – *suppositio formalis* –, while on the left side of the equivalence we have the name of the sentence – *suppositio materialis*. The construction of the definition of truth occurs in the metalanguage, whose purpose is to capture the connections between the language expressions and the objects of the world they refer to. Defining truth involves a recursive procedure where we start by specifying the objects that satisfy simple expressions and we continue by specifying the objects that satisfy the complex expressions. Furthermore, a semantic theory of truth for a language L must provide for every sentence s of that language, an equivalence of the form (T):

"(T) X is true, iff p." (Tarski, 1944, p. 344)

It is also worth mentioning that for Tarski, the equivalences of the form (T) and any instances of them are only partial definitions of truth. We would get a general definition of truth only if we were able to put all these partial definitions in a conjunction.

While the semantic conception of truth was designed by Tarski to define truth only for formalized languages, Davidson's proposal was the following: "What I propose is to reverse the direction of explanation: assuming translation, Tarski was able to define truth; the present idea is to take truth as basic and to extract an account of translation or interpretation." (Davidson, 2001, p. 134) But assuming truth and taking it as the starting point of an approach to meaning, he embraced a Primitivist perspective of the concept of truth: "It should be clear that I do not hope to define truth in terms of coherence and belief. Truth is beautifully transparent compared to belief and coherence, and I take it as a primitive concept." (Davidson, 2001, p. 139) The view expressed in the previous quote was manifested throughout his entire philosophical career: "It is a mistake to look for a behavioristic definition, or indeed any other sort of explicit definition or outright reduction of the concept of truth. Truth is one of the clearest and most basic concepts we have, so it is fruitless to dream of eliminating it in favor of something simpler and more fundamental." (Davidson, 2005b, p. 55) He is defending it even in his latest works: "We should apply this obvious observation to the concept of truth: we cannot hope to underpin it with something more transparent or easier to grasp. Truth is as G. E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, and Gottlob Frege maintained, and Alfred Tarski proved, an indefinable concept." (Davidson, 2005a, p. 21)

However, extending the semantic conception of truth to natural languages and taking truth as primitive, we are getting into a new situation for T-sentences:

"(T) "Es regnet" is true-in-German when spoken by x at time t if and only if it is raining near x at t." (Davidson, 1991, p. 135)

The striking aspect is that unlike Tarski, in the case of Davidson, T-sentences are formulated in two different languages. For Tarski the metalanguage translates the object-language expressions to determine their truth-values. For Davidson the metalanguage translates the object-language expressions to determine their meaning. It does so by assuming the concept of truth as primitive because: "Truth is a single property which attaches, or fails to attach, to utterances, while each utterance has its own interpretation; and truth is more apt to connect with fairly simple attitudes of speakers." (Davidson, 1991, p. 135)

Davidson's appeal to Tarski's semantic conception of truth was not accidental. Firstly, he had to deal with the compositional trait of natural languages and needed to show how we actually understand all the sentences of those languages. Secondly, he wanted to clarify the concept of meaning and to do so in situations like those faced by the field linguist – situations where someone is faced with a

totally alien language that must be grasped from scratch. He chose the Tarskian path because, on the one hand, it shows us how to holistically assign meaning to sentences uttered by a speaker that we want to interpret and understand. On the other hand, it describes the pattern that truth imprints on language and thought, and this was what he was fervently seeking for to develop a theory of meaning for natural languages.

Nevertheless, as long as according to Davidson, Tarski provided us only the form of truth, there must be something more to add to his approach. What must be added is the content of truth, the connection between truth and meaning, and the way of doing it is by showing how we can identify the pattern of truth indicated by Tarski, in the verbal behaviour of people.

Davidson on the content of truth

As we saw in the previous sections, Davidson's aim was to give an insight on the concept of meaning by focusing on the situation we are facing when we want to interpret and understand a speaker whose language is totally unknown – the situation of radical interpretation, in which we have neither dictionaries, nor translation manuals and we have to find a way to grasp the meaning of the utterances.

To understand his view, let's imagine that we are on an expedition in Northern Europe and we arrive into a Finnish speaking community. Having no previous contact with Finnish language and no means of translation at hand, when someone utters "Siellä on karhu!", what is the first step we should take to understand it? For Davidson, the first step of radical interpretation consists in assuming the rationality and truth of the sentences uttered by the speaker (Davidson, 1991, p. 136). In accordance with the Principle of charity, as long as a speaker is a rational agent who is mostly right about her environment and who intends to be interpreted and understood by others, we should be charitable with her and maximize our agreement. Firstly, we should observe her verbal behavior in order to fix the reference of the uttered sentences. Secondly, we should identify those objects and events from her environment to which she accepts to apply the utterance "Siellä on karhu!". Finally, based on her assent and dissent, and producing T-sentences to connect her language to her environment by satisfaction relations, we should arrive to the conclusion that:

(T) "Siellä on karhu!" is true in Finnish if, and only if, there is a bear over there.

Moreover, according to the Principle of charity, if we cannot find a way to interpret and understand the uttered sentences of a speaker as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true, then we have no reasons to count her as being rational or as having beliefs and saying something meaningful. The possibility of considering erroneously a false uttered sentence to be true is blocked by the semantic conception of truth itself, because T-sentences apply only to closed and true sentences of a language and connect utterances with objects and events by satisfaction relations.

However, the error in interpretation is possible, and as long as in Davidson's view the disagreements are intelligible only on a background of massive agreements, he must also give an account on the possibility and intelligibility of the error. To address the problem of error, he developed the model of triangulation: "Triangulation also creates the space needed for error, not by deciding what is true in any particular case, but by making objectivity dependent on intersubjectivity." (Davidson, 2004, p. 143) On triangulation, Davidson says that: "Ostensive learning, whether undertaken by a radical interpreter as a first step into a second language, or undergone by someone acquiring a first language, is an example of triangulation." (Davidson, 2004, p. 144) Hence, we have the speaker, the interpreter, and as the common ground of their interaction, the world they share – the condition of possibility for objectivity and intelligible error. In our example, we have a connecting line between the world and the speaker, another connecting line between the world and the interpreter and another one between the speaker and the interpreter. The point of convergence between the connecting line of the speaker with the world and the connecting line of the interpreter with the world is what reveals to the interpreter the cause of the speaker's utterances, namely the bear. But despite all these elements added by Davidson to his theory of meaning, even at this stage of the interpretation process, we have no clue of the meaning of the speaker's uttered sentences. Therefore, there is still something more to add to the content of truth.

According to Davidson, the meaning of the uttered sentences of a speaker is intertwined with her propositional attitudes such as beliefs, desires and preferences. But since this kind of attitudes are manifested in the actions of the speaker, what must be added is something that takes into consideration the fact that linguistic phenomena are behavioral, biological and physical phenomena described in terms of truth, meaning, reference and so on. In his view, the best way to accomplish this requirement is provided by a unified theory of verbal behavior interpretation and decision theory: "What we must add to decision theory, or incorporate in it, then, is a theory of verbal interpretation, a way of telling what an agent means by his words. Yet this addition must be made in the absence of detailed information about the propositional contents of beliefs, desires, or intentions." (Davidson, 2005b, pp. 60-61)

Assuming that the speaker's beliefs and uttered sentences are largely true – in virtue of the Principle of charity –, we need to look for what determined her to hold them true, why she prefers one belief or sentence to be true over another belief or sentence.

For Davidson, of all the existing decision theories, the most appropriate to help us grasp the meaning in a situation like that of radical interpretation is the one of Richard Jeffrey, and this is because Jeffrey's theory deals with propositions, relative desirabilities, subjective probabilities and leaves us a way to substitute the propositions with uttered sentences (Davidson, 2005b, pp. 67-75). Adopting this framework, we have to create multiple series of choices whose goal is to calculate the degree of beliefs, desires and preferences of the speaker whose uttered sentences we want to interpret and understand, until we reach a common point in interpretation and understanding. Once we have assumed the truth of the speaker's uttered sentences and we have correctly assigned her propositional attitudes, we are in the position to infer the meaning of what she is saying. It is like a chain of dominoes that begins with rationality and truth, continues with actions and propositional attitudes and ends with meaning. Therefore, Davidson added what he considered to be the content of truth, the necessary element to identify the best method of selecting the working hypothesis regarding the meaning of the uttered sentences of a speaker.

Limits of the Davidsonian approach

For some philosophers of language and for some linguists, Davidson's approach might seem very attractive. On the one hand, it shows us how we might holistically assign propositional attitudes to a speaker, in order to extract the meaning of her uttered sentences. On the other hand, it shows us how we might interpret the uttered sentences of a speaker, in a purely extensional manner, avoiding the use of intensional terms such as meaning – given Davidson's conviction that such a term is futile in the act of interpretation.

However, from the very beginning, the Davidsonian perspective faced a number of objections that deserve further attention. Accordingly, in this section I will focus on those aspects that I consider to be the most problematic for Davidson.

Perhaps the most common objection raised against truth-conditional semantics is the one that considers the extension of the Tarskian schema to natural languages. As we already know, given the semantically closed aspect of natural languages, Tarski was distrustful of such an approach. Furthermore, Davidson was

not only adopting the Tarskian schema, but reversing it. The problem here is that, in this context, we might be in the position to provide a definition of truth in a Tarskian manner, but without understanding what the meaning of that truth is. To illustrate how this is possible, I will give an example following the pattern of another example provided by Mircea Dumitru in a paper in which, to a certain extent, he is critical of the Davidsonian semantics (Dumitru, 2004, pp. 140-145).

Let us suppose that George is an English monolingual logician who wants to check whether Davidson's approach really helps in translating from German – and he does so in a homophonic version of it, thanks to its simplicity. He only knows that the German language has a certain logical structure – that consists of names, pronouns, predicates and so on –, and everything he needs to construct a Tarskian definition of truth – the German terms for biconditional, for "German", for the verb "to be", for terms such as "denotation", "satisfaction", "true"and so on. Then, he asks a German friend to utter a German sentence, for example, "Es regnet!". What follows from here is that George is able to construct a homophonic definition of truth in the Tarskian manner, like the following:

(T) „Es regnet" ist im Deutsch wahr dann und nur dann, wenn es regnet.

But despite the fact that he is able to correctly construct a Tarskian definition of truth for a German uttered sentence, he is not able to understand this sentence. He knows that this sentence expresses a truth, but he does not know what truth. Moreover, even if George will construct another definition of truth by which to refer to the truth expressed by the previous uttered sentence, he will be in the same situation. And the regress will continue *ad infinitum*.

This example shows us that giving a definition of truth for an uttered sentence is not the same thing with understanding what that sentence means. By appealing to Tarski's semantic conception of truth we might end up in the situation of being able to correctly manipulate some uttered words and sentences, but not being able to grasp their meaning.

Another possible problem for the Davidsonian approach that is intimately linked with the previous one, might be the problem of paradoxes, such as Pinocchio's paradox and the contingent paradox. On the one hand, as we already know, according to the story of Pinocchio, his nose grows whenever he tells a lie. But if in a possible world, Pinocchio will utter "My nose is growing.", we will reach an impasse, because we will face a paradox, without being able to determine its truth value: "Pinocchio's nose grows if and only if (iff) what he is stating is false, and Pinocchio says "My nose is growing". So, Pinocchio's nose is growing iff it is not

growing. It is clearly a version of the Liar." (Eldridge-Smith, 2010, p. 213) As long as it does not contain semantic predicates, but empirical ones, such as "to grow" – the relation between lying and the growing nose being causal rather than semantic –, and it evades the metalanguage-hierarchy solution provided by Tarski to block paradoxes, this example captures a possible problem for Davidson in the following sense. If, by chance, a speaker we want to interpret and understand would utter a Pinocchio-type paradox, when we will be about to assign truth values and to grasp the meaning of the uttered sentences, we would have to go beyond the Tarskian framework and try another solution. Otherwise, we would be stuck in interpretation forever. On the other hand, as Saul Kripke indicated in several papers in the 1970s, we have also the possibility of a paradox composed of two consecutive sentences, uttered by two different speakers (Kripke, 1975, pp. 695-696). For example, we could have two men, David and John, and when David would utter: "Everything John will say from now on, will be false.", John would reply: "That is true." The intractable problem here lies in the fact that it would be impossible for the utterances of John to have the meaning they would appear to have – and this would be contrary to the very idea of truth-conditional semantics. If in the case of Pinocchio's paradox, we might have an objection from a supporter of Davidson – the possibility of uttering such a paradox would be blocked by the Principle of charity itself –, in the case of the contingent paradox we certainly could not have a similar objection.

However, the problem I find the most difficult for the Davidsonian project is the one of the sentences whose truth values are assigned by experience – such as hypotheses – and the one of the sentences that do not have any truth values at all – such as performatives.

A hypothesis is a sentence usually formulated in a natural language, by which we are trying to explain an event, a phenomenon or a process, and whose truth values are not assumed, but assigned by experience. Sentences such as "If you play chess every day, your game will improve.", "If the fingerprints on the gun are John's, then he is the killer." and "If this solution is alkaline, then the phenolphthalein will turn red." are examples of hypotheses formulated in daily life, in forensic investigations and in scientific research, that we understand before they are tested to find out whether they are true or false. We may believe them to be true, we may hope them to be true, we may wish them to be true, but I do not see how "all evidence of this kind may be summed up in terms of holding sentences to be true.", – as Davidson suggested in *Radical Interpretation* (Davidson, 1991, p. 135). As sentences that need future tests to receive truth values, I suspect they would pose problems to Davidson's perspective because if they were uttered

before being tested – assuming that a speaker we want to interpret and understand would utter an untested hypothesis –, they would have no truth values at all. In this context, they would be in a somewhat similar situation of those sentences that exhibit truth value gaps – something like truth value gaps relative to test. If this is the case, then grasping their meaning would consist in anything but the appeal to the concept of truth, and by this, the involvement of truth conditional semantics would become fruitless.

Noting what kind of problems the status of hypotheses can raise for the Davidsonian perspective, let's now turn to the case of performatives. A performative is a sentence formulated in a natural language, usually in the first-person singular or plural, with the main verb in simple present tense, and which is not truth-evaluable. According to John Langshaw Austin, performatives such as " 'I do' – as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony.", " 'I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*' – as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stem.", " 'I give and bequeath my watch to my brother' – as occurring in the will." or " 'I bet you six pence it will rain tomorrow.' ", do not have truth-values (Austin, 1962, pp. 5-6). In his view, this aspect was so obvious that he did not even insist on arguing for it. These sentences have truth-values just as the expression "Damn!" does. For those still unconvinced by his words, one of the best ways[1] to find out if he was right is to focus on examples

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[1] Another way of approaching the performatives, which might seem attractive to supporters of Austin, is Michael Dummett's. In several papers published in the 1970s, inspired by Frege, he advanced a theory of meaning consisting of two parts: a theory of sense and reference and a theory of force (Dummett, 1976, p. 74). Furthermore, he proposed a verificationist criterion of meaning, considering that meaning is determined by the verification of a sentence – here, by verifying a sentence is meant what shows a sentence to be true. However, for the present paper I chose not to resort to this approach because it has some problematic aspects. For example, one of the most important of them considers the fact that a verificationistic theory of meaning can be formulated only for some formalized languages. Once we step outside their domain and face situations like that of empirical generalizations, we find ourselves without solutions (Prawitz, 1987, pp. 476-477).

Yet another way of approaching the performatives involves their participation as premises in deductive arguments (Tsohatzidis, 2018, pp. 115-118). As we know, when we seek to evaluate the validity and soundness of a deductive argument, we are looking for the truth or the falsity of its premises and of its conclusion. In any situation, the premises must be truth-evaluable. Hence, it is supposed that if we introduce a performative in a deductive argument form such as *modus ponens* or *modus tollens*, as long as it is an exhortation and do not say anything about the world, we come to find that we cannot take it as a premise. Otherwise, we would be in the position to conclude that classical logic is an improper way of reasoning. However, this time too, I chose not to resort to this approach either, because if performatives are used in such a way, there are still ways to bring them to standard form and to transform them into declarative sentences. In my view, the correct approach is to take performatives exactly as the speaker intended to utter them, without any further intervention or modification.

such as "Drink!", "Eat!", "Listen!", "Look!", "Pay attention!, "Run!", "Do you like this scent?", "What do you mean?" and so on, sentences that are often uttered by the speakers of an alien language, during the process of learning it. Are these sentences meaningful? Of course, we understand them very well, they express moods, warnings and haziness of the speaker, among others. Can we assign truth values to them? Well, as long as they say nothing about the world and thus, they lack information, I do not think there is any way to approach them from the truth-values perspective, and this is a dangerous consequence for Davidson's approach.

In my opinion, because for every uttered sentence s of a language *L*, truth-conditional semantics involves assuming the concept of truth in order to get the meaning of that sentence, when it comes to sentences without truth values such as performatives, we are thrown into a hopeless situation. In this framework, we are not able to take even a step towards interpreting and understanding a speaker when she utters performatives. Since sentences like these are not intended as assertions, to understand them we would need a theory that explains meaning in terms of the intentions of the speaker rather than in terms of truth conditions. At the same time, that theory should account for the way the speaker was taught by the community to which she belongs, to use the language depending on her communication intentions. Any involvement of the concept of truth where nothing is to be said about the world does nothing but mislead us in our search for a workable theory of meaning for natural languages.

Concluding remarks

The aim of this paper was to briefly outline and analyze critically Davidson's perspective about truth. We found out that he was interested in the concept of truth because he wanted to elucidate the concept of meaning. By appealing to Tarski's semantic conception of truth, he suggested the form of truth – he took the concept of truth to be primitive, the necessary condition of any attempt to grasp the meaning of an uttered sentence. By appealing to a unified theory of verbal behavior and decision theory, he suggested the content of truth – he sketched a possible way of assigning propositional attitudes to a speaker we want to understand and of deriving the meaning of her uttered sentences.

Finally, by focusing on the proposal of extending the Tarskian schema to natural languages, and on the approach of paradoxical sentences, hypotheses and performatives from the perspective of truth-conditional semantics, we saw some limits of this view. If Davidson targets only the constatative sentences of a natural language, then his view is too narrow. If Davidson targets any kind of sentences of

a natural language, then his view fails to account for sentences such as paradoxical sentences, hypotheses and performatives. In any of these situations, as long as it entertains the idea that we need the concept of truth to clarify the concept of meaning, the Davidsonian project seems to be doomed to failure.

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