# Philosophy of Language // Spring 2020

## Handout 12

## Meaning and interpretation: Davidson

**Desiderata for a theory of meaning.** Davidson's ambition is to build a systematic theory of meaning which broadly utilises Tarski's account of truth. We may start with specifying general strictures on the theory of meaning for a natural language $L$.

*Extensional adequacy.* The theory of meaning must generate a theorem which gives the meaning of each sentence of $L$.

*Compositionality.* The theory of meaning must have a finite number of axioms. Each of the generated theorems must exhibit the semantic structure of the sentence in question.

*Interpretation.* The theory of meaning for $L$ must allow us to interpret correctly the speakers of $L$.

A comment on compositionality: A theory of meaning which respects this condition can provide an answer to the questions of how we understand an infinite number of sentences by being exposed to only a finite number of them and how in fact it is possible to learn a language.

**Davidson's proposal.** The idea behind Davidson's view is that all the meanings are given when the truth-conditions of all sentences are given. His argument can be split into several stages:

(i) The theory of meaning must match each sentence $S$ in $L$ with some sentence in the meta-language.

(ii) We must avoid the bi-conditional schema:

$$S \text{ means that } p,$$

because we must eliminate the intensional expression in favour of an extensional connective.

(iii) We could try this:

$$S \leftrightarrow p.$$

(iv) But this is not well-formed, since '$S$' is a name. So the expression on the left-hand side should be converted into a sentence.

(v) An immediate suggestion would be to supplement the name with a predicate:

$$S \text{ is } G \leftrightarrow p.$$

(vi) But now it seems that the predicate 'is $G$' will at least be co-extensive with the truth predicate as spelled out by Tarski.

The argument seems plausible, so far as it does not insist on the uniqueness of the truth predicate to play the theoretical role assigned to it.

**Problems.** There are two problems with this account. One is the issue of *correct* translation. We must hold that the sentence named by '$S$' is translated by the sentence replaced by '$p$'. But any such translation is meaning-preserving. So a threat of circularity lurks here.

Another problem is the following rule linking meaning and truth conditions:

$$[S \text{ means-in-}L \text{ that } p] \Leftrightarrow [S \text{ is true-in-}L \text{ iff } p].$$

The rule appears to be endorsed by Davidson, when he says that giving truth conditions is a way of giving the meaning of the sentence. However, we can proceed from left to right, but not from right to left. This is so both when we read 'iff' as a material and strict bi-conditional. Consider the case of the material bi-conditional. From:

'Snow is white' means-in-$L$ that snow is white

we infer:

'Snow is white' is true-in-$L$ iff snow is white.

Now, on the other hand:

Snow is white iff grass is green.

Reading our rule above from right to left and using the rule of substitution, we now derive:

'Snow is white' means-in-$L$ that grass is green.

It is tempting now to read 'iff' as a strict bi-conditional, that is, as 'necessarily iff'. This is already bad enough for Davidson's theory, since its ambition was to have an extensional theory of meaning, thereby excluding modal locutions. But even then the rule fails from right to left. We should only consider the bi-conditional:

Snow is white iff snow is white and $2 + 2 = 4$,

which gives us:

'Snow is white' means-in-$L$ that snow is white and $2 + 2 = 4$.

**FROM TRUTH TO MEANING.** In order to respond to these objections we need an *interpretational* theory of truth to guide us in formulating a theory of meaning.

Suppose there is a language English* for which we have built a truth-theory. And suppose that the T-schema for English* yields the clause:

'Ankara is pretty' is true-in-English* iff snow is white.

Apart from that, English* is like English. Now the question is as to why exactly English* has such a clause. It may, first, be the case that this is an unstructured sentence. Then no interpreter would attribute English* to us (that is, would equate English with English*). For we are sensitive to the individual contributions of words to the content of utterance, to 'what is being said'.

Perhaps, then, this clause is derived from some other theorems governing the components of the sentence. Perhaps 'Ankara' refers to snow, and 'is pretty' is satisfied by white things. But suppose that the predicate 'is green' is satisfied by green things in English* and in English. Then we must consider another clause of the T-schema:

'Ankara is green' is true-in-English* iff snow is green.

And now the interpreter will discover that English speakers believe that 'Ankara is green' is true-in-English, but they disbelieve that snow is green. Thus English* and English are not the same language.

Similarly, consider the predicates 'has physical shape' and 'has physical size'. They are extensionally equivalent:

'$x$ has physical mass' is true-in-English iff $x$ has physical size.

Nevertheless they do not mean the same. To show this, take the predicate modifier 'large'. The compositional approach must explain the link between 'is a large $\phi$' and 'is a $\phi$'. So we must avoid saying that:

'$x$ has a large physical mass' is true-in-English iff $x$ has a large physical size.

This sentence is false, since there are small objects with a large mass, and *vice versa*.

Therefore, the idea is that the difference in meaning can be accounted on the basis of the difference in truth value, provided there are sufficient constraints on interpretation. The project of applying the T-schema to every sentence of the language eliminates false entries.

**STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINT.** The constraint on the theory of meaning emerging here is a structural one. A revealing theory of meaning must be such that the meaning specification of a sentence $S$ is determined by the meaning specifications for other sentences $S_1, \ldots, S_n$ just in case it would be possible to come to know what $S$ means on the basis of prior knowledge what $S_1, \ldots, S_n$ mean.

Now we must rule out the cases, like those above, where the speaker is in the condition where knowing $S$ triggers in him knowing $S_1, \ldots, S_n$. So instead we must reason from knowing what $S_1, \ldots, S_n$ mean to knowing what $S$ means. Hence:

> *Structural constraint.* It would be possible for someone to proceed by a *rational inductive method* from knowing what $S_1, \ldots, S_n$ mean to knowing what $S$ means just in case the meaning specifications for $S_1, \ldots, S_n$ determine the meaning specifications for $S$.