Davidson

Ted Sider
Phil Language

Davidson is critical of a "meanings as entities" approach to the theory of meaning, which i) associates entities—meanings—with each meaningful word, and ii) says that understanding a language amounts to knowing the meanings of words and also the rules for computing the meanings of complex expressions on the basis of their parts' meanings.

1. Meaningless versus meaning-less

2. Regress argument

> Paradoxically, the one thing meanings do not seem to do is oil the wheels of a theory of meaning—at least as long as we require of such a theory that it nontrivially give the meaning of every sentence in the language. (p. 116)

> One proposal is to begin by assigning some entity as meaning to each word (or other significant syntactical feature) of the sentence; thus we might assign Theaetetus to 'Theaetetus' and the property of flying to 'flies' in the sentence 'Theaetetus flies'. The problem then arises how the meaning of the sentence is generated from these meanings. (p 114)

Knowing that $\langle$Theaetetus, $F\rangle$ is the meaning of 'Theaetetus flies' isn't sufficient for knowing what that sentence means. You also have to know how to "interpret" the ordered pair. Might you add to the proposition another element that tells you how to interpret it?

> Viewing concatenation as a significant piece of syntax, we may assign to it the relation of participating or instantiating; however it is obvious that we have here the start of an infinite regress. (p. 114)

Knowing that $\langle$Theaetetus, $F, I\rangle$ is the meaning of 'Theaetetus flies', where I is the relation of instantiating, still isn't sufficient for understanding that sentence.

3. Uselessness objection

> Ask, for example, for the meaning of 'Theaetetus flies". A Fregean answer might go something like this: given the meaning of 'Theaetetus' as argument, the meaning of 'flies' yields the meaning of 'Theaetetus flies' as value. The vacuity of this answer is obvious. We wanted to know what the meaning of 'Theaetetus flies' is; it is no progress to be told that it is the meaning of 'Theaetetus flies'. (p. 115)

4. Dispensability objection

Suppose we want to explain the meanings of all of the following terms:

> Annette
>
> the father of Annette
>
> the father of the father of Annette
>
> the father of the father of the father of Annette
>
> etc.

Davidson says:

> It is easy to supply a theory that tells, for an arbitrary one of these singular terms, what it refers to: if the term is 'Annette' it refers to Annette, while if the term is complex, consisting of 'the father of' prefixed to a singular term t, then it refers to the father of the person to whom t refers. It is obvious that no entity corresponding to 'the father of' is, or needs to be, mentioned in stating this theory. (pp. 114–115)

No abstract entities needed. All you need is this theory of denotation.

5. Truth theories as meaning theories

Davidson's own vision of theory of meaning: do away with meanings as entities, and merely show how the truth values of whole sentences are determined.

> [Tarski's] definition works by giving necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of every sentence, and to give truth conditions is a way of giving the meaning of a sentence. 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, p. 96)

Davidson's theory To give an adequate theory of meaning for a language, L, it suffices to give an extensionally correct recursive definition of truth-in-L—i.e., to give a recursive definition of 'is true in L' such that for each sentence of L, there is a sentence ψ of the metalanguage such that the sentence "'ϕ' is true if and only if ψ" is: i) a consequence of the definition, and ii) true. Knowledge of the consequences of such a definition is sufficient for understanding language L.

Knowing an adequate truth definition for L is sufficient for understanding L.

6. The Foster objection

One concern: Davidson's theory seems to allow that an acceptable theory of meaning could include the following T-sentence:

'Snow is white' is true iff grass is green

Davidson's reply is that a recursive theory of truth won't generate this, because any natural theory of this sort would have clauses of this sort:

'is white' applies to x iff x is green

'snow' refers to grass

which would then generate other false T-sentences such as:

'Plants are white' is true iff plants are green

But the worry isn't dispelled so easily. You can come up with recursive T-theories that yield the T-sentence:

'Snow is white' is true iff Snow is white and $2+2=4$

Someone who misunderstood English and thought that 'snow is white' *means* that snow is white and $2+2=4$ would know what is said by this recursive T-theory.

7. Modal and belief contexts

'∼', '&', and '∨' are *truth-functional*—the truth values of whole sentences formed using them are *determined* by the truth values of their parts.

"Necessarily" isn't not truth-functional. "Necessarily, Ted is a philosopher" is false, whereas "Necessarily, $2+2=4$" is true.

So how will you give a recursive clause for 'Necessarily'?

> "Necessarily, ϕ" is true if and only if the ??? associated with ϕ is necessarily true

But what will the ??? be? It looks like it might need to be a meaning.

8. Replying to Davidson's arguments against meanings as entities