Davidson's Contribution to the Philosophy of Language*

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In these remarks, I try to emphasize the positive and concentrate on what I take to be Donald Davidson's more important contributions to the philosophy of language.

1 Finitude, Structure, and Truth

1.1 Finitude

The most basic theme in Davidson's writings in philosophy of language in the 1960s is that we are finite beings whose mastery of the indefinitely many expressions of our language must somehow arise out of our mastery of finite resources. Otherwise, there would be an unbounded number of distinct things to learn in learning a language, which would make language learning

impossible for finite beings like ourselves. The linguistic competence of a finite being of our sort must be the result of the interaction of a finite number of basic competencies.

This point led Davidson to emphasize what I will call a *finite primitives constraint*, namely, that there cannot be an unbounded number of primitive meanings of expressions in our language. Davidson argued that this constraint was incompatible with certain proposals of the time. It ruled out Israel Scheffler's proposal that intentional verb phrases be treated as primitive unstructured units.[1] In Scheffler's view, the verb phrase, *believes that Socrates was a philosopher*, was to be treated as a primitive unstructured predicate—*believes-that-Socrates-was-a-philosopher*. Since this proposal would entail infinitely many primitive expressions, it violated the finite primitives constraint. A similar objection can be made to Quine's proposal[2] to treat quoted expressions as primitive wholes.

Davidson argued in addition that the finite primitives constraint ruled out certain versions of Frege's proposal that words used in intentional contexts do not have their ordinary senses but instead have a special oblique sense, and have different still doubly oblique senses in doubly intentional contexts, and so on for deeper intentional contexts. In this sort of view, *philosopher* has its ordinary sense in *Socrates was a philosopher*, an oblique sense in *Mary thinks that Socrates was a philosopher*, a doubly oblique sense in *Jack says that Mary thinks that Socrates was a philosopher*, etc. If an oblique sense of an expression is not determined by the regular sense of the

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[1]Israel Scheffler, "An Inscriptional Approach to Indirect Discourse," *Analysis*, 10 (1954), pp. 83-90

[2]W. V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960, p. 144

expression, and similarly for the doubly oblique and higher order senses, then this view appears to be committed to indefinitely many primitive senses, which violates Davidson's finite primitives constraint.

These and other similar early arguments of Davidson had a major impact at the time and it is now widely agreed that any acceptable analysis in these areas must respect some version or other of the finite primitives constraint.

1.2 Semantic Structure and Theory of Truth

Given that there is no bound to the number of expressions in a language, the finite primitives constraint implies that most expressions in the language are not primitive. Non-primitive expressions are themselves composed of primitive expressions and it seems that their meanings must somehow be determined by the expressions out of which they are composed, the meanings of those expressions, and the way they are put together.[3]

But how can we explain the way that meanings of complex expressions are composed from the expressions they contain and the meanings of those expressions? Frege had proposed identifying meanings with entities of a certain sort, Fregean senses. The entity assigned as a sense to a compound expression was supposed to be a function of the entities assigned as senses to the expressions of which the compound expression was composed. However, Davidson argued that the Fregean approach had serious problems unless pursued in a certain way.

Davidson's positive proposal was that an explanation of how the mean-

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[3]This is weaker than a more controversial thesis of the compositionality of meaning, which says the meaning of an expression is completely determined merely by the meanings of its parts and the way the parts are put together.

ings of complex expressions in a language depend on the meanings of their parts could be achieved though a theory of truth for the whole language or at least for a fragment containing the relevant expressions. The theory was to be modeled on Tarski's theory of truth for a certain formal language L. It was to satisfy a version of Tarski's *Convention T*, allowing proofs of relevant T sentences of the form, *x is true in L iff p*, where x was to be replaced by something that referred to a sentence of the language and p was to be replaced by that sentence or a translation of that sentence.

Not just any sort of theory of truth would do, however. For example, consider a fragment of a language with no indexical elements and no ambiguous expressions. Consider the theory of truth for that fragment with infinitely many axioms of the form: *"S" is true iff S*. Such a theory would not by itself shed light on how the meanings of complex expressions depend on the expressions from which they are composed and the meanings of those expressions.

So there were two related projects. One was to formulate other conditions on a theory of truth, in addition to *Convention T*, to be met if the theory was to serve as a key part of an explanation of semantic competence. The other was to provide theories of truth of the relevant sort for various fragments of natural language.

With respect to the first project, that of finding additional constraints on the relevant sort of theory of truth, one suggestion was that the theory of truth have only finitely many (nonlogical) axioms. Such a constraint is related to the finite primitives constraint along with the idea that each axiom of the theory should correspond to a distinct aspect of a finite language

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user's competence, a distinct element that has to be learned in learning the language.

There were also constraints on the background logic. Substitutional quantification was disallowed and the logic was restricted to standard classical first order quantification theory with identity.

What to say about Davidson's impact here? On the one hand, it is now widely accepted that proposals in semantics should involve demonstrations of how those proposals permit relevant theories of truth for sentences of the sort being analyzed. Indeed standard textbooks in linguistic semantics[4] require students to acquire considerable facility in understanding how such theories are developed.[5]

On the other hand, there appear to be disagreements concerning permissible background logic, with most theorists following Montague[6] in allowing second or higher-order logic and not restricting the logic to standard first-order extensional logic.

With respect to the second project, that of providing the relevant sort of semantics for various fragments of natural language, Davidson made important proposals about adverbial modification and about indirect and direct quotation. His proposal about adverbial modification was that it can often be treated as the application of a predicate to an event. So *Jack walked in*

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[4]Irene Heim and Angelica Kratzer, *Semantics in Generative Grammar* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998); *Knowledge of Meaning: An Introduction to Semantic Theory* (Cambridge, MA: 1995); Gennaro Chierchia and Sally McConnell-Ginet, *Meaning and Grammar: an Introduction to Semantics*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

[5]Unfortunately, many students are terribly bored by having to learn rigorous theories of truth for fragments of natural language. They often resolve never to have anything to do with linguistics semantics ever again, which is a shame.

[6]*Formal Philosophy: Selected Papers of Richard Montague*, edited by Richmond H. Thomason (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).

the street was treated as having (roughly) the logical form

$$(\exists e)(\mathrm{walk}(e) \& \mathrm{agent}(\mathrm{Jack}, e) \& \mathrm{in}(e, \mathrm{the\ street}))$$

which made the implicatitons of this sort of adverbial modification easy to accommodate in a first-order theory of truth.

Davidson's initial proposal about direct and indirect quotation was that the quoted material was to be treated as displayed material that was not really part of the containing sentence. So, *Jack believes that snow is white* was treated as a sentence accompanied by a second sentence that was referred to by the sentence: *Jack believes that. Snow is white.* Each of these sentences could then be given a standard semantical treatment.

Davidson's more considered view was that quoted material could be correctly treated both as something referred to and also as part of the containing sentence.

What can be said about the contemporary importance of Davidson's proposals about logical form? His treatment of adverbial modification in action sentences has been extremely influential. It has been widely adopted and extended. I think it is fair to say it is the standard view. On the other hand, the jury is still out concerning his proposal about quotation, although competing proposals appear to face serious problems.

2   What Aspects of Meaning Do Theories of Truth Help to Explain?

A theory of truth that was part of an account of linguistic competence for finite beings would have axioms for each primitive. There would be two kinds of axioms. For primitive predicates there might be axioms saying for example that the predicate "red" applies to something iff that thing is red. For connectives or quantifiers, there would be axioms that account for the way semantic properties of larger expressions depended on the semantic properties of their parts. So, for example, there might be an axiom saying that the connective "and" connects two sentences S and T in such a way that the result is true if and only if both S and T are true.

How could such a theory be used to explain or at least characterize the semantical properties of expressions in a given language? Well, it could be used to indicate what expressions are semantically primitive by having a separate axiom for each such predicate. The theory could also indicate how semantic properties of larger expressions depended on the semantic properties of their parts and they way they were constructed from their parts, by having a separate axiom for each such construction.

In addition, such a theory could help to specify what sort of expression a given expression is: a predicate, sentential connective, quantifier, etc.

Could the theory be used to explain or characterize the meaning you assign to a primitive predicate? I myself do not think such a theory could say any more than what is said in saying that "red" means *red*, "house" means *house*, and "brillig" means *brillig*.

Of course, I agree that the example with "brillig" is incorrect. If you do not already understand "brillig," you will not understand the claim that "brillig" means *brillig.* So, you could not have a theory with that claim in it.

But suppose the issue is how to explain our own linguistic competence from within, so to speak. Then the point is that such a theory cannot really say anything useful about our distinctive competence with particular primitive predicates, beyond reflecting the point that we use them as predicates!

On the other hand, it does seem plausible that theories of truth can and do reveal something significant about the meanings of sentential connectives and quantifiers. Why? Maybe because the meanings for us of these expressions depend on how we use those expressions and how our use depends on our recognition of certain patterns of implication and inconsistency involving the expressions, where implication and inconsistency are explainable in terms of truth conditions. For example, it seems to be an important aspect of the meaning of *and* that we take a conjunctive sentence using *and* to imply each of its conjuncts and to be implied by those conjuncts taken together.

3 Interpretation and Indeterminacy

I now turn to Davidson's views about what is involved in understanding other people, including understanding their language, what they say, and so on.

A natural idea, which however Davidson rejected, goes something like

this. Meanings are entities of a certain sort. A theory of meaning is a theory about the meanings that people assign to expressions in their language. To understand other people requires identifying the meaning they associate with what they are saying. To translate an expression of another language into your own is to find an expression in your language with the same meaning as the expression in the other language.

There is something odd in this idea, however natural it may be, in its suggestion that you "assign" or "attach" a meaning to expressions in your own language. It is sometimes said that you "grasp" certain meanings, as if your understanding consists in getting your mental hands around something.[7] One problem with these metaphors of assigning, attaching, and grasping is that people are not aware of assigning, attaching, or grasping meanings in the way that they are aware of grasping doorknobs, attaching post-it notes, and assigning tasks to employees. In any event, Davidson did not find these metaphors to be useful either in understanding the semantic structure of one's own language or for the interpretation of others.

To understand someone else is to interpret them—that is, to find a way to translate from their outlook into one's own. Interpretation is translation.

Davidson's ideas about translation were strongly influenced by his reaction to Quine's discussion of translation in Chapter Two of *Word and Object*.[8] There were important differences. For example, where Quine took

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[7] Frege, G., "Sense and Reference," *Philosophical Writings*, ed., M. Black and P. T. Geach. Blackwell, Oxford (1962), 56-78; Dummett, M., *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* (London: Duckworth, 1991); Peacocke, C., *Being Known* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).; Fodor, J., "Having Concepts: A Brief Refutation of the 20th century," *Mind and Language*, 19 (2004), pp. 29-47.

[8] W. V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960)

observation sentences to be prompted by stimulations of sensory organs, Davidson took them to be prompted by the observation of objects in the local environment. But both writers thought that the translation of observation sentences was easier than the translation of other sentences and both accepted a version of a principle of "charity" according to which, other things being equal, one scheme of translation of another person's language into one's own language is better than another to the extent that we are interpreted as having more beliefs in common.

Both writers supposed that translation must involve what Quine called "analytical hypotheses," that allow the translations of larger expressions to make use of translations of their parts. For Quine the analytical hypotheses were merely useful instruments for achieving translations of whole sentences. For Davidson, at least sometimes, they were more than that and were supposed to capture the sort of semantic structure that was to be captured or expressed in theories of truth, so that the analytical hypotheses would include hypotheses about the semantic primitives and the nature of various constructions in the other language and how those things might be related to primitives and constructions in one's own language.

For Davidson, of course, the relevant sort of semantic structure was not a structure of meanings, intentions, and/or extensions. It was rather that aspect of syntactic or logical structure on which semantic interpretation depends.

3.1 Indeterminacy of Translation

Davidson like Quine believed in a certain sort of indeterminacy of translation. Both believed that there might be equally adequate and in fact correct ways to translate from another language L into one's own language according to which the translation of a certain sentence in the other language is S according to the first scheme of translation and T according to the second scheme of translation, where S and T are by no means synonymous and where it may even be that S is true iff T is not true.

One might take such indeterminacy to be incoherent because it would imply that the sentence in the other language is both true and false. But indeterminacy does not really have that implication, as I will try to explain.

It may help to use a distinction Quine made between immanent and transcendent predicates in the theory of language.[9] An immanent linguistic predicate is defined only for a particular language. A transcendent predicate is defined for all languages. The predicate *word* is presumably transcendent in this sense, whereas on the other hand Tarski's truth predicate is merely immanent because defined only for a particular language L.

We might define an immanent predicate $means_i$ by appeal to the schema:

"E" means$_i$ E

where the same expression replaces both instances of "E". This only makes sense when "E" is an expression of our language, which is why this defines only an immanent notion.

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[9] W. V. Quine, *Philosophy of Logic*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 19. I discuss the distinction at greater length in Gilbert Harman, "Immanent and Transcendent Approaches to Meaning and Mind," *Reasoning, Meaning, and Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

And we might go on to attempt to define a transcendent predicate $means_t$ by appeal to the principle:

> X in L $means_t$ E iff the translation of X in L into our language
> $means_i$ E.

This works to explain a transcendent notion of meaning that applies to expressions in any language, given the presupposition the expressions have unique translations into our language. Similarly, we might appeal to translation to define a transcendent truth predicate $true_t$ in terms of an immanent truth predicate $true_i$:

> X in L is $true_t$ iff the translation of X in L into our language is
> $true_i$.

These ways of defining transcendent notions of $meaning_t$ and $truth_t$ presuppose determinacy of translation.

If there is indeterminacy of translation there will be indeterminacy of transcendent $meaning_t$ and perhaps even indeterminacy of transcendent $truth_t$.

Suppose there is such indeterminacy of translation, because there are many equally good acceptable ways to map expressions in another language L into expressions in our language. Then we can define a relativized transcendent notion of meaning:

> In relation to acceptable translation mapping m between L and
> our language, X in L $means_t(m)$ E iff m maps X in L into
> something in our language that $means_i$ E.

And we can define a relativized transcendent notion of truth:

> In relation to acceptable translation mapping m between L and our language, X in L is $\text{true}_t(m)$ iff m maps X in L into something in our language that is true_i.

Now recall that Quine and Davidson both believed there might be equally adequate and in fact correct ways to translate from another language L into one's own language according to which the translation of a certain sentence in the other language is S according to the first scheme of translation and T according to the second scheme of translation, where S and T are by no means synonymous and where it may even be that S is true iff T is not true.

Recall the thought that such indeterminacy must be incoherent, because it would imply that the sentence in the other language is both true and false. We can now see that indeterminacy is not incoherent in that way. Indeterminacy of translation merely implies that truth_t is relative, that is, there is no absolute transcendent truth_t, and there might be two acceptable translation mappings m and n such that a sentence in L is $\text{true}_t(m)$ but not $\text{true}_t(n)$.

3.2   Indeterminacy of Reference

Of course, the coherence of such indeterminacy does not establish that translation actually is indeterminate in that way. And whether translation is indeterminate depends on what constraints there are on acceptable translation. The constraints Quine placed on translation—preservation of stimulus meaning and stimulus analyticity—were clearly not sufficient for determi-

nate translation. And, although Davidson argued that there were different and additional constraints, he did not think these additional constraints were enough for determinate translation.

In particular, where Quine took occasion sentences to be prompted by stimulations of one's sense organs, Davidson took them to be prompted by one's perception of objects in the environment. One might think this means that for Davidson occasion sentences were to be interpreted as *about* the objects that prompt them, that is, as *refering* to those objects, but that assumption conflicts with an argument Davidson gave for indeterminacy of reference.

Davidson's argument went something like this. Suppose there were an interpretation of another person's language that identified primitive expressions and methods of semantic combination in a way that allowed the construction of a theory of truth for that language, a way that maximally satisfied constraints on interpretations. Suppose also that this interpretation involved assumptions about the reference of singular terms and the extensions of predicates in the language. Consider the set of entities that could be in the extension of a predicate or referred to by a singular term in that language and consider any one-one mapping of that set onto itself. Then define new notions of reference and extension, using this mapping, so that a term that originally referred to x now referred to $M(x)$ and a predicate with an extension originally containing x now had an extension containing $M(x)$. Whatever sentences were true according to the original interpretation would be true according to the new one. Davidson took this to show that the new interpretation satisfied the same constraints as the original interpretation

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and concluded that there was indeterminacy of reference.

One might object that the new interpretation need not satisfy the same constraints, because it need not treat observation sentences as prompted by objects they are interpreted as referring to. Davidson would reply, I suggest, that the relevant constraint on interpretation was that occasion sentences *were prompted* by things observed not that they *referred* to things observed. This is an important distinction apart from from considerations of indeterminacy of reference. When I point to a pump at the gas station and say, "Fill it up with that!" I am not saying to fill my gas tank up with the pump and when a scientist looking at streaks in a cloud chamber in the 50s said, "There goes a proton!" the scientist was not saying that the proton was a streak of cloud.

4   Alternative Conceptual Schemes.

In order to avoid reifying meanings and "the myth of the museum" of meanings in the head, Quine suggested replacing claims about meaning with claims about significance and synonymy.[10] We were to replace a claim that an expression has a meaning with a claim that the expression is significant and replace a claim that an expression means E with the claim that the expression is synonymous with "E". Quine believed there are distinct behavioral criteria for significance and synonymy. He thought we might have excellent reason to believe that people are using a language significantly while being unable to translate from that language into our own language,

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[10]W. V. Quine, "The Problem of Meaning in Linguistics," *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953).

even when such translation is not even possible.

Davidson disagreed. He thought that we could make no sense of meanings that cannot be expressed in our language. How are we to assess this disagreement between Quine and Davidson?

Recall our earlier definition of transcendent meaning$_t$.

X in L means$_t$ E iff the translation of X into our language means$_i$ E.

Consider the further claim:

X in L means$_t$ something iff there is a translation of X in L into our language.

This further claim does not follow from the definition of transcendent meaning$_t$, because it is possible that X in L means something but there is no way of stating what X means in our language, no true statement in our language of the form "X in L means$_t$ E."

But Davidson argued that, since our understanding of transcendent meaning$_t$ arises from considerations of translation into our language, it does not make sense to suppose that something could have a transcendent meaning$_t$ that we cannot express in our language (and therefore it does not make sense to suppose there could be be an "alternative conceptual scheme" to our own).

One issue is whether our language is "universal" in the sense that anything can be expressed in it. Tarski thought so and thought that this led

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to paradox).[11] Jerry Katz also thought that every natural language was universal (but believed this did not lead to paradox).[12]

It might be objected that we have many concepts today that people did not have two hundred years ago, for example, various scientific concepts of electrons, quarks, and quantum states. It seems that the language of two hundred years ago could not express these concepts, which our language can express, so the language of two hundred years ago was not universal. If so, how can we suppose that our language today is universal?

Katz replied that today's concepts could have been explained to people of two hundred years ago, given enough time, and our current language could be translated into that language by considering how such explanations would go. Although speakers of 200 years ago would have great difficulty in understanding translations of contemporary scientific theories, that would be because of the complexity of the theories, not because of a defect in the translations.

Davidson may or may not have agreed with Katz, but he certainly disagreed with Quine's idea that questions of significance were distinct from questions of translation. Quine argued that we can tell people are using a language from the way they interact with each other, quite apart from whether we can translate them. Davidson replied that not all social interactions involve language use and that to be justified in attributing language to people we have to be justified in attributing to them something translat-

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[11] A. Tarski, "The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages," In J. H. Woodger, editor, *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956)

[12] J. J. Katz, *Semantic Theory* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) and "Effability and Translation," *Meaning and Translation: Philosophical and Linguistic Approaches*, F. Guenthner and M. Guenther-Reuter (London: Duckworth, 1978), pp. 191-234.

able into our language, whether or not we can at the moment provide that translation.

This is a difficult interesting issue that is not easy to resolve.

5   Conclusion

In these brief comments I have tried to list what I take to be Davidson's most important contributions to the philosophy of language. These contributions include a finite primitives constraint, an emphasis on including a formal theory of truth as part of a semantic analysis, Davidson's analyses of adverbial modification in action sentences and of direct and indirect quotation, his rejection of the idea that a theory of meaning is a theory about certain entities that language users "grasp" or "assign" to expressions, his understanding of interpretation as translation, and his discussions of indeterminacy of translation, of indeterminacy of reference, and of alternative conceptual schemes.