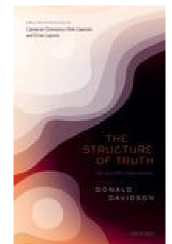

The Structure of Truth
Donald Davidson et al.
https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198842491.001.0001
Published: 2020 **Online ISBN:** 9780191878473 **Print ISBN:** 9780198842491

CHAPTER

Introduction: The Locke Lectures in Context

Cameron Domenico Kirk-Giannini, Ernie Lepore

https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198842491.003.0001 Pages 1–CI.P66
Published: February 2020

Abstract

This introduction to Davidson's 1970 Locke Lectures begins by describing their historical background, paying particular attention to the factors that made the philosophical community at Oxford at the time when they were delivered particularly receptive to the ideas in them. It then provides a brief summary of the contents of each of the lectures and gestures at how they depart from previously published works, both those that appeared before 1970 and those that would appear later. Special attention is paid to passages that either have never appeared before in print or appear in the lectures in a novel form.

Keywords: Donald Davidson, truth-theoretic semantics, ontology, quotation, propositional attitudes, adverbs, event semantics, translation

Subject: Philosophy of Language

Collection: Oxford Scholarship Online

Much of what follows in these lectures has already been published in one way or another, but what is familiar appears here in a novel form: either reworked from earlier published material or as early drafts which would subsequently appear after revision. In other words, these lectures comprise an invaluable historical document that illuminates how Davidson was thinking about the theory of meaning, the role of a truth theory therein, the ontological commitments of a truth theory, the notion of logical form, and so on, at a pivotal moment in the development of his thought. It is especially fitting that they should appear together in print for the first time in 2020, the fiftieth anniversary of their delivery in 1970.

There was a great deal of excitement surrounding the lectures at the time of Davidson's visit to Oxford. For years, David Wiggins and Michael Dummett (among others) had been regular visitors to the Stanford Philosophy Department, during which time they were essentially Davidson's guests. So, although Davidson had not yet published much prior to his arrival in Oxford, what he had published was both familiar to and quite influential on the philosophers in the community there, including Wiggins, Dummett, John McDowell, and Gareth Evans. Indeed, McDowell recalls Wiggins having all his New College undergraduates read "Actions, Reasons, and Causes" "in fading blue mimeo for a discussion group sometime between 1963 and 1965" (when he was Wiggins's undergraduate pupil), urging them as well to read Davidson's early language

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/36826/chapter/321990239 by Columbia University user on 26 September 2023

papers "Truth and Meaning" and "On Saying That." Another factor contributing to the excitement surrounding Davidson's lectures was that Noam Chomsky had delivered his legendary Locke Lectures just the year before, generating interest in the nature of language. In this context, Davidson's influential "Truth and Meaning" was ripe for scrutiny. After each of the lectures, which took place between May 13 and 29, 1970, philosophers would reassemble at Merton Street to discuss Davidson's project, and Davidson would p. 2 patiently and carefully respond to ↳ each critique. Given the reputation of Davidson's work in Oxford even before he arrived, the general excitement there concerning the philosophy of language, and Davidson's willingness to engage in extended discussion with the philosophers attending the lectures, it is perhaps unsurprising that the so-called "Davidsonic Boom" ensued in the early 1970s.[1]

We can locate the roots of many of Davidson's arguments and themes in these lectures and see how they developed in his later essays. There will inevitably be a great deal of interest in charting how the early Davidson conceived of some of the ideas that only appear in later essays—for example, the omniscient interpreter argument, which makes its appearance in Lecture VI. It will be obvious to anyone familiar with Davidson's writings that he is much more forthcoming here than in his published work about what his goal is—namely, to offer a theory of meaning—about why he thinks a truth theory can help to achieve this goal, and about why he thinks there aren't other ways to move forward. This comes out especially clearly in the first and last of the six lectures.

We are quite keen about the publication of these lectures, not so much because we believe that they contain hitherto completely unknown ideas of Davidson's (though there are discussions that have no echo in any of his published works), but rather because they are written so as to be presented to an audience as a fully organized and coherent exposition of his program in the philosophy of language. This kind of programmatic exposition is unique in the Davidsonian corpus. Even the various collections of his essays that have so far appeared fail to offer as coherent a presentation of his major themes, situating them within an overarching program. If these lectures had been widely available at the time, we believe the reception of his work, especially in the philosophy of language, might have been very different. Given the systematic nature of their presentation of Davidson's semantic program, we also hope that they will be of use to those encountering his thought for the first time.

Our intent in this brief introduction is merely to provide an overview of the contents of the lectures and, when relevant, to gesture at how they depart from previously published works. We pay special attention to passages that either have never appeared before in print or appear here in a novel form. What we do not provide, however, is any exegesis or criticism of our own. There are numerous books, collections, and essays p. 3 in print devoted ↳ to these exegetical and critical projects; we refer the reader to the bibliography at the end of the book for further information.

In addition to the writing of this introduction, our work as editors of this volume has involved the preparation of the text of the lectures for publication, a search through Davidson's published work to find connections with the material that appears in them, and historical research into the reception of the lectures by those at Oxford when they were delivered. Our investigations uncovered multiple versions of the texts of a number of the lectures.[2] In some of these cases, it was relatively straightforward to identify which version was the latest on the basis of evidence like the correction of typographical errors, and we have followed the text of the latest version; in others, we have simply opted for whichever version of a given passage seems to us clearer. At times the text of the lectures has been corrected; when these changes amount to more than the elimination of typographical errors, material that has been introduced or replaced by us appears in brackets: "[]" (though readers should be aware that Davidson sometimes set off sections of text with brackets in his manuscripts—the difference between editorial insertions and Davidson's own notes should be clear from the length of the material in brackets). We have, however, tried as much as possible to leave Davidson's prose intact. Readers should keep in mind that Davidson's style has been influenced by the fact that the text was prepared to be delivered orally rather than read as a book.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/36826/chapter/321990239 by Columbia University user on 26 September 2023

We now turn to the lectures.

Lecture I: Speaking the Truth

Davidson's first lecture begins with an extended defense of the claim that the notion of *speaking the truth* plays a foundational role in semantic theory. What is special about speaking the truth, Davidson claims, is that anyone who is competent with a language and who knows the relevant facts about the world is in a position to know whether a speaker of that language speaks the truth on any given occasion. In this regard, speaking the truth is unique—other linguistic acts, such as *asserting*, cannot be identified solely on the basis of semantic competence and knowledge of the way the world is. For one must determine a speaker's intentions in order to decide whether ↳ she is asserting, whereas one need only hear her correctly to know what she has said.

This is not to say that there are no conventional devices associated with linguistic acts such as assertion. The indicative mood is a conventional device which, when employed sincerely, serves to mark a speaker's utterance as an assertion. But any conventional device associated with a linguistic act other than *speaking the truth* can be used without the right intentions, as in mimesis. So, no other linguistic act is as intimately connected to linguistic competence, which is, after all, the object of semantic inquiry.

Our pre-theoretical notion of speaking the truth does not conform exactly to Davidson's claims about it. When a speaker uses metaphor or hyperbole to communicate a truth, we are often inclined to credit her with having spoken the truth. In such cases, one needs to draw on more than one's linguistic competence to decide whether the truth has been spoken. Davidson maintains, however, that there is nonetheless a notion of speaking the truth that is fit to play a foundational role in the theory of meaning. Indeed, Davidson suggests that it is partly our ability to determine whether someone speaks the truth in his favored sense that enables us to determine whether she speaks the truth in using metaphorical or hyperbolic language.

Having introduced the notion of speaking the truth and argued for its importance in semantic theory, Davidson proceeds to clarify that he is not in the business of offering an *analysis* of meaning. Indeed, he believes that the project of providing such an analysis is doomed from the start. This leads him to abandon the idea of a "*general* theory of meaning" and to focus instead on theories of meaning for particular languages.

The next large section of Lecture I is devoted to an extended argument for the claim that a Tarskian truth theory for English can serve as the basis for a theory of meaning for English. Davidson begins with the idea that a semantic theory must be recursive, which he takes to be suggested by the productivity of human linguistic competence—the fact that there is no obvious upper bound on how many expressions we can produce or comprehend. He then notes that the problem of articulating a recursive theory of the truth of sentences in a first-order language is more tractable than the problem of articulating a recursive theory of meaning. If, as Davidson argues, a translational theory of meaning is also inadequate, the Tarskian alternative is, he believes, all that remains. Davidson identifies and highlights the similarities between his preferred Tarskian methodology and a Fregean theory of reference, but argues that the Fregean theory ↳ oversteps when it posits entities (functions) referred to by predicates and sentential connectives.

Lecture I concludes with the tantalizing suggestion that the logical forms associated with sentences by an empirically supported Tarskian truth theory for a language can be identified with the Chomskyan deep structures of those sentences.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/36826/chapter/321990239 by Columbia University user on 26 September 2023

Connections with Published Work

Lecture I includes quite a few ideas that Davidson did not discuss in any detail elsewhere, or about which he came to change his mind after 1970. For example, he distinguishes between metaphorical meaning and literal meaning, a distinction that he famously came to reject. And his brief arguments that linguistic meaning is irreducible and that a general theory of meaning is impossible are not repeated elsewhere. One wonders whether the absence of these arguments in Davidson's published work indicates that he later came to reject them, and, if so, for what reason.

The suggestion that the logical forms associated with sentences by a truth theory can be identified with Chomskyan deep structure had been discussed in Davidson's "Semantics for Natural Languages," which appeared in 1968. Davidson's discussion of the relationship between asserting, speaking the truth, convention, and games was eventually incorporated into "Communication and Convention," which appeared in 1984.

Lecture II: Truth and Ontology

One elegant feature of these collected lectures is Davidson's choice to juxtapose certain of them: that the lecture on truth should appear between the lecture on the theory of meaning and the lecture on the logical form of action sentences makes much more sense than their arrangement in Davidson's published collections, where the subject of adverbial modification is not treated in the volume on the philosophy of language. In point of fact, these three lectures (as well as the essays on which the latter two are based) belong together.

Lecture II begins with the thought that a Tarskian truth-theoretic semantics for a natural language can serve as a guide to ontology. This may seem surprising, Davidson suggests, since the T-sentences generated p. 6 by such a ↳ semantics may at first blush seem to be truisms, and it would be surprising for a collection of truisms to serve as a guide to ontology. But a Tarskian truth-theoretic semantics is not merely a collection of T-sentences; it is a finitely axiomatized theory which entails a collection of T-sentences, and this is where, for Davidson, its ontological interest lies.

The thought that begins the lecture is then temporarily set aside, and Davidson embarks on a discussion of what sort of objects to identify as the primary bearers of truth and falsity. Davidson first argues that the truth of object-language sentences must be relativized to a speaker and a time: T-sentences should be of the form:

> ⌜S is true (in L) for s at t iff ϕ,⌝

where "S" is a constant denoting a sentence in the object language and "ϕ" is a variable ranging over sentences of the metalanguage.

Davidson then suggests that no further relativization is necessary, since any other candidate parameter for relativization, such as a demonstratum parameter, can be accounted for in terms of a speaker/time pair: the demonstratum associated with a given utterance produced by a speaker at a time is the object that that speaker is demonstrating at that time.

After briefly considering the idea that the primary bearers of truth are propositions or statements and rejecting it on the basis that positing propositions in addition to sentences is gratuitous, Davidson returns to the idea of a Tarskian truth-theoretic semantics as a guide to ontology. In light of the preceding discussion, he remarks that a Tarskian theory of truth requires at least an ontology containing sentences, individuals, and times. But what else might be required?

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/36826/chapter/321990239 by Columbia University user on 26 September 2023

Here Davidson proceeds by comparing his preferred Tarskian theory with a number of competitors, including what he calls the “double-negation” theory of truth, according to which “is true” should be understood as a sentential operator with the same effect as double negation, and the idea that a sentence is true just in case it corresponds to a fact. He argues that the double-negation theory, while it is entirely ontologically noncommittal, fails to account for sentences in which truth is predicated of named propositions, such as “Fermat’s last theorem is true.” Similarly, he rejects a fact-based theory of truth on the basis that, given certain plausible assumptions, it can be shown that there is only one fact (the so-called “Great Fact argument”). This, Davidson suggests, deprives the fact-based theory of interest.

p. 7 The final alternative Davidson considers is one that appeals to substitutional quantification. The substitutional approach to the semantics of quantified sentences interests Davidson because he believes that, if it were successful, it would show how to give an ontologically noncommittal semantics for those sentences. But, drawing on arguments originally due to John Wallace, Davidson argues that the substitutional account of quantification cannot be correct because it cannot account for the fact that (e.g.) if “Someone is wise” is true, then someone is wise.

Having finished his survey of alternative theories, Davidson sketches the Tarskian approach, focusing in particular on the notion of satisfaction of an open sentence by a sequence of entities. Since the Tarskian theory requires that we posit such sequences, it appears to require also that we posit the entities out of which they are constructed. Thus an adequate theory of natural language must, in the end, be ontologically committal: “Ontology comes in only with satisfaction, and satisfaction is an essential part of the machinery needed to run a recursive theory of truth that satisfies Convention T.”

Connections with Published Work

Davidson’s discussion in this lecture draws heavily on his “True to the Facts,” which appeared in 1969. In particular, the discussions of the double-negation theory, the fact-based theory, and the comparison between the fact-based theory and Davidson’s preferred satisfaction-based theory can be traced to the earlier paper, as can the argument that the truth of sentences need not be relativized to anything more than a speaker and a time. Davidson’s argument about substitutional quantification, for which he thanks John Wallace, does not appear in “True to the Facts” or his later work, though he often cites Wallace’s work on the subject, and he hints at a similar argument in “In Defense of Convention T” (1973).

Lecture III: Quotation

As Lecture III begins, Davidson signals that his attention has shifted from methodological remarks to the construction of semantic theories for particular natural language constructions. This project will occupy p. 8 him for the next three lectures: the subject of Lecture III is quotation; ↳ Lecture IV is devoted to ascriptions of attitude; and Lecture V concerns action sentences. In each case, Davidson proposes to examine extant theories to see if they satisfy Convention T, and, finding that they do not, proposes alternative analyses.

The first theory of quotation Davidson targets in his discussion is what he labels “the proper-name theory.” According to the proper-name theory, an expression surrounded by quotation marks is a logically simple name which refers to the linguistic expression inside the quotes. This theory, he points out, has trouble accounting for cases in which quoted material is apparently both used and mentioned. But, more importantly, Davidson argues that if quoted expressions are unstructured names, then each one will have to be separately included in the lexicon of any language including a syntactic device for quotation. Given that any quoted expression can itself be quoted, this means that the lexicon for any such language will have infinite cardinality. Since Davidson holds for methodological reasons that an adequate semantic theory for a

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/36826/chapter/321990239 by Columbia University user on 26 September 2023

natural language must posit a finite lexicon, he takes this to be a decisive objection to the proper-name theory.

Since the problem with the proper-name theory was that it treated quoted expressions as unstructured, Davidson turns next to a theory that treats quotation marks as an operator which renders enclosed material self-referential. According to this "picture theory," quoted expressions are syntactically complex, consisting of the quoted material, on the one hand, and the quotation operator, on the other. The picture theory successfully evades the threat of a bloated lexicon; Davidson, however, rejects it on the basis that merely stipulating that quoted expressions are self-referential does not explain how quotation succeeds *by* picturing; stating the semantics for the operator does not require appeal to the picturing relation.

Davidson pauses at this point to consider the charge that operators like the picture-theoretic quotation mark and "believes that" (construed along Fregean lines) are deviant in that the meanings of expressions, when they occur within the scope of such operators, are not functions of their meanings in other linguistic contexts. He suggests that this feature of the picture theory of quotation is in principle avoidable; one can treat all words as referring, by default, to themselves, and treat the absence of quotation as an operator which restores to expressions their intuitive referents.

The last theory Davidson considers before presenting his own is one that combines elements of the previous two. According to this "spelling theory," a quoted simple expression (a letter or other individual typographical element) refers to itself, as on the proper-name theory; however, a quoted complex p. 9 ↳ expression abbreviates the definite description that describes the sequence of simple expressions which, when concatenated, form it. Like the picture theory, the spelling theory avoids the problem of an infinitary lexicon. Davidson, however, objects that quotation marks play no essential role in the spelling theory, and that it predicts that one should be able to quantify into the quotation operator. He also argues that the spelling theory cannot account for our ability to introduce novel notation, such as Greek letters, using quotation.

Having found all competing theories unsatisfactory, Davidson concludes by describing his own proposal, the so-called "demonstrative theory." According to the demonstrative theory, quotation marks refer to the material they flank, which is not always a semantic part of the sentence containing it. The flexibility of demonstrative reference, Davidson claims, allows his theory to account for mixed use/mention cases: in these cases, the demonstrative introduced by the quotation marks refers to a part of the sentence that does make a semantic contribution. Moreover, since the demonstrative theory reduces quotation to demonstration, it is susceptible to a truth-theoretic treatment if demonstratives are. Since Davidson takes the semantics of demonstratives to require no more than the relativization of truth conditions to speakers and times, he takes the demonstrative theory to succeed in meeting the constraints imposed by Convention T.

Connections with Published Work

The text of Lecture III is similar to the text of Davidson's "Quotation," which appeared nine years later. The lecture thus demonstrates that Davidson's account of quotation was developed much earlier than is apparent from his history of publications. The most significant difference between Lecture III and the published version of "Quotation" is that the latter does not include Davidson's discussion of the "reverse" picture theory, according to which all expressions refer to themselves by default and reference to the nonlinguistic world is induced by a covert non-quotation operator.

In the text of the lecture, Davidson claims that this "reverse" theory avoids positing an operator that violates compositionality by interacting with material in its scope in a way that cannot be predicted on the basis of the semantic properties of that material. The idea seems to be that, while the ordinary picture

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/36826/chapter/321990239 by Columbia University user on 26 September 2023

theory requires the quotation operator to operate on (e.g.) “dog” and “hound,” which have the same semantic properties, and p. 10 ↳ produce different results, the reverse theory assigns “dog” and “hound” (and indeed any two distinct words) different semantic properties, thus preserving compositionality.

The reverse picture theory is subject to a number of difficulties. For example, it struggles to account for lexical ambiguity: all of the lexical items in the sentence “Jones went to the bank,” for example, are unambiguous, referring as they do to themselves. It follows that if the non-quotation operator is not to violate compositionality, it must either map “bank” to the property of being a financial institution in all linguistic contexts or map it to the property of being the side of a river in all linguistic contexts. Either way, one reading of “Jones went to the bank” will be lost. Given that Davidson does not ultimately endorse the reverse picture theory, however, it remains unclear why he eliminated discussion of it from the published version of “Quotation.”

Lecture IV: Attributions of Attitude

The subject of Lecture IV is attributions of attitude. In it, Davidson extends his theory of indirect quotation (“On Saying That,” 1968) to propositional attitudes generally, where these are individuated syntactically as verbs that can take a sentence or “that”-clause as internal argument. Before introducing the main subject of the paper, however, Davidson reflects on some methodological issues raised by his discussion of quotation in the previous lecture. The dialectic surrounding quotation, he argues, has a familiar form: first, the observation that a traditional theory is inadequate; second, an attempt to solve the problem syncategorematically; third, the realization that this syncategorematic solution requires an infinite lexicon and is, therefore, untenable. Davidson’s remarks here constitute a refreshing and atypically unhedged meta-discussion of how philosophy progresses.

In the case of quotation, we have seen that Davidson argues that the proper-name theory, which treats quoted expressions as semantically primitive, is unacceptable because it requires positing an infinitary lexicon. Davidson now claims that this kind of syncategorematic treatment is in fact desirable when it does not lead to unacceptable consequences, since it allows us to make our semantic theory for a given object language less ontologically committal. Opting for syncategorematic analyses whenever possible allows us to discover which entities we are forced to posit in order to account for human linguistic practice.

p. 11

Having made this methodological point, Davidson turns to the problem of constructing a truth theory for attributions of attitude. After distinguishing his subject from the problem of constructing a reductive analysis of belief, he settles on “asserted that” sentences as the primary focus of his theoretical attention. Davidson argues that the dialectic surrounding attributions of attitude parallels the dialectic surrounding quotation in that, once it was realized that expressions inside attitude ascriptions do not behave semantically as they do outside, theoreticians opted for syncategorematic treatments. Here he mentions Quine, to whom he attributes the view that every combination of an attitude verb and a complement clause is a distinct semantically unstructured predicate of speakers, and Scheffler, who defends a view which is similar except that the predicates are taken to be predicates of utterances, as well as theories that treat the complement clauses of attitude ascriptions as complex adverbial modifiers.

More controversially, Davidson argues that the theories of Church and Frege are subject to the same problem as those of Quine and Scheffler. For Davidson, Church’s theory, which involves introducing subscripts for lexical items that appear in ascriptions of attitude, amounts to positing an infinite number of homonymous expressions corresponding to each natural language word. Frege’s theory, which instead makes the interpretation of lexical items in ascriptions of attitude depend on the number of attitude verbs under which they are embedded, does not introduce an infinity of lexical items; nevertheless, it illicitly

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/36826/chapter/321990239 by Columbia University user on 26 September 2023

"welds" together "an expression plus an index gotten by counting the number of occurrences of verbs of attitude that dominate it."

It is not impossible to produce a truth-theoretically tractable theory of attitude ascriptions by appealing to intensions, however. If a theory that appeals only to extensions and intensions is viable (for example, if expressions behave in the same way whether they are singly or multiply embedded under attitude verbs), then one could have expressions refer primarily to their intensions, introducing an operator that would apply to them to make them refer to their extensions. Davidson concedes that such a theory would be viable; he argues that it would not be satisfactory, however, for at least two reasons. First, he argues that positing intensions in order to solve the problem of attitude reports is a bad-making feature of a semantic theory—it would be preferable to get by without any entities introduced for purely theoretical reasons. Second, he argues that the complementizer clauses in ascriptions of attitude cannot name intensions or propositions because the propositional attitude ascribed by any particular attitude ascription is not p. 12 ↳ fixed by the conventions of language, being instead dependent on myriad contextual factors.

Where have the theories Davidson has canvassed so far gone wrong? His suggestion is that they have regarded the syntactically embedded sentence, which characterizes the attitude ascribed, as *semantically* a part of the embedding sentence. Much better, Davidson argues, to regard attitude ascriptions along the lines of *discourses*, in which utterances are first made and then referred to using demonstratives, as in "The moon constitutes a severe threat to our security. This was asserted yesterday by the Mayor of the Indian Ocean." In such discourses, there is no temptation to regard the demonstrative "this" in the second sentence as somehow forcing the expressions in the first to have anything other than their normal semantic values. But if it is possible to produce and then refer to an utterance in this way, there is no in-principle reason why sincerely uttering one sentence, syntactically considered, might not involve doing both. This is, in fact, what Davidson suggests: according to his "paratactic analysis" of attitude ascriptions, they involve demonstrative reference to an utterance of the speaker's, which is claimed to stand in some relation to some utterance or attitude of the ascribee. Thus, the sentence "Heraclitus said that everything flows" is analyzed as "Some act of saying performed by Heraclitus was synonymous with the following act of saying (performed by me): Everything flows"; similarly, the sentence "Thales believed that there is a god in the magnet" is analyzed as "Some belief of Thales had the content expressed by the following act of saying (performed by me): There is a god in the magnet."

Davidson turns next to the question of first-person attributions of attitude. How is it, he wonders, that claiming that someone else asserts that the earth moves does not involve asserting oneself that the earth moves, but claiming that one asserts that the earth moves does sometimes involve asserting oneself that the earth moves? More generally, how is it that these first-person attitude ascriptions manage to perform the speech acts they report? Davidson regards it as a virtue of his theory that it can account for such performative uses of first-personal ascriptions of attitude. His suggestion is that, in performative cases, a single pronounced sentence both constitutes the performance of a speech act and serves to characterize the content of that speech act. Thus the sentence "I assert that the earth moves" is analyzed as "My next remark is synonymous with a present assertion of mine: The earth moves."

Davidson concludes with a discussion of the relationship between clausal mood and what he calls "mode" (illocutionary force). He points out that p. 13 ↳ mood is a matter of linguistic meaning, whereas mode is not, arguing that this observation undermines attempts to demonstrate that imperatives and interrogatives are non-truth-conditional. He then proposes a truth-conditional account of imperative clausal mood which parallels his paratactic analysis of indicative performatives like "assert." According to Davidson's proposal, imperative clauses are underlyingly quite complex, so that the sentence "Close the door," for example, is interpreted as "The next remark is imperative in mode. You will close the door."

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/36826/chapter/321990239 by Columbia University user on 26 September 2023

Connections with Published Work

Lecture IV draws on the paratactic account of indirect speech reports developed in "On Saying That" (1968), though it significantly generalizes that account by extending it to all forms of propositional attitude ascriptions—a strategy that Davidson mentions briefly in his 1976 "Reply to Foster." Although "On Saying That" does include a condensed version of Davidson's objections to the theories of attitude ascriptions proposed by Frege and Church, Lecture IV provides a lengthier exposition, and in this sense prefigures the discussion that would later appear in "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics" (1977). Davidson's discussion of mood and mode at the end of Lecture IV is clearly the predecessor of his much later essay "Moods and Performances" (1979).

Lecture V: Adverbial Modification

At the beginning of Lecture V, Davidson briefly pauses his project of analyzing troublesome constructions in natural language to offer a number of methodological remarks. Modifying Convention T allows us to account for indexicality in natural language, and Davidson has labored in the previous lectures to show that once we are able to accommodate demonstrative reference within a Tarskian theory, we can also accommodate quotation and attributions of attitude. Davidson now argues that the Tarskian approach he has been advocating—which can account for the logic of truth-conditional connectives, quantifiers, indexicals, quotation, attitude ascriptions, mood, and performatives—should also be able to accommodate descriptions, and might be able to accommodate non-referring singular terms and truth-value gaps. In fact, p. 14 Davidson describes three reasons for holding that a Tarskian ↳ approach will ultimately be able to accommodate the full range of natural language constructions. (This is a clear departure from the skepticism at the end of "Truth and Meaning" with regard to an exhaustive treatment of natural language, based on Tarskian considerations.)

The first of Davidson's reasons is that the Tarskian project may, in fact, be more flexible than is commonly recognized: the logic on which a T-theory is based need not be standard first-order logic, as long as it is possible to construct a theory of truth for it. His second reason is that work in generative syntax has brought work in linguistics much closer to work in logic in at least two respects: first, in particular choices like the choice to treat pronouns as variables and the choice to assign common nouns, (intransitive) verbs, and adjectives meanings of the same semantic type; second, in its general willingness to posit underlying levels of representation which differ radically from the prima facie structure of natural language phrases. Davidson's third reason has the flavor of a transcendental deduction: it is a condition for the possibility of our linguistic competence in assigning truth conditions to arbitrary sentences, he argues, that there exists some finite recursive theory for our language satisfying Convention T.

Having outlined his reasons for optimism about the Tarskian program, Davidson returns to the project of analyzing particular constructions—in this case, adverbial modifiers. Presumably because his analysis of adverbial modifiers will ultimately rely heavily on an ontology of events, he begins by discussing whether the semanticist is committed to such entities even before considering adverbs. A simple argument for adding events to one's semantic metalanguage is that sentences like "The chairman's resignation preceded the fall of the government" appear to contain singular terms which refer to events. Davidson considers and rejects a strategy for resisting this argument by assimilating the semantics of "The chairman's resignation preceded the fall of the government" to that of "The chairman resigned before the government fell." He has two arguments against this alternative, apparently event-free proposal: first, that "the chairman's resignation" either entails or presupposes the uniqueness of the resignation event, so that the two sentences, in fact, have different truth conditions; second, that a proper treatment of "before" will require the introduction of quantification over times, and a proper treatment of causal and explanatory connectives

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/36826/chapter/321990239 by Columbia University user on 26 September 2023

("caused," "because," etc.) will similarly require the introduction of quantification over events. So the strategy ultimately fails to escape the necessity of positing events.

p. 15 If, moreover, one adopts the methodology of assigning the same semantic contribution to sentences when they appear freestanding as when they appear embedded under connectives, then the realization that sentences embedded in causal and explanatory claims quantify over events requires that we hold that they also do so when they appear unembedded. Davidson's conception of natural language thus involves a pervasive covert substructure of quantification over events.

Davidson turns next to adverbial modification, presenting his semantic treatment of adverbs as a further argument for the claim that natural language sentences covertly quantify over events. He begins by noting the "variable polyadicity" of adverbial phrases, which is constituted by their syntactic and semantic capacity to accept a seemingly arbitrary number of modifiers—of time, location, manner, duration, and so forth. A naive logical treatment of verbs of action assigns them predicates or relations with fixed adicities (generally between one and three)—thus "smiled" is assigned a predicate, and "kicked" is assigned a binary relation. The diversity and optionality of adverbial modifiers seems, however, to doom such an approach: we are forced to represent each natural language verb with an indefinitely large set of relations of different adicities corresponding to the indefinitely large set of combinations of adverbial modifiers with which it could co-occur.

Davidson's solution to this problem is to treat verbs of action and change as introducing quantification over events, and to treat adverbial modifiers as introducing descriptive material into the scope of the event quantifier. This solves the problem of variable polyadicity by rendering the process of adverbial modification both compositional and recursive. The translation of natural language sentences into event descriptions, however, is not always straightforward; for example, in order to accommodate the ambiguity in the sentence "John broke the window," we need to posit a complex underlying representation containing two events: one the breaking of the window and the other some sort of movement. On one reading (the one where John breaks the window using some unspecified object), the movement in question will be one intentionally produced by John; on the other reading (the one where John jumps or is flung though the window), the movement will be one of John himself. Nevertheless, the main target for analysis—modification by adjunction—is given a very natural treatment, where (for example), the meaning of the preposition "at," on its temporal interpretation, is such that it combines with an expression denoting a time to form a predicate of events. Thus, the sentence "John smiled at eleven o'clock" is p. 16 ↳ interpreted as "There was a smiling event of which John was the agent and which occurred at eleven o'clock."

By way of concluding his discussion of adverbial modification, Davidson offers two caveats. First, the account does not extend naturally to adverbs like "intentionally," which induce linguistics environments in which the substitution of coreferential expressions fails to preserve truth; Davidson suggests that sentences containing such adverbs be analyzed along the lines of his account of ascriptions of attitude. Second, adverbs like "well" and "quickly" resist assimilation to Davidson's semantic framework, since events seem to be individuated too coarsely to be described as *good* or *fast*. To use Davidson's example, a single event could be both a good dancing and a poor seduction of the king. Davidson does not offer any proposed solution to this problem, merely noting it as a difficulty and moving on.

Having presented his analysis of adverbial modification, Davidson turns back to methodological remarks in the last third of the lecture. First, he notes that, now that a concrete proposal about the semantics of adverbial modification is on the table, we can assess various adverbial strategies for doing away with apparent ontological commitments. Since Davidson's proposal introduces an extensive ontology of events, it is not nominalistic in spirit; this, he expects, will disappoint advocates of most adverbial strategies. Second, he embarks on an extensive discussion of the notion of logical form.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/36826/chapter/321990239 by Columbia University user on 26 September 2023

A sentence, Davidson argues, should not be thought to have a unique logical form. Instead, the claim that an object-language sentence has a particular logical form must be relativized to both an underlying logical metalanguage (complete with a definition of entailment) and a method for translating object-language sentences into this metalanguage. Davidson's proposals about the logical forms of various English sentences should be interpreted, he maintains, as claims that the particular choices of a logical metalanguage and a translation procedure that he favors are particularly good ones.

To exhibit the advantages of his choices of logical form, Davidson contrasts them with the logical forms posited by an imagined theory which (as we have seen before) assigns to each natural language verb of action an indefinitely large set of logical relations of different adicity, but somehow manages to introduce rules of inference which preserve the intuitive entailment relations between, for example, the sentence "The ball rolled to the bush" and the sentence "The ball rolled." Davidson lists a number of virtues of his proposal as compared to this imagined one: its logic is known to be consistent and complete with respect to standard model theory; it posits fewer inference p. 17 ↳ rules; and it follows intuition in treating "rolled" as univocal—as contributing a "common conceptual element" to the interpretation of every sentence in which it occurs.

Connections with Published Work

Lecture V draws heavily on Davidson's essay "The Logical Form of Action Sentences," which had appeared three years earlier in 1967. However, Lecture V differs from that earlier work in that it integrates discussion of a number of points that emerged in Davidson's exchanges with various commentators between 1966 and 1970. For example, the discussion of the sentence "the chairman's resignation preceded the fall of the government," the analogy to Frege's theory of tense, the remarks on logical form, and the argument against appealing to additional inference rules all draw on Davidson's reply to James Cargile, published in 1970 (the analogy to Frege also reappears later in Davidson's 1977 "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics"). The discussion of the sentence "the rock broke the window" appears to have been inspired by Davidson's exchange with Héctor-Neri Castañeda, published in 1967. The methodological remarks in the first few pages of Lecture V appear to have been newly written for Davidson's Oxford audience.

It would also be remiss not to mention that this lecture comfortably and correctly situates Davidson's discussion of adverbial modification (and action and event sentences) within his program in the philosophy of language. When "The Logical Form of Action Sentences" was collected in 1980, Davidson included it with his work in action theory rather than philosophy of language, even though it is a paradigmatic discussion in, and perhaps his most lasting and appreciated contribution to, semantics.

Lecture VI: Invariants of Translation

In Lecture VI, Davidson turns away from the project of providing analyses for particular natural language constructions, which has occupied him for the previous three lectures, and back to questions of methodology. The issue he addresses in this final lecture is an epistemic one: how can we come to know that a candidate T-theory for an object language is correct? Davidson, following Quine, refers to this as the problem of *radical translation*. In the general case—the case where it is not assumed that the theoretician has p. 18 ↳ any antecedent knowledge of the object language—there will be no theory-independent way of knowing whether the T-sentences derivable in the theory are translational. One must therefore look for a criterion of success for a T-theory that does not presuppose that its T-sentences are translational. It is interesting to note that Davidson does not take pains in this lecture—as he does in his published work—to distance himself from Quine both in terms of methodology and by labeling his approach "radical interpretation" rather than "radical translation."

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/36826/chapter/321990239 by Columbia University user on 26 September 2023

A T-theory attempts to pair object-language sentences with the conditions under which one who speaks them speaks the truth, in the sense of speaking the truth Davidson articulates in Lecture I. Since Davidson's notion of speaking the truth is independent of speakers' intentions, it fits naturally into a theory designed to capture the purely linguistic rules governing the verbal behavior of a speech community (as opposed, for example, to a theory of the speech acts performed by members of the community). To describe a linguistic performance as a speaking of the truth (or as a failing to do so), Davidson reminds us, is not to characterize the non-linguistic goals (roughly, the perlocutionary intentions) of its author; neither is it to characterize what in Austinian terminology would be called the illocutionary act performed, since a given illocutionary act can be performed by uttering any number of different sentences; it is, instead, to characterize the locutionary act performed (the action described "in terms of [the speaker's] actual words and the intentions necessary to uttering a particular sentence with shared truth conditions as an act of communication."

An obvious way to test a Tarskian truth theory for an arbitrary object language would be to assess whether it could be used to prove some representative T-sentences for the object language. Unfortunately, since part of what it is to be a T-sentence is for the material that comes on the right-hand side of the biconditional to be a translation of the object-language sentence described on the left-hand side, there is no theory-independent way to know which sentences are T-sentences.

Davidson suggests that (i) we will be able to identify the genuine T-sentences if we are able to identify which sentences with the form of T-sentences are true, and (ii) it is possible to identify which sentences with the form of T-sentences are true. This latter possibility claim is predicated on two methodological assumptions. First, Davidson assumes that we will not be led too far astray if we assume that whenever an object-language speaker accepts a sentence, that sentence is true. Second, Davidson assumes that we, as theoreticians, are correct about which propositions that are candidate meanings for object-language sentences are true. Granting these p. 19 ↳ two assumptions, we are entitled, on the basis of observing that our subject accepts the sentence "Baarish ho rahii hai" when it is raining in his vicinity, to conclude that the sentence "Baarish ho rahii hai" is true in the subject's language iff it is raining. Davidson says little about how the theoretician is to determine whether her subject accepts a given sentence rather than bearing some other doxastic attitude toward it; he assumes that behavioral cues will render this epistemic problem tractable.

The project of pairing accepted sentences with true propositions is still fairly unconstrained, and Davidson suggests that the crucial factor in making it tractable is that the pairing must be effected in such a way that the underlying recursive structure of the object language is revealed. Since the recursive structures with which we are antecedently familiar are those of our own language, we will tend to find these in the object language, as well. In the context of Davidson's prior arguments, this amounts to the claim that the recursive structure we will uncover in the process of radical translation is first-order quantificational structure. The idea that first-order quantificational theory underlies all languages is, for Davidson, an empirical hypothesis; the idea that some single recursive theory (whatever that might be) underlies all languages is not, being instead a condition for the possibility of translation between them.

Davidson now turns to a skeptical worry: given his methodological assumptions, the theorist will never attribute massive, systematic error to the speakers of an object language—how could she, given that in choosing which propositions to pair with which accepted sentences, she assumes that speakers only accept sentences which express true propositions? But doesn't this conclusion rule out by fiat a genuine possibility, which is that the speakers of some language really do make massive, systematic errors about the facts? Davidson claims that this is not a genuine but improbable possibility; a theory that attributes such massive, systematic error to speakers of the object language is *unintelligible*. To endorse a theory that attributes such error is to undermine one's evidence for endorsing the theory.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/36826/chapter/321990239 by Columbia University user on 26 September 2023

This point about the limits of error applies not only in the context of radical translation, Davidson proceeds to argue; it also applies to our own beliefs. Davidson's argument for this radical conclusion is as follows: a person trying to interpret the language and beliefs of an omniscient informant would necessarily construct a theory according to which most of his or her own beliefs are true, as well.

The inevitability of discovering the recursive structure of our own language in the languages of others, as well as the preponderance of our beliefs in the minds of our peers, leads Davidson to reconceive of the project of semantics ↳ as an inquiry into the structural features of reality. For if there is a single recursive structure underlying all languages, then the ontological commitments of that structure are the ontological commitments of language in general. It is here that Davidson introduces the notion of an *invariant of translation*, a sentence the truth of which is preserved when switching between theories of a given phenomenon. If today's temperature is greater than yesterday's temperature as measured in degrees Fahrenheit, for example, then it is greater than yesterday's temperature as measured on any scale. Thus, sentences about the ordering of days induced by temperature measurement are invariant under translation between different theories of temperature. Similarly, Davidson suggests, there might be claims that are invariant under translation between adequate truth theories for a given language. While some claims about the existence of particular entities are unlikely to be invariants of translation, general commitments to classes of entities like events, which are imposed by the structure of quantificational theory, are more plausible candidates.

Davidson concludes by distinguishing his preferred approach to the study of language from those that begin by assigning meanings to particular expressions. The concept of a meaning, he claims, presupposes a semantic theory. There is thus no genuine alternative to his holistic methodology—interpretive hypotheses are not justified piecemeal, but rather by "the whole fabric of belief as evinced in a system of behavior."

Connections with Published Work

Davidson's approach to radical translation appears in its first published form in "Radical Interpretation" (1973) though it is prefigured by some brief remarks in "Truth and Meaning" (1967). It is worth noting that in "Radical Interpretation," Davidson places much more emphasis on the methodological differences between his approach and Quine's (hence the title's reference to radical *interpretation* rather than radical *translation*). Lecture VI may thus represent an earlier period in his thought, during which the differences between his own approach and Quine's seemed less significant. His "omniscient informant" argument seems to be a predecessor of the "omniscient interpreter" argument, which was first presented in "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics" (1977). Davidson in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (1984) remarks that "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (1974) is the direct descendant of Lecture VI.

Notes

1 Special thanks to Chris Peacocke and John McDowell for sharing their recollections of these events.

2 Special thanks to Anita Avramides and Kirk Ludwig for giving us access to their copies of the lectures, and to Marcia Cavell for supporting the publication of the lectures as a volume.

The Structure of Truth: The 1970 John Locke Lectures. Cameron Domenico Kirk-Giannini and Ernie Lepore, Oxford University Press (2020). © Cameron Domenico Kirk-Giannini and Ernie Lepore. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198842491.001.0001

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/36826/chapter/321990239 by Columbia University user on 26 September 2023