

Review of Ernest Lepore and Kirk Ludwig, *Donald Davidson's Truth-Theoretic Semantics*

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This is a companion volume to the authors' splendid *Donald Davidson: Meaning Truth, Language, and Reality*,¹ which offered a general exegetical and critical account of Donald Davidson's philosophical views.²

The present equally splendid volume concentrates on Davidson's defense of truth-theoretic semantics as a way of explicating the logico-semantic structure of various constructions in a natural language like English. The relevant kind of truth theory is to be finitely axiomatized and also "interpretive," in the sense that each axiom provides an acceptable interpretation of a given term or structural feature of the language.

The authors begin by providing an explicit interpretive truth theory for a very simple artificial language with a couple of names, a single one-place predicate, and three truth-functional sentential operators. The theory for that language consists of properly interpretive *base* axioms for the names and the predicate together with interpretive *recursive* axioms for the sentential operators.

In relation to those axioms, the authors introduce the notion of a "canonical proof" of a result of the form

(T) s is true iff p

where s is replaced by a structural name of a sentence of the simple language, p is a sentence that contains no semantic vocabulary introduced by the axioms, and the proof uses only universal quantifier

¹ Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005.

² Ernest Lepore and Kirk Ludwig, *Donald Davidson's Truth-Theoretic Semantics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

instantiation, substitution of identicals, and replacement of sentences proved equivalent.

The authors observe that, when there is such a canonical proof of an instance of (T) from interpretive axioms, we can infer the corresponding instance of

(M) *s* means that *p*.

The very simple language is extended to allow two context sensitive elements—a first person singular pronoun and an additional present tensed predicate. The authors describe two approaches to context sensitivity, one in which truth is a predicate of sentences that is relativized to a speaker and a time, the other in which truth is treated as non-relative predicate of *utterances* of sentences.

With this background, the authors pause to respond to four possible objections to the Davidsonian project: (1) a natural language does not have a precise enough syntax to allow a truth theory; (2) ordinary language is too ambiguous; (3) requiring a theory that yields all instances of (T) leads to the liar paradox; and (4) the existence of truth value gaps in natural languages dooms the project.

Variables and unrestricted quantifiers are introduced and the initial theory is extended by introducing the idea that open sentences can be satisfied by assignments of values to variables. (The authors also discuss alternative ways of accounting for truth conditions of quantified sentences.) Of course, English contains not only unrestricted quantifiers, but also restricted quantifiers, like “every apple” and “some salesman” and sentences with quantifiers like “most” are not equivalent to sentences with only unrestricted quantification.

The authors show that proper names are easily incorporated into the truth theory whether they are treated as directly referring or as having a Fregean sense, a key point being that the correct interpretive axiom for “Mark Twain” will be something like (A1) rather than (A2).

(A1) “Mark Twain” refers to Mark Twain.

(A2) “Mark Twain” refers to Samuel Clemens.

They next suggest that dates like “December 7, 1941” can be interpreted as complex but directly referring names and show how to give a reference axiom for such dates; similarly, for numerals like “1659” and function terms like “5 + 7.”

They distinguish relatively pure indexicality (as in a possible rule that an instance of “I” refers to its producer) from relatively pure

demonstratives (as in a possible rule saying an instance of “that” refers to whatever its producer demonstrates in connection with that instance). They observe that there is often a demonstrative aspect to items that may look at first to be pure indexicals—“here”, “now”, “today”, etc.

They present an axiom for the word “that” in complex demonstratives, as in “that man over there drinking a martini,” an axiom which treats this use of “that” as having two functions: a purely demonstrative function and a quantifier like function. So, “Mary likes that man over there drinking a martini” is assigned the same truth conditions as “Mary likes the one who is that one and is a man over there drinking a martini.”

They next assess Davidson’s view that a pair of quotation marks functions as a demonstrative pointing to the expression quoted. They compare Davidson’s proposal with a suggestion by John Wallace that a theory of truth can adopt the simple principle that a phrase consisting of quotation marks surrounding an expression refers to that expression.

Following Davidson, they take certain verbs to have a hidden event argument and certain adverbs to function as predicates of events. Davidson suggested that his analysis eliminated the need for a separate temporal argument. The authors argue that a temporal argument is needed to give a good account of tense and temporal quantifiers.

The authors discuss opaque complements of verbs of saying (indirect quotation) and attitude, as in “Galileo said that the earth moves.” Davidson took this to be equivalent to two utterances: “Galileo said that. The earth moves.” In this view, the word “that” is a demonstrative used to refer to the second utterance and the first utterance is true if and only if an utterance of Galileo’s said the same thing that the second utterance says.

That authors discuss and respond to a number of objections. One is that Davidson’s proposal is syntactically incorrect. The contained sentence, “the earth moves,” is syntactically part of the larger sentence “Galileo said that the earth moves.”

A related objection is that Davidson’s proposal cannot account for quantifying into the complement, as in

(S) Galileo said that something moves

where “something” has wide scope

(T) $(\exists x)(\text{Galileo said that } x \text{ moves})$.

Davidson's proposal would have to treat this as equivalent to two sentences,

(S1) Something is such that Galileo said that.

(T1) $(\exists x)(\text{Galileo said that})$

and

(S2) It moves.

(T2) x moves.

But in this analysis it would seem that the variable x in the second sentence cannot be bound by the quantifier in the first sentence, $(\exists x)$.

The authors reply that it does not violate the spirit of Davidson's proposal to accept the standard syntactic analyses, even though either the word "that" or the whole complement "that the earth moves" is treated as referring to the particular utterance of "the earth moves" in that complement. This syntactic analysis can then provide some help with the problem of quantifying in by assigning the wide scope reading of "Galileo said that something moves" the underlying syntactic structure noted above: $(\exists x)(\text{Galileo said that } x \text{ moves})$. The whole remark is true if and only if, for some assignment of a value to x , an utterance of Galileo's said the same thing as the utterance of the contained clause with x interpreted as referring to that value. The authors discuss a couple of ways to provide truth theoretic axioms to achieve this result.

Nondeclarative sentences, like imperatives and interrogatives, are not normally counted as true or false. Davidson supposes that such sentences have two parts, a part to which the truth theory applies and another part, a mood indicator, that indicates what is being done with the truth-evaluable part.

The truth evaluable part of the imperative, "Close the door!" is assigned the same truth condition as "You will close the door," but the mood indicates that the truth condition is being used as part of an imperative rather than an assertion. The truth evaluable part of the interrogative, "Did Bob close the door?" is assigned the same truth condition as "Bob closed the door," but the mood indicates that this truth condition is being queried rather than asserted. The interrogative, "Who closed the door" is assigned a satisfaction condition rather than a truth condition, with an indication that this is a request to specify something that satisfies that condition.

Davidson treats mood indicators as performatives: “I hereby ask you to close the door,” “I hereby ask you (to tell me) whether Bob closed the door,” and “I hereby ask you who closed the door.” According to Davidson, such performative utterances can be true, although we treat imperatives and interrogatives as neither true nor false. The authors disagree about the best way to resolve the apparent tension here.

After taking up specific issues about the treatment of various constructions in a truth theory of the relevant sort, they explain how what philosophers call “logical form” can be explicated in terms of the semantic structures determined by truth theory and discuss Davidson’s shifting views of truth and correspondence.

In a brief review like this, I am not able to convey the richness and significance of this book. It provides an excellent introduction to linguistic semantics from a Davidsonian truth-theoretic perspective, showing in detail the value of the approach, making many original contributions to semantic analysis.