

DAVIDSON'S TRUTH: FROM DIRECT CORRESPONDENCE TO INDIRECT CORRESPONDENCE

Matjaž Potrč and Vojko Strahovnik, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Davidson's project is centered at compositionality. It is important how to understand compositionality however. The first approach is that of T-schemas and of construal of truth as direct correspondence, according to the atomistic and tractable means and procedures. Although this is a necessary condition for Davidson's semantic project, it is far from sufficient, and actually it is wrong from the point of view of Davidson himself, if considered as the ultimate assessment of language and of its interpretation. If we supply the content needed for a realistic account of language to the T-schema based formal framework – the third person perspective and social interpretation, conceptual scheme normative adjustment, anti-cartesianism and anti-empiricism, principle of charity – we finish up with construal of truth as indirect correspondence that was actually embraced by Davidson himself. So Davidson's heart goes with truth as indirect correspondence, and this should also be a guideline for how to approach compositionality: in a holistic and intractable manner, so that the normativity has an important adjusting role to play.

I. Truth as direct correspondence

Davidson is known for two main projects: that of providing formal T-schema truth conditions based theory for semantics of natural language, and that of providing an account of theory of agency. These projects are linked to each other in much closer ways than this was usually perceived.¹ In this paper we will review some main features and points of departure for the theory concerning semantics of natural language. We claim that Tarski style T-theory of truth for natural language construes truth as direct correspondence. But although it offers a good departure position, such a construal is just untrue to the real nature of language which figures as an environment of social agency and interpretation. Thus in this manner we dedicate ourselves to the theory of truth for natural languages. Understanding of such a theory requires understanding of the accompanying account of compositionality, for which we claim that at its first formal stage is of generalist nature and that as such it leads to the construal of truth as direct correspondence. But although this generalist-supported compositionality is a necessary condition for a truth theory pertaining to natural language, it is not the sufficient condition. The groundings for the sufficient conditions are given by number of

¹ As our main secondary source we use the manuscript of yet to be published extensive book dedicated to Davidson's philosophy, and centered around the question of compositionality, written by Kirk Ludwig and Ernest LePore.

considerations concerning language, which primarily in this respect is understood as the means and environment of human action. These features then lead to conceiving of truth as indirect correspondence, which we believe is close to Davidson's heart.

As the construal of truth as direct correspondence and then again as indirect correspondence has the central place in our descriptive project, it is appropriate to characterize these here at least in a preliminary manner. If I say that the cat is on the mat, I seem to refer directly to the cat. So the truth of the sentence that I use and its eventual verification conditions are construed here as the ones figuring direct correspondence. The sentence that I utter will be true just in case the situation in the world will be such that the cat will indeed be on the mat. If I say that Beethoven's fifth symphony has four movements, my statement will still be true as a function of how matters turn out to be in the world. The sentence that I uttered though will not be true if symphony would happen to consist of just three movements. But even if this last sentence will be true in function of how the world turns out to be, it will be true in a much more *indirect* sense. Why? Well, there is no symphony out there in the world to interact with in a physical manner just in the manner that there was a milk eating and furry cat out there to touch in order to verify the first sentence. Symphony is still somehow out there, but the truth achieved by referring to it will be attained in a much more indirect manner as this was the case with the cat. Whereas the cat is a spatio-temporal object out there in the world, the spatio-temporal location of symphonies or again of universities is much more difficult to achieve. Is the symphony identical to this performance, to all of its performances, to the things that Beethoven has written on the paper, to the complex activity in his brain while he composed the symphony? None of these really seems to offer a satisfactory answer. Whereas it seems that there are not many considerations of normativity involved into location of the cat, symphonies depend in much more profiled ways upon normative activities and upon some kind of rule governed practices in community. Just what counts as a symphony is determined by normative characterizations and practices in the community of musicians. Just what is a symphony movement involves other considerations of community practice. And in general, finding out what a symphony is is not so much determined by its spatio-temporal localization, but by the intertwined network of normative human practices, such as these are characteristic for a certain specialized musical social environment and for a larger society. This is why we take assertions concerning cats to feature truth as direct correspondence, at least in relation to the assertions about symphonies which then feature truth as indirect correspondence. We actually do believe that even assertions about cats ultimately figure truth as indirect correspondence – in relation to the world itself. Under indirect correspondence view on truth and ontology truth is construed as correct assertibility. The later is governed by the world itself (since it is dependent upon the world (the way that the world is or isn't) that some statements have evidential support and others do not) and on the other hand by the norms governing correct assertibility in various contexts. At the ontology lectures at the

philosophy department such norm or standards are much higher as in normatively much more laid-back pub discussions if one discusses ultimate reality. But it suffices here to claim that sentences concerning symphonies are more indirectly true in respect to sentences figuring cats, because of the bigger involvement of normativity in the first case. Thus normativity brings indirect relation along with it. As far as Davidson is concerned, we will claim that such features as interpretation and principle of Charity bring more indirect truth considerations along with them, because they are more loaded with normativity as this is the case for just syntactic and generalist account of Tarski style T-theories. We see the principle of Charity as in itself presupposing some kind of dynamical normative structure. Being charitable therefore *prima facie* means being able to adjust norms in various contexts. And the principle of Charity is just one step of Davidson's route from direct to indirect correspondence.

Davidson's main project: compositionality: Semantic value of the composed construct depends upon the contribution of semantic value of its parts

Davidson's main project is theory of truth for natural languages. Truth in question is that of sentences. But sentences are composed of their parts. So the sentence "The cat is on the mat" has parts such as "cat" and "mat" involved in it. The truth of such a complex sentence then depends upon the relation of each of these parts to how things are in the world and upon the mutual and syntactically determined relatedness of parts inside the sentence to each other.

Consider now that a formal theory of truth for semantics of natural languages will have to account for some obvious facts concerning the functioning of such languages, such as productivity and systematicity. Productivity is the fact that speakers have the ability to construct a potentially infinite number of sentences upon the basis of just a limited number of linguistic input data. An argument then naturally seems to offer itself in respect to how such compositionality is possible. The thought is as follows. The language has to be systematic, i.e. speakers that are able to produce or understand the sentence "The cat is on the mat" are also necessarily able to produce and understand this another sentence, "The mat is on the cat". From this perspective in support for productivity, compositionality then figures the requirement that the meaning of each part of the expression that enters into the overall structure of the sentence should stay preserved over a range of cases, i.e. "cat" cannot mean cat on one occasion and dog on another occasion. If one wants to claim that both sentences are connected in a way that the understanding of one is dependent on the understanding of another (systematicity) a further condition is needed.

"Insofar as the language is systematic, a lexical item must make approximately the same semantic contribution to each expression in which it occurs. /.../ Similarity of constituent structure accounts for the semantic relatedness between systematical related

sentences only to the extent that the semantical properties of the shared constituents are context-independent". (Fodor&Pylyshyn 1988:42)

In this way, systematicity and compositionality seem to offer general preconditions and explanation of rationality as the support for the ability of the speaker to master productivity of language.

Tarski's theory of truth: T-truth: formal frame for interpretation of semantic value of natural language sentences.

Before Davidson, theories of truth for natural language were not really substantially exceeding the anecdotal approach. But Davidson proposed a systematic formal framework for interpretation of semantics for natural languages. In this he was inspired by Tarski's theory of truth. But whereas Tarski's proposal was closer to the theory of formal languages, such as formal language L, which should be specified by axiomatic means, Davidson's proposal was substantially to extend such a kind of theory and to adapt it to encompass semantics of sentences figuring in natural languages. Obviously compositionality will be of highest importance for such an enterprise.

Reasons why mere syntactic construal of truth goes into direction of direct correspondence: atomism, tractability:

The relation between the formal T-schemas as axioms to be applied to semantic interpretation of natural language, and between the intricacies with which we are confronted in our daily dealings with the meaning of sentences of natural language are perhaps still puzzling to many researchers working in this area. But here is an argument why mainly and primarily a syntactic framework for truth involved into natural languages is needed. T-schemas propose an axiomatic system as a basis for semantic interpretation. Such a system builds upon atomistic and tractable elements that are necessary in order for an explanation concerning the power of productivity that is characteristic for natural languages. Notice that atomistic and tractable procedures invite construal of truth as direct correspondence. Why? If borders between the building-block elements would be unclear, no productivity would really be possible. Or at least so it seems. On the other hand, if there would be no ordered syntactic procedure existing to put these atomistic elements together, there would not be any productivity possible either. But staying with these requirements the stress is clearly put onto the *syntactic* preconditions for a theory of semantics for sentences of natural language. A syntactic framework is assured though, without that one would really care about the particular content of sentences in this formal semantic framework. But if there is no concrete content involved, then the formal conditions for truth of semantic units such as sentences offer themselves to the interpretation of truth as direct correspondence. Why? The answer is as follows. If truth would be conceived as indirect correspondence, some normativity would have to be

involved into the story. But if there are just formal preconditions for semantic evaluation specified, there is no need for any involvement of normativity constraints. So truth according to the specification in T-schemas rather offers itself as truth conceived as direct correspondence. Reasons why T-schema style theory of truth goes into direction of conceiving truth as direct correspondence may be shortly clarified by the atomistic and tractable ingredients of the syntactic construal, as the precondition of a generalist productivity construal.

- *Atomism: each part is seen as contributing the same value at each possible occasion of its occurrence.*

Atomism is the requirement that each constituent part in the sentence should contribute the same semantic value at each occasion of its occurrence. Atomism also figures the requirement that these parts one with respect to another do not form unclear intersections. The “cat” as the ingredient part in the sentence “The cat is on the mat” should thus not be vague, so that it would be unclear whether it is capturing the meaning of “cat” or perhaps also partially the meaning of something else, such as “dog”. If this would be the case, then it would seem that there would be troubles for the explanation of productivity capability inherent to natural languages. It would be even worse in the case where the “cat” would now mean cat, and then at another occasion it would eventually mean dog, and perhaps then at some other occasion it would also mean bowl. This would even more seem to block the capability to explain the productivity of natural language.

If we assure ourselves against these arbitrary vagueness and valence change threats, we do indeed finish in an atomistic proposal. But this atomistic proposal then seems to guarantee the explanation of productivity, for the semantics as guided by T-schemas. General patterns are then assured that take charge of the transmission involving sameness of meaning of an atomistic ingredient from one occasion to another. The basis for productivity seems to be secured by this. But notice that each of instances in the general schema rests upon the presupposition of direct and syntactically empty relation to the world, upon the presupposition of truth as direct correspondence.

- *Tractability: a syntactically specified procedure assuring the composition of wholes from their ingredients, a procedure that is easy to follow.*

Another reason for assuring truth as direct correspondence in the T-schema semantic construal is tractability. Tractability means that there is some tractable procedure about how to put semantic ingredients together. Tractability succeeds in vicinity of atomism in a natural way. If there are atomistic ingredients of sentences, non-vague and with fixed meaning, which appear over a wide pattern of cases, then it is a natural idea to put these elements together according to the procedures that may be followed in a strictly prescribed manner. But this is exactly what the formal semantics for natural languages is supposed to do. It composes the sentential wholes from the atomistic elements by the

procedures that may be tracked and that may always in principle be followed. Formal semantics must look like that, it seems, because otherwise it could not have been specified in its generality.

II. Truth as indirect correspondence

Davidson's work is widely known in respect to the theory of truth and in respect to the theory of meaning concerning natural languages. But he actually began in his study in the area of theory of decision, which is a part and parcel of the theory of action and agency – in the field that is eminently entangled with norms and normativity. From this engagement of his, he retained appreciation for the importance of applying formal procedures to the study of a certain practical and empirical area. But in respect to the concrete area in question, he also learned that the formal framework can in no way be sufficient although it may be the necessary condition for a respectful study of the area under question.

If one should pay due appreciation to the nature of the studied empirical area, such as theory of agency, or again natural language and the semantic theory concerned with it, one cannot stay with the formal framework alone. One should insert some content to the purely formal considerations. Once one does this however, one also inserts considerations involving normativity and adjustable variable forms of normativity into this area. Accomplishing this, thus putting in some content to the area, the resulting theory of truth that offers itself then is rather that of indirect correspondence. Why? First because empirical content brings normativity and its variability along with it, and then the relation to whatever is under consideration will not be so much direct anymore, but it will rather be of an indirect nature.

The rest of features that contribute to truth

The truth itself and its theory cannot be just formal, according to Davidson. If one does not understand this, then one finishes with a view of semantics of natural languages that does not really accord with the usual features of language, but rather relies just on formal conditions. These formal conditions, because of their high normative requirements, offer themselves to a construal of truth as direct correspondence. Once you get attentive to the rest of the features that contribute to the nature of truth as an important activity, the empirical content and circumstances become of a higher importance and truth then rather offers itself as an indirect correspondence. It would be a grave misunderstanding of Davidson's intentions to portray his theory of truth as only involving direct correspondence considerations. Davidson repeatedly stressed the importance of other features specific for language that also should be included into an adequate interpretation of truth.

Here are some of these additional features that need to contribute to the assessment of truth of sentences for certain natural language, according to Davidson.

First, language should not be approached from a purely scientific and perhaps formal point of view, as Quine was more closely inclined to claim. Language is a means of communication, and this should be accounted for in its study. Language is a form of agency and it is a social enterprise. In using language, we interpret the sentences uttered by others. We interpret these sentences in a charitable way, i.e. we respect the normative requirement to treat speakers as rational agents. Related to this, the ability of language prohibits Cartesian and empiricist approaches to meaning: sentences and words cannot function then as atomistic building blocks anymore.

These and a bunch of other features were not treated by Davidson as something to be just contingently added to the formal framework of semantics for natural language. They were his main concern and as such they were closely *inherent* to the preconditions of specifying a viable semantic theory for a natural language. Actually, he was struggling himself to specify these additional conditions in order to deliver an appropriate theory of meaning and before that as its precondition a viable theory of compositionality for natural languages.

Matjaž Potrč co-organized a Davidson conference in the eighties. He remembers not to be completely certain how Davidson would accept his interpretation against epistemic intermediaries as being important for the theory of truth. But Davidson readily accepted his suggestions. In fact, the refusal to make meanings substances or epistemic intermediaries just goes along with the overall Davidson's refusal to treat truth under normative guidelines of direct correspondence. All the additional features that were mentioned earlier served Davidson to really construe truth as indirect correspondence. This is not something unexpected though, for most of these mentioned ingredients of his approach to language contain normative considerations. Charity and interpretation are certainly of normative nature. But this then makes them decisively turn the weight of construal of truth in direction of indirect correspondence.

No matter that syntactic determining of truth under the normative requirements of direct correspondence presents a necessary condition for delivering semantic value of sentences, it is not a sufficient condition, according to Davidson's own view.

Once as we have specified the additional features that are important for Davidson's theory of meaning for natural language, such as interpretation, third person perspective, we have shifted theory of truth in direction of indirect correspondence. In this case we have also claimed that his theory of truth is substantially that of indirect correspondence. But what about the T-schema? We did not propose to reject it. It is a necessary, although not a sufficient condition for a viable semantic interpretation of language, at least in Davidson's view. Indirect correspondence does not deny the formal aspect of T-schema it just proposes that we should soften the linkage between the terms used in correctly assertible or correctly deniable sentences and mind and discourse independent world.

We agree that a kind of structure, such as that of T-schema is really necessary for a viable semantics of natural language. So we do not propose that requirements of compositionality and systematicity that have led to the direct correspondence view of truth should be rejected. They should be just re-interpreted according to the additional criteria that Davidson takes into account for an interpretation of semantics of natural language. This interpretation will be still able to present the *structure* of compositionality and systematicity, say, but under non-classical interpretation. (Compare Horgan-Tienson 1996, about their non-classicist LOT proposal). And this is then not only the direction shown by Davidson himself in his concerns regarding language, but also the direction that indeed stays close to the actual dynamical functioning of meaning in natural languages. Syntactic requirements are still to be preserved then, although the atomism and tractability related normativity of truth as direct correspondence will have to be exchanged for the same features under some dynamical kind of interpretation, as proposed by the direction that is taken by Davidson himself in the study of semantics for natural language.

Davidson's proposal to go holistic (Fodor-LePore criticism) in compositionality.

If truth as direct correspondence is atomistic in its nature, truth as indirect correspondence with which Davidson ended is rather a holistic proposal. Why? Because the considerations of charity, interpretation and the rest include many normative dynamical ingredients that will not allow for atomistic approach. So Davidson's theory of meaning and of truth has to be holistic. Fodor is a rare opponent in respect to this issue, for he defends semantic atomism. Semantic holism claims that a meaning of a feature depends upon all the rest of features in the language. Semantic atomism claims that the meaning is independent of all of these rest of the features. Matjaž Potrč was at Rutgers talking to Fodor as Michael Devitt approached and discussed his molecularist proposal with him, according to which the meaning of an ingredient depends upon some of other relevant ingredients.

Fodor-LePore criticize Davidson as a holist in the area of compositionality. Whatever their criticism should be, we believe that a normatively changeable holism may still be an appropriate support for compositionality, although for a non-classical compositionality, taking into account metaphorical and other deviant meanings. The standard Davidson's move here was to consider the truth of indirect discourse. But Davidson's views changed over time.

All the rest of the stuff contributing to the realistic assessment of truth: interpretation from third person perspective, radical interpretation, principle of charity, conceptual schemas and their normative variable adjustment, non-cartesianism and anti-empiricism, against epistemic intermediaries.

We have made attentive to all the rest of features concerning the project of natural language semantics that go over and above the formal T-schema approach, and thus over and above truth as direct correspondence construal. These include the interpretation of language and ascription of linguistic or mental states from the third person perspective. Language is a social tool and environment, and so it is adept for radical interpretation, although not a scientific one, but the one that respects the givens of common sense. Principle of charity involves introduction of rationality and variable normativity requirements in order that it would be able to work. Conceptual schemas and especially their normative pressure variability, together with inscrutability of reference, again invite us into direction of truth as indirect correspondence. So do non-cartesianism and anti-empiricism with their refusal to reify meanings. All this goes into the direction of assessing truth as indirect correspondence.

Davidson's heart really is with truth as indirect correspondence.

If Davidson would have to choose, his heart would really embrace construal of truth as indirect correspondence. But as formal framework of construal of truth according to the Tarski inspired T-schema is a necessary condition for the enterprise, this may present a false dilemma. Both T-schema and interpretation considerations are needed for an appropriate construal of truth. What about the inclinations of heart now? The answer to this is easy: there is certainly the *dominance* of truth as indirect correspondence over and above the truth as direct correspondence in Davidson's work. This is witnessed by all the mentioned topics that preoccupied him and by his implicit request to stay true to the real environment and nature of language in the assessment of a semantic theory.

The central Davidson's project: compositionality, semantics: reassessment from the point of view of truth as indirect correspondence.

Now that we are certain about the dominance of truth as indirect correspondence and of its particularist holistic supported patterns in Davidson's work, we could have embarked upon the job of re-evaluation and of re-interpretation of his understanding of compositionality. Once truth is conceived as indirect correspondence, compositionality can stay in place as a basic semantic requirement leading to the explanation of the productivity of language. But atomism and tractability requirement will have to go as unrealistic requirements whose source is rather construal of truth as direct correspondence. Contrary to atomism compositionality requirement, vague and metaphorical meanings will have to be accommodated into such an approach. This means that compositionality would still stay there, although as a non-classicist and non-tractable structure. And rigid tractability rules following would have to go as well, dynamical normative forces substituting it in a non-classicist framework of a structure that we would propose to call the beautiful patterns structure. On the dynamical compositionality picture compositionality (as an ingredient of more general productivity

feature) has more to do with various normative pressures working than with fixed, atomistic and context-independent semantical properties of the constituents.

Davidson once claimed that there is no metaphorical meaning. This can be well taken. There is no additional reified kind of meaning, besides to the supposed literal meaning. Whatever the literal meaning would be, we do not believe though that it would stay there under the variable and dynamical normative pressures that Davidson has introduced himself as he actually considered truth as being of the nature of indirect correspondence, leaning on all the rest of the stuff that comes in addition to truth as direct correspondence and that should be supplemented to T-schema style direct correspondence account of truth and *dominating* it. All this would also go directly against Fodor's and Pylyshyn's proposal that the range of metaphorical meaning is overestimated and that one should treat context induced variation of meaning in a systematic and atomistic way by trying to include metaphorical meanings in the literal meaning by broadening but by that also impoverishing and weakening the later.