

On Dummett's Critique of Davidsonian Theory of Meaning

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Outline

I give a reconstruction of Dummett's critique of Davidson offered in his "What is a Theory of Meaning? (I)" (1975, henceforth WTMI), and elucidate the theoretical framework behind the critique.

1. Backgrounds
2. Reconstruction of Dummett 1975
 - 2.1 Modest / full-blooded distinction
 - 2.2, 2.3 Dummett's framework
3. How Davidson was criticized / Relevance to semantics in general.

Backgrounds: WTMI [§1]

- ▶ criticizes the Davidsonian conception of a theory of meaning (or semantics) as a Tarskian theory of truth, and marks the beginning of the debate between Dummett and Davidson.
- ▶ introduces the distinction between “modest” and “full-blooded” theories of meaning, and argues that Davidsonian conception yields only a modest theory and that a theory of meaning should be full-blooded.
- ▶ puzzles many readers.
 - ▶ “[A] modest theory of meaning [...] accomplishes no more than a translation manual” .
 - ▶ A modest theory of meaning “has to presuppose an understanding of the metalanguage” .
 - ▶ A full-blooded theory “should serve to explain new concepts to someone who does not already have them” .
 - ▶ A full-blooded theory “seeks actually to explain the concepts expressed by primitive terms of the language” .

Backgrounds: McDowell's interpretation [§1]

- ▶ McDowell (1987) maintained that Dummett's requirement of a full-blooded theory of meaning is that a theory of meaning explain what it is to have concepts "as from outside" content.
- ▶ Consider (cf. Gaifman 1996):
 - ▶ X understands "akai" if and only if X knows that "akai" applies to red things;
 - ▶ X understands "akai" if and only if, under some normal lighting condition, X accepts or rejects the sentence "Kore-wa akai" according to whether the indicated object is, or is not, red.

In the second one, the metalinguistic expression "red" is not used within a "that"-clause, whereas in the first it is. The second doesn't presuppose the role of "red" as a determinant of contents of propositional attitudes; it gives an explanation "as from outside" content.

Tasks [§1]

- ▶ McDowell argued that Dummett's position is motivated by the reductionist desire and this desire is a basis for Dummett's anti-realism.
 - ← I think Dummett's position is *not* based on reductionism.
- ▶ The need for explanations “as from outside” content (in some cases) is indeed implied by Dummett's argument; but this is not his *assumption*, but a *consequence* of his view.
- ▶ How it is derived? Is it based on a reductionist desire?
 - ← If I am correct, Dummett's consideration is quite *general*.
- ▶ How was Davidson criticized? How does the critique relate to the later debate between Dummett and Davidson?

Modest / full-blooded distinction [§2.1]

Observations:

1. The understanding of an expression (at least sometimes) involves the grasp of the concept or content expressed by the expression;
2. Then we may (formally) distinguish two ingredients of the understanding of an expression:
 - a the grasp of the concept which is expressed by the expression;
 - b the association of the concept with the expression.

A **modest theory of meaning** gives an account only of (b), whereas a **full-blooded theory of meaning** gives an account of both ingredients.

NB. We don't need any *special notion* of grasping a concept or understanding an expression.

What is wrong with modest theories [§2.1]

- ▶ For Dummett, a theory of meaning gives an account of the understanding of an exp., i.e. a **theory of understanding**.
- ▶ A consequence of the observations above:
If we want a theory of understanding, a modest theory of meaning (at least sometimes) needs to be supplemented by an account of the grasp of the corresponding concept.
- ▶ **The priority of language over thought:**
An account of the grasp of a concept is provided via an account of the understanding of a certain expressions in some language which expresses the concept.
- ▶ Then:
When used as a theory of understanding, a modest theory of meaning presupposes an account of an understanding of some language.
“A modest theory of meaning accomplishes no more than a translation manual”.

Questions [§§2.2, 2.3]

- ▶ How does all this relate to the Davidsonian conception of a theory of meaning as a truth-theory?
- ▶ What is a theory of understanding?
- ▶ Is it appropriate to regard the Davidsonian conception as concerning a theory of understanding?

What is a theory of understanding? [§2.3]

- ▶ According to Dummett, to know or understand a language is to be able to employ the language, i.e. to be able to use expressions of the language.
- ▶ To be able to use an expression of the language is to be able to do enormous varieties of things. But Dummett believes that we can give a **systematic** account of the use; i.e. we can select some “central aspect” of understanding, from which we can derive other aspects of use.
- ▶ Conceptions of meaning is seen in this light.
 - ▶ “To know the meaning of sentence is to know its truth-condition” says that knowledge of a truth-condition is the central aspect of understanding of a sentence.
 - ▶ “To know the meaning of sentence is to know what verifies it” says that knowledge of what verifies a sentence is the central aspect of understanding of the sentence.

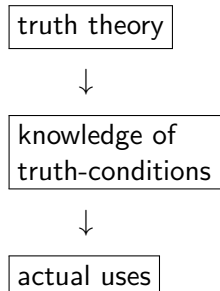
The role of truth-theory [§§2.2, 2.3]

- ▶ Correct T-sentences (derived from a correct truth-theory T) can be regarded as expressing the content of knowledge of truth-conditions;

I.e. T derives “ S is true iff p ”

$\Rightarrow (X \text{ understands } S \Leftrightarrow X \text{ knows that } S \text{ is true iff } p).$

- ▶ Now Dummett's question is:
Is it sufficient for an account of what the knowledge of truth-conditions *consists in*?
Three options:
 1. It doesn't matter.
 2. Yes.
 3. No.



Option 1:

Knowledge of t.-cons. as theoretical hypothesis [§2.3]

- ▶ Answer: The main point of the truth-conditional conception is that various features of use can be derived from knowledge of a truth-condition. If only we can derive it, we don't need to say what the knowledge of a truth-condition consists in.
- ▶ On this view, an ascription of knowledge of a truth-condition is a kind of **theoretical hypothesis** which imposes a coherent pattern on linguistic practice. We ascribe knowledge of a particular truth-condition to a speaker **only in so far as we haven't hit upon a better hypothesis**.
- ▶ Then, the ascription of belief about the fact would also become a theoretical hypothesis, since a linguistic behavior is a joint result of belief about the fact and knowledge of a truth-condition.
E.g. X holds "the earth moves" as true $\leftarrow X$ knows that "the earth moves" is true iff the earth moves, and X believes that the earth moves.

Option 2:

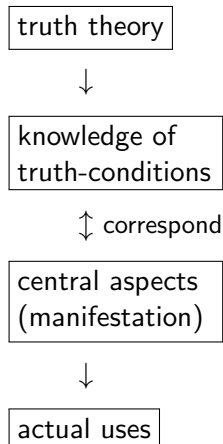
Knowledge of t.-cons. as explicit knowledge [§§2.2, 2.3]

- ▶ Answer: In many cases, to state the content of a piece of knowledge can be taken as an account of what the knowledge consists in; and T-sentences states the content of knowledge of meaning of sentences.
- ▶ But knowledge that p involves a grasp of the thought that p . According to Dummett, this doesn't cause problems in many cases because the subject can be assumed to know some language to express the thought that p . So:
In the case of knowledge of meaning, we should face the question of what a grasp of the thought that is expressed by a T-sentence. (This point is essentially the same as his criticism of modest theories.)
- ▶ So we cannot regard a truth-theory as an account of what the knowledge of truth-conditions *consists in*, unless we can find a way to rebut Dummett's critique of modest theories.

Option 3:

Knowledge of t.-cons. as implicit knowledge [§2.3]

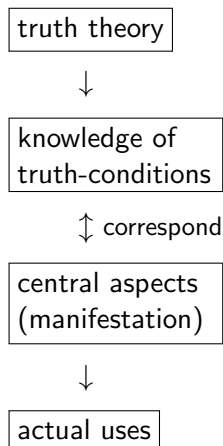
- ▶ Answer: Knowledge of a truth-condition is not a theoretical hypothesis, and a truth-theory doesn't explain what it consists in. So we should supplement a truth-theory with an account of what knowledge of truth-conditions consists in.
- ▶ On this view, knowledge of a truth-condition is made *correspondent* to the “central aspect” of understanding, rather than being the central aspect itself. The point of doing this is **to represent the systematic connection within an understanding of various sentences via a deductively connected system of propositions.**



Option 3 (cont.)

- ▶ The central aspect should not be attributed to speakers as a theoretical hypothesis; it should be discovered among speakers' *actual states or behavior*. (This is called the **manifestion** of an **implicit knowledge** of truth-conditions.)
- ▶ A naive candidate of the manifestation is in the right-hand side of an account “as from outside” content:
 - ▶ X understands “akai” if and only if, under some normal lighting condition, X accepts or rejects the sentence “Kore-wa akai” according to whether the indicated object is, or is not, red.

NB. This kind of account should be tested by the ability to derive other aspects of use.



Critique of Davidson [§3]

- ▶ Davidson's view is close enough to the Option 1. Indeed, for Davidson an ascription of knowledge of meaning and belief about the fact is only a theoretical hypothesis. This is a consequence of the indeterminacy of translation.
- ▶ Moreover, Davidson denies the possibility to take the Option 3. Davidson denies the reality of the “central aspect” of understanding and the conventions needed to derive various features of use from it. This is the point of his “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs” (1986) etc.
- ▶ Dummett's argument in WTMI is not strong enough to rebut these theses of Davidson. To do this we need a direct argument for the Option 3; a direct argument for the so-called manifestation requirement. In WTMI he only marked the difference between him and Davidson.

Relevance to semantics in general [§3]

- ▶ Dummett's conception of a theory of meaning as a theory of understanding provides quite general (even generic) framework for semantics.
- ▶ If we don't accept the indeterminacy of translation, the Option 3 is a natural position to take. (Of course, we don't need actually to specify the central aspect. Taking the Option 3 is only believing the existence of the central aspect.)
- ▶ Cost: the central aspect should be manifestable in behavior, but as long as we employ **the evidence-transcendent notion of truth**, this requirement is hard to fulfill; we should abandon **the evidence-transcendent notion of truth** and **the principle of bivalence**.