

Reconsidering
"What is a Theory of Meaning? (I)"

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Outline

Dummett's critique of Davidson offered in his famous "What is a Theory of Meaning? (I)" (1975, henceforth WTMI) is not well understood. I give a reconstruction of the critique and elucidate the theoretical framework behind it.

1. Backgrounds
2. Modest/full-blooded distinction
3. Truth-theory as a theory of understanding
4. Assessment

Backgrounds

Modest/full-blooded distinction

Truth-theory as a theory of understanding

Assessment

Backgrounds: WTMI

- ▶ criticized the Davidsonian conception of a theory of meaning (or semantics) as a Tarskian theory of truth, and marked the beginning of the debate between Dummett and Davidson.
- ▶ introduced 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.
- ▶ ... puzzled many readers.
 - ▶ A full-blooded theory “should serve to **explain new concepts to someone who does not already have them**”. (WTMI, p. 5)
 - ▶ A full-blooded theory “seeks actually to **explain the concepts expressed by primitive terms of the language**”. (Ibid.)
 - ▶ A modest theory of meaning “**accomplishes no more than a translation manual**”. (WTMI, p. 20)
 - ▶ A modest theory of meaning “has to **presuppose an understanding of the metalanguage**”. (Ibid.)

How WTMI puzzled many readers

- ▶ “A modest theory of meaning **accomplishes no more than a translation manual.**” But a truth theory *is* different from a translation manual (see e.g. Evans and McDowell (1976)):
 - ▶ Compare:
 1. “Der Schnee ist weiß” means the same as “Snow is white”;
 2. “Der Schnee ist weiß” is true iff snow is white.
 - ▶ T-sentence (2) *states* the truth-condition of the sentence “Der Schnee ist weiß”. This characterizes correctly the content of knowledge possessed by the one who understands “Der Schnee ist weiß”
- ← But this doesn't satisfy Dummett.

How WTMI puzzled many readers (cont.)

- ▶ “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.**”
← Dummett might demand some DEEP analysis of truth-conditions.
- ▶ “A modest theory of meaning **presupposes an understanding of the metalanguage**”. ← ???

Backgrounds: McDowell's interpretation

- ▶ 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”**.

Backgrounds: McDowell's criticism

McDowell further argued:

- ▶ The requirement of explanations “as from outside content” is so stringent a requirement that no theory could satisfy.
 - ← Gaifman (1996) etc. objected to this. (NB. they accept McDowell's interpretation, but reject consequences.)
- ▶ The requirement of explanations “as from outside content” is motivated by the reductionist desire and this desire is a basis for Dummett's anti-realism.
 - ← I think anti-realism is *not* based on reductionism.

Complaints and Questions

- ▶ McDowell's interpretation neglected the structure in Dummett's argument:
 - ▶ The need for explanations "as from outside content" is indeed implied (in some cases) by Dummett's argument; but this is not his **premise**, but a **consequence** of his view.
 - ▶ Dummett has not blamed Davidson just for the lack of explanations "as from outside content". Their conflict cuts more deep.
- ▶ How is the need for explanations "as from outside content" 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?
- ▶ What is the general implication of Dummett's argument for philosophy of language and semantics?

Backgrounds

Modest/full-blooded distinction

Truth-theory as a theory of understanding

Assessment

Modest/full-blooded distinction

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 the ingredient (b), whereas a **full-blooded theory of meaning** gives an account of both ingredients.

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

[...] the prototypical case of grasping a concept is that in which this grasp consists in the understanding of a certain word or expression, or range of expressions, in some language. Hence, if a theory of meaning is a theory of understanding, as I have claimed, it would appear to follow that **such a theory of meaning must, in explaining what one must know in order to know the meaning of each expression in the language, simultaneously explain what it is to have the concepts expressible by means of that language.**

The theory of meaning will, of course, do more than this [...] **the theory of meaning must also associate concepts with words of the language** – show or state which concepts are expressed by which words. And **an alternative view will be that it is only this latter task which properly belongs to the theory of meaning** [...]. Let us call a theory of meaning which purports to accomplish only this restricted task a *modest* theory of meaning, and one which seeks actually to explain the concepts expressed by primitive terms of the language a *full-blooded* theory.
(WTMI, p. 4f; my emphasis)

NB. I left out Dummett's talks about "explain new concepts".

What is wrong with modest theories?

- ▶ 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.
In this sense a modest theory of meaning **accomplishes no more than a translation manual**.

[...] since **our best model – and, in many cases, our only model – for the grasp of a concept is provided by the mastery of a certain expression or range of expressions in some language.** Thus a translation manual presupposes a mastery of some one other language – that into which the translation is made – if we are to derive from it an understanding of the translated language; but **a modest theory of meaning presupposes a mastery of some, though unspecified, language, if we are to derive from it an understanding of the object-language.** The significant contrast would, however, appear to be not between a theory which (like a translation manual) makes a specific presupposition and one which (like a modest theory of meaning) makes as heavy a presupposition, though less specific; but between theories which (like both of these) rely on extraneous presuppositions and those which (like full-blooded theories of meaning) involve no such presupposition at all. (WTMI, p. 6; my emphasis)

NB. Here “presupposes a mastery of ... language” should be read as “presupposes *an account of* a mastery of ... language”.

Questions

- ▶ What is wrong with translation manual?

Translation manuals *do indeed* give us some insight.

- ▶ How does all this apply to concrete cases?
- ▶ How does all this relate to the Davidsonian conception of a theory of meaning as a truth-theory?

In T-sentences there's no mention to understanding or knowledge.

To answer these questions, I will explain **Dummett's conception of theory of understanding**, and **how to take Davidsonian theory of meaning as theory of understanding**. Discussion in WTMI is placed in this framework.

Backgrounds

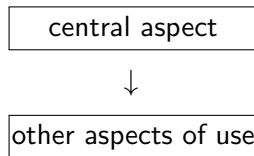
Modest/full-blooded distinction

Truth-theory as a theory of understanding

Assessment

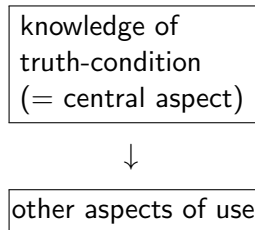
What is a theory of understanding?

- ▶ 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.
 - NB. To be able to use an expression of the language is to be able to do enormous varieties of things.
 - NB. Moreover, speakers might differ in what they can do with the language.
- ▶ Dummett believes that we can give a **systematic** account of use; i.e. **we can select some “central aspect” of understanding, from which we can derive other aspects of use.** (Cf. “sense and force distinction” in Dummett 1973, WTMII, etc.)



What is a theory of understanding? (cont.)

- ▶ Conceptions of meaning is seen in this light.
 - ▶ The dictum “To know the meaning of sentence is to know its truth-condition” tells that knowledge of a truth-condition is the **central aspect** of the understanding of a sentence.
 - ▶ The dictum “To know the meaning of sentence is to know what verifies it” tells that knowledge of what verifies a sentence is the **central aspect** of the understanding of the sentence.
- NB. In proof theoretic semantics, the central aspect is made more specific by the notion of normal or canonical proof.



The role of truth-theory

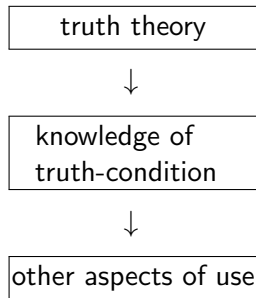
- ▶ When a truth-theory are meant to be a theory of meaning, **T-sentences which are theorems of it are meant to express the content of knowledge of truth-conditions:**

When T derives “ S is true iff p ”,

X understands $S \Leftrightarrow$

X knows that S is true iff p .

- ▶ From these statements, statements of the following form are meant to be derivable: **if X understands S in a situation s , then X holds S as true.** And from these in turn, various aspects of language use are meant to be derived.



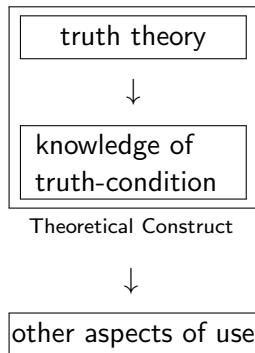
Dummett's point

- ▶ But the status of the knowledge ascription is problematic in the case of knowledge of truth-condition.
 1. The knowledge ascription is not to be regarded as a theoretical hypothesis.
 2. Usual account for knowledge ascription does not work in this case.

- NB. Dummett's discussion concerns **what the understanding of a sentence consists in**, but I will here reconstruct it as a discussion on **what the knowledge of truth-condition consists in**.

Knowledge ascription as theoretical hypothesis

- ▶ On the above explanation, the point of an ascription of knowledge of truth-condition is that various features of use can be derived from the ascription. We are interested mainly in **consequences** of the knowledge ascription.
- ▶ Then we might think that **an ascription of knowledge of a truth-condition is a kind of theoretical hypothesis**. I.e. we ascribe knowledge of a particular truth-condition to a speaker **only in so far as we haven't hit upon a better hypothesis** to derive various aspects of use. We cannot ask if the knowledge ascription is correct or incorrect; we can only ask if it is better or worse. (Cf. Dummett 1973, p. 461)

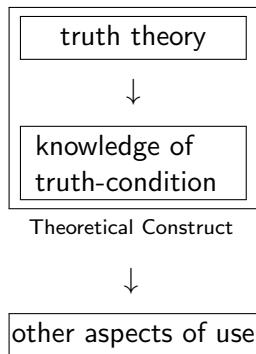


Knowledge ascription as theoretical hypothesis (cont.)

- ▶ 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 truth-condition.

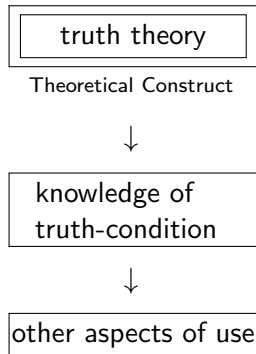
E.g. X holds “the earth moves” as true
← X knows that “the earth moves” is true iff the earth moves
+ X believes that the earth moves.

- ▶ Dummett regards this as absurd:
“[...] it is required that a place be left for a distinction between a disagreement of substance [i.e. disagreement about the fact] and a disagreement over meaning, a **distinction which was not, after all, invented by misguided theorists, but is actually employed within our language**” (WTMI, p. 19; cf. FPL, ch. 17).



Need for criteria of knowledge ascription

- ▶ If so, we should be able to ask if an ascription of knowledge of truth-condition is correct or incorrect. It follows that **there should be a criterion for an ascription of knowledge of truth-condition**; e.g. we should be in principle able to say when we are justified to ascribe knowledge of truth-condition to someone.
- ▶ What would such a criterion be like?



An application of discussion on modesty

- ▶ Thesis: The modest/full-blooded distinction can be best seen as relating to the **criteria** for an ascription of knowledge of truth-condition.
- ▶ Knowledge of truth-condition i.e. knowledge that S is true iff p involves a grasp of the thought that p .
 - ~ The understanding of a sentence involves the grasp of the content expressed by the sentence.
- ▶ In most cases of knowledge ascription, we can assume knowledge of some language on the side of the knower, so **one criterion for the grasp of the thought that p is the understanding of some sentence S' which expresses the thought that p .**
 - ~ The priority of language over thought.

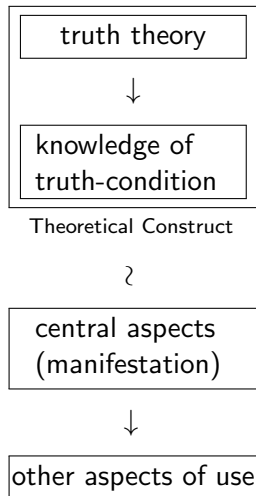
An application of discussion on modesty (cont.)

- ▶ If we adopt this naive criterion for the grasp of a thought, when we ascribe to X knowledge that S is true iff p , we should presuppose that X understands another sentence S' .
→ adopting this criterion \sim adopting modest theory.
- ▶ But our intention is to explain the understanding of S as the knowledge that S is true iff p ; then, when we ascribe to X an understanding of S , we should presuppose that X understands another sentence S' .
 \sim A modest theory of meaning accomplishes no more than a translation manual.
- ▶ We can come to understand an expression without understanding another expression which is synonymous with it, e.g. as a child. So the above criteria for knowledge ascription do not yield criteria for knowledge of language; then criteria for an ascription of knowledge of truth-condition other than the above one should be possible.

But, where we are concerned with a representation in terms of propositional knowledge of some practical ability, and, in particular, where that practical ability is precisely the mastery of a language, it is incumbent upon us, if our account is to be explanatory, not only to specify **what someone has to know for him to have that ability**, but also **what it is for him to have that knowledge**, that is, **what we are taking as constituting a manifestation of a knowledge of those propositions**; if we fail to do this, then the connection will not be made between the theoretical representation and the practical ability it is intended to represent. (WTMI, p. 21)

Manifestations

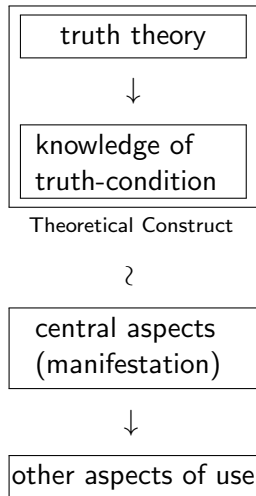
- ▶ We need criteria for ascription of knowledge of truth-condition which does not involve ascription of thought. It should be discovered among speakers' *actual states or behavior*. (This is called the **manifestion** of an **implicit knowledge** of truth-conditions.)
- ▶ On this view, knowledge of a truth-condition is made *corresponding* 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.**



Manifestations (cont.)

- ▶ 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.



Backgrounds

Modest/full-blooded distinction

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Assessment

Critique of Davidson

- ▶ Davidson's view is close enough to the view of "Knowledge ascription as theoretical hypothesis". Indeed, for Davidson an ascription of knowledge of meaning and belief about the fact is only a theoretical hypothesis. (This is a consequence of his acceptance of the indeterminacy of translation.)
- ▶ 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 so-called manifestation requirement.) Still, I think that WTMI gives a good starting point to see their difference and similarity.

Relevance to semantics in general

- ▶ 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, Dummett's position is a natural position to take. (Of course, we don't need actually to specify the central aspect. To take this position we need only believe in 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**.

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