

On Dummett's Critique of Davidsonian Theory of Meaning

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Abstract. This paper gives a detailed reconstruction of Dummett's critique of Davidson and the theoretical framework behind it in his "What is a Theory of Meaning? (I)". I shall show the generality of Dummett's premises, contrary to popular reading.

One of the influential sources for the well-known conception of a theory of meaning as a Tarskian truth theory is Davidson (1967) and his related works. Dummett had long criticized the Davidsonian conception, but his critical point is not well understood. This is especially true for Dummett (1975), which marks the beginning of the debate; indeed, not only its validity as criticism, but also its exact content has been problematic. In this paper, I shall give a detailed reconstruction of its argument and briefly discuss its relevance to the later debate between them. §1 presents some historical and philosophical background, §2 presents the reconstruction, and §3 briefly discusses its relevance to the later debate and to formal semantics in general.

1 Background

Dummett (1975) introduced the distinction between "modest" and "full-blooded" theories of meaning; a full-blooded theory of meaning, as he calls it, "seeks actually to explain the concepts expressed by primitive terms of the language", whereas a modest theory doesn't (Dummett 1975, p. 5). He held that the Davidsonian conception yields only a modest, not full-blooded, theory of meaning, and criticized modest theories, concluding as follows (Dummett 1975, p. 20):

a modest theory of meaning either accomplishes no more than a translation manual, [...]; or it must be construed holistically, in which case its claim to give a systematic account of the mastery of language is spurious, [...].

This conclusion, however, seems to miss a crucial point in the Davidsonian conception (see Evans and McDowell 1976). As is well known, a truth theory yields, as its theorems, "T-sentences" of the form " S is true if and only if p ", where S is to be replaced by a name of a sentence of the object-language, and p by a sentence of the metalanguage. It is a mistake to think that a T-sentence states

only a translation relation between the sentence named by S and the sentence p , because p is here *used*, as opposed to merely mentioned, to state that some state of affairs obtains; a T-sentence seeks to state the truth-condition of the sentence named by S . And if we know the truth-condition of the sentence named by S , as opposed to knowing only a translation relation between sentences, we can be said to know the meaning of the sentence; thus a correct T-sentence states what one should know when she knows the meaning of the sentence named by S . Therefore, it seems that a correct compositional truth theory gives “a systematic account of the mastery of language”, i.e. that a truth theory does accomplish more than a translation manual and this is just what we expect of a theory of meaning. But it is precisely to this conclusion that Dummett has opposed.

In fact, Dummett has not entirely neglected this point: he admitted, even argued, that a correct T-sentence states what one should know when she knows the meaning of the sentence named by S . He rejected only the inference from this to the conclusion that a truth theory with correct T-sentences as its theorems suffices for a theory of meaning. But this rejection is uncommon and puzzling, and often thought to betray some special assumptions which he has brought into his discussion on a theory of meaning. In particular, the phrase “explain (what it is to have) a concept”, which he employed in formulating his modest / full-blooded distinction, is often suspected to express some special requirement for a theory of meaning.

McDowell has given an influential interpretation of this kind for Dummett (1975). He maintained that Dummett’s requirement of a full-blooded theory of meaning is a requirement of “a theory of meaning that explains (what it is to have) concepts ‘as from outside’ content altogether” (McDowell 1987, p. 91), that is, to explain (what it is to have) the concepts without employing “that”-clauses which mentions those concepts. As a crude illustration, compare the following two explanations (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.

Both explanations, in explaining the understanding of the Japanese (object-language) expression “akai”, employ the English (metalanguage) expression “red”. However, in the former, the metalinguistic expression “red” is used within the scope of “know that”-operator. Thus the former, according to McDowell (1987, p. 91), presupposes the role of “red” as a determinant of contents of propositional attitudes, whereas the latter, although it employs the metalinguistic expression “red”, doesn’t presuppose this role of “red” as known; the latter gives an explanation “as from outside” content. This is his interpretation of the modest / full-blooded distinction.

Now, if one understands “akai”, she would surely know the role of “akai” as a determinant of content; hence the latter explanation, if it works, would presumably serve as a step toward a reductive account of propositional attitudes

and linguistic acts in terms of non-propositional states and behaviors. And McDowell suspected that Dummett's criticism of the Davidsonian conception was directed, essentially, at its lack of this kind of reductive account; Dummett's assumption is that a theory of meaning, properly so called, should give a reductive account of propositional attitudes and linguistic acts. It has also been suspected (see McDowell 1981) that this assumption is motivated by some epistemological concern, i.e. that only such propositional attitudes and linguistic acts can be admitted as such which could (in principle) be recognized for certain from behavioral evidences.

This line of interpretation relates to a philosophical issue: Dummett's famous challenge, based solely on an a priori consideration of theory of meaning, to the principle of bivalence, i.e. the principle that every proposition is determinately either true or false, in favor of intuitionistic logic. His challenge is very controversial among philosophers and has attracted many efforts to discover its hidden premises, without which, according to them, such an extraordinary conclusion couldn't follow from an a priori consideration. Now, if the interpretation outlined above is correct, and Dummett's consideration presupposes the epistemological concern as above from the outset, then his challenge will be less surprising; it will consist merely in the derivation of the rejection of the evidence-transcendent notion of truth which is involved in the principle of bivalence, from the rejection of the evidence-transcendent notion of understanding.

This "less surprising" challenge is not completely pointless, but, in my opinion, far less interesting than the original one. Dummett's challenge, originally, questions the *intelligibility* of the notion of truth-condition as given in terms of the evidence-transcendent notion of truth, not merely the incompatibility of such notions with some epistemological constraint. So his argument should be based on considerations of the most *general* conception of meaning, not of any specific narrow conception; if the generality of his consideration was denied and other conceptions of meaning, even epistemologically dubious ones, were shown to be possible, his original challenge would be *incoherent*, not just weakened. My own belief is that Dummett's original challenge can be shown to be coherent.

I am not saying that Dummett's argument is wholly free from any reductionist, epistemological thesis; however, in many cases, such theses are not *assumptions*, but *consequences* of more general considerations. In particular, McDowell's interpretation of the requirement of full-bloodedness in terms of explaining concepts "as from outside" content is not entirely wrong; however, as I see it, this is not Dummett's *assumption*, but a *consequence* of his view, and it is to be seen how it is derived.¹ This is the task for this paper; and my aim is to show the general character of Dummett's premises in his (1975). And if I am correct, his

¹ This is not intended to be a refutation of McDowell's criticism of Dummett. McDowell's point was that any explanation of understanding "as from outside" content is impossible, whether the requirement for it is assumed at the outset or derived from epistemological concern. McDowell's argument is based upon his own view on rule-following, which requires a lengthy discussion whether one approve it or deny it, and I should put off giving my own refutation to another occasion. For the moment I would just point out that there have already been many efforts to defend Dum-

consideration will be, by the virtue of its generality, relevant also to semantics in general.

2 Dummett's consideration

2.1 Modest / full-blooded theories of meaning

I will here present my own interpretation of the modest / full-blooded distinction in some detail. (Lengthy quotations are needed only because we are concerned with the premises of Dummett's argument.)

First, I quote a passage which introduces the phrase "explain what it is to have a concept" (Dummett 1975, p. 4):

[...] it seems, [a theory of meaning] must embody an explanation of all the concepts expressible in that language, at least by unitary expressions. We need not stop to enquire whether, or in what cases, someone who does not possess the linguistic means to express a concept, or who lacks a language altogether, may yet be said to grasp that concept: it is sufficient to acknowledge that 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.

He claims here that to explain what it is to understand, or know the meaning of, an expression involves explaining what it is to have the concept expressed by it. This is a quite mundane observation in itself. Indeed, if, for some concept, to grasp it is, typically, to understand a certain basic expression, then, quite naturally, to explain what it is to grasp the concept should be involved in explaining what it is to understand the basic expression. Thus we do not need here to introduce any special notion of grasping a concept or understanding an expression, or explaining them.

This together with another mundane observation yields the distinction in question (Dummett 1975, p. 4f):

The theory of meaning will, of course, do more than this: it plainly cannot merely explain the concepts expressible in the language, since these concepts may be grasped by someone who is quite ignorant of that particular language, who knows another language in which they are expressible. Hence the theory of meaning must also associate concepts

mett against McDowell's criticism, which is more or less correct; but they usually accept McDowell's interpretation of Dummett (1975), which needs to be examined. For example, see Gaifman (1996), Gunson (1998), Weiss (2002).

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: [...].

That is, if to understand an expression involves having the concept expressed by it, then we may distinguish, at least formally, two ingredients of the understanding of an expression: (1) the grasp of the concept which is expressed by the expression, and (2) the association of the concept with the expression; therefore we may also distinguish, accordingly, two ingredients in the task of explaining what it is to understand an expression. Now if a theory of meaning is to be a theory of understanding, then a natural view is that a theory of meaning should perform both tasks, i.e. that it should explain both ingredients of understanding; on my reading, this yields a full-blooded theory of meaning. “An alternative view”, which requires of a theory of meaning to explain only the latter ingredient of understanding, leaving the former ingredient unexplained, yields, on my reading, a modest theory of meaning. Thus we don’t need to think of full-bloodedness as a special requirement; it is only a natural, if naive, view of an explanation of what it is to understand an expression.²

Now we can easily see why Dummett regards modest theories as being “no more than a translation manual”. Dummett claims, first, that “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” (Dummett 1975, p. 6); this thesis is a version of what would later be called (e.g. in his 1993b) “the priority of language over thought”. If we accept the claim, and do not supply any other model for the grasp of a concept, then it follows that an account of the grasp of a concept involves an account of an understanding

² Unfortunately, Dummett’s own discussion of the distinction is obscured by misleading remarks (Dummett 1975, p. 5; this continues from the last sentence of the last quotation):

And an alternative view will be that it is only this latter task which properly belongs to the theory of meaning: that to demand of the theory of meaning that it should serve to explain new concepts to someone who does not already have them is to place too heavy a burden upon it, and that all that we can require of such a theory is that it give the interpretation of the language to someone who already has the concepts required. 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.

This is not completely wrong, because a full-blooded theory states what it is to grasp a concept, and this is just what should be learned by someone who wants to grasp the concept. Nevertheless, in this passage Dummett requires of a full-blooded theory that “it should serve to explain new concepts to someone who does not already have them”; this has suggested the reading that Dummett requires a full-blooded theory to be such that someone can acquire a grasp of the concepts expressible in the object-language *by learning the theory*, which we could never require of a full-blooded theory, or indeed of any theory of meaning

of some expression which expresses the same concept. Now, a modest theory of meaning, when it is used to explain the understanding of an expression, should presuppose an account of the grasp of the concept which is expressed by the expression, limiting itself only to an account of the association of the concept to the expression; therefore it will also, according to Dummett, presuppose an account of the understanding of some other expression which expresses the same concept as the original expression. Thus, when used to explain an understanding of an expression of a language, a modest theory of meaning presupposes an account of an understanding of some unspecified language, whereas a translation manual presupposes an account of an understanding of a particular language; there seems to be no significant contrast here (cf. Dummett 1975, p. 6) – unless, of course, we can supply some model for the grasp of a concept.³

We can also easily see what is wrong with modest theories according to Dummett. As we have seen, a modest theory (and also, in this respect, a translation manual) can explain the understanding of an expression, according to him, only when it presupposes an account of an understanding of another expression which expresses the same concept, i.e. which is synonymous with the former expression. But, of course, we can come to understand an expression without understanding another expression which is synonymous with it; that is the way we learn, as a child, our own first language, and we can also derive the understanding of a new sentence from an understanding of words in it, without presupposing a prior understanding of a synonymous sentence. Thus a modest theory or translation manual does not explain *what it is* to understand an expression, what the understanding of an expression *consists in*.

2.2 Truth theory as translation manual

All this is, I hope, clear enough. The question is: how is this consideration used to criticize Davidson? Now, we should note that a truth theory in itself does not contain any assertions about understanding. Dummett, however, takes the Davidsonian conception to imply that a truth theory can be *applied* to give

³ Again, his own explanation of (the lack of) the difference between a translation manual and a modest theory is misleading (Dummett 1975, p. 6):

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.

Here Dummett holds that a full-blooded theory of meaning could “derive” an understanding of the object-language, without presupposing an understanding of any other language. This has suggested the reading that Dummett requires of a full-blooded theory to *confer* an understanding of the object-language on someone *who learns the theory and doesn't have a prior understanding of any language*. I think that Dummett should have made clear that he was talking of the derivation of *an account of* understanding.

accounts of understanding; and Dummett's criticism is directed against the accounts of understanding which result from the application.

As we have seen, a correct T-sentence expresses what one should know when she knows the meaning of (therefore understands) the sentence mentioned in the left-hand side of it; if a correct truth theory yields a T-sentence " 'The earth moves' is true if and only if the earth moves", then we can say that to know that "The earth moves" is true if and only if the earth moves just is to know what "The earth moves" means (cf. Dummett 1975, p. 7).⁴ This might seem to work as an account of an understanding of the sentence "The earth moves". Later in the same article, Dummett also considers a similar proposal for proper names: if " 'Londra' denotes London" is an axiom of a correct truth theory, then we can say that to know that 'Londra' denotes London is just to know what 'Londra' means (ibid., p. 11ff)

Now, knowing that p , in general, involves a grasp of the thought that p . Thus if we leave unexplained what it is to know that "The earth moves" is true if and only if the earth moves, then we may well also leave unexplained what it is to grasp the thought that "The earth moves" is true if and only if the earth moves, and therefore also an account of a grasp of the thought that the earth moves, the same thought as expressed by "The earth moves"; and then we will have only a modest theory of meaning.

Dummett expressed this point in different terms. He introduced here the celebrated distinction between "knowledge of the truth of a sentence" and "knowledge of the proposition expressed by a sentence". When someone knows what "The earth moves" means, she not only knows that the T-sentence " 'The earth moves' is true if and only if the earth moves" is true (this is knowledge of the truth of T-sentence), but also knows that "The earth moves" is true if and only if the earth moves (this is knowledge of the proposition expressed by T-sentence); we can have the former knowledge without knowing what "The earth moves" means, if only we know that "The earth moves" mentioned in the left-hand side of the T-sentence is an English sentence, so that it is the same sentence as "the earth moves" in the right-hand side (cf. Dummett 1975, p. 8f). Thus we should

⁴ More precisely, Dummett points out that, according to Davidson, if a correct truth theory yields a T-sentence, then we may legitimately convert it into an "M-sentence", or "direct ascription of meaning": for example, if a correct truth theory yields the T-sentence " 'The earth moves' is true if and only if the earth moves", we can say that an M-sentence " 'The earth moves' means that the earth moves" is also correct; and he said that the M-sentence, rather than the T-sentence, expresses what one should know when she knows what "The earth moves" means (Dummett 1975, pp. 7–8). In fact, there are important differences between a T-sentence and an M-sentence, e.g. as to extensionality. But, as far as I can see, in this context, the argument will not be affected whether we talk of an M-sentence or a T-sentence. Indeed, as we see below, later in the same article, he considers the proposal that an axiom of a correct truth theory, rather than a corresponding M-sentence, expresses what one should know when she knows what the word which is dealt with in the axiom means. Thus I will talk only of T-sentences, and systematically substitute "T-sentence" for "M-sentence" in Dummett's passage.

find, in using a truth theory as a theory of understanding, a characterization of what, in addition, someone who knows the truth of the T-sentence has to know in order to know the proposition it expresses (cf. Dummett 1975, pp. 10, 11f); this task is substantially the same as that of explaining what it is to grasp the thought expressed by the T-sentence. And if a truth theory applied to give a theory of understanding leaves this grasp unexplained, then we have only a modest theory.

Now, Davidson does seem to have left unexplained what it is to know the proposition expressed by a T-sentence, and supplied no model for the grasp of a concept other than the mastery of some expression which expresses it (we shall discuss briefly the validity of this interpretation of Davidson in the last section). Therefore, as we saw in §2.1, if a truth theory is intended to give an account of the understanding of a sentence in the manner indicated above, then it will yield only a modest theory of meaning which is no more than a translation manual. Indeed, when we ascribe knowledge to someone, we usually assume that she knows a language to express the content of knowledge; and if knowledge of the proposition expressed by a T-sentence is interpreted in this way, then a Davidsonian theory could only be said to be reducing the understanding of an expression to the understanding of other expressions.

I take Dummett, in the following passage, as expressing this point in the contrapositive form (1975, p. 15):

Hence a [Davidsonian theory of meaning] merely exhibits what it is to arrive at an interpretation of one language via an understanding of another, which is just what a translation manual does [...].

This conclusion could be avoided only if we could ascribe to a speaker of the object-language a knowledge of the propositions expressed by the sentences of the theory of truth, independently of any language in which those propositions might be expressed. If this is the intention of such a theory of meaning, it appears deeply dissatisfying, since we have no model, and the theory provides none, for what an apprehension of such propositions might consist in, otherwise than in an ability to enunciate them linguistically.

2.3 What is a theory of understanding?

Our discussion so far has been based on intuitive ideas about what counts as an account of understanding. I will now discuss what Dummett has thought it is, in general, to give an account of understanding, and place the above discussion in it. We can then also see why his conclusion cited in the beginning gave the two alternatives of translation manual or holistic theory.

According to Dummett, to know or understand a language is to be able to employ the language (1975, p. 4; see also 1973, p. 92, where “understanding a language” and “being able to use a language” are used interchangeably). But now, to be able to employ a language, i.e. to be able to use expressions of the language, is to be able to do enormous varieties of things. “An account of the

understanding of an expression” is surely not intended to be an account of every feature of such use; rather, the hope is that we can choose some central aspect of understanding from which other features of use are derived.

One particular aspect will be taken as central, as constitutive of the meaning of any given sentence, and a detailed account provided of how the meaning of the sentence, as so construed, is determined from the way the sentence is built up out of its component words; all other features of the use of sentences will then be explained by a uniform account of their derivation from that feature taken as central. (Dummett 1973, p. 457)

According to Dummett, the truth-conditional conception of meaning, according to which, for example, to understand “The earth moves” is to know that “The earth moves” is true if and only if the earth moves, is one particular proposal along this line: the main point of this conception is that various features of someone’s use of “The earth moves” may be derived from the fact that she knows that “The earth moves” is true if and only if the earth moves, which is selected as the central aspect of the understanding of the object-language sentence “The earth moves”. The question is: what is knowledge of a truth-condition? There are three possible interpretations considered by Dummett.

A knowledge that “The earth moves” is true if and only if the earth moves is most straightforwardly interpreted as an ordinary, explicit knowledge that we are conscious of having, whose content is given by a T-sentence. As we have seen, however, this kind of knowledge involves a grasp of its content; thus, unless we can supply a model of the grasp of a content other than a mastery of some language which can express the content, to ascribe someone knowledge of this kind *presupposes* ascribing mastery of some language, and cannot be used to *derive* various features of this mastery.

But if the point of the truth-conditional conception is, as above, to assert that various features of use can be derived from knowledge of a truth-condition, this knowledge need not be such explicit knowledge. Thus other, oblique interpretations are possible for knowledge of a truth-condition. One is the interpretation of it as “a theoretical model of a practical ability” (Dummett 1975, p. 15; see also his 1973, p. 461, and his 1976, p. 36). According to this idea, when we ascribe knowledge of a truth-condition to the speaker of a language, we (implicitly) select some feature of use of a sentence, which can be regarded as central, and (implicitly) correlate it with a knowledge of a truth-condition of the sentence; in this way we represent some practical ability as knowledge of a truth-condition. The point of doing so is to represent the systematic connection between understandings of various sentences via a deductively connected system of propositions (cf. Dummett 1976, p. 36f). On this view, a truth theory, in giving an account of understanding, would have to be supplemented by a characterization of a practical ability correlated with knowledge of the truth-condition of each object-language sentence; this characterization can be said to specify what the knowledge of the truth-condition *consists in*.

Another possible interpretation of knowledge of a truth-condition is as a kind of theoretical hypothesis which imposes a coherent pattern on linguistic practice

(cf. Dummett 1973, p. 461). On this view, a truth theory, in giving an account of understanding, would also have to be supplemented by a specification of practical abilities which the knowledges in question is intended to explain; and the point in doing so would also be analogous. But, since we are not *correlating* practical ability with knowledge, we ascribe knowledge of a particular truth-condition to a speaker *only in so far as we haven't hit upon a better hypothesis*; if we should hit upon a better hypothesis, we would ascribe different knowledge to the speaker.

An extreme form of the third kind of interpretations is, I think, a holistic theory of meaning which is criticized in Dummett (1975, pp. 15–19). Here, as Dummett says, “a knowledge of the theory of truth as a whole issues, precisely, in an ability to speak and understand the object-language” (ibid., p. 15). In this case, surely we do not need to say any specific thing about the practical ability to be explained; we can thus eliminate the need to say what knowledge of a truth-condition consists in, and we seem to have a viable modest theory of meaning.

As I see, the essential point in Dummett's criticism of holistic theory is this (ibid., p. 19):

I am arguing, however, that it is required that a place be left for a distinction between a disagreement of substance and a disagreement over meaning, a distinction which was not, after all, invented by misguided theorists, but is actually employed within our language. Any theory which associates sentences merely with truth-conditions, without [...] providing any means of determining that an individual speaker, or even the whole community, associates a particular truth-condition with a particular sentence, save a rough agreement between the truth-conditions of all sentences under a given theory and the judgements made concerning them, is incapable of providing any place for such a distinction.

This point applies, not only to holistic theory, but to the third kind, as above, of interpretation of knowledge of a truth-condition generally. Suppose a person disagrees with us on the truth-value of the sentence “The earth moves”, i.e. she holds it false. This might be either because she does not know the fact that the earth moves around the sun (“disagreement of substance”), or because it is not the case that “The earth moves” in her mouth is true if and only if the earth moves (“disagreement over meaning”). If, now, her knowledge of the truth-condition of “The earth moves” can be ascribed to her merely as a theoretical hypothesis to explain her linguistic behavior, then the distinction between the two kinds of disagreement, and in particular the notion of error as to the fact, will be a theoretical concept. Dummett's point is that this is not the way our language is used (see below for more discussion).

Therefore, of the three possible interpretations, we are left only with the second. This possibility is a subject in Dummett (1976), the sequel to his (1975). I will now explain this possibility. A practical ability which is correlated with knowledge of a truth-condition is what Dummett has often called a “manifestation” of knowledge of a truth-condition. More concretely, he suggests that such a manifestation will be, at least in some basic cases, a capacity to recognize, or

a mastery of the means to recognize, whether the truth-condition obtains or not (1976, p. 45f). He now admits that it is possible that the understanding of a word can be equated with the understanding of, not every sentence containing it, but only some very specialized range of sentences containing it, thus with the manifestation of the understanding of that very specialized range of sentences; the result would be the kind of explanation which I mentioned in §1.

- *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.

Thus we could derive a “full-blooded” explanation in McDowell’s sense without appealing to any particularly epistemological concern.

However, as is well known to philosophers, he argued that this simple model for manifestation does not work in the case of sentences which are “not effectively decidable”, and that it is doubtful that there can be any other model for this kind of case (*ibid.*, p. 46); this is the so-called “manifestation challenge”. Thus he held that the truth-conditional conception of meaning confronts a formidable difficulty. But his proposal was to substitute mastery of the method of verification or falsification for knowledge of a truth-condition as the central aspect of the understanding of a sentence. This modifies the picture as a whole only slightly, save that the principle of bivalence should be abandoned.

3 Assessment

I will conclude with a brief discussion of the relevance of the above discussion to the later Dummett–Davidson debate.

It is not easy to judge how and how far the above applies to Davidson himself, because of the cryptic nature of his writing; but I think the third possibility I considered in §2.3 is close enough to Davidson himself (and I think Dummett’s interpretation of Davidson in the appendix to his 1975 is not better). First, Davidson would deny the reality of “the central aspect of understanding” I mentioned above, from which we could derive other features of understanding; he did deny repeatedly the idea that there are conventions which would make possible such derivation (e.g. in his 1986), and took issue with Dummett on that point (Dummett 1986, Davidson 1994, Dummett 1994). Thus he would never take the second interpretation in §2.3. Rather, he thought that “All understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation” (1973, p. 125); and in a radical interpretation, we keep striving for a more charitable interpretation, modifying the prior hypothesis.

In fact, I think, Dummett is not very far from Davidson in one fundamental point: both philosophers have thought that what gives meaning to language is our communication. I think that that is why, for Dummett, a theory of meaning should be a theory of understanding; what determines the meaning of words is mutual understanding in communication. Thus Dummett, in his debate with Davidson, said:

I welcome Davidson's attention to the communicative function of language, since I am disposed to take that as its primary role: language is a vehicle of thought because it is an instrument of communication, and not conversely. (Dummett 1986, p. 470f)

I believe that language could not serve as a vehicle of thought unless it were first an instrument of communication; unless I have grossly misunderstood him, Davidson is of the same opinion. (Dummett 1994, p. 262f)

Davidson tried to draw from this the surprising conclusion that we don't need any linguistic conventions in order to speak and understand a language; but this is plainly an overstatement, because, admitting communication which is not based upon prior conventions, stable communication will surely be based on conventions which we will find by reflection, and malapropism will be a *derivative* case based on such stable communication. I think Dummett was concerned with mainly with that reflective level.

Now what is its relevance to formal semantics in general? I claim that most of formal semantics can be seen as part of a full-blooded theory of meaning, along the line of the second interpretation in §2.3. Certainly, it is never concerned to specify the manifestation of an understanding of any expression; but it presupposes that there can be such a specification, concentrating on the relation between an understanding of an expression and that of another (see Evans 1981).

An exact formulation of what a truth-conditional semantics does has been notoriously difficult. Davidson's discussion has been valuable for this purpose, but it has its own biases: an a priori preference for first-order language and extensionality, a negative attitude towards linguistic convention, holism, etc. I think Dummett's exposition of a truth-conditional conception of meaning will, when properly understood, provide a much more fruitful basis for formal semantics – admittedly, at the cost of the principle of bivalence.

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