

Truth and Meaning in Davidson's Philosophy: A Critical Assessment

K. Ludwig

We will examine critically a number of important themes in Davidson's philosophy centered around the use that Davidson makes of an axiomatic truth theory in developing a theory of meaning.

The following are the five topics I anticipate taking up, as time permits, under this general program. In accordance with the interests of the seminar participants, we can focus more attention on some topics or subtopics than others. Readings for each topic are given after the description. The numbers are keyed to the reference list at the end. The readings are sorted under different headings. The principal readings are chapters from the two books [25] and [28], which cover the related topics. I give also some suggestions for what to read for those short of time. I mention related papers by myself (or with Lepore) and some small number of others mostly to serve as foils for discussion of misunderstandings of one or another sort. I also cite some papers by Davidson relevant to each topic for those who wish to review the most pertinent texts. For some general background on Davidson work, see [33], [24] and [29], the latter of which approaches his work from the standpoint of his intellectual development.

(1) We will begin with an examination of Davidson's proposal that an axiomatic, absolute truth theory can be deployed in giving a compositional account of the meanings of complex expressions in natural languages. I show how to understand Davidson's proposal so that can be used for that end without attributing to him the goal either of (i) rejecting the traditional project in the theory of meaning as confused in favor of its best successor or of (ii) reducing sentence meaning to truth conditions -- two common misinterpretations. Properly understood, the truth-theoretic approach allows us to meet the demands of the traditional project without appealing, in the machinery of the compositional meaning theory itself, to any assignments of abstracta to expressions in the language generally, whether senses, meanings, properties, relations, propositions, or functions of any sort. We will see, moreover, that the appeal to such entities does no real work in the pursuit of the aim of illuminating how we can understand complex expressions on the basis of their meaningful components and mode of combination. That appeal to such entities would illuminate meaning was always a chimera. Insofar as quantification over such entities serves a function, it is to provide translational pairings of object language sentences with metalanguage sentences or expressions that code for them. Whatever could be accomplished by such an approach is equally well accomplished without its burden of ontology by a recursive translation theory. However, a recursive translation theory falls short of the illumination provided by the truth-theoretic approach.

Principal reading: [25] Introduction, chapters 1-10, summary of part I (146 pages) , but especially chapters 3-9 (86 pages).

Short course of reading: [23] (28 pages).

Related work: [26] develops the argument for the inutility of assigning meanings in the theory of meaning; [28] chapter 1 gives an overview of the truth-theoretic framework, summarizing part I of [25] (34 pages), and chapters 2 and 3 discuss the modifications to a truth theory required by

quantifiers (44 pages); [32] focuses on the role of a truth theory in a meaning theory; [30] is a recent typescript reply to a criticism of Davidson's program by Soames in [40]. The exchange in [42], [27], and [43] may be of interest, the first being a review of [25], the second a highly critical response, and the third a response to the response. This covers matters related to topics (1)-(4). For some early examples misunderstandings in the reception of Davidson's work: [2], [41].

Most relevant papers by Davidson: [3], [4], [10].

(2) Next we will consider the use that Davidson makes of the form he gives to a compositional meaning theory in illuminating semantical and linked psychological concepts through an investigation into how one could confirm such a theory on the basis of purely behavioral evidence, that is, how Davidson embeds the truth-theoretic approach in the larger project of understanding meaning and related concepts from what he sees as the methodologically basic standpoint of the radical interpreter. We will address the following questions.

(a) What is it that a radical interpreter would have to know in order to know that he had confirmed an interpretive truth theory?

(b) What is the principle charity and what is its role? Is it the principle that Davidson needs? If not, what is?

(c) Is the radical interpreter in a position to confirm an interpretive truth theory for a speaker?

(d) What is indeterminacy of interpretation? Can Davidson appeal to it to reject the charge that the radical interpreter's epistemic position is too impoverished to justify an interpretation theory for a speaker? Can the indeterminacy of interpretation be rescued and shown to be both non-threatening and uninteresting by appeal to the measurement analogy?

I will argue for an overall negative assessment of the project: the epistemic position of the radical interpreter is demonstratively too impoverished, from the point of view of the radical interpreter himself, to yield a justified interpreter theory of another speaker, and the appeal to indeterminacy and the measurement analogy cannot rescue the project from its internal contradictions.

Principal reading: [25] Introduction to part II, chapters 11-16 (150 pages), but especially 11-13 (57 pages) and 15 (26 pages); more specifically, ch. 11 for (a), chs. 12-13 for (b), ch. 15 for (c) and (d).

Short course of reading: [25] chapters 11-12, and 15 (72 pages).

Related work: [37] is a reply to commentary on [25] that summarizes the criticism of radical interpretation. Again, [42], [27] and [43] may be of interest here.

Most relevant papers by Davidson: [8], [9], [10].

(3) Next we will consider Davidson's attempt to ground a variety of metaphysical and epistemological theses on his investigation into meaning and thought from the radical interpreter's standpoint: the

impossibility of radically different conceptual schemes, the inscrutability of reference, the relational determination of thought content, and the grounding of knowledge of the external world, of one's own and of other minds.

Principal reading: [25] Introduction to part III, chapters 18-21 (87 pages); 18 for conceptual schemes, 19 for externalism and massive error, 20 for first person authority, 21 for the inscrutability of reference.

Short course of reading: whichever chapters are of most interest.

Related work: see [42], [27] and [43].

Most relevant papers by Davidson: [11], [12], [16], [17], [18], [19], [20].

(4) Next we will consider scattered arguments Davidson has offered to provide something of the nature of an a priori grounding of the claim that radical interpretation is possible, that is, the claim that it is constitutive of the semantic and psychological concepts that they can be applied definitively and correctly solely on the basis of the evidence available from the radical interpreter's standpoint.

Principal reading: [25] chapter 22 (31 pages), summary of part III.

Most relevant papers by Davidson: [13], [14], [19], [20].

Related work: see [42], [27], [43], [36].

(5) Finally, we will return to the theory of meaning proper and consider some specific semantical issues from the standpoint of truth-theoretic semantics: (i) intensional contexts, including especially indirect discourse, attitude reports, and modal contexts; (ii) non-declarative sentences, i.e., interrogatives, imperatives, and exclamatives; and (iii) logico-semantic form from the standpoint of truth-theoretic semantics. By and large the verdict will be that the truth-theoretic framework is flexible enough to handle intensional contexts, that it can be extended to non-declaratives via a generalization which does not reduce non-declaratives to declaratives and which preserves the central conceptual role of the truth theory, and that it provides a particularly perspicuous framework for discussing issues of logico-semantic form.

Principal reading: [28] chapters 11-13 (75 pages); 11 for intensional contexts, 12 for nondeclaratives, 13 for logical form.

Short course of reading: whichever chapters are of most interest.

Related work: [31], [38], [39], [34], [1], [22], [35], [28] chapter 14.

Most relevant papers by Davidson: [5]- [7], [13].

References

- [1] Boisvert, Daniel, and Kirk Ludwig. 2005. Nondeclaratives. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Language*, edited by E. Lepore. New York: Oxford.
- [2] Chihara, Charles S. 1975. Davidson's Extensional Theory of Meaning. *Philosophical Studies* 28 (1):1-15.
- [3] Davidson, Donald. 2001. Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages. In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. New York: Clarendon Press. Originally published: 1966.
- [4] Davidson, Donald. 2001. Truth and Meaning. In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. New York: Clarendon Press. Originally published: 1967.
- [5] Davidson, Donald. 2001. The Logical Form of Action Sentences. In *Essays on Actions and Events*. New York: Clarendon Press. Originally published: 1967.
- [6] Davidson, Donald. 2001. On Saying That. In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. New York: Clarendon Press. Originally published: 1968.
- [7] Davidson, Donald. 2001. Criticism, Comment, and Defence.. In *Essays on Actions and Events*. New York: Clarendon Press. Originally published: 1970.
- [8] Davidson, Donald. 2001. Radical Interpretation. In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. New York: Clarendon Press. Originally published: 1973.
- [9] Davidson, Donald. 2001. Belief and the Basis of Meaning. In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. New York: Clarendon Press. Originally published: 1974.
- [10] Davidson, Donald. 2001. Reply to Foster. In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. New York: Clarendon Press. Originally published: 1976.
- [11] Davidson, Donald. 2001. On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme. In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. New York: Clarendon Press. Originally published: 1974.
- [12] Davidson, Donald. 2001. The Inscrutability of Reference. In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. New York: Clarendon Press. Originally published: 1979.
- [13] Davidson, Donald. 2001. Moods and Performances. In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. New York: Clarendon Press. Originally published: 1979.
- [14] Davidson, Donald. 2001. Rational Animals. In *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. New York: Clarendon Press. Originally published: 1982.
- [15] Davidson, Donald. 2001. *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. 2nd ed. New York: Clarendon Press. Originally published: 1984.

- [16] Davidson, Donald. 2001. First Person Authority. In *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. New York: Clarendon Press. Originally published: 1984.
- [17] Davidson, Donald. 2001. A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge. In *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. New York: Clarendon Press. Originally published: 1983.
- [18] Davidson, Donald. 2001. Afterthoughts. In *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. New York: Clarendon Press. Originally published: 1987.
- [19] Davidson, Donald. 2001. Three Varieties of Knowledge. In *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. New York: Clarendon Press. Originally published: 1988.
- [20] Davidson, Donald. 2001. Epistemology Externalized. In *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. New York: Clarendon Press. Originally published: 1990.
- [21] Davidson, Donald. 2001. *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. New York: Clarendon Press.
- [22] Lepore, Ernest, and Kirk Ludwig. 2002. What Is Logical Form? In *Logical Form and Language*, Preyer, Gerhard (ed), 54-90. Oxford: Clarendon Oxford Press.
- [23] Lepore, Ernest and Kirk Ludwig. 2003. Truth and Meaning. In *Donald Davidson*, edited by K. Ludwig. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- [24] Lepore, Ernest, and Kirk Ludwig. 2004. Donald Davidson. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 28:309-333.
- [25] Lepore, Ernest, and Kirk Ludwig. 2005. *Donald Davidson: Truth, Meaning, Language and Reality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [26] Lepore, Ernest, and K. Ludwig. 2006. Ontology in the theory of meaning. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 14 (3):325-335.
- [27] Lepore, Ernest, and K. Ludwig. 2007. Radical Misinterpretation: A Reply to Stoutland. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 15 (4):557-585.
- [28] Lepore, Ernest, and Kirk Ludwig. 2007. *Donald Davidson: Truth-theoretic Semantics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [29] Lepore, Ernie, and Kirk Ludwig. 2009. Donald Davidson. In *12 Modern Philosophers*, edited by C. Belshaw and G. Kemp. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- [30] Lepore, Ernest, and Kirk Ludwig. 2009. Truth and Meaning Redux: Reply to Soames. Typescript.
- [31] Ludwig, Kirk, and Greg Ray. 1998. Semantics for Opaque Contexts. *Philosophical Perspectives* 12:141-166.

- [32] Ludwig, Kirk. 2002. What is the Role of a Truth Theory in a Meaning Theory? In *Meaning and Truth: Investigations in Philosophical Semantics*, edited by D. Shier, J. K. Campbell and M. O'Rourke. New York: Seven Bridges Press.
- [33] Ludwig, Kirk. 2003. Introduction. In *Donald Davidson*, edited by K. Ludwig. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [34] Ludwig, Kirk. 2003. The Truth about Moods. In *Concepts of Meaning*, edited by G. Preyer, G. Peter and M. Ulkan. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- [35] Ludwig, Kirk. 2004. Davidson's Objection to Horwich's Minimalism about Truth. *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 101, no. 8, pp.
- [36] Ludwig, Kirk. 2007. Critical Notice: Donald Davidson, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective; Problems of Rationality; Language, Truth and History*. *Mind* 116:405-416.
- [37] Ludwig, Kirk. 2007. The Problem with Radical Interpretation: Reply to Simon Evnine and Piers Rawling. *Florida Philosophical Review: The Journal of the Florida Philosophical Association* VII (1):138-146.
- [38] Ludwig, Kirk. 2009. De Re Necessities. Typescript.
- [39] Ludwig, Kirk. 2009. Sententialism and Higher-Order Attitude Reports. Typescript.
- [40] Soames, S. 2008. Truth and Meaning: In Perspective. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 32:1-19.
- [41] Stich, Stephen. 1976. Davidson's Semantic Program. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 6:201-227.
- [42] Stoutland, Frederick. 2006. A Mistaken View of Davidson's Legacy. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 14 (4):579-596.
- [43] Stoutland, Frederick. 2007. Radical Misinterpretation Indeed: Response to Lepore and Ludwig. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 15 (4):587-597.