

DAVIDSON'S OBJECTION TO HORWICH'S  
MINIMALISM ABOUT TRUTH\*

In this paper, I show how one can respond within truth-theoretic semantics, without appeal to parataxis, to Donald Davidson's objection to the intelligibility of Paul Horwich's statement of the minimalist position on truth.

I

In "The Folly of Trying to Define Truth,"<sup>1</sup> Davidson expressed puzzlement about how to understand the schema (T) in terms of which Horwich<sup>2</sup> explains the minimalist position on truth.

(T) The proposition that *p* is true iff *p*

The minimalist holds that our understanding of the concept of truth is exhausted by our tendency to accept (nonsemantically defective) instances of (T). Davidson observes that in (T) the same schematic letter '*p*' appears in two places. He asks how they are related, and, in particular, how in an instance of (T) the expression that replaces '*p*' in the first occurrence functions semantically. He sets aside the suggestion that each instance of 'the proposition that *p*' is to be taken as a semantic primitive. This would make the language unlearnable by finite beings, contrary to fact. We must ascribe some semantic structure to 'the proposition that *p*'. A natural suggestion, Davidson thinks, is to treat 'the proposition that *p*' as 'the proposition expressed by "*p*"', and to rewrite (T) as (T')

(T') The proposition expressed by '*p*' is true iff *p*

This is unworkable, however, for the same sentence may express different propositions in different languages. Thus, we must amend it by adding a relativization to a language, namely, the language of the schema itself, to get (T'').

(T'') The proposition expressed by '*p*' in English is true iff *p*

This relativization to a language, Davidson says, "Horwich must cir-

\* I would like to thank Ana Maria Andrei and Emil Badici for helpful discussion.

<sup>1</sup> This JOURNAL, XCIII, 6 (June 1996): 263–78.

<sup>2</sup> "Davidson on Deflationism," in Urszula Zeglen, ed., *Donald Davidson: Truth, Meaning and Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 20–24; and *Truth*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford, 1998).

cumvent" (*op. cit.*, p. 318). Why? The point of explaining the minimalist's position in terms of (T) is, in part, that it captures the idea that truth is not a concept restricted to any particular language. Propositions are translinguistic. They may be expressed in different languages, and some may not be expressed in any actual human language. This aspect of the concept of truth would not be captured in a tendency to accept (nonsemantically defective) instances of (T''). Davidson concluded that:

We cannot eliminate this iteration of the same sentence without destroying all appearance of a theory. But we cannot *understand* the result of the iteration unless we can see how to make use of the same semantic features of the repeated sentence in both of its appearances—make use of them in giving the semantics of the schema instances. I do not see how this can be done (*op. cit.*, p. 318).

Here, Davidson means he does not see how it can be done compatibly with the role the phrase is to play in expressing minimalism; for he has provided one way of understanding it which is unproblematic, but not useful for Horwich's purposes.

## II

Horwich has replied to this objection by refusing the challenge issued, but, I think, mistakenly.

Davidson's...objection to the brand of deflationism presented here is that expressions like 'the proposition that dogs bark', construed as singular terms, are unintelligible. However, this rather counterintuitive claim is entirely theory-driven: it is derived from his inability to find any account (of the sort required by his truth-theoretic paradigm) of how the referents of such expressions could be determined by the referents of their parts.<sup>3</sup>

Horwich concludes that Davidson's inability to find any appropriate account of expressions of the form 'the proposition that *p*' is a reason to give up Davidson's truth-theoretic paradigm, rather than a reason to reject minimalism.

Horwich mischaracterizes Davidson's semantic program.<sup>4</sup> But, in

<sup>3</sup> *Truth*, p. 133.

<sup>4</sup> Horwich claims that "no-one yet has been able to articulate a conception of 'truth condition' (that is, of '*u* is true if and only if *p*') that would be sufficiently strong to constitute the facts about meaning (that is, '*u* means that *p*')"—"Davidson on Deflationism," p. 22. This is a misunderstanding. A Tarski-style truth theory is not a meaning theory. Davidson's claim is rather that a Tarski-style truth theory we know and about which we know certain things will put us in a position to understand every sentence of the object language. In particular, we are supposed to know that a Tarski-style theory meets Convention T, or a suitable analog for natural languages, in order to use it for interpretation. Consider just the case of a language *L* without

any case, the challenge is not tied to that program, except insofar as that program is committed to making sense of the referents of complex referring terms (or the denotations of definite descriptions construed as quantifier expressions) on the basis of their semantically significant parts. This is presumably something we should all be committed to, whatever our other commitments. It is also worth noting that Davidson did not claim that descriptions such as 'the proposition that dogs bark' are unintelligible. On this point, Horwich has misread him. He only claimed that he could not see how to give the semantics for such terms in a way that serves Horwich's purposes.

Horwich offers a "use-theoretic" account of ' $u$  expresses the proposition that  $p$ ' in one place, namely,

$u$  expresses the proposition that  $p$  iff  $\text{Int}(u) = \text{my } 'p'$

"where the content of the right-hand side is that our procedures of interpretation, when applied to the utterance  $u$  (given the context in which it occurs) yields the sentence ' $p$ ' of the interpreter's current language."<sup>5</sup> This does not meet the challenge, for it does not explain or exhibit how we understand 'the proposition that  $p$ ' on the basis of understanding its constituent expressions. But it is not intended to meet that challenge. It is intended to make sense of our understanding the expression without having to meet the challenge. Does it do so? And does it do so in a way that serves Horwich's purposes?

I think it is doubtful that it does suffice to make sense of our understanding of the expression. The gloss of the right-hand side is: the correct interpretation of  $u$  in my current language is given by ' $p$ '. Set aside the fact that an interpreter may speak more than one language, and that the sentence ' $p$ ' may be context sensitive. These

context sensitive expressions. If a truth theory for  $L$  meets Tarski's Convention T, then we know that among its theorems are all true instances of ' $s$  is true in  $L$  iff  $p$ ' where what replaces ' $p$ ' in the metalanguage translates  $s$  in  $L$ . In this case, we can replace 'is true in  $L$  iff' with 'means in  $L$  that', thus preserving truth—see Davidson, "Semantics for Natural Languages," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford, 2001), pp. 55–64, here p. 60. There is no attempt here to articulate a conception of "truth condition" that guarantees the satisfaction of Convention T. For further discussion and defense, see Kirk Ludwig, "What Is the Role of a Truth Theory in a Meaning Theory?" in David Shier, Joseph Keim Campbell, and Michael O'Rourke, eds., *Meaning and Truth: Investigations in Philosophical Semantics* (New York: Seven Bridges, 2002), pp. 142–63. Although I will not follow out the point here, reflection on this also shows that truth-theoretic semantics does not, as Horwich believes, carry any commitment to the concept of truth being more basic than, or at least as basic as, the concept of meaning. This is something that Davidson holds. But it is not a consequence of his conception of truth-theoretic semantics. It is an independent commitment.

<sup>5</sup> "Davidson on Deflationism," p. 24.

defects can be corrected. A more serious point is that the right-hand side does not express a relation between an utterance and a proposition: it merely says that a certain sentence, perhaps taken relative to a context, in my current language, interprets a certain utterance. If we take the ontology of propositions seriously, this is not sufficient to give us the idea of a proposition. This becomes clear if we replace the left-hand side with ' $E(u, p)$ ', so that we do not rely on our prior understanding of the words that appear there. It is also clear that intuitively the right-hand side is context sensitive in a way that the left-hand side is not. If ' $p$ ' is a context insensitive sentence, then the truth value of the left-hand side is the same across all contexts of utterance, but that is not true of the right-hand side. Moreover, it can be true that a certain sentence  $S$  interprets a certain utterance  $u$  without its being true that  $u$  expresses the denotation of 'the proposition that  $p$ '.  $S. u$  may be an utterance of 'What time is it?', for example. Even if  $u$  is the utterance of an indicative sentence, since sentential mood is no guarantee that a proposition is expressed, the interpretation relation is still inadequate to capture the idea that  $u$  expresses a proposition. This may be because the sentence itself, though it has an interpretation, is also defective in a way that prevents it from expressing a proposition. Or it may be because it is a sentence that, as is sometimes alleged about ethical sentences, although in the indicative mood, has some function in the language besides that of expressing propositions.

Even waiving these objections, would this account serve Horwich's purposes? It would not, if Davidson was right, as Horwich grants, that the interpretation he offered of the (T)-schema is not adequate for Horwich's purposes. The difficulty with Davidson's suggestion, for Horwich's purposes, was that it tied understanding of truth to a language, because it tied understanding the literal content of 'the proposition that  $p$ ' to a particular language. Horwich's own proposal does the same thing, for it amounts to saying that our understanding of this phrase is bound up with thinking that a sentence interpreted in a language, one's own, interprets an utterance. But the concept of a proposition, and of truth, was to be translinguistic.

The challenge then needs to be answered. It is not tied to Davidson's program in semantics. Horwich's suggestion about how to avoid explaining how we understand 'the proposition that  $p$ ' on the basis of our understanding of its significant parts is not adequate. And it appears to be subject to the criticism that Davidson originally raised to Horwich's adopting the proposal for understanding it that Davidson suggested.

## III

Nevertheless, I think Davidson's challenge to minimalism can be met fairly straightforwardly, and very much in the spirit of some of Davidson's own proposals, though without their more controversial features.<sup>6</sup>

The problem is to give an account of the semantic structure of 'the proposition that *p*' that does not involve relativization to any language, and otherwise raises no problems for understanding (T) in a way compatible with minimalism. I will adapt certain features of Davidson's proposal for indirect discourse.<sup>7</sup> Davidson's well-known proposal is that an utterance of a sentence such as (1) can be treated as equivalent semantically to an utterance of (2).

- (1) Galileo said that the earth moves.
- (2) Galileo said that. The earth moves.

In (2), 'that' functions in use as a demonstrative referring to the following utterance of 'The earth moves', and 'Galileo said that' as used is true just in case some utterance of Galileo's translates the utterance demonstrated. Here, although a sentence is used to make an utterance, and the meaning of the utterance is determined by the sentence's being used in English, no reference to English is required for the utterance to express the proposition that the sentence expresses as so used in English.<sup>8</sup>

We can make use of the fact that this proposal relies upon, that an utterance act (a locutionary act in Austin's sense) is individuated, if it is of a fully meaningful declarative sentence, and not otherwise semantically defective as used (for example, by including a nonreferring demonstrative), by (inter alia) what proposition it expresses.<sup>9</sup> For present purposes, we may treat 'the proposition that *p*' as a complex

<sup>6</sup> That Davidson's own view looks to provide a response to the objection has been noted by Julian Dodd, "On a Davidsonian Objection to Minimalism," *Analysis*, LVII, 4 (October 1997): 267–72. Dodd amends Davidson's paratactic account of indirect discourse to involve demonstrative reference to propositions, and adapts it to 'the proposition that *p*'; the present discussion extends the response by showing how to detach it from Davidson's controversial paratactic analysis.

<sup>7</sup> See Davidson, "On Saying That," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford, 2001), pp. 93–108.

<sup>8</sup> In stating this in terms of propositions I am departing from Davidson, for whom these are, in Quine's words, "creatures of darkness." But my aim is to use materials Davidson supplies to defend Horwich, not of course to preserve everything Davidson believes in providing that defense.

<sup>9</sup> Suppose we had started with the schemata: the belief/statement that *p* is true iff *p*. Davidson would not have been tempted in these cases to appeal to any relativization to a language. But then the suggestion of an extension would have been obvious.

referring term.<sup>10</sup> The idea then is to appeal to uses of ‘the proposition that  $p$ ’, and require that they refer to the proposition expressed by ‘ $p$ ’ as used in it. The most straightforward adaptation of Davidson’s proposal about indirect discourse would be to treat a use of ‘the proposition that  $p$ ’ as involving a demonstrative reference to an utterance of ‘ $p$ ’. The whole expression then would be required to refer to the proposition expressed by what ‘that’ is used to refer to. This would not involve any reference to the sentence ‘ $p$ ’ or its language in the account of the semantic structure of ‘the proposition that  $p$ ’. Treating the reference as secured by a demonstration by the speaker, however, is a feature of Davidson’s original account which is not necessary, and which causes unnecessary difficulties, which throw the adequacy of the account into doubt on independent grounds.<sup>11</sup> My aim then is to develop the proposal without Davidson’s commitment to parataxis.

We wish to treat ‘the proposition that  $p$ ’ as having a referent only in use, because it is used to refer to the proposition expressed by the utterance of ‘ $p$ ’ embedded in it. The proposal can be expressed precisely as a reference clause in an interpretive truth theory for the language which gives the referent of the expression relative to a use of it.<sup>12</sup> We do this by quantifying over utterances of the expression by a speaker at a time, and utterances of its component ‘ $p$ ’, requiring the utterance of the whole to refer to the proposition expressed by the utterance of the component.

(R) For any declarative sentence  $\phi$ , for any speaker  $s$ , and time  $t$ , for any utterance  $u$  of ‘the proposition that’ $\wedge\phi$  by  $s$  at  $t$ , for any utterance  $u'$  such that  $u'$  is a subpart of  $u$  and  $u'$  is an utterance of  $\phi$ , for any proposition  $p$ , if  $p$  is expressed by  $u'$ , then  $\text{ref}(\text{‘the proposition that’}\wedge\phi, s, t, u) = p$ .<sup>13</sup>

‘ $\text{ref}(\text{‘the proposition that’}\wedge\phi, s, t, u)$ ’ is read as ‘the referent of “the

<sup>10</sup> We can adapt the proposal to a Russellian account of the definite description by unpacking ‘the proposition that  $p$ ’ as ‘[the  $x$ :  $x$  is a proposition and  $x = \text{that } p$ ]’, taking ‘that  $p$ ’ to be the referring term. Then ‘that  $p$ ’ could be treated as the whole is below in (R).

<sup>11</sup> For example, one of the well-known difficulties with this is that there is no guarantee that an utterance of (2) is true in the same circumstances as an utterance of (1) because nothing constrains the speaker in (2) to refer to the following utterance, or to be speaking English when he utters it. For a review of difficulties, see Ludwig and Greg Ray, “Semantics for Opaque Contexts,” *Philosophical Perspectives*, xii (1998): 141–66.

<sup>12</sup> Ludwig, “What Is the Role of a Truth Theory in a Meaning Theory?”

<sup>13</sup> In a formal theory we would in effect define ‘declarative sentence  $\phi$ ’ over a recursive characterization of sentences of English, so that the clause would cover only English expressions.

proposition that  $\phi$  as used by  $s$  at  $t$  in  $u$ '. For illustration, let us apply (R) to an utterance  $v$  of 'the proposition that dogs bark' by Sam in English at  $\tau$ , where  $v'$  is the utterance of 'dogs bark' in  $v$ . We will suppose that this utterance is a part of an utterance of a full declarative sentence, perhaps, 'The proposition that dogs bark is true if and only if dogs bark'. I will use '<dogs bark>' as a metalanguage term to denote the proposition that dogs bark.<sup>14</sup> In hearing Sam utter 'The proposition that dogs bark is true if and only if dogs bark', we must understand what he refers to using 'the proposition that dogs bark' on the basis of its structure. (R) gives us a rule for doing this. Instantiating to Sam's case, we have

For any proposition  $p$ , if  $p$  is expressed by  $v'$ , then  $\text{ref}(\text{'the proposition that dogs bark'}, \text{Sam}, \tau, v) = p$ .

Knowing that Sam is speaking English sincerely and literally, we know that the proposition expressed by his utterance of 'dogs bark', that is, by  $v'$ , is <dogs bark>. And so we can infer that

$\text{Ref}(\text{'the proposition that dogs bark'}, \text{Sam}, \tau, v) = \text{<dogs bark>}$ .

Clearly, (R) gives us a way of understanding how the referent of an utterance of 'the proposition that  $p$ ' is determined on the basis of the parts of the expression that secures intuitively the right proposition (if any) as its referent, without any relativization of the sentence ' $p$ ' to its language being involved in our understanding of how the referent is secured.

It is no objection to this that we quantify over sentences of the language in (R). Quantification over expressions of the language is involved in every clause in a truth theory. We would not say on that ground that all of those expressions for which we give referents, or satisfaction or truth conditions, are about their language, or express concepts that involve the concept of any particular language. The use of the sentence as a sentence of the language determines that it expresses the proposition it does, but we get at the proposition not through referring to the language but through referring to the utterance. So our grasp of (T) does not involve any restriction, on this

<sup>14</sup> Similarly we use quantifiers in the metalanguage when giving the recursive truth conditions for quantifiers in the object language, proper names in the metalanguage when giving the referents of proper names in the object language, and quotation names in the metalanguage when giving the referents of quotation names in the object language. This is permissible when our object is to show how understanding of parts and their combination is involved in understanding the complexes in which they appear.

way of understanding 'the proposition that  $p$ ', to any particular language. Nor is it an objection that to know what proposition is expressed by a token utterance of, for example, 'dogs bark', in an utterance of 'the proposition that dogs bark', one may rely on knowledge of what language the speaker is speaking. Knowledge of what language the speaker is speaking, and knowing the language, aids us in determining what proposition is expressed. But it does not follow from this that the expression we interpret involves reference to the language we know is being spoken.

To use this proposal in defense of minimalism, we must restate minimalism as about utterances of the schema (T). This is needed in any case. The schema (T) is an idealization in the case of natural languages, many of whose sentences are context sensitive because of the use of tensed verbs, and of indexicals and demonstratives. We can restate minimalism to accommodate this as follows.

Our understanding of the concept of truth is exhausted by our tendency to accept all (nonsemantically defective) token utterances of (T):

(T) The proposition that  $p$  is true iff  $p$ .<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, Horwich has available a more satisfactory reply to Davidson than the one he gives. He can appeal to materials that Davidson himself has made use of to give an account of the semantic structure of 'the proposition that  $p$ ' that avoids the pitfalls Davidson identifies, and he can do so without commitment to Davidson's controversial paratactic account of opaque contexts. It was a mistake to think that

<sup>15</sup> Once we take into account context sensitivity in natural languages, other complications begin to emerge. In the case of a sentence containing a demonstrative, 'that is brown', for example, it is possible for a token utterance of (T) to be false, since the speaker could use 'that' to refer to different things on the left and right-hand sides of the biconditional. Similar difficulties arise with tense. Consider: the proposition that I am standing is true if and only if I am standing. Arguably, the time indexed in the first utterance of 'I am standing' and in the second utterance of it are different. I can say, without contradiction: I am standing now, but I am not standing now. (As Jaakko Hintikka has pointed out, even the context insensitive disquotational schema is problematic for instances such as 'The proposition that any man is mortal is true if and only if any man is mortal' since the second occurrence of 'any', because of how it is embedded, receives an existential reading. See his "A Counterexample to Tarski-type Truth-definitions as Applied to Natural Languages," *Philosophia*, v (July 1975): 207–12.) It may be possible to handle these difficulties compatibly with the leading idea of minimalism, but I will not pursue either the problem or possible solutions here. My present interest is in the adequacy of Davidson's objection to minimalism. That objection focuses on the problem of giving a compositional account of 'the proposition that  $p$ ' that is consistent with the use to which Horwich wants to put the schema (T) in explaining minimalism.



the problem Davidson raised was bound up with commitment to truth-theoretic semantics; but it was also a mistake to think that it could not be solved within that framework without reference to a particular language. There is nothing in truth-theoretic semantics, at least so far as using the truth theory as the vehicle of a compositional meaning theory goes, that prevents one from adopting a minimalist position on truth.<sup>16</sup> Objections to minimalism must rest rather on establishing important connections between the concept of truth and other concepts.

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<sup>16</sup> Again, see Ludwig, "What Is the Role of a Truth Theory in a Meaning Theory?"