DAVIDSON'S ACCOUNT OF TRUTH AND FICTIONAL MEANING

MICHAEL BOURKE

BRITISH COLUMBIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Abstract

Fictional and non-fictional texts rely on the same language to express their meaning; yet many philosophers in the analytic tradition would say, with reason, that fictional texts literally make no truth claims, or more modestly that the rhetorical and literary devices (e.g., metaphor) to which fiction and non-fiction writers alike have recourse are unconnected to truth or have no propositional content. These related views are associated with a doctrine in the philosophy of language, most notably advanced by the late Donald Davidson, which holds that we understand the semantic structure of a language by applying to it a theory of truth, which involves discovering the truth conditions of its sentences. This approach to semantic theory raises several seemingly intractable problems, such as the problem of stating the meaning of non-declarative sentences, e.g. questions and imperatives. The chief aim of this paper will be to try to dispel these problems by suggesting an adjustment in Davidson's account of the relation of truth to meaning, one which will also allow us to picture such troublesome linguistic items as metaphor within a semantic theory, and to expand the range of objects which can be brought into a general theory of meaning.

The truth-theory approach to meaning

Donald Davidson's effort to develop a truth-theoretic account of the semantic structure of language has been widely recognised, within the analytic tradition, as the leading example of this kind of approach to semantic theory. It was clear to Davidson, however,

starting with his 1967 paper "Truth and Meaning," that a truth-theoretic approach to meaning faces sizable and far-reaching problems.[1] These include the problem of providing an account of the meaning of non-declarative sentences, and, less of a concern for many analytic philosophers, of accounting for figurative and metaphorical uses of language, and of fictional meaning in general. This paper proposes an adjustment of the role that truth plays in a truth-based semantic theory, with a view to avoiding the seemingly intractable problems which Davidson's theory has raised, and to widening the range of objects which can be brought within such a theory.

The intimate relationship between language and reality suggests an attractive general method for philosophers who regard the task of explicating the semantics of a natural language as requiring a description of its truth conditions. In "Truth and Meaning" Davidson committed himself to the view that the only available procedure for providing such a description lay in a Tarski-styled truth theory.[2] This procedure might be as simple as placing an object sentence in quotation marks and then stating that this sentence would, and only could, be true relative to some true, perhaps grammatically equivalent, sentence outside quotation marks. We might, for example, say that the sentence 'Snow is white' is true *if and only if* snow is (actually) white. Such a procedure does not establish a direct, non-linguistic link between the declarative sentence 'Snow is white', presented within quotation marks, and the reality to which a corresponding sentence outside quotation marks refers. Indeed Davidson, in early and later writings, explicitly rejected the idea of a non-linguistic, "unprocessed" relation between reality and our thoughts or descriptions of reality.[3] The intent of the procedure, more modestly, is to use language to offer a description of the relevant features of reality, in order to be able to fix the

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[1] Davidson (1984 [1967]), pp. 35-6.
[2] Ibid, p. 35.
[3] For example: "Seeing Through Language" (1997), p. 15.

propositional content and so meaning of the sentence in quotation marks; and ultimately, were a systematic semantic analysis to be achieved, of the entire natural language to which the sentence belongs. Within Davidson's project, showing the semantic pattern of a natural language would thus involve specifying the propositional content of sentences within that language that take a truth value. From the project's inception, however, even though this is part of the project which never succeeded, Davidson's intent was to say how a semantic theory can show how other parts of language and how sentences which are non-propositional also become part of this general pattern.

A decisive obstacle facing the truth-theory approach might involve the very ambition of establishing a formal semantics or general meaning for a natural language. The ambition is slightly odd for Davidson to have maintained, given the transient nature of the semantic criteria that his theory permitted, for example in his proposal of a passing language or a language that two speakers who don't share the conventions of a common language might temporarily construct in order to communicate. But as Davidson makes clear in a late online discussion with Richard Rorty,[4] while his ambition might not have been as grand as some interpreters have supposed, it did retain this commitment: that some semantic pattern must exist for linguistic communication to occur. In that discussion it also becomes clear that he retained his view that, if two speakers are to understand what the other is saying, the pattern in question needs to entail a common truth theory, an understanding of what it means to assert or deny a range of propositions as extensive as their mutual understanding.

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[4] "The Rorty Discussion," Google links, 2008.

To this extent, Davidson's account of linguistic understanding is difficult to resist. But it is also limited, in so far as it assumes that a passing language in which speakers understand what the other is saying must convey propositional attitudes or claims. That assumption might seem plausible, since it seems strange to envision a situation in which linguistic communication takes place without assertions at least being suggested. We can of course imagine scenarios of lopsided communication, where, for example, the speakers have been instructed to confine their exchanges to questions and requests. In these situations, it seems natural to assume that assertions are lurking beneath the surface, if only because we would expect the recipient of the questions or requests, if she understands the language being spoken, to be able to formulate an approximate theory of what was being said, simply to show that she understands the questions or requests; and such a theory can only be represented through a series of assertions. But unlike the Tarski-styled truth theories which, in Davidson's view, we need to invoke to explicate sentences that have a propositional content, the theory that we expect of the recipient in such a situation attaches truth to a *description* of the speech she understands, not to the speech, let us say set apart in quotation marks, which her description is intended to explicate, since that speech consists entirely of questions and requests. Her test of linguistic competence, then, involves primarily an application of truth to her interpretation (description) of the meaning of an utterance or a text – an utterance which may or may not be asserting a truth – and only secondarily, and not in every instance, an application of truth to the utterance itself.

This characterisation of her linguistic competence, of her capacity to discern a semantic pattern in the utterances she seeks to understand, adjusts Davidson's semantic theory by shifting the application of a truth theory away from meaning *per se*, whatever purportedly

is meaningful, to the interpretations which ascribe meaning. The adjustment raises several issues. If we follow Davidson's approach, we can't speak of meaning without a truth theory. Against this view, the adjustment we have in mind assumes that the relationship between (true) interpretations and (propositional) meaning cannot categorically be one of equivalence, which Davidson's use of a Tarski-styled truth formula, at least in paradigmatic instances, seems to require. Another issue concerns the main purpose of an interpretation versus the purposes of the text or utterance to which it ascribes meaning. While interpretations are designed to illuminate the meaning of a particular utterance or text in relation to a wider semantic pattern, or 'language' in Davidson's sense of the term, the intended meaning of a great many utterances and texts is unrelated to this task. Further, there is this difference between meaning and interpretation: While an utterance or text might express its meaning in a few words, an interpretation that describes that meaning in relation to a language and context is liable to be of encyclopaedic length.

Fiction and indeterminacy: the problem of metaphorical meaning

We can see a difference between interpretation and meaning that goes to the heart of Davidson's commitment to a truth theory when we consider fictional texts. Fiction, after all, presents an arena of meaning that is fundamentally non-propositional, as fictional texts offer no explicit truths, only suggestions of truths and a mimetic engagement with reality, unless we can find a way to collapse the contexts that inform the declarative sentences of fictional contexts into real-world contexts. Davidson's discussion of metaphor inadvertently points toward this implication. In his landmark essay "What Metaphors Mean" (1978), Davidson concluded that all metaphors are literally

meaningless. His reasons for asserting this bold conclusion suggest a tension between his view that a formal semantics reveals a semantic pattern that enables communication and his ideas of radical interpretation and linguistic indeterminacy. If ongoing interpretation rather than semantic convention is primary in deciding the meaning of sentences, the fact that what metaphorical sentences suggest or draw our attention to requires us at some point in our interpretation to reject the literal conventional sense of their words would not seem to raise a worry. The problem, however, as Davidson emphasises, is that "there is no limit" to the content that metaphors can suggest.[5] When a radical interpreter faces an unusual or unclear use of words in a sentence, she can only make sense of them if she assigns them to a larger pattern which fixes their meaning. On Davidson's account, non-metaphorical declarative sentences are indeterminate only in a limited sense. Their meaning depends on a specific assignment of meaning, provided by an interpretation which places them in some language, which makes them true relative to that language. Without an assignment that fixes the meaning of an indeterminate sentence, thus rendering it determinate relative to some language, linguistic communication on Davidson's account is impossible. By contrast metaphors by their very nature resist being fixed in this way, being confined to a single interpretation of their propositional content, and thus are incapable of communicating any content directly. They can of course, as Davidson accepts, suggest a great many truths; but they state none and so are without propositional content, and therefore on his account without meaning.

That conclusion might follow, but only if we reject Davidson's wider semantic commitment to an indeterminist view of what it means to speak a language. In particular we would need to reject the basis of his challenge, issued in "On the Very Idea of a

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[5] Davidson (1984 [1978]), 263.

Conceptual Scheme" (1974), to the assumption that a language, in so far as it is conceived as what grounds actual communication, has fixed semantic boundaries. What Davidson's worry about the limitless semantic potential of metaphors seems to downplay or ignore is his view of the indeterminate nature of the thing which ultimately grounds all communication, namely language, conceived not primarily as a set of semantic conventions but as a locus of ongoing semantic adjustment through interpretation. Davidson's strategy in "What Metaphors Mean" is to sever the link between metaphor and truth, and thus between metaphor and meaning, by pointing to the fact that metaphors do not state truths. This strategy relies on the assumption that we have brought into question, namely that interpretation and meaning, in paradigm cases of interpretation, are approximately equivalent, and that meaning reduces to a fixed propositional content. Davidson is right to say that metaphors suggest many things rather than state specific truths, a claim which might be taken to mean that our interpretation of a metaphor will be an ongoing affair and not come to an end; but Davidson's view is that interpretation can make no headway, discern no meaning, since it would be difficult or impossible to raise a consistent language to which we might make relative the various contrary truths that we would ascribe to the metaphor. Maintaining a consistent language in Davidson's solution becomes an important ideal. The more seriously we take this idea, however, the more we seem to be interfering with his view that the idea of a language as a fixed shared structure plays no essential role in explaining actual linguistic communication.

The problem of contradictory interpretations

Metaphors play havoc with any semantic structure, whether conceived as a set of semantic conventions or as a temporarily constructed passing language. But so, too, do

such unremarkable looking sentences as these: 'The bachelors here are unmarried' and 'The bachelors here are bachelors.' If we interpret these sentences according to the semantic conventions of English, they would seem to be saying the same thing. But even if we preserve the conventions of English, we may have doubts. If we're impressed by Quine's famous discussion of synonymy in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," we may doubt whether both sentences express tautologies;[6] and if we wonder whether 'bachelor' draws on the same convention each time it occurs in the second sentence, we may take the view that neither sentence is a tautology. Further, it could be that the sentence flies in the face of convention, or that the convention is undecided; considering the latter possibility, we may wonder, for instance, whether, according to convention, widowers and divorced men should count as bachelors, which might turn into a doubt about whether our existing dictionaries capture the convention correctly.

Should we conclude that the sentence is meaningless until we can stipulate a single and exclusive meaning? Davidson seems to be committed to this constraint when he resists the idea of metaphorical meaning on account of our inability to assign a single truth-theory to a metaphor. By contrast, he would allow that the sentence 'The bachelors here are bachelors' is meaningful, even though it might have inconsistent meanings, provided that we specify each meaning. Using his procedure of stating the propositional content of each meaning, we might unfortunately end by having the sentence, on the basis of our best evidence of the speaker's behaviour, represent contradictory truths. Davidson dealt quite neatly with this problem in "The Inscrutability of Reference" (1979). His solution there was to dispel the assumption that the sentence belongs to "a unique language,"[7] and then to suggest that we can specify the language in relation to which each interpretation is

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[6] Quine (1980 [1951]), pp. 27-32.
[7] Davidson (1984 [1979]), p. 239.

true. Alternative interpretations would thus entail different languages; and a single sentence could thereby represent different propositions.

Normally when we disambiguate in this way, we have in mind a single language which happens to contain, as natural languages do and as a passing language might, alternative meanings for words. By referring to different languages in his solution to the problem of consistency posed by an inscrutable utterance, as opposed to a language without set boundaries, Davidson seems to be concerned to fix categorically the language relative to which the sentence considered under alternative interpretations is true. But that solution isn't coherently available to Davidson. The very idea of a constraint which proliferates languages begins to resemble the mistake to which he believes we are committed when we picture a language as essentially an established system that we share in advance of communication. Perhaps Davidson's solution could be reinforced by invoking his idea of a passing language or non-conventional shared structure, to allow for indeterminacy at the level of grammatical appearance – where we face a sentence that does not belong to "a unique language" – and to ensure determinate literal meaning at the level at which language actually communicates.[8] But how strenuously should we preserve the idea of distinct languages, whether conceived as conventional or passing languages, or more realistically as hybrid languages, i.e., heavily conventional languages which are continually being adjusted or passing languages which for fairly obvious reasons draw heavily on convention? Conceiving of a passing language as a temporary semantic pattern that permits communication to pass between speakers who do not share any linguistic conventions at the outset suggests, *for practical reasons*, a rather limited language, whereas the idea of a passing language that changes or develops semantic

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[8] Davidson presents his idea of a passing language and rejects the view of language as essentially conventional in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (1986).

conventions would seem, for contingent reasons, to conform more readily to the semantic patterns that actually allow communication to take place. But either way, there is no need to assume a distinct language in the face of an ambiguous sentence that suggests, prior to disambiguation, contradictory interpretations. Unless the intent of Davidson's solution is that we must view passing languages as wholly distinct, there is no need to reject the assumption of a unique language, or to accept it; the concern either way seems to be bound to a view of language that Davidson explicitly rejects.[9]

A more economical solution is available. Instead of having the same sentence, by virtue of being ambiguous in respect of propositional content, belong to more than one language, we simply observe that using the resources of language we can perform many marvellous tasks, including the task of saying different things across varying contexts with the same words, or roughly the same things using different words. When raising different contexts, we are not continually speaking different languages but drawing on and continually altering language.

Language and the incompleteness of interpretation

The limitless proliferation of meaning which Davidson gives as a reason to withhold meaning from metaphors should similarly prevent interpretations from assigning meaning to a declarative sentence that purportedly bears a truth value. For there is no way to know the limits of what we might have such a sentence mean, unless we can predict how innovatively or routinely the language in which it figures will be spoken. The rest of the speaker's linguistic behaviour might over time shed light on what she intended to

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[9] E.g., in Davidson (1984), p. 198.

communicate at a particular moment, but unless we invoke the idea of a language with definite semantic boundaries, we are not in a position to prevent an expansion of the sentence's meaning. The sentence might develop a semantic history, to which the speaker and other language users alike may contribute. Metaphors, in so far as they remain alive, encourage such an expansion, but no sentence, regardless of the intent of its speaker, can remain safe from an expansion of its meaning if it belongs to an actual language and attracts the interest of interpreters over time. The only way, seemingly, to fix a sentence categorically is to fix the semantic pattern or language in which it has meaning. But again, Davidson cannot accept that solution, short of rejecting his own view of a language.

Davidson is concerned that "much of what we are caused [by metaphors] to notice is not propositional in character."[10] Of course what *any* sentence might cause us to notice could be non-propositional. But the point which Davidson is suggesting is unavoidable: Metaphorical meaning, if we allow the hypothesis that metaphors have meaning, is not propositional, at least not directly so; a metaphor might, as Davidson says, suggest many truths, but it doesn't state any. Even the putatively literal reading of a metaphorical sentence, such as 'Achilles is a lion,' only has a propositional content if we fail to recognise that the sentence is a metaphor, or if the sentence is asserted in a context in which it refers to a lion rather than to the fictional character or figure of legend named 'Achilles.' An interpretation which describes the sentence as metaphorical should not end by affirming the view that Achilles might actually be a lion but instead provide a description of the relationships that the metaphor suggests. Since these relationships can continue to expand, the interpretation will be incomplete. But that is hardly surprising.

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[10] Davidson (1984 [1978]), p. 263.

We expect the meaning of metaphors to remain open, and so never to be completely described.

Davidson is right to emphasise that metaphors do not state propositions on another count. At one point in his discussion he offers and quickly dismisses the proposal that we could provide a propositional content for a metaphorical sentence by taking a truth that it suggests to us and imposing it on the sentence.[11] By radically adjusting the sense of the words of the sentence we might be able to do just that; but then we would not be left with a metaphor but a single assertion with a single sense. For as soon as we give the sentence a propositional content, we must also give it the logical form of a proposition, a form which implies a single truth value.

This requirement points to an important division between propositional language and figurative uses of language, in which we would include not only all metaphors but all fiction. Whereas the meaning of a proposition can be expressed by any number of declarative sentences – with the only constraint being that the new expression retain the truth value of the expression it translates, along with all the logical relations of the translated expression to all possible propositions – the meaning of figurative uses of language tends to be bound to the particular words in which it is expressed. Further, if the figurative expression occurs in a fictional work, then the task of translating the particular words becomes more exacting, since their meaning is confined to a context that depends on the narrative or aesthetic structure of that unique work. In instances where the aesthetic significance of the words depends on unique features (their sonic value, letters,

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[11] *Ibid.*

a unique etymology, and so on) the words may need to be carried into translation unchanged, or the translator may only be able to produce an analogous result.

While the meaning of particular words and sentences in a fictional work remains largely attached to those words, unlike the meaning by which a sentence expresses a proposition, the meaning produced by those words, unlike propositional meaning, is indeterminate. This difference between figurative and propositional uses of language points to a division in the linguistic indeterminacy thesis, at least if we accept the following characterisation of how the thesis applies: In the case of propositional language, the linguistic appearance of a sentence used to express a proposition is indeterminate, but the propositional meaning of that sentence is fixed; in the case of fiction, its meaning is indeterminate, i.e. no interpretation fixes its (developing) meaning.

It might seem odd to speak of meaning which is not definite. But this oddness may point to another problem with collapsing interpretation into meaning. In the case of metaphor, insisting on a definite meaning clearly threatens our logical scruples if we collapse interpretation into meaning. Consider again 'Achilles is a lion.' We might take that sentence to mean that Achilles is a lion and is not a lion, assuming that we want to maintain the tension which the metaphor suggests – if we agree with Davidson that the sentence does not reduce to the vague proposition that Achilles is merely *like* a lion.[12] The definite claims that we can make about the sentence readily lead to a contradiction, and so to an incoherent interpretation. On at least one reading that outcome seems inevitable. But this way of thinking about the relation between interpretation and meaning, in which interpretations are thought to assign truth values and thereby to

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[12] *Ibid*, p. 255

establish meaning, misses the temporal and dynamic nature of much non-propositional meaning. A more plausible interpretation would describe Achilles' apparent transformation into a lion as suggestive of a tension, not as a literal conflation of reference that establishes a contradiction, and would retain that suggestion of a tension all the way through an ongoing description of what the metaphor begins to draw our attention to.

This alternative way of thinking about metaphor is consistent with Davidson's theory. In considering the suggestive capacity of language, though, we need not follow his view that metaphors are causal, that they merely cause us to think of various things the way "a bump on the head" might.[13] In line with Davidson's general outlook on meaning, it would be clearer to say that we interpret the metaphor to be maintaining a mimetic, playful relationship between our messy, open-ended, and yet in many ways quite specific idea of lions and the messy, open-ended, and yet in many ways quite specific qualities embodied in the ideal of a man represented by the fictional or legendary figure named 'Achilles.' But whereas our interpretation is a definite description, and therefore propositional, the meaning which it describes has no propositional content; it draws exclusively from fictional contexts which only mimetically and indefinitely engage qualities whose references derive from a real-world context.

This distinction turns on our adjustment of Davidson's semantic theory, by not collapsing interpretation into meaning and by rejecting an essential connection between meaning and truth relegated to a truth-theory. Truth is still indispensable in the sense implied by the view that an interpretive description of meaning is propositional. But its propositional

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[13] *Ibid*. p. 262.

content is distinct from the content/meaning of what it describes, because it relates not only the parts of what we find meaningful to a whole, but also relates that meaningful whole to a wider, never finished semantic pattern, a *language* in Davidson's sense. Truth plays an essential role in this wider description, but not in the way pictured by Davidson's use of a Tarski-styled truth formula. Even when a description of meaning assigns propositional content to a sentence, the wider description of that sentence's meaning remains an incomplete project, in so far as it picks out the sentence's relations to a language. The wider description of a sentence's meaning is thus not equivalent to the propositional content of the sentence, which is always definite and complete, regardless of whether the sentence used to express this content serves other semantic purposes. Even in the case of a purely analytic sentence, the wider semantic project required to explicate its semantic structure would need to include a theory of how a sizable number of signs relate to other signs, including various logical and grammatical signs, whereas the sentence itself draws on but doesn't state any of these relations when expressing its propositional content.

In the case of fictional sentences, the situation resembles the special case of metaphor, in that none of the sentences of a fictional work are propositional. Instead they represent truths through the complex mimetic relations of a fictional context, and are themselves issued through the fictional device of narrative or character voice. In some instances, it might seem perverse to withhold truth status from a fictional sentence, when its mimetic context draws straightforwardly on real-world references, and when the sentence would have a truth value were it to be uttered outside the work of fiction. If the doctrine seems unpalatable in such instances, we might be tempted to hold that the meaning of many works of fiction shifts between outer and inner contexts, between real-world contexts and

those fictional contexts which mimetically engage real-world references. But this solution assumes that we can assign the meaning of a group of sentences within a fictional work to various real-world contexts without severing its interaction with the fictional context which supplies a different meaning, and so without cutting it off from all the narrative elements (of theme, voice, character, scene, mood, and so forth) conveyed by the sentences which draw their meaning from the fictional context. This assumption aside, we gain nothing semantically unique from this division of contexts, as any truth stated inside the work, if we can still coherently refer to meaning deriving from a real-world context as *inside the fictional work*, will be equivalent to its assertion outside the work. If the concern is that some truths might not occur to us without the myriad associations of the fictional work, then we are no longer referring to explicit propositional content. We have instead returned to a worry which we might similarly have over metaphor. How can a particular sentence (or other piece of language, or anything non-propositional) suggest truths which it does not literally state?

Davidson's causal theory of metaphor

Davidson's answer to this concern, as we have seen, was that a metaphor's capacity to suggest various truths is wholly causal, and as such as inadvertent and adventitious as the relation between the same suggested truths and "a bump on the head."[14] But how can that be? At his rate there would be no distinction to be made between the active critical task of interpreting a metaphor, of assigning meaning to it on the basis of its parts in relation to their whole within a specific context, and in relation to our language, and passively being affected by it. Nor would the composition of a metaphor matter. When delving into the

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[14] Davidson (1984 [1978]), p. 262.

semantic associations of 'Achilles is a lion,' we would stand no better chance of acquiring any of the insights that the metaphor might suggest than were we to turn to a very different sentence, for instance 'Achilles is flock of geese.' Instead of a critical task, Davidson sees the "elucidation" of metaphor as a causal task. The 'elucidator' in this idiosyncratic sense of the term doesn't assign a meaning; rather, she provides a "so-called paraphrase" designed for a less "sensitive or educated reader,"[15] which is intended to work causally on such a reader, to produce the kind of effect which the metaphor is liable to have, namely the effect of stimulating an insight. This solution would seem once again to eliminate the distinction between interpretation and causal effect, but oddly by invoking the idea of another insight-stimulator, whose task it would seem brings her precariously close to the activity of interpretation. Indeed Davidson appears to concede "that interpretation and elucidation" are "in order" when seeking insight from metaphor, even though he characterises the critic as being involved in a rather curious game of stimulus-response, "in benign competition with the metaphor maker,"[16] or, presumably, with prospective head-bumpers who similarly collapse the distinction between interpretation and causal effect and who similarly expect by this method to produce insight.

The idea of metaphors imparting a specific insight depends on an idea which Davidson is right to reject, namely that metaphors have a propositional content, an idea which assumes that metaphors have a determinate meaning. But that idea is curious from the start. Davidson might simply have pointed out that metaphors are inherently indeterminate, a point which he does suggest when he says that "there is no limit to what

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[15] *Ibid*, p. 264.
[16] *Ibid.*

a metaphor calls to our attention,"[17] and that any sentence which is not given a determinate content cannot take a truth value. The issue then reverts to the plausibility of the wider semantic project, which categorically rejects the idea of semantic indeterminacy, even though indeterminacy is assumed as a kind of linguistic veneer over sentences and over an entire language (comprised exclusively of propositions?) before apparently indeterminate sentences have been delivered to their proper languages by a consistent theory of truth. Against this picture, our adjustment permits discovery of insights which a metaphor suggests to us while accepting that no metaphor, other than the dead sort, literally states or entails these. Truth, or as Davidson would sometimes say, avoidance of error, is still a constraint on interpretation, but only in the sense that an interpretation must be true, as opposed to the idea that an interpretation must project truth on to the sentence to which it ascribes meaning. Accordingly it would make sense, depending on context, to reject an interpretation of 'Achilles is a lion' which asserts that the sentence promotes the view that 'Achilles' names not one but many creatures of a kind, and that these creatures have wings, tend to flock together, and at times leave the ground in sustained flight; in short, to treat 'is a lion' as though it reads 'is a flock of geese.' In the case of sentences issued through narration or a character, we can take a similar line, perhaps at times blurring the distinction between discovery and interpretive recovery and invention, as seems natural to say of indeterminate meaning that unfolds through ongoing interpretation, and view what insights we discover as suggested by a semantic structure, a series of semantic relations within the entire work, to which we contribute.

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[17] *Ibid*, p. 263.

The original truth-theoretic semantics and determinate meaning

Semantic determinacy, even in the limited sense advanced by Davidson, is a requirement of truth-theory accounts of meaning that drastically reduces, in principle, the permissible range of meaningful sentences. This reduction extends beyond fictional and metaphorical sentences to the kind of sentences whose prospective meaning inspired the invention of the first truth-theoretic semantic approach to linguistic meaning. The moment occurred when Augustine, in his *Confessions*, faced the problem of trying to decipher the meaning of the perplexing and vague opening verse of Genesis – rendered from Hebrew to Latin by Augustine, and here to English – "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (King James).

In his lengthy discussion of this verse Augustine introduced much of the essential framework of a truth-theoretic semantics, including the first use of the accompanying principle of interpretive charity, a version of which would become the basis of Davidson's model of radical interpretation. But Augustine's use of charity in that discussion extended not merely to the object language and particular sentence which he sought to explicate; it extended to all plausible interpretations of the sentence. While closely examining numerous interpretations of Genesis 1:1, Augustine explicitly welcomed contrary ascriptions of truth, as provisional interpretations of a sentence whose meaning remains, at least for human interpreters, unfixed. Under a truth-theoretic semantics, however, such openness risks incoherence; certainly it does when Augustine characterises many of the contrary interpretations he considers as true.[18] He would avoid incoherence if it turns out that he anticipated Davidson's solution of making contrary

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[18] Confessions, XII, xxv (35).

ascriptions of truth to the same sentence thereby deliver the sentence into different languages, though given Augustine's practice of extending charity as far as possible toward competing plausible interpretations, this solution would involve assigning Genesis 1:1 to a multitude – given the obscurity of the verse, a "potential infinitude" – of languages, which suggests why Davidson was loath to regard metaphors as meaningful beyond a recovery of their literal meaning. Less extravagantly, Augustine could have meant that the first verse of Genesis suggests many truths but that none of these truths circumscribes or is equivalent to its meaning. That more modest appraisal, however, would have involved giving up the (nascent) project of a truth-theoretic semantics, or – not an option for Augustine, nor required with our adjustment – consigning the sentence to an expression of nonsense.

Language and content

Faced with these choices, an interpretation-based semantic theory seems to waver between a multiple-language model (to which the need to provide a fixed propositional content in at least one instance committed Davidson), regardless of the issue of whether or not we should consign metaphor and cryptic sentences to the status of nonsense, and a view of meaning which doesn't assume that a semantic structure must derive from a truth-theory. The model to which Davidson committed himself when offering a solution to the problem of contrary truth assignments backed him into a corner in which he tacitly assumed the idea of distinct languages; otherwise his solution to the problem of contrary truths assigned to the same sentence fails. Davidson, though, as we have seen, rejects the view of languages or worldviews as distinct, or of language as "a clearly defined shared

[conventional] structure."[19] Perhaps his idea of a passing language can come to the rescue here, as it offers a model of communication which has no recourse to convention. We might, following Davidson's solution to the problem of contrary interpretations, imagine two passing languages to which contrary assignments of truth to the same sentence are respectively relative. A passing language, though, assuming that it doesn't become inert or conventionalised, presumably poses no barriers to meanings or truths which we wish to express in it. If that's how we conceive of the passing languages to which the truth assignments are relative, it would be difficult to say that the meaning of the sentence that we have made equivalent to a truth assignment is determinate, since the two languages to which each contrary assignment of truth is relative are not distinct. When faced with the challenge to the indeterminacy thesis based on contrary interpretations, we might instead take the view that, while the semantic relations between sentences and a language are endlessly variable, a sentence uttered in a certain context can take a truth value and a particular interpretation. If we then vary the truth value and propositional content of the sentence, and presumably its context, we will be in a position to consider another aspect of its (evolving) meaning; and another if we vary it again, as many aspects as our variations impose. In making these variances, instead of proliferating languages, we are taking seriously Davidson's rejection of the dualism of (linguistic) scheme and content, which involves abandoning the idea of language as a structure with distinct and inert semantic boundaries, and with it the solution of shifting the same sentence into different languages to avoid contradiction.

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[19] Davidson (1986), p. 446.

The insufficiency of truth-theories

Davidson's solution to the indeterminacy problem only needs to be offered if we save the assumption of an equivalence between meaning and interpretation. We might add, in cases where an interpretation, conceived as a truth-theory, *is not in error*. This qualification goes to the heart of Davidson's efforts, and in a more modest form can be preserved if we give up the view that interpretation of linguistic meaning entails projection of a truth-theory. Of course when we describe the semantic structure of a sentence which asserts a truth, our description will in effect assign a truth-theory. But doesn't such an assignment assume a description of the words and word-relations of the sentence, and of the context which determines how we are using and relating these words in this instance? A change of context, after all, changes the meaning of the words as they form a sentence and so what the sentence asserts. So, a description of the semantic structure of a sentence which asserts a truth must include a description of word-order relative to a context. While that description naturally is guided in part by what we take the sentence to be asserting, what it asserts in turn is determined by the context which informs how we are to understand particular words in their relation to the whole sentence, and in relation to an indefinitely large number of other sentences. A description of meaning, then, does not reduce to a description of the sentence's propositional content.

This distinction doesn't interfere with Davidson's claim, in "Seeing through Language" (1997), that "there is no distinction between having a concept and having thoughts with propositional content," [20] including presumably thoughts concerning a concept someone is asking us about – for example, in the question 'Do you think "Achilles" refers to a

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[20] Davidson (1997), p. 25.

flock of geese?' Understanding a question assumes that we have accurate thoughts about the content and context of the question, and presumably that ordinarily we would recognise the mistake of anyone who, say, treats the question as though it were a command or a declaration. Linguistic understanding, as Davidson stresses in "Seeing through Language," requires a capacity to recognise errors of language use as errors. In that essay, Davidson makes no mention of the requirement of a Tarski-styled truth-theory, and speaks instead of linguistic understanding simply as requiring a capacity to recognise an error in interpretation as an error.[21] In effect, he speaks as though he distinguishes between the propositional content of the interpretation which represents our understanding of an utterance and the (perhaps non-propositional) content or meaning of the utterance. He doesn't acknowledge this distinction, but none of the requirements of linguistic understanding which he specifies in this late essay would be undermined were it to be maintained. What would be gained? For one thing, we would be able to talk, without further explanation, of understanding non-propositional meaning, while preserving the constraint of truth. We would be able to talk of the meaningfulness of questions and imperatives, and of being correct or mistaken about their meaning, without further adjustments to our semantic theory. Likewise, we would be entitled to refer to fictional or mimetic meaning. The only truth constraint which we will have eliminated is the one that rests on the dogma that tacitly eliminates a distinction between interpretation and meaning.

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[21] *Ibid.*

Non-linguistic meaning

Once we eliminate this dogma, there is no obvious reason why we cannot extend a theory of meaning to non-linguistic items, for example, visual artworks and musical performances. Provided that our interpretations of the artwork or music can describe discernible relationships between the entire work and its parts, and we can specify contexts in which our interpretation could be in error (for example, when we mistakenly take sporadic coughing to be integrally rather than incidentally connected to a musical performance), then we can intelligibly speak, as we tend commonly to do, of these objects as meaningful, in a sense that accords with a general theory of meaning. Like questions, imperatives, and the sentences of fiction (and for that matter declarative sentences which assert truths), an artwork or piece of music says nothing by itself, outside a context in which recovery of meaning is possible. Beyond the minimal condition of context, all these semantic objects require, not a truth-theory but a theory or interpretation which happens to be true (relative to our language as it applies within a specific context which we can specify more or less exactly), to recover or elaborate their content. In the case of declarative sentences which state a truth, the theory is itself true and it describes the sentences as having the form of a specific statement, and so in effect, among other things, projects a theory of truth. In the case of questions and imperatives which refer to real-world concepts, the theory is true but it doesn't project truth on to the question or imperative to which its description assigns meaning. With mimetic objects, we might be tempted to say that the possibility of error recedes and with it the prospects for an attribution of meaning. But less dramatically we can say that the contexts of recovery are more frequently varied and sometimes more difficult to specify, and conclude from these hermeneutic facts the banal point that some interpretive tasks remain

conspicuously incomplete and so present an ongoing challenge. Such (unsettled) works

provide an exemplary instance of the fact that interpretations are provisional in at least

these two respects: a shift in context requires a shift in interpretation; and failure to

specify all aspects of a (complex) context leaves an interpretation incomplete. But these

are considerations of a practical nature; they don't in principle rule out the possibility of

meaning for sentences and objects whose presumed meaning is not explicit and whose

interpretive context is not relatively straightforward.

Ineffable meaning versus explicit meaning

The adjustment to Davidson's (full-blown) semantic project which this paper offers keeps

in tact his view that truth, or avoidance of error, plays an essential role in our recovery or

elaboration[22] of meaning. Michael Morris raises an important challenge to this view in his

Introduction to the Philosophy of Language (Oxford, 2007). Following a criticism of

Davidson suggested to him by Paul Davies, a colleague at Sussex University, Morris

invokes the open-ended significance of works of art – the fact that no interpretation ever

fully captures the significance of those "pieces of music, works of literature, paintings,

and so on" to which we find ourselves returning "again and again" – to question the

assumption that the situation is different in the case of "ordinary linguistic meaning,"

which might similarly elude our ability to capture it through an "explicit statement" or

series of statements.[23] After raising Davies' concern, Morris points out that "[n]o

argument is provided for [the aforementioned] assumption, and in general it's not

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[22] This distinction is worth maintaining, as the speaker, author, or creator of something meaningful presumably cannot anticipate every future context in which her utterance or creation has meaning, nor anticipate all the surprising relations which might occur in contexts which she does have in mind. Further, we can presumably provide contexts in which we can speak of the meaning of things that are not man-made.

[23] Morris (2007), p. 192.

questioned within the analytic tradition."[24] Davies' criticism and Morris' suggested application of it beyond Davidson's theory of language raise an important challenge to semantic theories within the analytic tradition, and to the present adjustment to Davidson's theory. While their concern concurs with the view advanced by this paper, and it seems by most non-philosophers, that we can speak reasonably of the meaningfulness of works of art, including non-linguistic works of art, they doubt whether an explicit description of meaning is a necessary condition of meaning.

I would agree entirely with this point of their concern. Clearly, we only rarely explicitly interpret the meaning of texts or objects which we regard as imparting significance of some kind, and perhaps we never do so completely. Nor is it likely that, if pressed, many of us would be able meet to the challenge of explicitly describing very far the meaning of even relatively simple meaningful objects, for instance, straightforwardly true declarative sentences. For that matter, it remains an open question whether anyone, in a tradition based on the development of linguistic analysis for over a hundred years and substantially dedicated to the task of analysis within the limited arena of declarative sentences which bear a truth value, typically considered within unproblematic contexts, has provided an adequate general theory to account for the meaning of these, let alone of the stream of words and sentences which comprise the less containable but perhaps no less representative parts of linguistic communication. My response to this elaborate concern brings my agreement with Davidson to a head. It is this: that if any of our encounters with meaning are not illusory, they must in principle, irrespective of normal, unexamined practice, represent a series of semantic relations and a context which could be made explicit, even if in fact they never completely will be. If this response is right, then there

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[24] *Ibid*.

remains, after we give up the general semantic requirement of a truth-theory, an essential connection between meaning and truth, even in the case of fictional meaning.

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