

PHIL 332: Philosophy of Language
Class 21: Davidson's Approach to Meaning

1. How is it that equipped with a finite amount of knowledge we are able to understand an infinite number of novel sentences of our language? "Last night I was so depressed from finishing my last Saranac pumpkin ale that not even watching Family Guy for four hours straight could console me."
2. One explanation is this: our language is compositional: the meaning of a complex expression is determined by its structure and the meanings of its immediate constituents. From a finite stock of simple expressions, and a finite stock of structures, we can generate an infinite number of complex expressions. If we know the meanings of each of the simple expressions, and how each of the structures composes the meanings of its constituents (that is, by knowing a **theory of meaning** for our language), then we are in a position to know the meaning of every one of the infinite number of expressions in our language.
3. Davidson proposed that the meaning of a sentence is its *truth conditions*.
4. This places a constraint on the form that a theory of meaning should take. It should, for every sentence S of our language, yield a theorem that gives the truth conditions of S: "S is true iff ...". In particular, it should yield each of the following:
 - a. 'Snow is white' is true iff snow is white.
 - b. 'Grass is green' is true iff grass is green.
 - c. 'Ithaca is gorges' is true iff Ithaca is gorges.

Such a theory is called a *truth theory*.

5. The meaning of a sub-sentential expression, then, is whatever it needs to be to get the truth theory to work.
6. To illustrate, we shall develop a Davidson-style truth theory for a fragment of English, *Frag*.
7. Syntax of Frag:
 - a. Frag has four primitive syntactic categories: names, intransitive verbs, transitive verbs, and binary connectives.
 - b. Frag has two names, 'alan' and 'betty', two intransitive verbs, 'smokes' and 'drinks', two transitive verbs, 'loves' and 'knows', and one binary connective, 'and'.
 - c. Frag has two defined syntactic categories: verb phrases and sentences.
 - i. If I is an intransitive verb then I is a verb phrase. So 'smokes' is a verb phrase.
 - ii. If T is a transitive verb and N is a name then 'T N' is a verb phrase. So 'loves alan' is a verb phrase. (How many verb phrases are there?)

- iii. If N is a name and V is a verb phrase then 'N V' is a sentence. So 'alan smokes' is a sentence.
- iv. If S_1 and S_2 are sentences then ' S_1 and S_2 ' is a sentence. So 'alan smokes and betty drinks' is a sentence. (How many sentences are there?)

8. Semantics of Frag:

- a. The denotation of a name is a particular. The denotation of 'alan' is alan. The denotation of 'betty' is betty.
- b. The denotation of an intransitive verb is a property. The denotation of 'smokes' is the property of smoking. The denotation of 'drinks' is the property of drinking.

[Alternatives: a set of particulars; a function from particulars to truth values.]

- c. The denotation of a transitive verb is a 2-place relation. The denotation of 'loves' is the relation of loving. The denotation of 'knows' is the relation of knowing.

[Alternatives: a set of ordered pairs of particulars; a function from particulars to functions from particulars to truth values.]

- d. The denotation of a binary connective is a 2-place function from truth conditions to truth conditions. The denotation of 'and' is the function f such that $f(C_1, C_2)$ is the condition that C_1 obtains and C_2 obtains.

[Alternatives: a set of ordered pairs of truth conditions; a function from truth conditions to functions from truth conditions to truth conditions.]

- e. The denotation of a verb phrase is a property. If the verb phrase is I, for some I, then the denotation of V is the denotation of I. If the verb phrase is 'T N' for some transitive verb T and name N, then the denotation of 'T N' is the property of standing in the relation denoted by T to the particular denoted by N. So the denotation of 'loves alan' is the property of loving alan.

[Alternatives: the denotation of 'loves alan' is the set of all particulars x such that $\langle x, alan \rangle$ is in the denotation of 'loves', or the result of applying the denotation of 'loves' to alan.]

- f. The denotation of a sentence is a truth condition. The denotation of 'N V' is the condition that the particular denoted by N has the property denoted by V. So 'N V' is true iff the particular denoted by N has the property denoted by V. The denotation of ' S_1 and S_2 ' is the result of applying the function denoted by 'and' to the truth conditions denoted by S_1 and S_2 . So ' S_1 and S_2 ' is true iff S_1 is true and S_2 is true.

[Alternatives: the denotation of 'N V' is the condition that the particular denoted by N is in the set denoted by V; the denotation of 'N V' is the condition that applying the function denoted by V to the particular denoted by N yields True.]