

Davidson on Action Sentences

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Pre-lecture reading:

Davidson, D. (1967), 'The Logical Form of Action Sentences', in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

1. Davidson's question: How are the truth conditions of action sentences like the following derived compositionally?

(1.1) Jones buttered the toast.

(He asks: What is its logical form? But the previous way of putting it is better for us.)

2. One theory: 'Jones' denotes Jones; 'the toast' denotes the toast; 'buttered' denotes the 2-place relation $\{ \langle x, y \rangle : x \text{ buttered } y \}$; the sentence is true iff the object denoted by 'Jones' stands in the relation denoted 'buttered' to the object denoted by 'the toast'. That will allow us to compositionally derive the right truth conditions.

How?

If this theory is right, then we can adequately translate (1.1) into predicate calculus as the following formula, if we interpret 'B' as denoting the relation above, 'j' as denoting Jones, and 't' as denoting the toast:

(2.1) Bjt

(Davidson would call this 'giving the logical form' of (1.1))

3. But then what about the following sentences?

(3.1) Jones buttered the toast in the bathroom.

(3.2) Jones buttered the toast in the bathroom with a knife.

(3.3) Jones buttered the toast in the bathroom with a knife at midnight.

If we continue with the same approach, we might say that in (3.1) 'buttered' denotes a **3-place** relation between people, objects, and locations; that in (3.2) 'buttered' denotes a **4-place** relation between people, objects, locations, and instruments; and that in (3.3) 'buttered' denotes a **5-place** relation between people, objects, locations, instruments, and times.

Then we could translate these sentences into predicate calculus as follows:

(3.4) $Cjtb$

(3.5) $Djtbk$

(3.6) $Ejtbkm$

How should we interpret each symbol?

Note: we *have* to use a different predicate letter in each case.

4. But there are two (related) problems with this approach: First, it means that 'buttered' is multiply ambiguous.

Why?

What's wrong with that?

Second, it fails to predict the entailment relations that hold between (1.1), (3.1), (3.2), and (3.3).

Why?

What's wrong with that?

5. A possible fix: claim that 'battered' denotes a 5-place relation in **all** of (1.1), (3.1), (3.2), and (3.3):

- 'Jones battered the toast in the bathroom with a knife at midnight' can be translated as:

$Bjtbkm$.

- 'Jones battered the toast in the bathroom with a knife' is elliptical for:
'Jones battered the toast in the bathroom with a knife at some time'
It can be translated as:

$\exists tBjtbkt$.

- 'Jones battered the toast in the bathroom' is elliptical for:

It can be translated as:

How does that solve the two problems above?

6. But then there is a problem with:

- (a) Jones battered the toast in the bathroom with a knife at midnight by holding it between the toes of his left foot.

Why?

7. Davidson considers and rejects proposals by Kenny, Chisholm, Von Wright, and Reichenbach, but we won't look at that here – we will go straight to his positive account.

8. Davidson's proposal: 'battered' denotes the following **3-place** relation between events, objects, and people, in **all** of its uses above: $\{ \langle e, x, y \rangle : e \text{ was a battering of } x \text{ by } y \}$. The adverbial modifiers do not denote arguments of this relation; rather, they denote **sets of events**.

'Jones battered the toast' can be translated as $\exists eBetej$.

'Jones battered the toast in the bathroom' can be translated as $\exists e[Betej \wedge Fe]$, where 'F' is interpreted as denoting the set of events that occurred in the bathroom.

'Jones battered the toast in the bathroom with a knife' can be translated as $\exists e[Betej \wedge Fe \wedge Ge]$, where 'G' is interpreted as denoting the set of events that were done with a knife.

'Jones battered the toast in the bathroom with a knife at midnight' can be translated as $\exists e[Betej \wedge Fe \wedge Ge \wedge He]$, where 'H' is interpreted as denoting the set of events that occurred at midnight.

This avoids claiming that 'battered' is ambiguous. Why?

It predicts the entailment relations that we observe. Why?

9. If Davidson is right, then what should we conclude about the existence of events? Can we do metaphysics by doing semantics?