

Is Truth-Conditional Semantics Possible?

Semantics is often understood to depend on metaphysics. Metaphysics is the attempt to understand and state what there is—to discover what is true and state the facts. Semantics is the study of meaning, or more precisely, the study of how sentences are to be determined as true or false.¹ It's almost a matter of common sense that knowledge of what reality consists of ought to provide a foundation for knowing which sentences *about* reality are true. But Michael Dummett's *Thought and Reality* develops the surprising idea that this isn't so. In essence, he argues there may be cases where there is no fact of the matter about whether an object has a given property. When we can have no method of verification or justification for metaphysical questions, there may, in fact, be no answers to find. Therefore, Dummett contends, we should build an *empirical* semantic theory to understand when our statements about the world could be true.² Our theory of semantics would then determine our metaphysics.

For Dummett, facts are true propositions that are expressed by sentences in particular languages. But the same facts could be expressed by similar sentences in a variety of languages. The statement that “there is a bird in the tree” expresses the same proposition in English as वृक्षे द्विजोऽस्तीति does in Sanskrit. This being the case, how then ought we think about the relationship of semantics and metaphysics? If true propositions exist independently of the particular languages in which they are instantiated, does that mean we can begin our inquiry of the relationship between truth and meaning by simply asking which propositions are true? Could we then let our metaphysics determine our semantic theory?

¹ Dummett, M. (2006). *Thought and Reality*, 14. Oxford University Press.

² Ibid, 15.

Dummett thinks not. He argues that we have no way of deciding metaphysical questions without an account of the propositions we use to frame our inquiry.³ In other words, we need a semantic theory to determine our metaphysics. Unfortunately, the views on offer seem unsuited to the task of determining metaphysics through semantics. By far the dominant approach to the study of meaning is truth-conditional semantics, which is predicated on the idea that a word's meaning is the object it describes. On that basis, propositions are thought to express the relationships between objects in a determinate way that can be spelled out in terms of truth-conditions. On this model, the sentence "Philip Glass composed the opera Satyagraha" is true insofar as the conditions of its truth (that there is a composer named Philip Glass, that he composed an opera, that the opera was named Satyagraha) obtain.

It would be surprising if truth-conditional semantic theories were well-equipped to determine the answers to metaphysical questions because they are designed to operate in precisely the opposite direction. Truth-conditional semantics *begins* with metaphysical statements about what exists in terms of truth-conditions (that there is a composer named Philip Glass, that Satyagraha is an opera, etc.), then move to knowledge of those truth-conditions (knowing that "Philip Glass composed Satyagraha" is true etc), and conclude with knowledge of semantics (knowing how to use the sentence "Philip glass composed the opera Satyagraha"). For reasons we'll discuss at more length below, Dummett believes such an account is irredeemably circular, representing knowledge of the meaning of one sentence in terms of knowledge of the meaning of another. The correct account of meaning would run in the other direction: beginning with a representation of the ability to use words and sentences—an ability that draws on an extensive, subconscious knowledge of facts—and that terminates with all those metaphysical statements we could verify or justify.

³ Ibid.

For this reason, Dummett suggests the two main schools of thought on this matter, whom he calls the linguistic philosophers and the philosopher of thought, suffer from a vicious circularity when they attempt to theorize meaning in terms of truth-conditions. In my estimation, Dummett demonstrates that both schools leave implicit the relationship between our knowledge of truth and our ability 1) to use words and sentences and 2) to frame concepts and propositions. Failing to provide an adequate account of meaning, neither school, on Dummett's view, can provide a non-circular account of *understanding*. For the rest of this essay, I'll reconstruct Dummett's circularity objections to truth-conditional semantics to both these schools of thought. Based on this reconstruction, I'll advocate for the position that truth-conditional theories of meaning are irredeemably circular and do not explain what they purport to explain.

What must we know to understand the meaning of a sentence?

An account of meaning must make explicit the knowledge a competent speaker of a language implicitly brings to bear in linguistic comprehension. Dummett's primary objection to truth-conditional theories of meaning is that they leave the relation between truth and meaning implicit. Let's reconsider the sentence "Philip Glass composed the opera Satyagraha." What does understanding this sentence consist in? On a truth-conditional account of meaning, understanding this sentence means possessing knowledge of the conditions that would have to obtain in the world for it to be true. To flesh out how such a theory might be elaborated philosophically, let's turn to Dummett's account of Frege.

Dummett credits Frege with the first fully articulated compositional semantic theory.⁴ Eschewing the concept of *linguistic meaning* per se, Frege distinguished *sense*, *force*, and *tone* to delineate the properties of propositions whose semantic values must be known for the proposition to be grasped. Through a process of composition these semantic values would

⁴ 2,000 years of Sanskrit philosophy of language notwithstanding.

determine the truth-value of a particular thought or utterance.⁵ For example, let us represent our two-place predicate with the notation COMPOSED(X, Y). The sentence “Philip Glass composed the opera Satyagraha” has the semantic value *true* because it consists in two proper names and a two-place predicate that maps semantic values to a function with outputs *true* in the cases where X composed Y and *false* in the cases where X did not compose Y. Therefore Frege’s account, according to Dummett, is not only compositional but truth-conditional in character. While this approach has been much criticized, Dummett claims it is the only account anyone has offered of how sentences acquire their meaning through the process of composition.⁶ Most importantly for our purposes, Frege’s compositional semantics conceives the process of understanding a true proposition as the process of acquiring theoretical knowledge about states of affairs in the world. According to Dummett’s Frege, when we grasp the sense of the true proposition “Philip Glass composed the opera Satyagraha” we acquire *theoretical* (as opposed to *practical*) knowledge about the world.

Three Kinds of Knowledge

Does Dummett’s Frege provide a plausible account of the knowledge we bring to bear in understanding words and sentences? Not for Dummett. For one thing, he claims the traditional dichotomy of theoretical and practical knowledge is inadequate. Both are forms of knowledge that can be spelled out in words. In other words, they consist in propositional knowledge. But it is unclear whether our capacity to understand the meanings of words consists in propositional knowledge. In the pairing of theoretical and practical knowledge, the former consists in knowing *that* something is the case and the latter in *how* something is the case. Traditionally, practical knowledge is taken to be non- propositional in character, but Dummett believes this

⁵ Dummett, M. (2006). *Thought and Reality*, 45. Oxford University Press.

⁶ Ibid 43.

classification is inadequate, because neither theoretical nor practical knowledge is knowledge of *what it is to do* something.⁷ When I open and close my hand, I can give a theoretical description of the states of affairs that must hold in the world for me to do so: I must have a body, a thing called a hand, a capacity to open it and so on. I can offer a practical account of how the bony and fleshy parts of my hand move about so as to open and close. But what I cannot say in words — what I don't even know how to formulate in thought — is how *I* manage to open and close my hand. More precisely, my opening and closing my hand *involves* certain facts that hold about reality, but it does not consist in my possessing propositional knowledge of those facts. It requires holding what Dummett calls *demonstrative knowledge* of an ability I possess. Namely, the ability to open and close my hand.

Dummett would contend that parallel considerations such as those just developed apply to understanding the meanings of sentences. Demonstrative knowledge of how I open and close my hand can be held independently of all of the theoretical and practical knowledge I would hold if I knew all the relevant facts about biology or physics. Similarly, a moment's reflection reveals that it is precisely *demonstrative knowledge* which is the kind of knowledge we use in understanding the sentences in our own mother tongue. Knowing the facts that obtain about how words relate to objects, or the facts of how lexical knowledge is stored in the brain, is certainly *not* the knowledge that is actually used by a speaker-hearer who understands the proposition "Philip Glass composed the opera *Satyagraha*." If this is true, truth-conditional semantic theories, which purport to explain linguistic knowledge solely in terms of theoretical knowledge, are failing to explain the demonstrative knowledge that is largely constitutive of our knowledge of language.

⁷ Ibid, 48-49.

The Circularity of Truth-Conditional Semantics

Why does Dummett believe that truth-conditional semantics is irredeemably circular? Let's begin with Dummett's critique of the linguistic philosopher. A linguistic philosopher believes that the only way to get a philosophical account of thought is through a theory which accounts for what it is to understand the sentences of a language.⁸ Dummett maintains that an account of meaning must come prior to an account of understanding, which in turn must precede an account of theoretical knowledge, for how could you understand a sentence that's meaningless? And how could you hold propositional knowledge of senses you don't understand? You can't and you don't. But if a linguistic philosopher moves to theorize meaning in terms of truth-conditions, they are moving in exactly the opposite direction! Truth-conditions are expressible through propositions. But propositions require the possession of theoretical knowledge of states of affairs in the world. By understanding those states of affairs we come to know the meaning of a sentence. We begin with thought and end with the meanings of sentences. But if you're a linguistic philosopher, you cannot accept that knowledge of the sense of propositions can be held prior to knowledge of the meanings of words and sentences. Once you accept truth-conditional semantics, you've abandoned linguistic philosophy and have fashioned yourself a philosopher of thought!

But perhaps the grass is greener on the other side of the debate. Unfortunately, Dummett shows — convincingly, to my mind — that the circularity is even tighter in the mind of the philosopher of thought. In the case of the linguistic philosopher, we were trying to understand the sense of the sentence “Philip Glass composed the opera Satyagraha” in terms of our theoretical knowledge of the related sentence, “It is true that ‘Philip Glass composed the opera Satyagraha.’” We didn't assume a grasp of propositions — only sentences — and thus when it became clear

⁸ Ibid 50.

we'd have to begin with propositions we defected and became thought-philosophers. When we assume a grasp of propositions at the outset — what I earlier called *mental content* — as a philosopher of thought is entitled to do, the moment we attempt to explain our understanding of the proposition that “Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer had a very shiny nose” by virtue of our possessing theoretical knowledge of its truth-conditions, we are merely explaining a grasp of one proposition in terms of another. We haven't broken the circle.

But perhaps we moved too quickly through our explanation and presented the illusion of a circular argument, as if we were twirling around a lit cigarette in the dark. Beginning with the thought-philosopher's account, we may ask, in what does grasping the sense of the proposition “Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer had a very shiny nose” consist? The thought expressed by this proposition is composed of constituents, which we can call *concepts*. As Dummet points out, theses concepts will bear relations to the objects, properties, and relations denoted by “table” “computer” “my” “in” &c in just the same way as the senses of expressions were related to semantic values in Frege's theory.⁹ Their composition will thus determine the truth-value of the proposition as a whole. And knowledge of the sense of the proposition will amount to knowledge of the sense of a different proposition, namely, the proposition that “It is true that ‘Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer had a very shiny nose.’” It is, to use Dummett's phrase, flagrantly circular. And the account in terms of linguistic philosophy, spelled out with similar attention to detail, will yield the same result. When we attempt to ground our grasp of the sense of sentences or the mental content of propositions in terms of theoretical knowledge, we find ourselves subject to an infinite regress.

⁹ Ibid 51.

Reference

Dummett, M. (2006). *Thought and Reality*. Oxford University Press.

The Philosophy of Language with John Searle [Video file]. (2016, March 5). Retrieved November 10, 2020, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SMA1G6Mb0Y0> Originally published 1978, BBC as Episode 10 of *Men of Ideas*.