
Introduction

There is a certain approach to theorizing about language that is called ‘truth-conditional semantics’. The underlying idea of truth-conditional semantics is often summarized as the idea that the meaning of a sentence can be specified by giving the condition under which it would be true. This is then condensed into the slogan that the meaning of a sentence is its truth condition. The slogan has intuitive appeal, because the meaning of a sentence is what one knows when one understands it, and it is plausible to suppose that knowing the conditions under which a sentence is true is to understand it.¹

If this characterization is correct, then truth-conditional semantics faces a huge problem. It seems to presuppose that all sentences are evaluable as true or false, but there are many reasons to think that not all sentences are candidates for truth or falsehood. This book is about one kind of reason for doubting that all sentences have truth conditions: non-objectivity.² Many philosophers believe that, for example, values and probabilities aren’t objective. On this view, if a (declarative) sentence concerns a matter of taste, a moral question or the probability of an event, then it concerns something non-objective. But how can such a sentence then be evaluated as true or false? It seems that truth-conditional semantics rests on a highly dubious presupposition.

This book’s aim is to examine possible solutions to this problem. Should truth-conditional semanticists insist that all sentences nevertheless have truth conditions, and if so, does this entail that all sentences describe objective reality? Or should non-objective sentences be exempted from the truth-conditional treatment? These questions have received some attention from metaphysicians and meta-ethicists and they continue to be debated. By contrast, they have been largely neglected by natural language semanticists who work within the truth-conditional paradigm, i.e. by those who attempt to make the truth-conditional approach work for particular natural language constructions. This is surprising. According to the truth-conditional slogan, the meaning of a sentence is its truth condition. So isn’t the question whether, say, evaluative sentences are truth evaluable an obvious and urgent preliminary question each truth-conditional semanticist has to settle?

The neglect can be explained. Behind the truth-conditional slogan is a very complex view which has little, if anything, to do with the profound metaphysical significance the slogan suggests. Truth-conditional semantics is a view concerning the *form* a theory of meaning (semantic theory) for a particular natural language should take, namely the view that it should take the form of an axiomatic theory whose recursive axioms generate theorems of the form ‘*s* is true iff *p*’ for every sentence *s* of the language in question. This view has guided the work of many philosophers of language and linguists. But its primary motivation is not the idea that a theory of meaning for a language ought to tell us something about how that language’s expressions relate to extra-linguistic reality. Rather, it is motivated by the need to describe in a precise way, how the meanings of complex expressions depend on the meanings of their parts. Most theorists who work within the truth-conditional paradigm do so because it allows them to account for the compositionality of languages, be this because they want to explain learnability, because they are interested in the logical properties of a language or for some other reason. The attraction of truth-conditional semantics lies not in the fact that it connects the notion of meaning with the notion of truth, but rather that in so doing it can map out the semantic structure of particular languages.

My stance on the issue of the truth evaluability of non-objective sentences is driven by the view of truth-conditional semantics I just outlined. Semantic theory is primarily concerned with the phenomena of language, not with metaphysics. Thus, if certain metaphysical intuitions about the objectivity of truth threaten the otherwise healthy project of constructing semantic theories that employ a notion of truth, then the semanticist should, if possible, deny that the notion employed in semantics is identical with the notion whose metaphysical features create the problems. This book defends the view that the notion of truth employed in semantic theories is a metaphysically neutral notion, according to which a sentence’s possessing a truth condition does not yet entail that it concerns an objective subject matter. Truth in semantics is truth without objectivity.

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to describe this book as metaphysics-free. I argue that the notion of truth invoked in semantics can be identified with the notion of truth we actually employ—or rather with one of the two notions we employ. I also argue that a notion of truth without objectivity must be a notion of relative truth. Finally, I defend relativism about truth (and other forms of relativism) against the charge of incoherence. Thus, while the semanticist should be allowed to operate with his or her own semantic notion of truth without interference from metaphysics, I believe that there is a coherent metaphysical theory of truth that serves the purposes of semantics. Readers who are not prepared to agree with me on these metaphysical points can still agree with me in the philosophy of language concerning the notion of truth used in semantics. The metaphysics in this book can be separated from the semantics.

My argument for these conclusions is not as quick as the previous two paragraphs suggest. I start by explaining in Chapter 1 what truth-conditional semantics is, or rather how I view it. In Chapter 2, I set up the problem: truth-

conditional semantics seems to presuppose that all sentences are truth evaluable and this conflicts with the common view that some sentences aren't truth evaluable because they concern non-objective matters. I distinguish three ways of dealing with this problem: revising the contents assigned to sentences (revisionism), exempting some sentences from truth-conditional treatment (expressivism), and employing a notion of truth that does not entail objectivity (soft truth). I then devise a criterion for objectivity which is inspired by, but in crucial respects different from, Crispin Wright's criterion of 'cognitive command'. According to this criterion, a proposition is objective if a mere disagreement on that proposition shows that a mistake has been made. I argue that the only way in which a proposition could be truth evaluable yet non-objective is that truth is relative. Relativism about truth is therefore a consequence of the soft-truth strategy.

Radical solutions are only palatable if no less radical alternative is available. That's why in Chapters 3 and 4 I examine revisionism and expressivism in some detail. Revisionism is the claim that sentences on non-objective matters are generally elliptical, and involve an implicit indexical element. For example, 'laver bread is tasty' might be claimed to be elliptical for 'I find laver bread tasty'. I argue that any such claim is false, because there are demonstrable differences in meaning between the original sentences and the ones that they are said to be elliptical for.

Expressivism requires a much more detailed examination. Expressivists want to exempt problematic sentences from truth-conditional semantic treatment and account for the meaning of these sentences in some other way, usually claiming that they exhibit some special kind of illocutionary force. They face the problem that the objectivity or non-objectivity of a sentence's subject matter has usually little influence on that sentence's syntactic properties. That is, the sentences the expressivist wants to exempt from truth-conditional treatment can be combined with, and embedded in, other sentences—even those that have been approved for the truth-conditional treatment. In short, the expressivist is up against the syntactic uniformity of sentences that aren't uniform in respect of their objectivity status. I argue that even though sophisticated expressivists might overcome these difficulties, they will end up with a uniform *non*-truth-conditional semantics. Thus, even though expressivism can be a coherent position, it is then no longer a solution to the problem I posed, i.e. not a solution for a fundamental problem *within* truth-conditional semantics.

With revisionism and expressivism discarded as solutions to the problem, I move on to defend my own view in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. First, I show in Chapter 5 how truth-conditional semantics took a wrong turn in the early 1970s, when Davidson started claiming that the notion of truth plays a crucial explanatory role in semantics. I argue, inspired by McDowell's writings from the 1970s, that within the semantics of natural language, truth should be regarded as a theoretical notion that can be fully understood by its role in a semantic theory. I also

argue that another Davidsonian dogma, the view that a theory of meaning can only generate extensional theorems, is unjustified.

The path is then clear for my positive account of relative truth in chapter 6. I expound a theory according to which (1) truth is relative to *perspectives*, (2) each thinker *possesses* a perspective and (3) a thinker ought not to believe anything that isn't true in his or her own perspective. A perspective, on this theory, is just a function that evaluates all propositions consistently; thus there is nothing philosophically substantial in the postulation of perspectives. The substantial element of the theory is rather the claim that the relation of perspective possession is constrained in a certain way by certain a priori norms of communication. These norms specify that in some areas of discourse disagreements indicate that a mistake has been made and that therefore reasoned discussion would be worth while. These are areas one might call objective. Thus objectivity, on this view, is the result of certain rules of communication. I also show how this theory of perspective possession can be further refined to make finer distinctions between more or less objective topic areas.

The final chapter examines relativism in general. This is necessary because discussions of relativism are often hampered by a lack of clarity concerning the nature of relativism. Often one form of relativism is dismissed because of problems that arise only for other forms of relativism. I therefore begin the chapter by developing a scheme of classification for different forms of relativism. After that, I use the classificatory scheme to examine how well-known objections to relativism fare against the various forms of relativism. The result of this examination is that the impact of these objections is surprisingly small.

The main conclusions I shall reach thus are: (1) the best response to the problem of non-objective sentences in truth-conditional semantics is the adoption of a truth notion on which mere truth evaluability does not yet entail objectivity; (2) any truth notion to fit that bill must be relative; (3) an independently fruitful theory of perspectives and perspective possession can be devised; and (4) this form of relativism, even though it is a global form, does not fall to any of the usual objections.

¹Thus the slogan seems to tie in with Wittgenstein's claim in the *Tractatus* 4.024 that to understand a sentence is to know what is the case if it is true.

²This book is concerned *only* with this kind of reason. I do not consider, e.g., verificationist reasons for denying truth evaluability, or reasons to do with vagueness.