

## Truth as the Way to Meaning *Janne Mantykoski*

### *1. The Problem*

Not so long ago during a semi-intellectual pub conversation a journalist friend told me that there was no objective truth. The claim was delivered with an air of throw-away triviality in the midst of a catalogue of other practical problems involving the life of a reporter. One could see her point, of course. I fully appreciate the obstacles in discerning for instance what actually is and isn't said behind closed doors by politicians. Did the government lie about its Iraqi WMD dossier? One can see how deeper inquiries with new sources and wider contexts might simply serve to unearth increasingly conflicting claims and points of view. In a way, the more we try, the further away the objective truth seems to slide, with a likelihood that our interpretations of the facts are forever open to revision.<sup>1</sup>

This problem is hardly restricted to journalism, but is notoriously intractable in numerous other respectable academic disciplines such as social anthropology and history, and many academics share a similar scepticism about the possibility of objectivity. History will always remain open to revision by the next generation of historians, even in the absence of new sources or interesting discoveries. If there is no convergence of facts within these disciplines, then perhaps there indeed is nothing we could call objectively true about them.

Still, this line of argument is unlikely to impress philosophers, who could easily diagnose the problem as just journalists and historians confusing an epistemological problem (how we come to know the facts) with a metaphysical one (what the facts are regardless of how they may be found out). That objective truth is often hard, perhaps even impossible, to come by is not yet an argument against its existence. It is easy to see why this is likely to be the case. For instance, consider some obscure historical fact we can confidently expect never to be uncovered by historians, such as what Julius Caesar's grandmother's blood type was. Nonetheless, as sure as you have a blood type, so did she, and it seems foolhardy in the extreme to question, let alone deny, this. The probable impossibility of the epistemic task seems wholly irrelevant to the question of the fact's actuality. Truth, in other words, is not determined by epistemological constraints alone, there is more to truth. How much more? (And what is this 'more' anyway?) In fact, many philosophers argue that it is not an epistemic notion at all and I am inclined to agree with them. Some things, according to this kind of view, are true or false regardless of its inquirers. Facts, the view suggests, are completely observer (or mind) independent. Call this view realism, and its rejection antirealism.

This dispute about the nature of truth is usually put in terms of the realism-antirealism debate, suggesting a simple dichotomy, but it does more justice to the complexity of the debate to see it as a more fine-grained issue. Rather, we can see philosophers arguing that truth is more or less mind-dependent, with the absolute realists at one end of the spectrum, with radical relativists and other deniers of objective truth, at the opposite antirealist extreme. The argument for mind-independence of facts about the

physical constitution of Caesar's grandmother clearly supports those situated towards the realist end of the spectrum, but the considerations my friend took to be crucial, i.e. difficulties concerning political facts, clearly seem to pull in the opposite direction. The difference between these two kinds of facts seems to be in the way we come to know them, if we do. Facts about physical properties seem to be less vulnerable to conflicting interpretations than those about politics. What did Tony Blair really say, and according to whom? And what was the exact context? This problem of interpretation, usually called the indeterminacy of interpretation problem, is at the heart of the debate about truth. Interpretation is about meaning, and meaning clearly matters to the question of truth. If we are to know a fact we have to understand the fact. And if facts are objective, then two people who know the same fact must understand that fact the same way. If truth is objective then so must meaning be. To have a grasp of truth, it seems we have a grasp of meaning as well, and so a philosophy of one is likely to become a philosophy of the other as well. But, I will also argue, this notion of truth serves to undermine the realist-antirealist dichotomy, showing that the dichotomy can't be about truth in general, but rather about types of (supposed) facts; we are all realists and antirealists about *something* (e.g. many are likely to be realists about biology and antirealists about astrology).

In what follows I will try to clarify and contrast two related philosophies of truth and meaning, which are widely debated in contemporary philosophy, the Tarski-Fregean Building-Block model and the Tarski-Davidsonian Holistic model.<sup>2</sup> A choice between the two lands us at different points (if this kind of talk is helpful) on the gradient between the relativists and the absolutists, with the Fregeans closer to the absolutists than the Davidsonians. The differences between the two are slight but absolutely crucial, and my purpose here is to argue that the Holistic model of truth and meaning has some crucial virtues the Building-Block alternative lacks, and fewer of the failings. But to make better sense of the debate (and for chronological validity) I will start with the Tarski-Fregean model.

## 2. *Tarski-Fregean Building-Block model*

First a word about the nomenclature. There is a reason why both models carry the name of the Polish logician Alfred Tarski, who famously defined truth in terms of satisfaction for well-behaved formal languages (I will describe how in a second). This was one of the seminal achievements in the 20th century semantics, indeed in philosophy in general, and the two models discussed here are really identical in their formal semantic properties, and differ only in terms of practical application that is best characterised as a dispute about the constitution of meaning. Exactly how will hopefully come clear during the course of the current and the following section.

A formal definition of truth is not an intuitively obvious notion, so allow me to start by an important qualification. Tarski stressed that he hadn't defined truth for natural languages, and proved that the general notion of truth could not be thus defined. Satisfaction is itself defined as a formal semantic relation that holds between sentential functions with formal structures similar to sentences and certain other objects such as sentential and logical connectives (e.g. 'and', 'or', 'because'), nouns and adverbs, e.g. the predicate 'ist Weiss' is a sentential function of the form 'x ist Weiss'.<sup>3</sup> Those who know a bit about programming languages will be familiar with these types of functions, and of course a programming language is a paradigmatic

example of a formal language. So this particular sentential function has one free variable which accepts nouns, e.g. it can be filled by the word 'Schnee'. If all the free variables in the sentential function are filled with appropriate objects we get a sentence, and if the sentential function is satisfied by those objects, we end up with true sentences. Tarski was able to show that the objects available to fill the free variables of the sentential function always either satisfy the sentential function completely or not at all, giving us an elegant definition of truth as a satisfied sentence.<sup>4</sup> Because the definition is recursive, it can be used to derive all and only the infinitely many true sentences from a finite stock of sentential functions, connectives and objects, taking advantage of the recursive properties of languages.<sup>5</sup> The definition of truth for a (formal) language then turns out to be just the infinite list of sentences that are true, produced by the finite list of theorems that lists the formal semantic units and specifies their properties. Given together, this list of theorems constitutes a *theory of truth* for a particular (formal) language.

Reference is a relation words have with things in the world. According to the great 19th century German logician and philosopher of language Gottlob Frege, words in general have both a sense (or meaning) and reference, i.e. the thing in the world that the word somehow represents or picks out. The meaning of a word is like a function that is true if it refers, so for instance the word 'Schnee' means the same as 'snow' in part because it refers to snow in the world. 'Weiss' means the same as 'white' in part because it refers to white, and so on. Of course something like a colour isn't really a 'thing', but we can think of it as a property that is instantiated in things, so the reference of 'white' would be just the property of white, or whiteness. The way philosophers sometimes make sense of this kind of talk is by suggesting that the reference is an extension, because it is literally extended in space, so the extension of whiteness would simply be all the white things in the world. The reference-extension couple can be contrasted with the corresponding meaning-intension couple: the meaning of the word is the concept that we grasp with our minds, i.e. the intension of the word. The intension is ultimately what determines the extension.

It is obvious that reference is a notion intimately connected with satisfaction. Since we understand the notion of reference in general as the relationship that holds between the word and its extension, i.e. the reference of 'Schnee' is snow, the reference of 'Weiss' is white, or more carefully, the set of all things that are white, we can understand satisfaction as a matching of extensions in the appropriate way, for instance the subject 'Schnee' satisfies the predicate 'ist Weiss' because the extension of 'Schnee' is a subset of the extension of 'Weiss'. This just means that if you gathered all the white things in the world in the same place, those things would automatically include all the snow in the world (and much else besides). In Tarski's framework satisfaction is a formal property of formal languages that we can simply stipulate between sentential functions and semantic objects, but it is easy to see how real languages have this same property with the crucial difference that it is not so open to stipulation. In real languages, satisfaction is quite a complicated property that depends on meanings of words and the way the world is.

This becomes clearer if we follow Frege in thinking that knowing the full meaning of a referring expression entails that we know what its reference would be, because meaning of a singular term just is its reference condition. So if we fully understand the meanings of the words 'Schnee' and 'Weiss', we know what their referents are.

But to know whether the sentence 'Schnee ist Weiss' is true we have to know more than just the meanings of the individual words, we have to also know whether snow is white, or, equivalently, whether 'Schnee' satisfies 'ist Weiss'. It is natural to think that it is our knowledge of the extensions which allows us to make this check, e.g. we investigate samples of snow to determine what colour they are. But we can see how, according to this picture, satisfaction is determined by the sense and reference of the words, and if these are objective, we can see that truth of sentences is itself entirely objective. The meaning of the sentence is its truth condition, which means that understanding a sentence is knowing what the world is like if the sentence is true. Let's see how this is supposed to work.

Although Tarski's definition of truth strictly speaking only concerned formal languages, his obvious intention was to say something interesting about truth and natural languages in general. In his own words he wanted to '...catch hold of the actual meaning of an old notion.'<sup>6</sup> What he showed was that, together with the more commonplace logical connectives, truth could be defined in terms of satisfaction. Satisfaction itself is strictly speaking also a technical relation, but we can see how it would be applicable. If we take our German sentence 'Schnee ist Weiss', we notice that if 'Schnee' refers to snow, and 'Weiss' refers to whiteness, and 'ist' acts like a mapping procedure that maps all things snow onto all things white, then if the set of all things that are snow is included in the set of all white things, the sentence is true. In other words, 'Schnee' satisfies 'ist Weiss'.

The Tarski-Fregean philosophy of language gives us a neat and attractive model of how language works that explains how meaning is related to truth. According to Tarski-Fregeans, sentences are composed of sentential functions (e.g. predicates), semantic objects (e.g. nouns, adjectives, adverbs) and sentential connectives (e.g. and, or, but, because), and when we put them together in a complete sentence, we can work out according to the satisfaction relations what the truth conditions of the sentences are. If we knew all the satisfaction relations beforehand, we could just work out all the true sentences formally, but of course the point is that the words of natural languages have meanings that are not automatically known to us, and we have to find out what the satisfaction relations actually are by doing real empirical research. For instance, we used to think that 'whale is a type of fish' was a true sentence, but of course it is false because whales are actually mammals. This was an empirical discovery; we were wrong about the extension of the property of being a type of fish and mistakenly thought that 'whale' satisfied the predicate 'is a type of fish', and now we know better.

Because the semantic units are discrete, well-defined and objective, this picture is sometimes called the Building-Block model of language. As we have seen, satisfaction for natural languages in turn is completely determined by sense and reference, and given that these are themselves objective properties of words of a language, in principle any sentence we care to put together is objectively true or false in a given language, regardless of what any number of people might insist. According to the Building-Block model, our actual interpretations of sentences are incidental to their actual meaning and truth; if interpretations of two sentences seem to be inconsistent (i.e. we get two sentences that we think are both true, yet they can't be true together), then this just shows that at least one of the interpretations must be wrong. According to this model, my friend's claim about objective truth is clearly

false. Things are not that simple, because I'm now going to argue that this is in fact a bad model. We can see why when we contrast it with another one, which I think can easily be considered as an improved shake-up of the Building-Block model: the Tarski-Davidsonian Holistic model.

### *3. Tarski-Davidsonian Holistic model*

As we have seen, Frege showed how sense and reference are two crucial interrelated aspects of language. Tarski's achievement was to show how we can define truth for formal languages with his notion of satisfaction, in keeping with the intuition that the truth of natural language sentences might be defined in terms of logical connectives and correspondence relations between words and their extensions (or, more accurately, their sense and reference). Tarski showed exactly how the truth of a sentence depends on the semantic features of parts of the sentence, especially reference. Of course, Tarski didn't define the actual concept of reference either, all he did was introduce a relation he called satisfaction that connects the formal syntactic structures of a formal language, the point being that a relation of this kind is essential to the definition: we can't define truth without it.<sup>7</sup> A definition of truth can thus be taken completely formalistically as a tautological definition of the interrelated notions truth and reference.<sup>8</sup> But, equally, if we apply at least one of these concepts to the relevant feature of reality, we can get something with empirical applicability.

We have seen how, in order to give content to a theory of truth, we must first define a sentence, and then provide a recursive characterisation of a satisfaction relation. Truth can then be defined on the basis of satisfaction: if all the referring terms in the sentence satisfy the sentential function, the sentence is true. Since both truth and satisfaction are formally related semantic concepts, one is not prior to the other and so we are free to define either in terms of the other. According to Davidson, Tarski defines satisfaction as the relation that gives the correct account of truth, so he starts with a prior understanding of the concept of truth and therefore doesn't require any prior understanding of the concept of reference. He could have chosen the opposite route, the more traditional, and perhaps initially more intuitive method of defining truth in terms of reference, which is exactly the tactic of the Building-Block model. After all, it makes intuitive pedagogical sense that we learn to understand whole sentences only after we've learned to understand parts of sentences, i.e. words, giving us a method which is applied to, for instance, second language teaching in schools. But Davidson's revolutionary insight is based on the thought that truth is the semantic concept we have the best pre-theoretical grasp of. The notions of reference, sentential connective and singular term are (by comparison) obscure and theoretical.<sup>9</sup>

The import of the insight comes to this: we can tell whether the speaker of a sentence holds the sentence true or false prior to understanding the sentence. Once we know that a given sentence is true we can start theorising about the finer structural subtleties of the sentence. What count as a sentence are utterances and scribbles by creatures we can usefully recognise as language-users, and so truth itself only has application in the context of language-users. When we try to give content to a theory of truth that might apply to a real language, the sentences produced by the theory must have meaning that is independent of the theory, and consequently the best evidence we can hope for is in the facts that are publicly available about how speakers use the language.<sup>10</sup> To see the sense in this consider the case of children acquiring their first words. If the

children didn't have some sort of pre-theoretical sense that the sounds emerging from people's mouths had something to do with the way things are, there would be no hope for them ever to get their linguistic development started. How could a child know, for instance whether the sound of 'that's a dog' stands for one word or many words?

The point is that she doesn't, nor does she need to, all she needs to be aware of is that the sentence is held true by the speaker, and that it seems to have something to do with the friendly fluffy creature in the room, as that is where the speaker's attention is directed towards while uttering the sentence. The realisation that the sound of 'that's a dog' is composed of four semantic units, or words, some of which refer more specifically to the fluffy creature, comes later, once the child has a more refined, or posttheoretical, grasp of truth and language.

The Holistic model turns the Building-Block model on its head. Whereas the Tarski-Fregeans define satisfaction in terms of sense and reference, with truth simply following as the property of satisfied sentences, Davidsonians start with a true sentence and then attempt to derive the satisfaction relations, and the sense and reference of words, as theoretical notions as a part of the process of coming to understand sentences uttered by speakers. In other words the theory of truth is not something we start off with, it is the end product of a competent language user. We shall see that this end product is not an ideal we strive towards, or that at certain point we reach a stage which can't be improved upon—the end product itself changes organically with the speakers. Whatever the other virtues of this move, it is important to see that Tarskian formalisms are neutral to it. If we accept that truth can be defined in terms of satisfaction, then it is just a logical fact that satisfaction can be defined in terms of truth. A definitional relation is an equivalence relation, and this relation is symmetric: if a is b by definition, then b is a by that same definition.

We have seen the initial motivation for this move, the problem of how children actually acquire the understanding of languages. The two models make different predictions about this process, the Fregeans would suggest that children need to learn words before they can understand sentences, Davidsonians that children start with sentences, and only then learn to abstract the meanings of individual words. The feasibility of this process depends on one practical and two necessary conditions. First of all there needs to be a sufficiently large pool of utterances (i.e. sets of sentences) which allow theoretical extrapolations to take place. Secondly the prospective language-users must have some of pre-theoretical grasp of truth, and thirdly there must be a way to distinguish between true and false utterances, and thereby to correlate the utterances with features or regularities of the world. The first consideration is just equivalent to the near truism that to learn a language we must be exposed to language—that children raised in linguistic isolation will not become language users is a well confirmed empirical fact. But since, out of all the creatures on Earth, only humans seem fully capable of accomplishing this feat, more is needed. That would shoulder the philosophically interesting burden on the second and third conditions. Davidson's response to the problem was to propose a set of heuristic assumptions that all language users must share, which he called the 'Principle of Charity'.<sup>11</sup>

Davidson's assumption is that the ability to process utterances in the analogous manner to constructing theories of truth which allow the interpreters to abstract the

atomic units of meaning out of sentences, i.e. get at the words. But this is only possible if the interpreters know in advance which sentences are true and which false. We also need a starting point in order to theorise about the contents of the sentences to begin with. This is where a second consideration comes in. When we start learning a language we must start with the assumption that the sentences we hear are true—without this assumption the process couldn't even get started. Also, we assume that we can somehow start by correlating some of the sentences of other speakers with some salient observable features of the world. We must therefore add to the assumption that we can correctly guess from our judgement of the direction of the attention of the speakers what the probable content of the sentence may be. Testing our budding theories about the meaning of the utterances by producing our own utterances is a crucial part of the theory construction, and in this we must recognise acts of assent and dissent of other speakers. Consider again a toddler's first attempts at language—they are always likely to concern observational claims about people and everyday objects—it is intuitively absurd to think that a child's first utterances might just as likely be about abstract entities. The further assumption is that in time the toddler's theory becomes more sophisticated, allowing the possibility to incorporate errors in the interpretation process by noting inconsistencies among speakers. This is crucial, and becomes relevant later on.

#### *4. Why we should be Holists rather than Blockers*

Although I've presented the model in the context of language acquisition, we should be clear that (even if we only considered speakers who have acquired full-blown linguistic capacities) the two models make importantly different claims about meaning and language. Consider the phenomenon of language evolution and the drift of conventional meanings. It is a well-known fact that languages evolve in time, divide into different dialects, which eventually may become wholly incomprehensible and thus fully different languages. The Romance languages, such as Portuguese, French and Romanian are reasonably described as descendants of Latin, in the sense that we can see traces of historical records that fairly accurately suggest how the Latin spoken two millennia ago in the relevant regions gradually drifted into these three mutually incomprehensible languages. Linguistic drift as a real phenomenon is not open to dispute, and I want to emphasise how absolutely prevalent this phenomenon actually is, everyone notices the differences in the ways their much elder or younger relatives speak, even if from the same dialectical region. Languages are in constant state of change, and in fact linguists such as Noam Chomsky think there is little reason to think there is any serious reality to a well-defined object such as English Language in some semantically interesting sense.<sup>12</sup> There are only languages that are more or less mutually comprehensible, but all language users can learn any other language.

This is an empirical point that seems to be reasonably well agreed on by most linguists, and the point is, of course, that only the Davidsonian holistic model is compatible with it. According to the Fregean Building-Block model, meanings of words are objective (speaker-independent) entities, which determine the references and thereby satisfaction relations of sentential objects and eventually the truth of the sentence itself. But if this is the case, then a language such as English consists of an objectively inert stock of atomic semantic units, which we can combine in various ways to express our thoughts and make true or false claims about the world. But how

could it accommodate, let alone explain, the fact that English manifests itself in countless dialects, which moreover continuously mutate, branch and assimilate in and out of existence? It seems that a Fregean Building-Block theorist would have to insist that all dialects are in fact different languages, since a sentence which is true in one dialect, 'Michael is wearing pants' is false in another (because Michael is wearing trousers—pants are undergarments). But this then seems to push the theorist into holding an absurd claim that speakers must know countless different languages in order to communicate with different people. If there is no objective way to delineate dialects we'd eventually be pushed into a view according to which everyone spoke a different language, which is where the Building-Block model becomes intolerable. It would amount to a claim that all speakers, by virtue of speaking slightly different dialects, had different, unmatching building blocks. But the whole, initially intuitive, project of the Building-Block model was in the attempt to explain linguistic communication by the fact that meanings were objective and shared. Of course a diagnosis of this problem can be discerned from the impossibility of acquiring these building blocks—how can one acquire the meaning of the term 'carburettor' without already somehow being in possession of that meaning. After all, how can you understand the sentence beginning with 'carburettor is...' if you completely lack the sense of the word 'carburettor'. But if you can't understand this sentence prior to learning about carburettors, it seems it is impossible to learn what a carburettor is. And this is absurd.<sup>13</sup> What the Tarski-Fregean model fails to account for is the organic nature of language which could explain its communicational flexibility by the fact that new words and constructions are so readily learnable.<sup>14</sup>

By contrast, the Tarski-Davidsonian Holistic theory is primed to explain exactly this crucial flexibility in the way we communicate. In his seminal papers 'Communication and Convention' and 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' Davidson explains how communication doesn't depend on any shared knowledge of meanings or other conventions, all we need is the ability to incorporate speaker utterances into theories of truth out of which we can extrapolate the meanings of words.<sup>15</sup> This is no mean feat, of course, and the way we actually do it is unlikely to bear identical resemblance to Tarskian truth theories, but Davidson's point is that if we can provide one framework with which to model it, we have removed the mystery of the process. If there is one way, there are likely to be many. It is also clear that since we are dealing with a finite stock of evidence for our theories, we are always up against a possibility of error. Whenever we have hit upon a theory of truth that seems to correctly account for the utterances of a given speaker, there are likely to be many others besides, which may moreover be inconsistent with each other. This is no weakness of the model, because this kind of uncertainty represents the actual communicative imperfections that always prevail between speakers: misunderstandings are commonplace, but not so common as to make scepticism a viable option in general. We want our model to explain the imperfections in linguistic communication as much as its other features.

This explains finally our opening dilemma: the reason why a fact about some physical property, such as a blood type of an individual, is in some sense more objective than a fact about what someone said because a fact about some physical property is not dependent on the speakers' interpretation about what the correct way of describing it may be. Certainly mistakes do occur here as well, scientists sometimes postulate properties that don't exist at all, and when they do exist they are commonly incorrectly described and/or characterised, but the mistake, when it is made, is itself



objective in the sense that further inquiry can show it to be such. This is precisely the reason why we can expect present science to disagree with its previous theories and findings. But things are not so straightforward when it comes to interpreting utterances and intentions. Whereas the outside world shared by all the speakers provides the clear foundation for claims about it, there is no such obviously objective foundation for facts about correct interpretations. This is clear to anyone who has ever studied literature, but the phenomenon is much more universal, and applies to communication in general. Just as there is no objective fact of the matter<sup>16</sup> whether Hamlet intended to kill Polonius, there may be no objective fact whether the government lied about the WMD dossier. That is not to say that there can't be such a fact—if Tony Blair sometime in his future memoirs confessed to having lied, then there clearly would be such a fact (even now). It may be that there is evidence to suggest that the government clearly didn't lie. But it could also be a fact that there was no unambiguous intention to lie, even if certain untruths were inadvertently passed on to make the case for war. In that case it seems a matter of interpretation to make a case for either, but such a balanced situation would elude any objective assertion of fact of the matter. The point is not epistemological, as there is nowhere in the world where such a fact may be determined (even in principle), any more than there are likely to be facts about correct interpretations of Shakespeare's plays.

This lack of facts is not odd nor debilitating, for there can surely be propositions camouflaging as truths. Truth, as we have been discussing it, is not simply identical to the facts (which presumably just are the infinite list of true sentences). The notion of truth is rather what we have grasped when we understand how beliefs work in the world, i.e. that they apply to sentences that describe some state of affairs either correctly or incorrectly. Even if it may be true that there is no determinate fact about whether Hamlet murdered Polonius, we know that if we held this as a fact, we couldn't at the same time hold that Hamlet didn't murder Polonius (and many other more subtle consequences besides—all truths must cohere with one another). Indeed, we can easily imagine an emergence of a tradition of dogmatic Shakespearean literary orthodoxy according to which it is simply a fact that Hamlet murdered Polonius. But real facts aren't matters of tradition or consensus, nor do they depend on epistemic access. With matters of interpretation there often isn't enough evidence even for the ideal interpreter, so a fact, if such there be, will not be recognisable as such. This is not a place to advance arguments on whether we should or shouldn't believe in such facts if they are interpretation-transcended, *prima facie* there could be such facts. On the other hand, I don't see why there should be, and prefer to remain agnostic about them.

This is in itself of course a less than an absolutely realist position. The point is, as I suggested in the introduction, everyone is a realist and an antirealist about some things, and so to express the issue as a simple dichotomy is to grossly trivialise it, and indeed a single one-dimensional gradient between realists and anti-realists is probably also too simple. The underlying point is, though, that the dispute itself is undermined by the realisation that it doesn't really depend on the concept of truth, nor does our concept of truth directly affect the debate. The debate is, rather, on how the world is and how our ways of exploring it are restricted—a much more practical problem than the deeply philosophical one it is often construed as.

### 5. Conclusion: Truth as the way to meaning

It is worth emphasising that the point is not to attribute to Fregeans absurd views such as that learning a language is impossible, or that we are born with all the senses innately in our heads. These are views few serious philosopher are likely to entertain, and helps to emphasise the philosophically important point that it is the model we are criticising. The Tarski-Fregean model provides us with no method for the acquisition of meaning, and for related reasons can't account for the organic way languages are in constant state of change. This is primarily an empirical point, the model doesn't seem to correspond with the way speakers (and languages themselves) are actually observed to be, but it can be applied to philosophy as well. A philosophy that is at odds with what we clearly perceive to be the case is just bad philosophy! It is perhaps unfair to criticise The Building Block model for such practical problems, since it could be defended as an ideal of what all natural languages approach (but never achieve). It can still successfully represent other crucial aspects of languages, and how these aspects tie truth in with meaning. But, on the contrary, my point about Davidsonian Holism is precisely that it embodies all the virtues of the Building Block model, as it is in its formal properties based on the same Tarskian framework, and as I have argued, much less of the sins. Tarski-Davidsonian Holism is thus rightly viewed as an improvement, a step in the right direction for philosophy of language. Its greatest virtue is in showing why truth matters so much, what makes it such a central concept, and why we can't do without it. An understanding of truth requires us to understand that we share the objective reality with others, and our words are about the objective reality. Truth is the connection between language and reality, a correct description of the world is a true sentence, and this can be ascertained only if we understand the sentence correctly. Understanding a sentence is knowing what it means, knowing what the reality is like if the sentence is true. Prior to having meanings, knowing that a sentence is true gives us the only method of finding out what it means: this is the method of truth. Take away truth and you take away our ability to understand one another or to describe the world—it is a good philosophical question what, if anything, would remain.

Janne Mantykoski  
*King's College London*

---

<sup>1</sup> I will talk about facts throughout this essay, but want to resist any strong ontological commitments about them. What I mean by 'facts' are simply true thoughts expressible as sentences, without advocating any specific theory of thought.

<sup>2</sup> I've adapted these labels from Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) p. 221.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Tarski, 'The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundations of Semantics.' (1944) Reprinted in Simon Blackburn and Keith Simmons, *Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 115-143; p. 128.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 129.

<sup>5</sup> For instance if we have a sentence 'a is b' and the conjunctive connective 'and', we can create an infinity of different sentences like this: 'a is b', 'a is b and a is b', 'a is b and a is b and a is b', and so on for ever. Note that because of the truth-functional properties of the conjunction 'and', if 'a is b' is true, then the rest of the produced sentences are too (and if it is false then so are all of them).

<sup>6</sup> Tarski (op. cit.) p. 116.

---

<sup>7</sup> Donald Davidson, 'The Structure and Content of Truth.' In *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990) pp. 279-328; p. 296.

<sup>8</sup> Or really, satisfaction, but since satisfaction for natural languages is crucially dependent on reference, it is reasonable to say that meanings of words are really their reference conditions which determine their satisfaction relations.

<sup>9</sup> Davidson, 'The Structure and Content of Truth' (op. cit.) p. 300.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 301.

<sup>11</sup> See Davidson 1984 (op. cit.).

<sup>12</sup> Compare this with the linguist's joke in John Collins, 'Language: A Dialogue.' In *Richmond Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 1 Issue 5 (2003), pp. 18-24; p. 22.: 'A language is something with an army and a navy.' He explains a few sentences later, '[According to linguists] there is no thing – English – which all and only those we want to call English speakers know.'

<sup>13</sup> One is reminded of Louis Armstrong's immortal reply when asked to explain what jazz was: 'If you gotta ask, you ain't never gonna get to know.' I disagree with the spirit of Armstrong's nativist elitism.

<sup>14</sup> This common complaint is given voice by for instance Leslie Stevenson in his article 'Dummett on Frege', asking, '...can we distinguish the respective contributions of meaning and fact? Is there always one standard way, common to all speakers of the language, of establishing the reference of an expression? Quine's scepticism on this point must be faced. Frege's picture is not generally true of our actual use of language; he himself realised that different users of a proper name referring to the same person may attach different sense to the name.' In *Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 24 (1974), pp. 349-359; p. 352.

<sup>15</sup> 'Communication and Convention' is in Davidson (1984) (op. cit.) pp. 265-288, 'Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' is in Ernest LePore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) pp. 433-446.

<sup>16</sup> No *knowable* objective fact, at any rate.