Notes on Davidson and Truth-Theoretic Semantics

Philosophy 360
Spring 2015

1. **Goals**: account for compositionality and do so in the context of an empirically verifiable theory of meaning.

2. **Strategy 1**: account for compositionality by assigning meanings to atomic elements and then building complexes up from there. This fails.

3. **Strategy 2**: take words to have meanings in virtue of their systematic contribution to the meanings of sentences, and explain sentence meaning in terms of truth.
   a. **Sentence holism**: words only have meanings in the context of sentences, and sentences only have meanings in the context of a language.
   b. **Getting the theorem form right**: work through “S means M” formulation; emphasize the fully extensional meta-language.
   c. **Embedding Tarski’s Convention T into the theory of meaning**: the goal is to derive the theorems, where the derivation supplies insight into the semantic contribution of syntax and the relationships between sentences in virtue of their words. This gets compositionality in a principled fashion. Davidson does weaken Convention T, eliminating translation between OL and ML for logical equivalence. **Question**: how can we get what we need by way of axioms for our derivational system and still embrace sentence holism?

4. **Nature of a Full Theory**: Content + Illocutionary Force + Pragmatic Theory

5. **Empirical Verifiability**: This is the second principal goal. With the sketch of a theory in hand, we can now ask how such a theory should come to be, and how could it be empirical?
   a. **The Radical Interpreter**
   b. **The Interdependence of Belief and Meaning**: We can get meaning, assuming belief, or vice versa; but if we don’t have either, we must solve for both at the same time given what we do have, which is assent behavior.