I. Administrative

A. Assignment Preview: Readings and Writings.

B. Reading Essay #3: due next Thursday, 16 April

C. Undergraduate Philosophy Conference this weekend – http://www.philosophy.msu.edu/undergraduate/undergraduate-conference/

D. General Questions?

II. Davidson’s Approach to the Theory of Meaning (TM)

A. Motivation

1. Language acquisition → compositionality

2. Need also to do justice to communicability

B. Semantics vs. Metasemantics: Need to have a ToM that produces a meaning for every meaningful sentence in a language

III. Goal for a Theory of Meaning

A. Give an account of how the meanings of sentences depend on the meaning of words.

B. Comments:

1. This must be possible, since we are able to produce and interpret a potential infinity of sentences out of a finite set of words and a finite set of combination rules.

2. In effect, what we want to do is provide an account of what it is we understand when we understand a language.
IV. Strategy #1

A. Assign meanings to each word, and then take sentence meaning to be "built up" out of these meanings.

B. Meaning as Reference:
   1. "Theatetus flies" has what meaning it has because of the meaning of "T" and "f" and the combination of these forced by their concatenation, where the last thing provides the equivalent of "participates in" or some such. But here we get a regress.
   2. Davidson believes that the meanings we are supposed to attach to some expressions do no work at all: consider the infinite class of complex singular terms built up from "the father of" and "Annette". Here we can provide a semantic account of any term without mentioning the meaning for "the father of" at all. The lesson: we don't need to assign meanings to all expressions because some exert their semantic influence by systematically influencing the sentences in which they are found.
   3. Frege recognizes this and so treats predicates, like "flies" as unsaturated or incomplete entities, functions, that produce meanings as values when they are "filled in". So sentences on this view are simply a special case of complex singular terms. But here we run into the slingshot argument.

C. Meaning as Meaning:
   1. All of this comes about because we have identified meaning with reference, so perhaps we should distinguish between meaning and reference and thereby extricate ourselves from this situation.
   2. Problem with this is that it leads to vacuity. (Consider a theory of meaning as implying sentences of the form "s means m").

D. Meaning as the result of Recursive Syntax + Dictionary: This fails, since we cannot account for the meanings of propositional attitude sentences with the meanings of the words and the syntactical rules.

V. Strategy #2

A. Take words to have meanings in virtue of their systematic contribution to the meanings of sentences, and explain sentence meaning in terms of
truth.

B. Frege was correct in thinking that words only have meaning in the context of sentences. But in addition, a sentence only has meaning in the context of a language, since the contribution words make to a sentence must be understood relative to the systematic contribution they make to all the sentences in which they appear.

1. This forces us to regard meaning holistically: only in the context of a sentence does a words have a meaning, and only in the context of a language does a sentence have a meaning.

2. This is implicit in our initial requirement that a theory of meaning entail all sentences of the form "s means m" for a language.

C. Start with the form of sentence we need: "s means m".

1. Replace "m", since we are no longer thinking of meaning in terms of a thing assigned to each word. Instead, think of it in terms of a sentence: "s means that P".

2. What of "means that"? Isn't that intensional? Yes, but it can be replaced by treating P extensionally: "s is T iff P". All we need to do is match every sentence s with a matching sentence P that "gives the meaning of s".

3. But what is "T"? The theory of meaning will place restrictions on T such that we can generate all the "T-sentences" for sentences s in L; the result will be a TM for L, or what is the same thing, a definition of T in L. But this project will apply to all and only the true sentences in L, which tells us that T must be truth.

D. Summary: A TM for L shows "how the meanings of sentences depend on the meanings of words" if it contains a (recursive) definition of truth-in-L.

E. Ramifications:

1. This theory tells us nothing new about the conditions under which a sentence is true—we learn nothing more than what the sentence tells us. What the theory does is relate the known truth conditions of each sentence to those aspects of the sentence (viz.,
words) that occur in other sentences and can be assigned similar roles in other sentences.

2. How does this answer our initial question? Remember that the words here are the primitives, and this is where the holism exerts its influence. We may not be able to recover the meaning of a word without the theory of meaning as a whole, but we are told by the theory of meaning how a sentence, with its truth condition, is built up out of the parts.

3. This tells us all we need to know about what it is to understand the language—to know the semantic concept of truth for the language is to know the language.

F. Nuances:

1. Davidson’s view embraces meaning holism

2. A theory of meaning, so understood, is an empirical theory

3. Responds to the Liar Paradox in a way that seems to reject Tarski’s strict regimentation

4. Is natural language too “confused and amorphous” to admit of explanation in formal terms?