

***Inquiries into Truth and  
Interpretation***

**DONALD DAVIDSON**

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## *Provenance of the Essays and Acknowledgements*

Essay 1, 'Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages', was read at the 1964 International Congress for Logic, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. It was subsequently published in the Proceedings of that congress in a volume edited by Yehoshua Bar-Hillel and published by North-Holland Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1965. It is reprinted here with the permission of the publishers.

An earlier version of Essay 2, 'Truth and Meaning', was read at the Eastern Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association in December 1966. The main theme traces back to a paper delivered at the Pacific Division in 1962. The present essay owes much to John Wallace with whom I discussed these matters from 1962 onward. My research was supported by the National Science Foundation. The paper was first published in *Synthese*, 17 (1967), 304–23. Copyright © 1967 by D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht-Holland, and reprinted by permission of D. Reidel Publishing Company.

Essay 3, 'True to the Facts', was first presented at a symposium on Truth in December 1969 at a meeting of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association. The other symposiast was James F. Thomson. The paper first appeared in the *Journal of Philosophy*, 66 (1969), 748–64, and is printed here with the permission of the editors.

'Semantics for Natural Languages', Essay 4, was read at a symposium organized by the Olivetti Company in honour of its founder, and held in Milan in October 1968. The proceedings were published in *Linguaggi nella Società e nella Tecnica*, Edizioni di Comunità, Milan, 1970.

## x *Provenance of the Essays*

Essay 5, 'In Defence of Convention T', was read at a conference on Alternative Semantics held at Temple University in December 1970, and was published in *Truth, Syntax and Modality* (the title *Truth Valued*, suggested by Dana Scott, was unfortunately rejected). The book was edited by Hugues Leblanc and published by North-Holland Publishing Company, 1973. It is reprinted here by permission of the publishers.

The next Essay, number 6, 'Quotation', was published in a special issue of *Theory and Decision* on Language Theory edited by H. L. Berghel (*Theory and Decision*, 11 (1979), 27–40). Copyright © 1979 by D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht-Holland. Reprinted by permission of D. Reidel Publishing Company.

'On Saying That', which is Essay 7, was published in a double issue of *Synthese* devoted to the work of W. V. Quine (*Synthese*, 19 (1968–9), 130–46). It was subsequently published in *Words and Objections, Essays on the Work of W. V. Quine*, edited by D. Davidson and J. Hintikka, D. Reidel, 1969, pp. 158–74 (revised edition, 1975). Copyright © 1969 by D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht-Holland. Reprinted by permission of D. Reidel Publishing Company. Quine's reply to this essay is on pages 333–5 of *Words and Objections*.

Essay 8, 'Moods and Performances', was read at the second Jerusalem Philosophical Encounter, held in Israel in April 1976, and was commented on by W. V. Quine. It was published in *Meaning and Use*, edited by A. Margalit, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht-Holland, 1979.

'Radical Interpretation', Essay 9, was read at a colloquium on Philosophical Problems of Language in Biel, Switzerland, in May 1973, and in another version at a conference on Language and Meaning at Cumberland Lodge, Great Park, Windsor in November of that year. It was published in *Dialectica*, 27 (1973), 313–28, and is reprinted here with the permission of the editor, H. Lauener.

Essay 10 on 'Belief and the Basis of Meaning' was prepared for a conference on Language, Intentionality, and Translation Theory held at the University of Connecticut in March 1973, and was published in a double issue of *Synthese* edited by J. G. Troyer and S. C. Wheeler III (*Synthese*, 27 (1974), 309–23). This issue also contains valuable comments by W. V. Quine (325–9) and David Lewis (331–44) and my replies (345–9). David Lewis's reply has the title 'Radical Interpretation'. Copyright © 1974 by D. Reidel Publishing

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Essay 11, 'Thought and Talk', was a 1974 Wolfson College lecture, and was published in *Mind and Language*, edited by Samuel Guttenplan, © Oxford University Press, 1975. It is reprinted here with the permission of Oxford University Press on behalf of Wolfson College.

In June 1974 John Foster read a paper, 'Meaning and Truth Theory', to the Oxford Philosophical Society, and Essay 12, 'Reply to Foster', is my reply to the parts of his paper that concerned my work. Foster's paper and my response were published in *Truth and Meaning: Essays in Semantics*, edited by Gareth Evans and John McDowell, © Oxford University Press, 1976. My paper is reprinted here with the permission of the Oxford University Press.

Essay 13, 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', was slow to reach its present form. The sixth and last of my John Locke lectures, titled 'Invariants of Translation', was an early draft, delivered in Trinity Term, 1970, at Oxford. In January of the next year I gave two lectures on Alternative Conceptual Schemes at the University of London which contained much of what is in the present essay. The material was distilled down to almost final form for my presidential address to the Eastern Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Atlanta, 28 December 1973. After that, but before publication, I gave a closely related talk, 'The Third Dogma of Empiricism', to the Philosophical Society at Oxford. The discussion was opened by W. V. Quine, and his comments helped me write the final draft. Some later fall-out from that discussion will be found in Quine's 'On the Very Idea of a Third Dogma'. My paper was published in the *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 47 (1974), and is reprinted here with the permission of the Association.

Essay 14, 'The Method of Truth in Metaphysics', was first published in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 2: *Studies in the Philosophy of Language*, edited by P. A. French, T. E. Uehling, Jr., and H. K. Wettstein, The University of Minnesota, Morris, 1977. To my great profit, Gilbert Harman and W. V. Quine commented on earlier versions.

Essay 15, 'Reality Without Reference', was first given in different form at a Semantics and Linguistics Workshop at the University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario in April 1972. Criticisms and

suggestions followed, and changed, the paper over the years. It was first published in *Dialectica*, 31 (1977), 247–53, and is reprinted here with the permission of the editor.

‘The Inscrutability of Reference’, Essay 16, was written for a special issue of *The Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* devoted to the work of W. V. Quine, but I missed the deadline and the paper appeared in a later issue, *The Southwestern Journal of Philosophy*, 10 (1979), 7–19. It is reprinted here with permission of the Journal. Quine replied to my paper along with others in ‘Replies to the Eleven Essays’, *Philosophical Topics*, 11 (1981), 242–3.

Essay 17, ‘What Metaphors Mean’, was read at a conference on metaphor at the University of Chicago in February 1978. It was first published in *Critical Inquiry*, 5 (1978), 31–47; © 1978 by Donald Davidson. The extract from ‘The Hippopotamus’ on p. 256 is from *Collected Poems 1909–1962* by T. S. Eliot, copyright 1936 by Faber and Faber and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.; copyright © 1963, 1964 by T. S. Eliot. It is reprinted by permission of the publishers. In a subsequent issue of the same journal, Nelson Goodman and Max Black responded to my piece. Neither found much to agree with in what I had written. (Nelson Goodman, ‘Metaphor as Moonlighting’, *Critical Inquiry*, 6 (1979), 125–30 and Max Black, ‘How Metaphors Work: A Reply to Donald Davidson’, *Critical Inquiry*, 6 (1979), 131–43.)

The last essay, Essay 18, on ‘Communication and Convention’, was read at the first Campinas Encounter in the Philosophy of Language at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas in August 1981. It is scheduled to be published in the proceedings of the Encounter, *Dialogue: an Interdisciplinary Approach*, edited by Marcelo Dascal, John Benjamins, Amsterdam.

# *Introduction*

What is it for words to mean what they do? In the essays collected here I explore the idea that we would have an answer to this question if we knew how to construct a theory satisfying two demands: it would provide an interpretation of all utterances, actual and potential, of a speaker or group of speakers; and it would be verifiable without knowledge of the detailed propositional attitudes of the speaker. The first condition acknowledges the holistic nature of linguistic understanding. The second condition aims to prevent smuggling into the foundations of the theory concepts too closely allied to the concept of meaning. A theory that does not satisfy both conditions cannot be said to answer our opening question in a philosophically instructive way.

The first five essays are mainly concerned with the question what sort of a theory would satisfy the first condition.

*Essay 1*, 'Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages', urges that a satisfactory theory must discover a finite basic vocabulary in the verbal phenomena to be interpreted if it is to prove useful to a creature with finite powers. If this is so, there is no escape from the need to treat the semantic features of the potential infinity of sentences as owed to the semantic features of the items in a finite vocabulary. It turns out that a number of familiar theories fail to meet this condition: Frege's analysis of oblique contexts, Church's logic of sense and denotation, Tarski's informal treatment of quotation are examples. Standard theories of adverbial modification might well be added to the list.

*Essay 2*, 'Truth and Meaning', argues that a theory of truth along the lines of Tarski's truth definitions, but modified in various ways to apply to a natural language, would be enough for an interpreter

to go on. Such theories have clear virtues. They make no use of meanings as entities; no objects are introduced to correspond to predicates or sentences; and from a finite set of axioms it is possible to prove, for each sentence of the language to be interpreted, a theorem that states truth conditions for that sentence. Further, the proof of such a theorem amounts to an analysis of how the truth or falsity of the sentence depends on how it is composed from elements drawn from the basic vocabulary. If such theories really do satisfy the two conditions listed in the first paragraph, we can take the word 'theory' in 'theory of meaning' seriously.

Many objections have been made to the claim that truth theories can do duty as theories of meaning. Some of the objections I have tried to meet or deflect in other essays in this book. But whether or not the claim can be made good, some of the arguments for it in 'Truth and Meaning' are faulty. The reader will find that I shifted ground more than once as I tried to improve or clarify this central thesis. One thing that only gradually dawned on me was that while Tarski intended to analyse the concept of truth by appealing (in Convention T) to the concept of meaning (in the guise of sameness of meaning, or translation), I have the reverse in mind. I considered truth to be the central primitive concept, and hoped, by detailing truth's structure, to get at meaning. These are remarks *about* theories of truth, of course, not remarks to be found in them.

Something else that was slow coming to me was that since I was treating theories of truth as empirical theories, the axioms and theorems had to be viewed as laws. So a theorem like "'Schnee ist weiss" is true in the mouth of a German speaker if and only if snow is white' has to be taken not merely as true, but as capable of supporting counterfactual claims. Indeed, given that the evidence for this law, if it is one, depends ultimately on certain causal relations between speakers and the world, one can say that it is no accident that 'Schnee ist weiss' is true if and only if snow is white; it is the whiteness of snow that *makes* 'Schnee ist weiss' true. How much of a concession this is to intensionality depends, I suppose, on one's analysis of the concept of law. What seems clear is that whatever the concession comes to, it is one that must be made for any empirical science. These matters are discussed in Essay 12.

Essay 3, 'True to the Facts', asks whether a theory of truth in Tarski's style should be called a correspondence theory. Such theories do not, like most correspondence theories, explain truth by

finding entities such as facts for true sentences to correspond to. And there are good reasons, which can be traced back to Frege, for rejecting facts as entities that could play this role. On the other hand, theories of truth of the kind considered here do require that a relation between entities and expressions be characterized ('satisfaction'). It is not easy to see how a satisfactory route to truth can escape this step if the language the theory treats has the usual quantificational resources.

'Semantics for Natural Languages', *Essay 4*, urges that truth theories could provide a formal semantics for natural languages to match the sort of formal syntax linguists from Chomsky on have favoured. When this essay was written, the deep structures of syntax were thought to be the vehicles for semantic interpretation. *Essay 4* suggested that the deep structure of a sentence should correspond to the logical form a theory of truth assigned to that sentence.

Tarski's Convention T, which is defended in *Essay 5*, is an informal, but powerful, instrument for testing theories of truth against one's prior grasp of the concept. In the most direct application, the test merely calls on us to recognize the disquotational feature of truth predicates; sentences like "'Snow is white" is true in English if and only if snow is white' are trivially true. Since the totality of such sentences uniquely determines the extension of a truth predicate for English, a theory that entails all such sentences must be extensionally correct. Critics have often made the error of thinking that since the theorems that show a theory to be correct are trivial, the theory or the concept of truth it characterizes, must also be trivial.

A theory of truth would serve to interpret a speaker only if the theory were up to accounting for all the linguistic resources of the speaker. But is a theory that satisfies Convention T adequate to a natural language? Here there are two questions. One is what devices to make or consider available in the language of the theory; the other is how to apply these devices to the language of the speaker. My working assumption has been that nothing more than standard first-order quantification theory is available. Indeed, I was long convinced that many alternative approaches to semantics, employing, for example, modal logics, possible world semantics, or substitutional quantification, could not be accommodated in a theory that met the demands of Convention T. I now know this was hasty. Convention T does not settle as much as I thought, and more

possibilities for interesting theorizing are open than I had realized. The well-known virtues of first-order quantification theory still provide plenty of motivation, however, to see how much we can do with it. In the next three essays, collected under the head of application, I attempt the semantic taming of three related but recalcitrant idioms: quotation, indirect discourse, and mood operators.

*Essay 6* points out that no current theory of quotation is entirely satisfactory, and it proposes an explicitly demonstrative approach which makes quotation a special case of the demonstrative reference of words to other words in the verbal neighbourhood.

*Essay 7*, 'On Saying That', concentrates on one of the many kinds of sentence used to attribute attitudes; the paratactic solution suggested has obvious affinities with the treatment of quotation in *Essay 6*. In *Essay 3* there are hints (which I think could be developed) on how the analysis could be extended to belief sentences. If the strategy were to be pursued, it might serve to give a semantics (though not a logic) for the modalities, for counterfactuals, and further sentences about 'propositional' attitudes.

*Essay 8*, 'Moods and Performances', stresses the often neglected distinction between grammatical moods on the one hand and various sorts of illocutionary force on the other. Only the first is of concern to a theory of what words mean. Here a paratactic analysis of imperatives is suggested which is intended to accommodate our natural feeling that imperatives don't have a truth value while remaining within the resources of a theory of truth.

In the companion volume to this one, *Essays on Actions and Events*, I show how a theory of truth can be applied to a number of further problem cases: sentences about actions and other events, adverbial modification, and singular causal statements.

The third section of the present book is addressed to the question whether a theory of truth for a speaker can be verified without assuming too much of what it sets out to describe.

In 'Radical Interpretation', *Essay 9*, as in the rest of the essays, I follow Quine in supposing that even if we narrow attention to verbal behaviour that reveals when, and under what conditions, a speaker gives credence to a sentence, there is no direct way of sorting out the roles of belief and meaning in explaining that credence. Eliciting separate accounts of belief and meaning requires a theory that can bring to bear on the interpretation of each sentence and its

accompanying attitudes the contribution of further data. Only by studying the *pattern* of assents to sentences can we decide what is meant and what believed.

Depending on evidence which, without the aid of theory, makes no distinction between the contributions of belief and meaning to linguistic behaviour, requires a method for effecting the separation to a degree sufficient for communication. Devices to this end are described and defended in the present essays. But all of them, in one way or another, rely on the Principle of Charity.

The phrase and the basic idea come from Neil Wilson, 'Substances Without Substrata'. Quine puts it this way: '... assertions startlingly false on the face of them are likely to turn on hidden differences of language' (*Word and Object*, p. 59). Quine applies the principle primarily to the interpretation of the logical constants.

Because I find I cannot use Quine's notion of stimulus meaning as a basis for interpreting certain sentences, I apply the Principle of Charity across the board. So applied, it counsels us quite generally to prefer theories of interpretation that minimize disagreement. So I tended to put the matter in the early essays, wanting to stress the inevitability of the appeal to charity. But minimizing disagreement, or maximizing agreement, is a confused ideal. The aim of interpretation is not agreement but understanding. My point has always been that understanding can be secured only by interpreting in a way that makes for the right sort of agreement. The 'right sort', however, is no easier to specify than to say what constitutes a good reason for holding a particular belief.

The subtle pressures on the Principle of Charity begin to emerge in Essays 10 and 11. Yet here too there are only hints; in work now in progress I attempt to develop the subject in more detail.

*Essay 10*, 'Belief and the Basis of Meaning', insists on the symmetry of belief and meaning in the exploration of verbal behaviour. In one important respect it goes further. It develops a striking parallel between Bayesian theories of decision and theories of meaning, and gives reasons why the two theories should be considered mutually dependent. The hints dropped here, which give promise of a unified theory of speech and action, have been taken up in my Carus Lectures, and will be published presently.

The first two essays on radical interpretation stress the fact that understanding the words of a speaker requires knowing much about what he believes. *Essay 11*, 'Thought and Talk', attends to the

reciprocal dependence, and concludes, rather speculatively, that only a creature with a language can properly be said to have a full-fledged scheme of propositional attitudes.

*Essay 12*, 'Reply to Foster', as remarked above, recognizes that if a theory of truth is to suffice for interpretation, it must be more than true: its axioms and theorems must be natural laws. If an interpreter knew such a theory, he could use it to understand a speaker, but only if he knew that the theory's pronouncements were nomic.

The next four essays may be described as philosophical fall-out from the approach to truth and interpretation recommended here.

A theory of truth can be called a correspondence theory in the unassuming sense of *Essay 3*, but that sense does not encourage the thought that we understand what it would be like to compare sentences with what they are about, since the theory provides no entities with which to compare sentences. Along related lines, *Essay 13*, 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', scouts the intelligibility of claims that different languages or conceptual schemes 'divide up' or 'cope with' reality in importantly different ways. Our general method of interpretation forestalls the possibility of discovering that others have radically different intellectual equipment. But more important, it is argued that if we reject the idea of an uninterpreted source of evidence no room is left for a dualism of scheme and content. Without such a dualism we cannot make sense of conceptual relativism. This does not mean that we must give up the idea of an objective world independent of our knowledge of it. The argument against conceptual relativism shows rather that language is not a screen or filter through which our knowledge of the world must pass.

Giving up the dualism of scheme and content amounts to abandoning a theme central to empiricism in its main historical manifestations. But I do not think, as friends and critics have variously suggested, that my argument against empiricism makes me, or ought to make me, a pragmatist, a transcendental idealist, or an 'internal' realist. All these positions are forms of relativism that I find as hard to understand as the empiricisms I attack.

According to *Essay 13*, no sense can be made of the idea that the conceptual resources of different languages differ dramatically. The argument that makes for this conclusion makes equally for the conclusion that the general outlines of our view of the world are

correct; we individually and communally may go plenty wrong, but only on condition that in most large respects we are right. It follows that when we study what our language—any language—requires in the way of overall ontology, we are not just making a tour of our own picture of things: what we take there to be is pretty much what there is. This is the theme of *Essay 14*, 'The Method of Truth in Metaphysics'.

A theory of truth is tested by theorems that state the conditions under which sentences are true; these theorems say nothing about reference. *Essay 15*, 'Reality Without Reference', accordingly contends that how a theory of truth maps non-sentential expressions on to objects is a matter of indifference as long as the conditions of truth are not affected. The question what objects a particular sentence is about, like the questions what object a term refers to, or what objects a predicate is true of, has no answer.

In *Essay 15* I am with Quine in holding reference to be inscrutable. *Essay 16*, 'The Inscrutability of Reference', warns against taking inscrutability as a reason for trying somehow to relativize the reference and ontology of singular terms and predicates. For since nothing can reveal how a speaker's words have been mapped on to objects, there is nothing to relativize to; and interpretation being unaffected, there is no need to relativize.

No discussion of theories of meaning can fail to take account of the limits of application of such theories. The scope must be broad enough to provide an insight into how language can serve our endless purposes, but restricted enough to be amenable to serious systematization. *Essay 8* took a necessary step by distinguishing between grammatical mood, which the meanest theory must account for, and the force of utterances, which is beyond the reach of comparable regimentation. *Essay 17*, 'What Metaphors Mean', is mainly devoted to the thesis that we explain what words in metaphor do only by supposing they have the same meanings they do in non-figurative contexts. We lose our ability to account for metaphor, as well as rule out all hope of responsible theory, if we posit metaphorical meanings.

*Essay 18*, 'Communication and Convention', draws another boundary. It is always an open question how well the theory an interpreter brings to a linguistic encounter will cope. In practice an interpreter keeps the conversation going by adjusting his theory on the spot. The principles of such inventive accommodation are not

themselves reducible to theory, involving as they do nothing less than all our skills at theory construction.\*

The essays have been retouched in minor ways to reduce repetition, to eliminate unnecessary or confused passages, or to bring early more into line with later thoughts. These temperings have been limited to the trivial. Where my errors or lapses have earned attention I have let things stand, or marked the change with a footnote.

Many more people have helped me than I can possibly thank here, but I do especially want to mention Paul Grice, Gilbert Harman, Saul Kripke, David Lewis, Richard Rorty, Sir Peter Strawson, and Bruce Vermazen. Sue Larson and Akeel Bilgrami did indispensable work on the footnotes, bibliography, and index. Much more than that, they gave me philosophical advice and moral support. Sue Larson has taught me much about philosophy of language; her influence is especially strong in Essays 8 and 18.

In 1970 I gave the John Locke lectures at Oxford. The contents of those lectures turn up here (much modified) in Essays 2, 3, 6, 7, and 13. A further lecture on adverbial modification drew on material now printed in Essays 6–11 of *Essays on Actions and Events*.

An early influence on my thinking was Michael Dummett, who lectured on Frege and philosophy of language several times at Stanford University while I was there in the fifties. Our discussions took a public form in 1974 when we gave a joint seminar on truth while I was a visiting fellow at All Souls College.

Over the years John Wallace and I talked endlessly about the issues raised in this book. He early appreciated the power of Tarski's work on truth, and much that I have written reflects his insight and sympathetic criticism.

W. V. Quine was my teacher at a crucial stage in my life. He not only started me thinking about language, but he was the first to give me the idea that there is such a thing as being right, or at least wrong, in philosophy, and that it matters which. Without the inspiration of his writing, his patient tutelage, his friendly wit and his generous encouragement, this book would not be worse than it is. It would not be.

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