

DAVIDSON'S CRITICISM OF THE PROXIMAL THEORY OF MEANING

DIRK GREIMANN

Federal University of Santa Maria

Abstract

According to the proximal theory of meaning, which is to be found in Quine's early writings, meaning is determined completely by the correlation of sentences with sensory stimulations. Davidson tried to show that this theory is untenable because it leads to a radical form of skepticism. The present paper aims to show, first, that Davidson's criticism is not sound, and, second, that nonetheless the proximal theory is untenable because it has a very similar and equally unacceptable consequence: it implies that the truth-value of ordinary sentences like 'Snow is white' is completely determined by the properties of the speaker, not by the properties of the objects to which these sentences refer.

Quine famously argued that the semantic doctrine defended by Carnap that all theoretical sentences can be translated into observational ones is a "dogma of empiricism" that must be abandoned. Nevertheless, Quine adopted the general semantic approach of empiricism. In "Epistemology Naturalized," he writes:

Two cardinal tenets of empiricism remained unassailable, however, and so remain to this day. One is that whatever evidence there is for science is sensory evidence. The other ... is that all inculcation of meanings of words must rest ultimately on sensory evidence. (Quine 1969, p. 75.)

The point of the latter doctrine, which we may call "semantic empiricism," is that meaning is completely determined by sensory impressions or some similar kind of evidence.

In his article “Meaning, Truth and Evidence” (1990), Davidson tried to show that semantic empiricism is untenable because it allows for a radical kind of skepticism. His argument is that if meaning were determined completely by sensory impressions, the field linguist could correctly interpret the sentences of a speaker and at the same time attribute massive error to him. In order to overcome this difficulty, Davidson proposes to exchange Quine’s “proximal view” of meaning by his own “distal view.” According to the proximal view, meaning is determined by sensory impressions while, on the distal view, it is determined by the properties of the objects to which we refer.

In what follows, my aim is to show, first, that Davidson’s criticism is not sound because semantic empiricism does not imply skepticism and, second, that nonetheless semantic empiricism is untenable because it leads to a very similar problem which I shall call “semantic solipsism.” The latter is the view that the truth-value of ordinary sentences like ‘Snow is white’ is completely determined by the properties of the speaker, not by the properties of the objects to which the sentences refer. This view, which has first been criticized by Frege in his discussion of psychologistic semantics, is unacceptable because it undermines the possibility of successful communication in science.

The paper falls into three parts. In part 1, Quine’s empiricist conception of meaning is briefly recapitulated, and, in part 2, Davidson’s criticism is discussed. Finally, in part 3, my own criticism of Quine’s conception is presented.

1. Semantic Empiricism

Quine’s conception of linguistic meaning is conditioned in large part by three principles: naturalism, behaviorism and empiricism. In order to characterize his brand of semantic empiricism, we must briefly consider his naturalism and his behaviorism.

According to Quine’s naturalism, the semantic structure of language must be construed in such a way that it becomes an object open to study by the intersubjective methods of inquiry that are

characteristic of natural sciences. This view is opposed to the mentalistic conception of language, which is the claim that meanings are entities in the speaker's head that are to be studied through the medium of introspection.

In order to satisfy the naturalistic demand, Quine construes language as a "social art which we all acquire on the evidence solely of other people's overt behavior under publicly recognizable circumstances" (Quine 1969, p. 26). By emphasizing this social-art aspect of language, Quine rejects, in particular, what he calls the "myth of the museum," i.e., the mentalistic view that the semantic structure of language is constituted by the correlation of sentences with thoughts in the speaker's head.¹ According to this view, whose main representative is Frege, the meaning of a sentence is determined by which thought the speaker wishes to express by means of the sentence.

When, on the other hand, meaning is naturalized, it becomes a property of verbal behavior. The semantic structure of language is determined by the correlation of sentences with verbal behavior in publicly observable circumstances.² What are these circumstances? As Davidson notes, Quine is ambiguous with regard to this question. There are two different approaches to be found in his work, which Davidson calls the "distal" and the "proximal" theory of meaning. According to the distal theory, which Davidson himself endorses, meaning is constituted by the correlation of sentences with the objects and situations to which they refer.³ The meaning of a sentence is determined, on this view, by its objective truth-conditions, understood as the conditions objective reality must satisfy in order to make the sentence true. The sentence 'Snow is white', for instance, is made true by the objective circumstance that snow is white. The core-element of the proximal theory is the empiricist doctrine that meaning is determined by observation, i.e., the semantic structure of language is constituted by the correlation of sentences with observations that would refute or confirm them.

In his defense of scientific realism and especially of Tarski's theory of truth, Quine advocates the distal theory. In *Philosophy of Logic*, for instance, he writes:⁴

No sentence is true but reality makes it so. The sentence ‘Snow is white’ is true, as Tarski has taught us, if and only if real snow is really white. (Quine 1970, p. 10.)

However, in his explanation of language learning, Quine subscribes to the proximal view. In *The Roots of Reference*, for instance, he takes the following stance:

The meaning of a sentence lies in the observations that would support or refute it. To learn a language is to learn the meaning of its sentences, and hence to learn what observations to count as evidence for and against them. The evidence relation and the semantical relation of observation to theory are coextensive. (Quine 1974, p. 38.)

Semantic empiricism or, as Quine sometimes calls it, the “verification theory of meaning,” branches into a mentalistic and a behavioristic version. According to the mentalistic version, typically adopted by the older empiricists, observations are mental events occurring in the speaker’s mind. Quine, on the other hand, opts for a behavioristic conception of observation according to which observations are sensory stimuli, that is, physical events taking place at the speaker’s sensory receptors. This conception is motivated not only by Quine’s naturalism, but also by his behavioristic account of language learning.

His notion of stimulus-meaning, developed in *Word and Object*, may be considered as a behavioristic explication of the empiricist thesis that the meaning of a sentence lies in the observations that would support or refute it.⁵ That an observation *O* supports a given sentence *S*, means, according to this explication, that *O*, considered as an external stimulus, would prompt a speaker to assent to *S*. That the observation *O* refutes *S*, means, correspondingly, that *O* is a member of the negative stimulus-meaning of *S*. The class of observations prompting assent is called by Quine the positive stimulus-meaning of sentence *S*, and the class of observations prompting dissent its negative stimulus-meaning.

2. Davidson's Criticism

The proximal theory of meaning, as it is discussed by Davidson, is the behavioristic version of semantic empiricism. This version involves a certain externalization of meaning in the sense that it locates the constitution of meaning at the surface of the speaker's skin. The mentalistic version, in contrast, claims that meaning is constituted in the speaker's head.

Davidson's general objection against the proximal theory is that the externalization it involves does not go far enough. In his view, meaning is constituted by the correlation of sentences with items that are typically even more remote from the speaker, namely, by the objects and situations to which sentences refer. The label "distal theory of meaning" is supposed to indicate that meaning is constituted by these remote objects and situations. In order to interpret a speaker, we must hence look, according to Davidson, not at the sensory stimulations the speaker receives, but at the objects and events causing these stimulations (cf. Davidson 1990, p. 73).

Davidson's main argument against the proximal theory is that it leads to skepticism. His point of departure is Barry Stroud's worry, based on Putnam's brain-in-a-vat-scenario, that it might happen that the world is completely different from the way our sensory impacts lead us to think of it. Quine replied that this would not make any difference because all that our overall scientific theory really claims regarding the world is that it is somehow so structured as to assure the patterns of stimulation that our theory gives us to expect.⁶ The truth-values of the sentences affirmed by our theory would not be affected when it would turn out that we are brains in a vat.

Davidson, on the other hand, wants to show that this is mistaken. He argues as follows:

...let us imagine someone who, when a warthog trots by, has just the patterns of stimulations I have when there is a rabbit in view. Let us suppose the one-word sentence the warthog inspires him to assent to is 'Gavagai!' Going by stimulus meaning, I translate his 'Gavagai!' by my 'Lo, a rabbit' though I see only a warthog and no

rabbit when he says and believes (according to the proximal theory) that there is a rabbit. The supposition that leads to this conclusion is not absurd; simply a rearranged sensorium. Mere astigmatism will yield examples, deafness others; little green man and women from Mars who locate objects by sonar, like bats, present a more extreme case, and brains in vats controlled by mad scientists can provide any world you or they please. According to the proximal theory each of these speakers will be wrong to some degree about the world as conceived by a normal interpreter – the brain in a vat can be as wrong as Stroud feared. (Davidson 1990, p. 74.)

Davidson's argument seems to be that the proximal view opens up the possibility that we might interpret a speaker in such a way that (i) our interpretation is semantically correct and (ii) the majority of the sentences the speaker accepts turns out to be false on this interpretation. Such a speaker, in turn, might interpret us in such a way that his interpretation is semantically correct and that we are globally mistaken. Hence, the proximal theory raises doubt about our own beliefs. It is in this sense that the proximal theory leads to skepticism.

Davidson thinks that the crucial mistake underlying the proximal theory resides in the idea that "empirical knowledge requires an epistemological step between the world as we conceive it and our conception of it" (Davidson 1990, p. 74). From his distal point of view, there is no such gap to be bridged because the distal theory connects meaning directly with situations and events that make sentences true or false. If a speaker assents to 'Gavagai' if and only if a warthog trots by, then we must translate 'Gavagai!' as 'Lo, a warthog', no matter what the pattern of stimulations might be that the speaker receives when he is looking at a warthog.

The problem I see with this argument is that it rests on a confusion of the proximal and the distal view of the truth-conditions of sentences. Given the proximal theory, the truth-values of sentences are indifferent as to whether the stimulations the speakers receive are caused by the events taking place in objective reality or by a mad scientist in the brain-in-a-vat scenario. To show this, I must

briefly describe the proximal view of the relationship between language and world.

Let us call any relation between an expression and the corresponding elements of reality a "language-world relation." Examples are: the satisfaction of a predicate by objects; the denotation of an object by a singular term; the refutation of a sentence by an observation; the confirmation of a sentence by an observation. From the point of view of the distal theory, the fundamental language-world relations are satisfaction and denotation, and the truth-value of the sentence 'Snow is white' is fixed by the properties an object must have in order to be the denotation of 'snow' and in order to satisfy the predicate 'is white'.

From the point of view of the proximal theory, in contrast, the connection between language and world is constituted by stimulus-meaning, that is, by the correlation of sentences with patterns of sensory stimulations that prompt the speakers either to affirm or deny sentences. The basic language-world relations are refutation and confirmation and any other language-world relation such as denotation and satisfaction must be constituted by refutation and confirmation. The primary bearers of reference are what Quine calls observation-sentences like 'This is snow' and 'This is white'. These sentences refer to reality in a *holophrastic*, not in a compositional way, i.e., their connection with reality is constituted, not by the reference of their parts, but by their correlation as whole sentences with patterns of stimulations. Because of their holophrastic reference observation-sentences are ontologically neutral, i.e., the assertion of such a sentence does not commit the speaker to acknowledge entities of some sort or another.⁷

Now, according to the distal theory, the observation-sentence 'Lo, a rabbit' is true in a context C if and only if the object to which the speaker refers in C is a rabbit. According to the proximal theory, on the other hand, the sentence is true in context C if and only if the sensory events taking place at the speaker's sensory receptors in C belong to the positive stimulus-meaning of this sentence. Hence, the truth-maker of this sentence is not, as Davidson presupposes, the object of which the sentence speaks, but the pattern of stimulation triggering the speaker to assent to this sentence.

The relation of theoretical sentences to reality is, from the proximal point of view, an indirect one; it is mediated by the implication of observation-sentences. Thus, the reference of the theoretical sentence 'Neutrinos lack mass' is constituted by the reference of the observation-sentences it implies (together with other theoretical sentences). The truth-conditions of theoretical sentences are thus determined by the truth-conditions of the observation-sentences they imply.⁸

Words are, according to the proximal theory, syncategorematic expressions whose meanings "are abstractions from the truth-conditions of sentences that contain them."⁹ On this view, the relation of theoretical words like 'Neutrino' to reality is a doubly indirect relation: the reference of these words consists in the contribution they make to the reference of the theoretical sentences in which they occur, and the reference of these sentences consists in the reference of the observation sentences they imply. This conception of word meaning corresponds to the "cardinal tenet of empiricism" that all inculcation of meaning rests ultimately on sensory evidence.

In sum, the proximal theory holds that language is connected with reality by the following three language-world relations: (i) the direct holophrastic connection of observation sentences with patterns of sensory stimulations by means of their stimulus meaning; (ii) the indirect connection of theoretical sentences with patterns of sensory stimulations by means of the implication of observation sentences; (iii) the doubly indirect connection of words with patterns of sensory stimulations by means of the contribution they make to the fixation of the truth-conditions of theoretical sentences. In this way, all connections between language and world are generated by the correlation of sentences with patterns of sensory stimulations that the child has to learn in order to become a competent speaker.

As Quine himself has shown, the proximal theory implies that the language-world relations postulated by the distal theory belong to the realm of fiction. The reason is that these relations are not reflected in the correlation of sentences with patterns of sensory stimuli: we may permute the denotation of terms and the satisfac-

tion-conditions of predicates in a systematic way by means of so-called proxy-functions without affecting the correlation of sentences with patterns of sensory stimulations.¹⁰ As a consequence, questions of denotation and satisfactions are not questions of a matter of fact. This is the core of Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of reference.¹¹

The proximal theory implies, then, that the truth of a theory, considered as a set of sentences, depends exclusively on our sensory stimulations. The truth-maker of the sentence 'Snow is white' is not real snow's being really white, as the distal theory has it, but the pattern of stimulations we receive that belongs to its positive stimulus-meaning. Hence, Quine is right when he maintains:

Our overall scientific theory demands of the world only that it be so structured as to assure the sequences of stimulation that our theory gives us to expect. More concrete demands are empty, what with the freedom of proxy functions. (Quine 1981a, p. 22.)

The conclusion I draw is that Davidson's criticism of Quine rests on a conflation of the proximal and the distal theory of reference and truth-making. When a speaker assents to 'Lo, a rabbit' in a context where a warthog trots by, because he receives a pattern of stimulation belonging to the positive stimulus-meaning of 'Lo, a warthog', the sentence 'Lo, a rabbit' is true in this context. The proximal theory does not lead to skepticism, because, even in the brain-in-a-vat-scenario, where the world is completely different from the way the sensory stimulations of the speaker leads him to think of it, the sentences affirmed by the speaker are true in this context.

3. The Real Problem

In my view, the real problem behind the proximal theory of meaning is that it implies a kind of solipsism that is illustrated by Frege's criticism of the psychologistic conception of language according to which all sentences refer to subjective ideas. On this conception, the sentence 'The Moon revolves around the Earth', for instance, does not refer to the Moon, considered as a self-subsisting object,

but to the mental representation of the Moon in the speaker's consciousness. The rationale behind this conception is the epistemic assumption that our cognitive access is limited to the ideas in our minds.

In the preface to the first volume of *Basic Laws*, Frege criticizes the psychologistic approach on the ground that it leads to the following kind of solipsism:

Thus everything leads into idealism and with perfect logical consistency into solipsism. If everyone designated something different by the name 'Moon', namely, one of his ideas, ... , then admittedly the psychological way of looking at things would be justified; but a dispute about the properties of the Moon would be pointless: one person could quite well assert of his Moon the opposite of what another person, with equal right, said of his. If we could grasp nothing but what is in ourselves, then a [genuine] conflict of opinions, a reciprocity of understanding, would be impossible, since there would be no common ground, and no idea in the psychological sense can be such a ground. (Frege 1997, p. 206.)

Solipsism, in this context, is the view that the truth-value of a given sentence depends solely on the properties of the speaker. The psychologistic conception of meaning implies this kind of solipsism because, according to it, the truth-value of a common sentence like 'The Moon revolves around the Earth' does not depend on the properties of the Moon, considered as an external object, but only of the properties of the speaker's mind. For, on this conception, the expression 'the Moon' is an indexical term like 'I' and 'now' whose reference is fixed by the context. If a speaker *A* utters 'The Moon revolves around the Earth', the term 'the Moon' refers to the representation of the moon in *A*'s consciousness, and if a speaker *B* utters the same sentence, this term refers to the representation of the moon in *B*'s consciousness. As a consequence, a dispute about the properties of the Moon between *A* and *B* would be pointless, because *A* could truly assert of his Moon the opposite of what *B* truly asserts of his. The reason is that, on the psychologistic approach, the truth-conditions of the sentence 'The Moon revolves around

the Earth' vary from speaker to speaker, in exactly the same sense as the truth-conditions of 'I am hungry' vary from speaker to speaker. And just as the truth-value of 'I am hungry' depends entirely on the properties of the speaker, so too the truth-value of 'The Moon revolves around the Earth' does. If A utters 'The Moon revolves around the Earth' truly, his utterance is made true by the properties of A, and if B truly utters the negation, 'The Moon does not revolve around the Earth', this utterance is made true by the properties of B.

Quine's proximal theory leads to the same kind of solipsism because it implies that the truth of sentences depends exclusively on the speakers properties. To be sure, it does not imply that two speakers cannot share a common language because the meanings of sentences vary from speaker to speaker. For, we can construe the patterns of stimulations constituting meaning as types, not as tokens. The problem lies rather in the implication that the truth-makers of sentences vary from speaker to speaker. This is a consequence of the fact that, according to the proximal view, an observation sentence is true in a given context of utterance if and only if the pattern of stimuli that *the speaker* receives belongs to the positive stimulus meaning of that sentence. One speaker could quite well assert of his stimulations the opposite of what another speaker asserts with equal right of his stimulations. What is missing is a "common ground," as Frege calls it, i.e. a common reality fixing the truth-values of utterances by different speakers.

The conclusion I draw is that the proximal theory undermines the possibility of scientific communication and hence of science itself. It offends against the essential success-condition of this type of discourse that it is possible that one speaker denies what another speaker affirms. For this reason, the proximal theory must be rejected.

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Dirk Greimann
Departamento de Filosofia
Campus Universitário, Faixa de Camobi, Km 9
97119-900 Santa Maria, RS, BRAZIL
greimann@dirk-greimann.de

Resumo

Segundo a teoria proximal do significado, que pode ser encontrada nos primeiros escritos de Quine, o significado é completamente determinado pela correlação de sentenças com estimulações sensoriais. Davidson tentou mostrar que essa teoria é insustentável porque conduz a uma forma radical de ceticismo. O presente artigo objetiva mostrar, primeiro, que a crítica de Davidson não é legítima e, segundo, que a teoria proximal é, não obstante, insustentável porque tem uma consequência muito similar e igualmente inaceitável: implica que o valor de verdade de sentenças ordinárias como 'a neve é branca' é completamente determinado pelas propriedades do falante, não pelas propriedades dos objetos a que essas sentenças se referem.

Palavras-chave

Davidson, Quine, teoria proximal, teoria distal, ceticismo, condições de verdade.

Notes

¹ Cf. Quine 1969, p. 27. For a detailed reconstruction of Quine's criticism of mentalistic semantics, see Greimann 1996 and Greimann 2000.

² See, for instance, Quine 1969, pp. 26–7) and Quine 1987, p. 5.

³ Cf. Davidson 1990, pp. 72ff.

⁴ See also Quine 1990, p. 80.

⁵ Cf. Quine 1960, chap. 2.

⁶ Cf. Quine 1981b, p. 474.

⁷ For this reason it is possible to vary a theory's ontology without affecting

its empirical content. See Quine 1981a, p. 22.

⁸ Cf. Quine 1969, pp. 75, 79–81 and Quine 1973, p. 38.

⁹ Quine 1981a, p. 69.

¹⁰ Cf. Quine 1981a, p. 19.

¹¹ Cf. Quine 1969, pp. 38, 47.