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On Contemporary Philosophy and Social Sciences

The Semantic Significance of What is Said

Emma Borg

Abstract

It is often held that a correct semantic theory should assign a semantic content, p, to a given sentence, s, just in case a speaker who utters s says that p – thus 'what is said' is taken to be a semantically significant notion. This paper explores what exactly such a claim amounts to and offers five versions of the relationship between a semantic theory and judgements of what is said. The first three of these versions embody the central claim of semantic significance; however, I argue that none of these versions are feasible. Thus, contrary to the initial proposal, I claim that 'what is said' is not a semantically significant notion. Assignments of semantic content do not turn on evaluations of what a speaker uttering a sentence says.

The question of how to correctly analyse sentences of *oratio obliqua* (indirect reported speech) has received a good deal of attention within the confines of philosophy of language and one reason for this, we might think, is that such sentences may prove interesting not only in their own right, but also because of the role they play in informing us about the meaning of the sentences they report. If a speaker, U, who utters a sentence, s, can be correctly reported by an act of *oratio obliqua* of the form 'U said that p' (where 'p' supplies the content sentence of the indirect speech act), then it seems that we have learnt something about the meaning of s. Now, exactly how we spell out this thought is open to question (as we will see in §1), but the intuitive idea which it embodies is that there is a move to be made *from* reports of what is said *to* the contents of a correct semantic theory. Such a stance, which I label the 'standard view', has a distinguished history, but it is a position which I wish to reject in this paper. I will argue that there is *no* semantically privileged notion of 'what is said', and thus no considerations concerning *oratio obliqua* should constrain or otherwise affect our semantic theorising. In no case of indirect speech reporting is it possible to move from the acceptability of 'U said that p' to a claim that p provides the correct semantic analysis of the original sentence s.

The structure of the paper is as follows: in §1 I will set out five distinct ways in which the relationship between semantic theories and indirect speech reports might be construed. The initial three positions, (a-c), embody the key

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Representing What Others Say

Cara Spencer

Abstract

The semantics of belief reports has recently received a great deal of attention.[1] Speech reports have largely been left behind in this discussion. Here I extend a familiar recent account of attitude reports, the Russellian theory, to the special case of speech reports. I then consider how it compares to Davidson's paratactic theory with respect to a few examples that raise special problems about speech reports. Neither theory accounts for everything we want to say about these cases. I suggest that the problem lies in an assumption common to both theories, that in reporting what others say, we aim to represent what was said exactly as the original speaker represented it, in so far as this is possible.

I.

Davidson's paratactic theory is offered as a response to a familiar problem about the logical form of speech and attitude ascription sentences. Since 'Mark Twain' and 'Samuel L. Clemens' are co-referring singular terms, we would expect that substitution of one for the other in a sentence would not change what the sentence says. Yet the speech reports in (1) and (2) seem to say different things, and as such seem like they can differ in truth value.

(1) Mary said that Mark Twain wrote *The Innocents Abroad*.
(2) Mary said that Samuel L. Clemens wrote *The Innocents Abroad*.

Davidson's response to the problem is the syntactically and semantically anomalous suggestion that the complementizer 'that' functions as a demonstrative that refers to an utterance. For Davidson, an indirect speech report (i.e., one of the form 'A says that s') says that the utterance to which the demonstrative 'that' refers stands in a certain relation to some utterance of the subject of the speech report. Although Davidson does not put it in precisely this way, his discussion clearly indicates the following reflexive semantics for speech reports:

1 See David Braun (1998); Mark Crimmins (1992); Francois Recanati (1993); Mark Richard (1990); Nathan Salmon (1986); Jennifer Saul (1997); and Scott Soames (1987), (1995). This brief list is far from exhaustive.

The Things People Say

Jonathan Sutton

Abstract

It appears that the objects of belief and the objects of assertion are, often, one and the same. The objects of assertion must be communicable – if an assertion leads to successful communication, the audience grasps what the speaker said. There are good reasons for thinking that beliefs are relations to very fine-grained contents, however, which appear to be unsuitable for reliable transmission from speaker to audience. I consider two accounts of the apparent intersection of the objects of belief and the objects of assertion, and find them unable to embrace both of these claims. I defend the view that beliefs have multiple, truth-conditionally equivalent contents on the grounds that it is able to reconcile the apparently conflicting claims.

Introduction

You can believe what I say, and you can say – or, more idiomatically, state – what I believe. I will say some things relating to the objects of belief and assertion in this article, and you can believe them; I do. For example, I will say that beliefs have multiple truth-conditionally equivalent contents, and I hope that you will believe what I say. I further hope that you will tell others what I believe about these matters. You might even believe everything that I say about belief and assertion, although I will not have the space to state everything that I believe about these issues.

The statements that I made in the preceding paragraph suggest that the objects of belief (and other propositional attitudes) and the objects of assertion (and similar speech acts) *intersect.* At least some of the things that a thinker believes can be asserted by himself and others. At least some of the things that a speaker asserts (or questions, or denies) can be believed by himself and others. I will explore three ways in which we might try to explain appearances here. Each way will be grounded, naturally, in views about the nature of the objects of belief and assertion. I will start by examining a simple, natural account of the objects of belief and assertion and their intersection. Most philosophers nowadays will reject the simple account, and I am among their number. Having rejected the simple account, I will explore an account that coheres much better with views about the objects of *belief*

Reported Speech and the Epistemology of Testimony

Sanford C. Goldberg

Abstract

*Speech reports of the form '*A *said that* p*' are sometimes used by a speaker* S *as a reason in support of* S*'s own claim to know that* p *– in particular, when* S*'s claim to know is made on the basis of* A*'s testimony. In this paper I appeal to intuitions regarding the epistemology of testimony to argue that such 'testimonial' uses of speech reports ought to be ascribed their strict* de dicto *truth conditions. This result is then used as the basis for the claim that, no matter how they are used, all speech reports of this form ought to be ascribed their strict* de dicto *truth conditions. I conclude by offering a characterization of the content of the notions of* saying *and* what is said*, and by making some programmatic remarks regarding the role of these notions in semantic theory.*

1. Introduction

There are various uses for speech-reporting sentences of the form '*A* said that *p*'. Suppose that someone wants to know how to evaluate a speech act *A* made on a particular utterance-occasion; in this context, a sentence of the form '*A* said that *p*' could be used to provide the semantic content of *A*'s speech act. But by no means is this the only use of speech reports of this form. Suppose *A*, a sententious and long-winded speaker, lectures for some time about the evils of lying. In this context, reporter *S* might then use '*A* said that lying is wrong', not to characterize the semantic content of any particular speech act *A* made in the course of her lecture, but rather to summarize that lecture. Or (to take another example) suppose that *A*, a police chief in charge of a murder investigation, is asked whether Jones has been charged with the murder, and replies by uttering 'No one has been charged.' Under such circumstances, reporter *S* might use '*A* said that Jones has not been charged with the murder,' not to characterize the semantic content of *A*'s utterance, but rather to identify the relevant implicature of *A*'s speech act.

In fact, cursory reflection on the uses of speech reports would support two claims. First, there are many distinct uses for speech reports of the form '*A* said that *p*', corresponding to the many distinct conversational aims one might have in making such a report (see e.g. Cappelen and Lepore 1997).

Reports and Imagination

Eros Corazza

Abstract

The following thesis will be discussed and defended:

An attitude ascription is an empathetic exercise resting on our, more general, imaginative faculty. Sentences of natural language are the best medium we have to classify someone's mental life. The sentence used to classify one's mental state is the one the reporter would use to express the attributee's mental state if the reporter were in the attributee's situation. A report of the form "A believes/desires/wishes/… that p *" captures the attributee's (A) mental life inasmuch as it conveys the sentence the reporter would use to express her mental state if the latter were in A's situation.*

My paper can be viewed as a long footnote to the following passage from Quine's *Word and Object*:

> [I]n indirect quotation we project ourselves into what, from his remarks and other indications, we *imagine* the speaker's state of mind to have been, and then we say what, *in our language*, is natural and *relevant for us* in the state thus feigned. An indirect quotation can usually expect to rate only as better or worse, more or less faithful, and we cannot even hope for a strict standard of more and less; what is involved is evaluation, relative to special purposes, of an essentially dramatic act. Correspondingly for other propositional attitudes, for all of one's own imagined verbal response to an imagined situation.
>
> Casting our real selves thus in unreal roles, we do not generally know how much reality to hold constant. Quandaries arise. But despite them we find ourselves attributing beliefs, wishes and strivings even to creatures lacking the power of speech, such is our dramatic virtuosity. *We project ourselves* even into what from his behavior we imagine a mouse's state of mind to have been, dramatize it as a belief, wish, or striving, verbalized as seems relevant and natural to us in the state thus feigned. (Quine 1960: 219, italics mine)

The main idea behind this view can be tracked back to Aristotle:

> The people we pity are: those whom we know, if only they are not very closely related to us – in that case *we feel about them as if we*

On Representing Content

David Hunter

Abstract

I consider whether the content of a speech act is best represented by a set of possible worlds or by an ordered set containing the individual and properties the speech act is about. I argue that there is nothing in such contents that an ordered set can represent that a set of worlds cannot. In particular, both can be used to capture what is distinctive about singular propositions. But a set of worlds better represents content in cases where the content concerns individuals that no longer exist. It is also better at representing how content can be expressed in different ways, and how assertion relates to the pursuit of truth. Finally, representing content by a set of worlds allows for a clearer view of the puzzle about logical omniscience, even though it is often taken to founder on that puzzle.

Suppose Jones were to say something in assertively uttering (1).

(1) Tony Blair is a proud father.

Jones said things to be a certain way. A natural thought is that to report what Jones said one need only report how he said things to be: how things would be if things were as he said them to be. This natural thought supports a proposal about how we might represent what he said. Putting it picturesquely, we could represent what Jones said by a set of possible worlds: those where things are as he said them to be. I am inclined to think that this natural thought and the proposal it supports are right.[1]

But both are now almost universally rejected. All sides (or almost all) agree that whatever we use to represent what Jones said must determine that set of possible worlds. But most contend that this is not enough. There is, they claim, more to represent in what Jones said than is represented, or representable, by a set of possible worlds. According to one view, what Jones said can be better represented by an ordered set containing Tony Blair and the prop-

1 This proposal is familiar from the work of Robert Stalnaker. See the papers collected in (Stalnaker 1999). But it is also found, though less picturesquely, in Charles Travis' work, especially (Travis 2000). What I say here, and especially in section 5, owes an important debt to their work.

Conceptual Realism and Interpretation

Max A. Freund

Abstract

Conceptual realism (a logico-philosophical semantic theory) has introduced a logical distinction between the cognitive structure of an assertion and its truth-conditions. We shall argue that the cognitive structure is part of the meaning of an assertion and that, consequently, should be taken into account when interpreting a natural language. We shall also explore this topic in relation to the problem of radical interpretation. The distinction will be made evident by first formulating a logical system (having conceptual realism as its philosophical background) and then exhibiting it in the formal system. This will be preceded by a description of the main philosophical features of conceptual realism.

An interpretation for a natural language is a theory that should provide, in any given situation and for every possible expression of the language, a meaning to that expression in that situation. As remarked by several authors, the theory must fulfill further conditions. It might be required, for instance, that the theory be sufficiently enough for semantic mastery of the language or that it should satisfy compositionality[1]. It might also be demanded that the adequacy of the theory be ascertained by standards set by a theory of radical interpretation, that is, by a theory determining how interpretation should be carried out under very restrictive epistemic conditions. They are conditions under which the (radical) interpreter would not have access to informants knowing his language or to the informants' linguistic intuitions concerning their native tongue. A theory for this situation should specify, among other things, the quality or quantity of the evidence a radical interpreter must take into account to construct an interpretation of the totally alien tongue. Indeed, there are approaches that limit these data to the informants' observable behaviour only. Since there are convincing arguments for not adopting this position[2] and because of the philosophical standpoint of the present article, we shall not here endorse that restrictive view on the evidence.

1 See, for example, Forster (1976).

2 See Chomsky (2000, chapter 3); and J. Fodor and E. Lepore (1992, chapter 3).

Content Partialism and Davidson's Dilemma

Corey Washington

Abstract

Hartry Field, Jerry Fodor and others differ with Donald Davidson over the question of how a theory of content should be structured. Field and Fodor maintain that a theory should begin by following the compositional structure of a sentence in reducing the semantic properties of complex expressions to the semantic properties of their simplest parts and complete the job by reducing the semantic properties of the parts to non-semantic ones. Davidson describes this approach as the 'Building-Block method' and maintains that it cannot possibly succeed. He holds that a theory of content should 'give up reference' by treating the semantic properties of basic expressions as a purely technical devices with no direct relation to non-semantic phenomenon. In this essay, I examine what I call "Davidson's Dilemma", the conflict between the apparent soundness the arguments for the view that a theory must treat reference as a point where linguistic and non-linguistic reality meet and the equally apparent soundness his argument that reference cannot possibly play this role. I propose a resolution to the dilemma that grants the validity of Davidson's arguments against the building-block theories but is, I believe, more palatable to mainstream semanticists than Davidson's solution. This solution, which I call 'content partialism' treats the reference of terms as regularities across propositional contents. I show how content partialism is consistent with a Kripkean theory of reference fixing, the touchstone of those who advocate building-block theories.

> There is no reason why a semantical theory should assign information content independently to each expression in a symbol system. It will do if contents are assigned only to the atomic expressions, the semantics for molecular symbols being built up recursively by the sorts of techniques that are familiar from the construction of truth definitions. In what follows, I will in fact assume that the problem of naturalizing representation reduces to the problem of naturalizing it for atomic symbols.
>
> Jerry Fodor ("A Theory of Content I")

> If we could give the desired analysis or reduction of the concept of reference, then all would, I suppose, be clear sailing. Having explained directly the semantic features of proper names and simple predicates, we could go on to explain the reference of complex sin-

Vagueness, Indirect Speech Reports, and the World

Steven Gross

Abstract

Can all truths be stated in precise language? Not if true indirect speech reports of assertions entered using vague language must themselves use vague language. Sententialism – the view that an indirect speech report is true if and only if the report's complement clause "same-says" the sentence the original speaker uttered – provides two ways of resisting this claim: first, by allowing that precise language can "same-say" vague language; second, by implying that expressions occurring in an indirect speech report's complement clause are not used. *I reject the first line of resistance, but argue that the second is successful if one accepts sententialism.*

I. Introduction

Vagueness is a pervasive feature of natural language. This is not surprising, given our sensory and cognitive endowments and limitations: vague expressions are easier to learn and apply than precise replacements would be, and bestow a beneficial flexibility. So, perhaps we shouldn't expect or desire to eliminate vagueness from natural language generally. Still, it might be thought that at least in principle all truths can be stated in precise language.

Why might one think this? One reason might be an antecedent commitment to the supervenience of the vague on the precise.[1] But does it follow *generally*, from the supervenience of truths stated using X-expressions on truths stated using Y-language, that the former could be stated using only Y-language? It would be very controversial to claim on the basis merely of the relevant supervenience claim, for example, that all truths stated using non-physical vocabulary can be stated using physical vocabulary. Indeed, supervenience relations are of interest precisely because they promise naturalistic acceptability without *reduction*. It has been argued that this promise is not fulfilled, that supervenience of the relevant variety entails reduction.[2] But the

1 Compare Timothy Williamson (1994: 108): "… vague properties *supervene* on precise ones. A tempting conclusion to draw, but not a necessary one, is that the world can be completely described without resort to vague language."

2 See Jaegwon Kim (1989: 31-47).

Epistemological Remarks Concerning the Concepts "Theory" and "Theoretical Concepts"

Hans Lenk

Abstract

Current interpretations of the concept of theory by philosophers of science of different orientations are sketched out, in particular the traditional statement view (theories as systems of statements) and the formal axiomatic interpretation (theories as calculi) as well as the historical or historicist interpretation of theories as series of successive research programs or paradigms etc. (theory dynamics). In addition, the model-theoretical non-statement view (the so-called structuralist interpretation) of theories is roughly delineated and discussed as regards the status and interpretation of theoretical (T-theoretical) concepts. Finally, technological and action-theoretical approaches defining the model-theoretic view are presented as particularly apt for a methodology of technology.

A number of recommendations are developed from this, particularly the idea of satisficing in construction theory and the methodological idea of optimum fit instead of approximation to truth.

The interplay between action, experiment and gaining knowledge is highlighted from a methodological and schema-interpretationist perspective. This approach seems to be conducive to a methodology and epistemology of engineering sciences, in particular construction theory and design theory.

Introduction

Let me start with some rather ironic aphorisms: "A theory is nothing but the skin of truth – propped and stuffed" (Henry Ward Beecher). (We may infer from this "that theory has something to do with truth and should be related to practical applications" – as stated in the second bon-mot): "Theory should never forget that it is nothing but applied practice" – that is the late Gabriel Laub's rather pointed ironic version of the proverbial insight that nothing would be more practical than a good theory. Or does A. J. Carter's sarcastic remark apply:truth would just be a conjecture with academic education or qualification?

In some sense these aphoristic insights make sense and all of them lead to different conceptions of theories.

Social Science and (Null) Hypothesis Testing: Some Ontological Issues

Steven Miller and Marcel Fredericks

There appears to be a continuing interest in the applicability of the so-called null hypothesis testing issue to a variety of concerns in the philosophy of social science. Thus, Douglass (2000) has recently argued that statistical testing (NHST) is a form of "inductive risk" whereby non-epistemic values do enter into interpretations of scientific models. For example, in the testing of dioxin levels on alleged cancer rates, the values guiding the choice of levels of statistical significance in how model generated data are eventually interpreted become crucial. As Douglas (2000: 567) indicates in this regard, the setting of standards of statistical significance must take into consideration the balancing of false negatives and false positives in terms of the policy consequences of such decisions.While the issue of what values (epistemic or non-epistemic) may mitigate "inductive risk" is specifically central to discussions of NHST, we wish to generalize the idea of inductive risk to an examination of how such risk may figure into the evaluation of theories, both in the natural and social sciences. What we have in mind is not to argue for the desirability of critical or "severe tests" (Mayo, 1997, 1996, 1991) based on error statistics – we take this as a given – but rather that the application of NHST as a way of providing for severe tests for theory assessment presents additional difficulties. These difficulties lie in the epistemological neglect of the implications of the fuller NHST model, one that must take into consideration the associated ideas of "power" and others in relation to the notion of so called Type II error. Our argument is two fold: (1) that the appropriateness of the NHST model for theory assessment must, especially, take the "power" dimension *explicitly* into consideration but, paradoxically, doing so undermines the possibility of meaningfully addressing hypotheses from both "strong" and "weak" theories.

We need to point out that our concern is not centered around the epistemological adequacy of the NHST model itself, which has been reviewed elsewhere (e.g., Cohen, 1994), but how it plays out in what kinds of "ontological commitments" *remain* given the NHST assumptions. Our concern, then, is what can be "said" about a theory (whether "strong" or "weak") once a more complete view of NHST is itself taken as a background theory. In doing this, the intent is not to enter into either the thicket of "semantical"

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