

**Handout on:**

**Deflationism, Meaning and Truth-Conditions**

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- I Brief characterization of deflationism and the problem we are faced, metaphysical version of the DA
- II Three possible deflationist objections to the argument and rebuttal
- III A Deflationary reading of the DA
- (IV Epistemic version of the DA)
- V Conclusion

## I

## Characterization of the Problem(s)

- **Truth-Condition Theory of Meaning:** Meaning of a sentence is (at least partly) constituted by its truth conditions. (The meaning of the sentence “Snow is white” is determined by the conditions under which it is said to be true)
- **Deflationism:** Truth is only a logical device. That means it is *nothing that is attributed to a sentence or its meaning*. Saying from a sentence it is true is not a statement *about* the sentence or its contents - it adds nothing to it.
- **Incompatibility Claim:** Deflationism is incompatible with a truth-condition theory of meaning for at least two reasons:
  - Since truth in the deflationist’s conception is neither an attribute of the sentence nor its meaning it can’t play any explanatory role for the explanation of meaning as it is demanded by a truth-condition theory.
  - Some deflationists define: “S is true” means just S. So truth is here definiendum and the meaning of S is here the definiens. But in the truth-condition theory, the meaning of S is definiendum and truth or truth-conditions are taken as definiendum. This together is circular.
- $\Rightarrow$  The deflationist needs an alternative theory of meaning, since the truth-condition theory of meaning is not available to her (it’s incompatible). This theory must explain meaning without any appeal to truth-conditions because otherwise a truth-condition theory of meaning would be immediately accessible (which is incompatible).
- **Determination Argument (DA):** Since a sentence’s meaning + worldly fact together determine the sentence’s *truth-value*, meaning must at least in part be a *truth-condition*. (Meaning must involve truth-conditions/Meaning is a condition of truth).
- $\Rightarrow$  If the deflationist can’t define meaning without truth-conditions and if she can’t have truth-conditions because of the incompatibility claim, she can’t have a definition of meaning at all.

## Metaphysical version of DA (Lewis):

- P1 (Det) A sentence’s meaning taken together with a possible world determines the sentence’s truth-value at that world.
- K1 (2) A sentence-meaning is at least a function from possible worlds to truth-values.  
[From (Det)]
- P2 (3) Such a function is a truth-condition. [As conceived in intensional logic] (To determine the truth-value of a sentence given a possible world we need that function. So the function is a condition of truth)
- K2 (4) A sentence-meaning is at least a truth-condition.

## II

If the deflationists wants to hold her theory she must refute DA! To do so she can reject either one or both of its two premises, or else reject one or both of its inferences.

### Deflationist objections against the DA

#### Objection 1 (against (Det))

- Two possible interpretations of (Det):
  - (standard reading) Whether a sentence is true or false is a matter of what the sentence says as well as of how things are in the world
  - (ambitious reading) (Det) identifies a crucial ingredient in the mix (of meaning and fact) which constitutes the sentence's substantive property of *being true*. In this way truth would be a composite property (whose components are meaning and fact) of a sentence.
- But for the deflationist truth is no such property! So if she assumes the ambitious reading she could reject (Det).
- **Reply:** Ambitious reading is otiose (without any purpose). The Determination Argument itself does not require that meaning and fact be *components* or constituents of truth in any sense.
- My answer: Talking about a sentence's truth-value does already involve an understanding of truth as some kind of property of that sentence. So the deflationist can insist on the ambitious reading and is therefore on the safe side.

#### Objection 2 (against (Det))

- (Det) could be just rewritten as follows:
 

(Det\*) A sentence's meaning taken together with a possible world determines *whether the sentence is true at that world*.
- We can instantiate this as follows:
 

(Det-s) The meaning of "Snow is white" taken together with a possible world determines whether "Snow is white" is true at that world.
- But with our deflationist Equivalence-Scheme ("Snow is white" is true iff snow is white) we can substitute as follows:
 

(Det-s') The meaning of "Snow is white" taken together with a possible world determines whether snow is white at that world.

- This seems to be false, since we already know, given a world, if snow is white at that world. For this task we don't need to know the meaning of "Snow is white". So meaning has here no constitutional role in determining whether snow is white at some world.
- **Reply:** (Det-s') is not false but rather trivially or degenerately true. If we already know that snow is white at a given world then we also know that snow is white at that world given any additional information like that "Snow is white" means snow is white.
- My answer: This is not an argument *against* the deflationist's argument but rather an alternative interpretation of (Det-s').

### Objection 3 (against the step from (Det) to (2))

- Given the reply to objection 2, truth-value is already determined by fact alone.
- If the sentence's meaning is not involved in the work of determination, then it is a mistake to conclude (2). Since meaning does no job it could be anything here and must not be a function from possible worlds to truth-values.
- determining the truth-value of "Snow is white" in the deflationist understanding is nothing more than to determine if snow is white in the given world which seems to be already done given the world.
- truth-value is already determined given the world so truth-value is already defined given a world and a bread.
- **Reply:** Meaning tells us *what* worldly condition is *relevant* to a sentence's truth. So meaning still does work. It is the worldly condition that snow is white and not that chickens can fly which determines the truth value of "Snow is white". Furthermore, the authors argue that if the meaning of "Snow is white" changes to the fact that grass is black then even if snow is still white "Snow is white" would now be false and the equivalence schema would have then a false instance. So the determinist must accept that the truth-value of a sentence depends on its meaning and meaning does a job for determination.
- My answer (not take this too serious): The right side of the schema takes the meaning of the left side sentence. And it is a convention of object-language to denote by the unquoted sentence its meaning. So if the meaning of the left side sentence "Snow is white" is now consequently updated to the fact that chickens can fly, then if we talk now about the facts that snow is white and that chickens can fly we talk about the same facts now. But this seems wrong. So we must conclude that the authors are not allowed to do such strange things like changing meanings arbitrarily. But of course there is some relation between the sentence "snow is white is true" and its meaning which is referred to by saying snow is white and this relation must be taken and be explained primarily by the deflationist.

- Furthermore, the authors still talk a lot about the truth-values *of* sentences which seems to me confusing from a deflationist point of view.

### III

#### Objection 4

- The conclusion of the Determination Argument states that meaning is somehow a truth condition. But this does not obviously implicate that we have all the truth-conditions that enable a truth-condition theory of meaning (which allows to define all sentence's meaning). So if it doesn't follow that the DA enables a truth-condition theory of meaning and if we can explain the meaning of sentences without the need for truth-conditions, accepting the DA is consistent with a deflationist theory of truth.
- The trick of the Determination Argument is to move to a functional characterization of meaning: a sentence's meaning is presented as (at least) a function from possible worlds to truth-values. This is what enables us to identify a 'job' for meaning to perform which can allegedly be performed by its truth-conditions.
- Furthermore the deflationist can argue that this functional characterization amounts to very little: To say a sentence's meaning is a 'function from possible worlds to truth-values' is just to say that, given a sentence's meaning, we are in a position to set up a mapping from possible worlds to truth-values for that sentence. But there is no intensional basis for the various pairings of possible worlds with truth-values (in contrast to the mathematical function  $x \cdot 2$  for example). This functional role doesn't enable us to understand how "Snow is white" gets its meaning in the first (why the function is related to the sentence).
- $\Rightarrow$  Since, in this sense, the Determination Argument is insufficient for an *explanation* of meaning it is not able to establish the full-blooded truth-conditional view of meaning. (So the DA can't provide us with the kind of truth-conditions we need for a 'full-blooded' truth-condition theory of meaning).  
(It seems to me that also the full-blooded truth-condition theory of meaning wouldn't have a satisfying explanation of the sentences's meaning without explaining why the truth-conditions of sentences are how they are. So in this point of view we must criticize the truth-condition theory anyway. So if the truth-conditions are taken in the 'weaker' or in the 'stronger' sense, this argument doesn't prevent the deflationist from the DA argument)
- **Reply:**
- A truth-condition theorist, it seems, should accept the burden of showing truth-conditions to play any explanatory role in her account. Furthermore, if the truth-theorist wants to threat deflationism she must show that the DA itself supports this explanation.

- This is done by pointing out, that DA itself highlights the an insistent explanandum: the undeniable fact that the meaning of a sentence partially determines the sentence's truth-value. If truth-conditions played no role in explaining the meanings of sentences, then it would become a mystery why meanings should play the role they play in determining truth-values (of course we need another theory. But this is no argument *against* deflationism at all if the deflationism comes up with this theory).

## V - Conclusion

- In both versions, the metaphysical and the epistemological, the Determination Argument seems to indicate that capturing crucial features of meaning invokes the notion of a truth condition.  
This makes it at least legitimate to demand from the deflationist an explicit, alternative definition of meaning and its defense against the charge that non-truth-related fetures could not suffice for knowledge of truth-value (even given knowledge of fact).
- Alternatively the discussion of the Determination Argument in both versions cast doubt on the claim that deflationism is incompatible with holding a truth-condition theory of meaning (The replys do not really refute the deflationists arguments).