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Year: 2010

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Riegelnik, Stefan

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-125903>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Riegelnik, Stefan (2010). ”Having identified an utterance ...” – predication and interpretation. *Conceptus Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 39(96):85-100.

# “Having Identified an Utterance . . .” — Predication and Interpretation

Štefan Riegelnik

**Summary:** What is it for predicates to mean what they do and what is their contribution to the meaning of an utterance? It is exactly this question to which Davidson dedicates his book *Truth and Predication* (2005). Most commentators focus on Davidson’s discussion of failed accounts, in particular of Frege’s account. In contrast to this tendency, I focus here on Davidson’s own account. The structure is as follows. First, I sketch the problem of predication and I glance at Davidson’s discussion of failed accounts. Then I present his solution and integrate it in his theory of interpretation, thereby bringing out the particularity of the account. In doing so I shall scrutinize some criticisms as well, for as I intend to show, they originate from a wrong understanding of his comprehensive theory of interpretation.

## I

A peculiarity of Donald Davidson’s approach towards a unified theory of interpretation is that he focuses at first on the form such a theory should take. This leaves open room for the question of what conditions a theory of interpretation must fulfil in order to count as a comprehensive approach. Though it seems to be obvious that natural languages as the object of examination determine these conditions, Davidson considers natural languages as necessarily having certain features to be the object of such an examination at all. One such feature Davidson accentuates constantly throughout his work is the so-called *learnability feature*. The reason for bringing out such a feature is simple: we are born into this world without linguistic competence and after a while we are competent speakers of at least one natural language. Theories

of meaning ignoring this condition are thus to be considered as a failure from the outset. Davidson suggests “to see the natural language as a formal system” (Davidson 1970: 55), to reveal as much structure as possible and to build up a theory on the basis of the revealed structure. In “Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages” he writes “it must be possible to give a constructive account of the meaning of the sentences in the language” (Davidson 1965: 3). Putting this closer to the way we speak and avoiding the conflict-laden comparison of natural languages with *formal systems*, to *give a constructive account* means primarily that we understand an utterance of a sentence on the basis of the contributions of its parts:

Since there seems to be no clear limit to the number of meaningful expressions, a workable theory must account for the meaning of each expression on the basis of the patterned exhibition of a finite number of features. (Davidson 1970: 55)

A second, perhaps more obvious rationale for the introduction of the *learnability condition* might be the fact that people do not normally face problems in understanding utterances of sentences heard or read for the first time. Sticking with the revealed structure and the idea that parts of sentences contribute to their meaning, we may carry on to ask in what these contributions consist. The analysis of a simple predicative sentence like “Jack is tall” might go as follows: “Jack” contributes to the meaning of the sentence by naming a person and “tall” contributes by characterizing the person’s height. The concept in order to account for the contribution in the case of “Jack” is *reference* or *denotation* – but on behalf of what concept shall we explain the contribution of “tall” or “is tall”? It is true that *to characterize* characterizes the usage of predicates, but a mere paraphrase does not seem to be a substantive advancement here. It is rather – as is often the case when it comes to explaining the role of predicates – a yet-to-be-explained metaphor. Thus, what is it for predicates to mean what they do, or what is their contribution to the meaning of an

utterance? It is exactly this question to which Davidson devoted *Truth and Predication* (hereafter TaP).

## II

Broadly construed, the problem of predication consists in explaining the semantical role of predicates. Avoiding any unjustified anticipations, it consists in explaining the contributions of what comes after the subject<sup>1</sup> term to the meaning of an utterance of a sentence. Putting hair-splitting aside, the traditional and ordinary word for what comes after the subject term is “predicate” and I use this term without any particular anticipation. As Davidson holds, “a grasp of the semantic role of predicates is central to any account of how sentences are articulated” (TaP: 2), for predicates are the indispensable part of sentences. He puts the problem into the context of the ancient and mediaeval problem of universals and traces it back to Plato, who is the main responsible philosopher for the problem of predication, for “the theory of forms or ideas led directly to it” (TaP: 77). Davidson admits that nowadays there is a tendency to consider the problem of predication mainly as a problem in the philosophy of language (TaP: 77), and he follows this tendency. In light of this, one might point out that TaP does not deal with a substantive theory of predication, but with failed attempts. This is partly true. On the basis of prominent accounts, among them the accounts of Plato, Aristotle, Russell, Strawson, Sellars and Quine, and with a more benevolent attitude – Frege’s account – Davidson identifies an archetypical error in all their efforts: it consists in applying the same concept to predicates as to names and singular terms, namely *reference*. At first sight this does not seem to be wrong: even in our ordinary speech we often say that “red” used in a sentence like “the flag is red” *refers* to the property of redness, and who wants to change the way we speak? Surely, nothing is wrong with the way we speak. But this neither commits us to applying a particular concept in order to explain the role of predicates nor does the mere postulation of entities such as

<sup>1</sup> In most languages the ‘predicate’ follows to the ‘subject’.

properties etc. constitute an explanation. While one might speak of “meanings” of uttered sentences in everyday contexts, they are of no help in the context of theories of meanings (see Davidson 1967 on this). As regards predication and the theoretical notion of *reference*, Davidson shows at length in the form of a *reductio ad absurdum* that appealing to this concept in order to explain the semantical role of predicates makes it impossible to explain the difference between a mere list of names and a sentence, for a sentence exhibits a unity, which is a condition for sentences being either true or false. If one insists and tries to get along with *reference* – even in different guises –

associating predicates with objects such as universals, properties, relations, or sets will not solve the problem because it will always lead to an infinite regress. (TaP: 143)

Thus the problem is not only putting predicates and names on the same level, but explaining the difference between mere lists of strings and sentences. In other words, appealing to the notion of *reference* exclusively in order to explain all the fragmentary contributions of names and predicates seems to impede an explanation of the unity of a sentence. Yet it is important to note that the problem of predication does not consist merely in an avoidance of problems explaining sentences as unities – and it is mistaken to read TaP as elaborating on failed accounts exclusively.

### III

First and foremost, what we are looking for is an account to explain predication, or as Davidson asks and analyses:

What is the role of the verb or predicate? If we say it names or is otherwise related to the property of Sitting, we have so far pointed to nothing that could be true or false, for we have simply indicated two entities. Of course what we want to add is that the sentence is true if and

only if the entity named *has* the property: Theaetetus has the property of Sitting. The little word ‘has’ is the missing verb: it is a two-place predicate which should, in turn, be explained by reference to the relation of Instantiation. We are once more on the regress. (TaP: 87).

The gist of Davidson’s criticism of rival accounts is that if we rely on the concept of *reference* or its cognates, we are unable to explain the unity of a sentence; we would need to postulate an entity (“glue”) which explains the unity, but we would need to postulate a further entity to unite the uniting entity with the referring parts, and for this we would need to postulate again a uniting entity, etcetera, etcetera, ad infinitum. Showing how prominent accounts fall into this trap is Davidson’s *leitmotif* in *Truth and Predication*. Among others (for instance, Pfisterer 2009), Tyler Burge (2008) criticizes Davidson (besides his sloppiness) for not having shown conclusively that the regress is invoked. However, Burge’s review essay covers many points Davidson raises in TaP. The role of postulations of properties, relations, universals and Forms, etc. and Davidson’s rejection of them for the problem of predication get special attention (besides Davidson’s reading of Frege). Burge argues that Davidson mistakenly puts the regress on a level with merely mentioning properties, for this does not necessarily run into the regress. Burge writes about Davidson that

[h]e believes that many philosophers fell into regresses because they tried to explain the unity effected by predication in terms of an ontology of universals and particulars, or properties and individuals. (Burge 2008: 586)

and more upbraiding

he thinks that taking predicates to bear *any* semantical relation to a single entity like a property, relation, universal, Form, or the like makes no contribution at all to solving these problems. (Burge 2008: 590)

Burge agrees that such a postulation of entities does not “*in itself solve*” (Burge 2008: 591) the problem of predication, but leaves open the possibility that postulations of this kind are of some help. In particular, Burge holds that

[h]e [Davidson] gives no good reason to deny that predicates bear a semantical relation to properties, relations, or the like. (Burge 2008: 591)

The question, then, is what such a semantical relation of predicates to postulated entities amounts to (if not that between a singular term and an entity). Even if such a relation is explicable coherently, it still remains questionable whether it has any explanatory value. Burge ignores the risk of postulating properties and relations – and holds that even if there are infinite properties and instantiation, it does not constitute an infinite regress, but profusion. This kind of criticism is misleading. At the outset, Davidson is amenable to the postulation of properties:

[t]here is no objection to taking properties and relations as entities about which we want to think and say things (TaP 85)

but remains sceptical about whether

positing the existence of properties and relations helps us to understand the structure and nature of judgments (TaP 85).

If one follows Burge and ignores the lack of identity criteria of such postulated properties, what then has to be explained is how predicates are related to these properties. For obvious reasons, this kind of relation must be different from the one between names or singular terms and ordinary objects. Even if one succeeds in showing this, there still remains the question of how this helps to understand the role of predicates in sentences. Again we are back to the question of the role of predicates in sentences.

But a first lesson could be learned from this: the paradigm error Davidson identifies in failed accounts, then, is, to put it more

precisely, that what has to be explained are the *distinctive* contributions of names and predicates to a sentence as a unity. In order to avoid questions about how sentences should be divided and what constitutes a sentence’s subject or predicate, I settle for claiming that the contributions that subjects and predicates make to the meaning of a sentence have to be distinctive. But this is not the sole lesson to be learned and it takes us away now from failed attempts. By dealing with rival theories, Davidson develops a catalogue of conditions that a satisfactory theory of predication has to meet. The yet-to-be-found theory of predication (i) has to explain how “predicates contribute to the truth or falsity of the sentence in which they occur” (TaP 141), and (ii) has to avoid the infinite regress which arises if predicates are associated with “objects such as universals, properties, relations, or sets” (TaP 143). From (ii) follows (iii), i.e. that “it is essential to separate the obvious observation that predicates introduce generality into sentences from the thought that predicates must at the same time introduce universals or other abstract entities” (TaP 145). The lesson learned consists in the insight that (iv) “the full scope and nature of the problem of predication emerges only in conjunction with a clear conception of the logical form of sentences” (TaP 147).

The crucial point for any theory of predication is (iii), for the introduction of generality is the main contrast to referring terms, which introduce individuality, i.e. they single out an object. With these criteria at hand, what is Davidson’s own attempt to solve the so-called problem of predication bothering philosophers for millennia?

## IV

To readers of Davidson’s earlier works the proposal is not new. In “Reality Without Reference”, for instance, he writes:

In the case of predicates, Tarski’s method as we know, involves appeal to the concept of *satisfaction* [my emphasis, SR], a relation between predicates and *n*-tuples of enti-



ties of which the predicates are true, actually, sequences of such. (Davidson 1977: 217)

Here Davidson contrasts *satisfaction* with *reference* which he takes “to be a relation between proper names and what they name” (Davidson 1977: 216). In TaP, Davidson is more explicit: the role of predicates in sentences ought to be explained by means of the concept Tarski used for his definition of truth for formal languages, namely satisfaction, which is pretty much the converse of the Quinean notion of *true of*. The concept of *satisfaction* pairs objects and so-called *open sentences*, which are expressions with free variables. Thus an object *satisfies* an open sentence if the resulting sentence becomes a true one. Hence “*snow*” satisfies “*x is white*” because “*snow is white*” is true, and “*grass*” does not satisfy “*x is white*” because it is not the case that grass is white. This approach ought to fulfil all the conditions worked out from the examination of failed accounts: beside the avoidance of the infinite regress, the most essential one is that the application of the concept *satisfaction* links predicates as the essential parts of sentences to the sentences’ truth, which is the key concept in his theory of interpretation. So much for the theory.

How convincing is this? First of all, it goes without saying that *satisfaction* is a neutral and trivial notion – with the help of it, the stating of a sentence’s truth condition is uncomplicated and straightforward. To quote again from “Reality Without Reference”, where Davidson admits the austerity, i.e. the triviality of this framework.

When the theory comes to characterize satisfaction for the predicate ‘*x flies*’, for example, it merely tells us that an entity satisfies ‘*x flies*’ if and only if that entity flies. If we ask for a further explanation or analysis of the relation, we will be disappointed. (Davidson 1977: 217)

Tarski himself has often been criticized for the austerity of his definition of truth. Among his most prominent critics are Max Black (1949) and Ernst Tugendhat (1976). It seems that even

Davidson agrees in TaP (and elsewhere, for instance in “Truth Rehabilitated” (1997)) to such a diagnosis –

Tarski showed how to define a truth predicate for each of a number of well-behaved languages, but his definitions do not, of course, tell us what these predicates have in common. (TaP: 15)

In the same vein one could object that *satisfaction* pairs objects and open sentences, but what all these “pairings” have in common remains unexplained: it is not clear why, exactly, *satisfaction* represents a solution to the problem of predication. Hrachovec (2006) generalizes this kind of criticisms and holds that Davidson neglects the promise to give a solution for a problem bothering philosophers since Plato. The question, however, is whether the problem persists, if, as Davidson writes, “what does emerge is a method for specifying the role of each and every predicate in a specific language” (TaP: 161). What should not be neglected are the advantages of the way to give truth conditions over other readings of the interdependency of truth and meaning. These advantages perpetuate to the inner structure of a sentence – which becomes manifest in the fact, too, that there is no need to postulate abstract entities or to appeal to strange apparatuses in order to explain the semantic roles of predicates.

To put it differently and in a broader way, Davidson seeks to explain the interpretation of an uttered sentence by taking the concept of truth as basic – exhibited especially in Tarski’s truth definition – and to explain the interpretation of an arbitrary sentence by appealing to its truth conditions. Thus it is only consequent to explain predication in these terms, i.e. “to show how our grasp of the concept of truth can explain predication” (TaP: 161).

However, maintaining that the the sole advantage of this reading over alternative attempts is the avoidance of difficulties would leave out a lot. Though it is hard to imagine a more concise reading of the relation between truth and meaning, it goes without saying that one has to put flesh on the bones of the framework

and treat *sentence, truth, satisfaction, reference, predication, etc.* in the first place, as argued above, as theoretical constructs with their assigned roles: these concepts are primarily used to read structure into natural languages and it is advisable here to take a step back and integrate the proposed solution in Davidson's theory of meaning.

The introduction to the collection of essays *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (2001) opens with the question "What is it for words to mean what they do?" (p. xv). In previous writings he suggests that:

a theory of truth for a language does, in a minimal but important respect, do what we want, that is, give the meanings of all independently meaningful expressions on the basis of an analysis of their structure (Davidson 1970: 55)

To know the semantic concept of truth for a language is to know what it is for a sentence – any sentence – to be true, and this amounts, in one good sense we can give to phrase, to understanding the language (Davidson: 1967: 24).

The theory of truth Davidson has in mind is, of course, Tarki's definition of truth (as laid down in Tarski 1944). What Tarski did, in short, was to apply the predicate "true" to sentences and construct a definition of truth with the general form

(T)  $X$  is true if, and only if,  $p$

and instances of that such as

(1) "Jack is tall" is true if, and only if, Jack is tall.

On the left side of (T),  $X$  is substituted by a structural description or a name of an uttered sentence and the right side states the

truth conditions of *X*, which are, or should be, sufficient to understand *X*. The attractiveness of giving truth conditions in this way is that the sentence itself provides all we need: we can free ourselves from the idea that sentences refer to states of affairs, facts or other strange entities like *The True* or *The False*. And there is no need to struggle like verificationists with the “*essential incompleteness*” (cf. Waismann 1945) of protocol statements. In addition to these conveniences – and what is of crucial importance in this context here – truth conditions are given on the basis of the *inner structure* of sentences, i.e. the semantic features of the parts and how they are related. If one admits the priority of the inner structure of a sentence for its truth, little can be said against the application of the concept *satisfaction* in order to explain how a subject of a sentence is related to a predicate. To summarize the general approach so far – the question is, how should one explain the meaning of a complex expression as depending on the contribution of the parts? In a minimalistic respect – and it has to be elucidated in what respect Davidson’s theory is minimalistic – Tarski’s truth definition serves this purpose. Tarski’s emphasis on the inner structure of a sentence is crucial for any account of predication – and it is exactly at this point where the notion *satisfaction* and its strength for the question of how predicated contribute to the meaning of an utterance come into play.

It might be retorted that in consideration of the minimalistic character of Davidson’s solution to the problem of predication, an application to non-formal languages is a non-starter. Since even optimists of such an approach concede that fundamental adjustments are necessary in order to account for particularities that natural languages implicate, it remains at least questionable whether Tarski’s machinery represents a suitable starting point at all. However, it is worth noting that that proponents of of minimalistic accounts do not provide sound reasons why it should not be possible to go beyond a certain point, though this might be a futile endeavour. And it is doubtful whether Davidson’s use

of Tarski's truth definition deserves the label "minimalistic" at all. (I shall not address these points here.)

## V

At this stage of the argument, I want to scrutinize some further criticisms of Davidson's account of predication. In order to do this, I go a little further into detail concerning the theory of interpretation Davidson has in mind. This theory has often been characterized as a double-tracked approach: on the one hand, the formal apparatus based on Tarski's definition of truth for formal approaches plus necessary adjustments in order to deal with indexical expressions and demonstratives; on the other hand, the empirical part centering around the thought experiment inspired by Quine, known under the label "radical interpretation", which concerns, as well, the characteristics and abilities a radical interpreter must have in order to decipher an alien tongue. Interpreters of Davidson's philosophy give various reasons for leaving the armchair and "going empirical". Some try to mitigate shortcomings in the "formal realm" such as paradoxes (most prominently the liar paradox). Some look for evidential support to undermine various criticisms of Davidson's "austere" solution. Some see radical interpretation as a playground for anthropological debates. Others see radical interpretation as a criterion for (formal) theories of language to comply with. I think they all expect too much from such a scenario, but this is not my issue here. More important is – a feature that all these argumentations have in common – the supposed division between a formal and an empirical part of a theory. I agree that for various reasons semanticists should take the position of a radical interpreter or that of an observer of a radical interpreter, but this does not necessarily imply a separation. It is true that theoretical constructs such as *reference*, *predication*, *satisfaction*, *sentence*, etc. become secondary in a situation of a radical interpretation, but this neither means giving them up entirely nor that they are mere formal devices in need of empirical completion. The question, then, is how they fit into the thought experiment *radical interpretation*.

As regards Davidson’s appeal to *truth* and *satisfaction*, Eva Picardi (2008) argues that

the whole construction would be [...] hanging in the air unless we were able to show that the concept of truth is really involved in the practice of speaking a language (Picardi 2008: 60f.)

What is left untouched by Tarski’s account, she argues, is the connection between the set of beliefs of an interpreter and truth. Picardi considers this to be the task of the theory of radical interpretation and she accuses Davidson of not showing that

through this relation [satisfaction, SR] [...] language hooks upon the world. (Picardi 2008: 60)

What she is missing is “*the epistemology of the relation of satisfaction*”.

I doubt that these criticisms are legitimate, for my contention is this. We do not make use of the concept of truth in order to explain the workings of natural languages on the basis of empirical observations. The what might be called “interdependency of truth and meaning” – the basis for a thought experiment like radical interpretation – consists mainly in the fact that the truth of a sentence does not depend only on how the world is, but also on what the words used in a sentence mean. Even the success of radical interpretation, i.e. the decipherment of an unknown language from scratch, does not give us decisive reasons to prefer one concept to another. The task of a radical interpreter is to identify utterances as intentional and linguistic and to read as much structure as possible into the alien’s language by means of Tarski’s truth theory. On the basis of facts such as the behaviour of the speaker and the surroundings, the radical interpreter verifies that her T-sentences are true. But this does not imply, too, as Picardi holds, that the internal machinery is subject to direct empirical observation. On the contrary, the satisfaction relation is part of the internal machinery, or rather, it is a device for the radical interpreter to state the truth conditions of the sentences

uttered by the speaker, thereby reading structure into the utterances in question. *Mutatis mutandis*, radical interpretation of an alien language does not elucidate the concept of satisfaction. But it is not the aim of the thought experiment to do so at all. Just as we cannot start with referring terms and base a theory of language on them, we cannot start with predicates. It is clear that this puts constraints on the characteristics and abilities of the radical interpreter or the person running the experiment. Since the radical interpreter already knows a first language, concept formation and concept identification are not at stake here, nor in need of explanation as demanded by Picardi. Again, we should not expect too much of empirical observations and the thought experiment such as radical interpretation – it is, as Davidson puts it, mainly “a way of studying interpretation by purifying the situation in an artificial way” (Davidson 1993: 6).

In the context of radical interpretation for which Tarski’s truth theory is the basis, the problem of predication changes: utterances are the primary semantic unit and the question now is how it is possible that utterances are related coherently, which is again a condition for understanding an alien speaker.

The question here is how sentences are related so that they form a set of coherent sentences.

“Radical interpretation” (1973) begins with “having identified an utterance” (125), which means that Davidson considers utterances as the primary semantic unit. On the one hand, this sounds like a truism, but on the other hand it implies that predicates are the result of decomposition of an utterance of a sentence. And in this context, there is just “no empirical content [assigned] directly to relations between names or predicates and objects” (Davidson 1977: 223). However, this does not relieve us from the task of explaining the role of predicates and how they are related to names.

#### IV

It has often been said that Davidson’s solution is a less-is-more proposal (Burge 2008; Davidson 2005). What does this mean? Does it mean that the problem of predication as stated in terms of Plato’s notion just vanishes? Is the main point of Davidson’s

elaboration really just to present a solution which avoids insoluble problems, viz. infinite regresses? The gist of these questions is as such: thinkers who are neither convinced of Davidson’s theory of interpretation nor of his reading of the interdependency of truth and meaning are most likely not convinced of his theory of predication either. So the question is whether we can give independent reasons for why the appeal to Tarski’s truth definition *and* to the notion of satisfaction is the proper way to explain the role of predicates. I give my answer in different terms. Davidson’s approach starts with an elaboration of the conditions that a satisfactory theory of meaning has to meet. If we agree that these conditions are best met by a theory of truth, then a further condition for the very same theory is to explain the contribution of the parts and how they are related. From this point of view Davidson’s solution is not a “more-is-less solution” but rather an “all-in-one solution”.

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Institute of Philosophy  
 University of Zurich  
 Zürichbergstrasse 43  
 CH-8044 Zurich  
 Switzerland  
 stefan.rieglernik@philos.uzh.ch