

SEMANTICS FOR NONINDICATIVE SENTENCES*

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In *Grundgesetze* § 32¹ Frege says that the sense of a sentence (sc. name of a truth-value) is the thought that its truth-conditions are fulfilled, and that the sense of a sentence constituent is its contribution to the expression of this thought. Davidson's proposal that a theory of truth, in the style of Tarski, constitutes an adequate theory of meaning for a natural language seems an attractive articulation of Frege's idea.² Frege denies, however, that nonindicative sentences express thoughts or bear truth-value.³ The *prima facie* plausibility of Frege's denial presents an obstacle to Davidson's programme, since his hope was to provide a systematic semantics for languages containing such sentences.⁴ In this paper I consider some suggestions on how nonindicatives may be brought within the reach of the sort of truth-based semantics Davidson advocates.

It would be superficial, I think, to regard the difficulty over nonindicatives as a mere lacuna in truth-theoretic semantic theory, to be filled by some other and different account of their meaning. For the resulting theoretical pluralism runs against the grain of two solid intuitions: that indicatives and nonindicatives share a common core of meaning, and (connectedly) that words, as they recur in sentences of different types, discharge the same semantic function. If the sense of words is to be explained as their contribution to sentence-sense, as Frege and Davidson recommend, then we need some one property of sentences in terms of which that contribution may be explained, or else the systematic character of their contribution across sentences will go unregistered.⁵ This reflection encourages the imposition of a third requirement in addition to the two already imposed by Davidson. A semantic theory for a natural language will be adequate only if: (i) it serves to 'give the meaning' of every sentence of the language; (ii) it fulfils the first requirement in terms of an assignment of suitable semantic properties to the primitive expressions of the language, i.e. it shows how the meaning of an arbitrary sentence depends upon the meanings of its parts; and (iii) it

fulfils the second requirement in a systematic and uniform way. Since, as Davidson argued, *truth* seems the concept best fitted to meeting these adequacy conditions on semantic theories, we do well to try to make it plausible that, even in the presence of sentences to which the concept seems inapplicable, it can retain its central position. For if such sentences were to prove recalcitrant to Davidson's style of semantics, we would be obliged to acknowledge a basic inadequacy in the programme.⁶

The decision to persist in taking conditions for truth as semantically central is tantamount to attributing a certain primacy to indicative sentences. Such a primacy claim admits of stronger and weaker variants. A strong version of it would be to the effect that there could not be a used or actual language devoid of indicative sentences. This seems clearly false: it seems perfectly possible for there to be a linguistic community all of whose utterances were injunctions. And in the absence of assertoric speech acts, whose vehicle is the indicative sentence, it is implausible to maintain that it is in terms of truth that we must construe the sense of *their* sentences. A weaker version of the claim, which is all that I wish to be committed to, would be that in the case of natural languages as we have them, e.g. English, it is possible — and, in lack of some alternative, desirable — to fulfil our adequacy conditions by more or less ingenious employment of the concept of truth. As will become evident, this requires that the indicative mood be somehow read into all sentences. I shall claim that this can yield a natural and theoretically satisfactory account of the matter, but I do not present the account as underpinned by some sort of transcendental argument concerning the status of truth and the indicative in natural languages.

What we require, then, is a theory, i.e. a finite set of axioms, which implies infinitely many theorems of the schematic form '*s* ... *p*', one for each sentence (indicative or nonindicative) of the object-language, where what replaces '*s*' is a canonical description of a sentence of the object-language and what replaces '*p*' is a sentence of the metalanguage (which may include the object-language as a proper part) which in some acceptable way 'gives the meaning' of the sentence aforementioned. Davidson's suggestion was that filling the schematic dots with 'is true iff' would, when backed with a Tarskian theory, be what we want. Our question is: what in the case of nonindicatives should be substituted for '*s*' as regimented input to the theory? and, correlatively, what would be an appropriate filling for the schema, in particular what predicate of sentences should be right-hand-side

of the biconditional be specifying the application conditions of? I shall divide the proposals to be canvassed into two groups: those that cleave to the 'is true iff' filling and argue that suitable substitutions for 's' and 'p' can be contrived; and those that acknowledge the implausibility of that manoeuvre, preferring to opt for a different predicate or predicates and meeting adequacy condition (iii) more indirectly.

The first proposal, or type of proposal, I shall consider may be discerned more or less clearly in Dummett.⁷ The basic idea is that different sentence types may coincide in *sense*, in the Fregean thought they express, while being differentiated into those types by the super-addition of a certain *force* – assertoric, imperatival, etc. The thought expressed, i.e. the properly semantical dimension of the sentence's total signification, can be understood in terms of truth-conditions, whereas an account of the force of the sentence can be consigned to a pragmatic department of the total theory of language use. As will emerge, I think this suggestion is along the right lines, but as stated it must be rejected, because it conflates force and mood.

What principally drives a wedge between mood and force is what Geach calls the Frege point.⁸ This is the observation that the very same sentence can be employed, without alteration in its sense, now assertively, now unassertively. More generally, a sentence can be uttered with or without its customary force, its strict meaning remaining unchanged. Thus an indicative sentence uttered by an actor in a play is not asserted by him; sentences uttered in recitation or impersonation are likewise non-assertoric; and a speaker's saying something in order to get across some implicature of what he literally says is not in general to be counted as an assertion of that thing. Parallel remarks apply in the case of, e.g., imperatives. Also, the same sentence, bearing the same sense, can either stand on its own as asserted, or figure as a component of a complex sentence, e.g. in the antecedent of a conditional, as unasserted. What this shows is that it cannot be any feature of the sentence *itself* that confers on its utterance the requisite force, or else its utterance would be invariably endowed with that force. Mood, to be sure, conventionally and standardly *signifies* force, but it cannot *guarantee* it. Force is a property of speech acts, mood is a property of sentences.⁹

It follows that prescindng from force does not yield as residue a neutral expression, but a mood-endowed sentence; and if the mood of the sentence is not indicative it still cannot, without impropriety, be said to possess truth-value. An imperative sentence, for example, hardly becomes truth-evaluable

by being uttered in a play, or because it is one disjunct of a disjunctive command. Semantically, therefore, we are in just as pluralistic a position as we were before we excluded force.¹⁰ This is precisely because mood is a matter of meaning, whereas force is a strictly pragmatic affair.

The unworkability of the Dummettian approach is most readily appreciated if one tries to substitute into the schema 's is true iff p' (say) an imperative sentence, conceived as denuded of the force of a command; the result is at best highly unnatural and at worst it is ill-formed. Having thus carefully distinguished mood from force, we can put the latter aside as semantically irrelevant.

The second proposal, due to David Lewis,¹¹ attempts to ground the truth-evaluability of nonindicatives in a semantical thesis concerning their underlying structure. Ross¹² claimed that indicative sentences contain, at the level of deep structure, a performative verb (along with appropriate auxiliaries), *viz.* a verb of saying. Lakoff¹³ extended the thesis to cover all sentence types, so that, for example, 'I order you to shut the door' would aptly represent the underlying logical form of 'Shut the door'. Lewis steers a middle course, agreeing with Lakoff on nonindicatives, disagreeing with him and Ross on indicatives. The significance, for Lewis, of the thesis that nonindicatives are elliptical paraphrases of the corresponding explicit performatives is that, since, as he plausibly contends, performatives *are* possessed of truth-conditions, and since they differ merely syntactically from nonindicatives, these too may be assigned truth-conditions. Thus, in a Davidsonian semantics, we should give the meaning of (say) an imperative by mapping it syntactically onto an explicit performative which then becomes regimented input to the truth-theory. The theorems will then take the form

'I ϕ that p' is true iff I ϕ that p

(where indexicals are handled in some acceptable way and the performative may itself be subjected to further semantic analysis.)

The proposal has its attractions, but I do not find it plausible, because I am dubious of the claimed equivalence. Before I articulate this worry, however, I shall mention an argument that might be lodged against Lewis, which, though inconclusive, point in the direction of semantical inequivalence. This objection to Lewis is that, since it is apparent that there *could* be languages containing (say) imperatives that did not contain any appropriate performative verbs, e.g. 'command', it would be at the least highly implausible that im-

perative surface structures were the output of deletion transformations on such lexical items; so for such a language Lewis's proposal seems clearly incorrect. The objection is inconclusive for two sorts of reason: firstly, the proposal might be confined to actual natural languages, where the requisite verbs exist in plenty; second, the absence of such verbs from a conceivable actual language is compatible with a relation of semantic equivalence (translation) holding between that language's nonindicatives and the explicit performatives of some *other* and richer language, e.g. the theorist's. However, the objection does start a suspicion that, though such mappings might be devised, the explicit performative is essentially richer in semantic content than the ordinary nonindicative.

As remarked, Lewis maintains, reversing Austin's position,¹⁴ that performatives have truth-value: their truth-condition is precisely that the performer does in fact perform the speech act he says he is performing. I agree – but would go further. If the performative counts as a truth-evaluable *saying*, and yet a speech act of (say) *commanding* can be performed in its (felicitous) utterance, then the whole speech act must be tantamount to the performance of *two* speech acts, where the (felicitous) performance of one (saying or asserting) is sufficient for the performance of the other (commanding, etc.) (This would help to explain why it is that I can assert that *p* by asserting that I assert it.) So in uttering a performative one both performs a certain speech act and declares that one does; and indeed the sentence uttered displays this duality.¹⁵ But no such duality is apparent in respect of straight nonindicatives, e.g. 'Shut the door'. It is just false to claim that in issuing a command by uttering such an imperative sentence one also *says that* one is issuing that command. Put more semantically, 'I command you to shut the door' mentions me and commanding, but 'Shut the door' manifestly does not. So they are simply not equivalent in meaning. Indeed, this should already have been evident from the fact that substitution of the performative into the 's is true iff *p*' schema produces sense and truth, whereas the result of substituting the corresponding nonindicative is dubiously intelligible. This is no mere prejudice against calling imperatives true or false; it reflects the deep semantic difference between the two types of sentence.

The difference comes out clearly in the case of indicatives, and indeed Lewis insists upon it: 'I assert that the earth moves' differs in ontology and truth-conditions from 'The earth moves'. But he does not acknowledge a parallel difference of meaning when the embedded sentence is not indicative.

The implied asymmetry of case seems to me invidious. And it is symptomatic of the artificiality of the approach that the appropriate 'semantic value' for (say) an imperative is determined by the conditions under which it counts as a command and not the conditions under which it is obeyed or fulfilled by an intended audience.¹⁶

Perhaps these criticisms of Lewis will not seem decisive to someone with theoretical commitments and a strong stomach. What I shall now try to do is propose an equally materially adequate and far more natural account of the semantics of nonindicatives, in the hope that theory and linguistic intuition might be seen to consort more amicably with each other.

The type of approach to be considered tries, on the one hand, to respect Frege's intuition that nonindicatives are not truth-evaluable and, on the other, to meet the theoretical requirements we laid down at the outset. To satisfy both of these apparently conflicting constraints we aim, not to construe nonindicatives *as* more or less disguised indicatives, but rather to discern an indicative component *in* nonindicatives. The basic idea is familiar: a sentence is to be conceived as composed of two principal constituents, a mood indicator and a 'sentence radical'. The radical, it is hoped, will submit to truth-theoretic treatment, while the semantic contribution of the mood indicator to total sentence meaning will be specified separately. (It is just this idea that lay behind Dummett's confused talk of force and sense.) On this conception, we are to understand a natural language to comprise a finite (in fact rather small) number of mood indicating devices and an infinity of sentence radicals, indicative in character, built up recursively from a finite stock of primitive elements. Syntactically, a whole sentence, fit for the performance of complete speech acts, is formed by concatenating a radical with a mood indicator. Inasmuch as we can give a semantic interpretation of such concatenation, and of what get concatenated, which conforms to our adequacy conditions (i) – (iii), we shall have a satisfactory semantics for nonindicatives.

Thus far stated, the proposal is purely programmatic. We need to be told exactly how the sentences split up and how their meaning is determined by the meanings of their constituents. As a first step, then, let us paraphrase the sentences concerned in such a way as to exhibit their duplexity. The following may be regarded as somewhat unidiomatic equivalents of the obvious imperative, interrogative and optative sentences:

Make it the case that the door is shut!

Is it the case that the door is shut?

Would it were the case that the door is shut.

As hitherto I shall concentrate on the imperative. Two questions immediately arise: (1) Should the indicative itself receive the same treatment? and (2) What segment of these sentences should be identified as the sentence radical?

To treat indicatives likewise would be to represent them as prefixed with some such construction as 'It is the case that'. But notice that attaching this to an indicative sentence does not, as Frege observed, yield a sentence different in sense from the original indicative. The case is quite otherwise in respect of nonindicatives; the result of the concatenation *is* a sentence distinct in sense from the original. Of course, there is nothing surprising about this asymmetry, since the radical is itself indicative in character. But the asymmetry calls for a difference of treatment; there is no real point in discerning such duplexity in the indicative. (If we like we can stipulate that in the case of the indicative the radical is an *improper* part of the sentence.) On this view, indicatives enjoy a certain primacy, because nonindicatives are built up out of them but not conversely; and this is precisely what we had been led to expect.

Lewis, following Stenius,¹⁷ insists that the sentence radical is not an indicative sentence but a 'that'-clause; he then suggests that his apparatus of referential semantics be directed onto such radicals and not onto whole sentences. I do not say that this cannot be done; but within the more austere constraints of a Tarski-Davidson truth-theory here presupposed such a shift of perspective seems less than satisfactory. Certainly it is hard to see how Tarski's method of defining truth could be re-directed onto 'that'-clauses. Nor would it be congenial to Davidson's predilections to construe such clauses as singular terms for intensional entities like propositions. More conformable with his general semantic programme would be an analysis on the model of that adopted for indirect discourse¹⁸ or the standard recursion clauses for (extensional) sentence operators — for both of which the major semantic break in the sentences to be analysed occurs *after* the particle 'that'. So I now try to apply these treatments to the problem of nonindicatives.

Davidson's proposal on indirect discourse was that such a surface structure sentence be regimented as two sentences, a token of the first containing demonstrative reference, *via* 'that', to a token of the second. Let us call this

a paratactic treatment. On such a treatment a verb of propositional attitude reaches the axioms of a truth-theory as a two-place predicate relating persons and utterances, and is accordingly given a straightforward satisfaction axiom as fixing its semantic contribution to sentences in which it features. If we run a paratactic treatment for mood we will get a similar result – mood indicators turn out to be predicates. Thus, simplifying for the sake of exposition, a suitable axiom for the imperative might take roughly this form:

Satisfies ($u, \lceil \text{Make the case } x \rceil$ at t) $\equiv u$ is made the case at t ,

where ‘ u ’ ranges over (demonstrated) utterances and ‘ t ’ over times.¹⁹ Or again, a theorem adequate to a closed imperatival sentence paratactically construed might be:

Fulfilled ($\lceil \text{Make the case } \textit{that} \rceil$ at t) \equiv denotation $\lceil \textit{that} \rceil$ is made the case at t .²⁰

(Neither of these clauses pretends to incorporate an adequate handling of indexicality; they are intended only to get over the basic paratactic idea.)

Thus it appears that a paratactic analysis, suitably refined and supplemented, will do what we want. What now of an operator treatment? On this analysis, the imperative mood is construed as a unary sentence operator, and the appropriate specification of its semantic contribution would mirror the standard clause for negation, as follows:

Fulfilled ($\lceil \text{Make it the case that } A \rceil$ at t) \equiv It is made the case that $\lceil A \rceil$ is true at t .

Notice that these paratactic and operator treatments of mood proceed by employing a new predicate in application to imperative sentences, *viz.* ‘fulfilled’. In the paratactic case the ‘embedded’ indicative is separated off and its meaning given in terms of truth-conditions in the usual way. In the operator case the fulfilment predicate has its application conditions specified partly in terms of the truth-conditions of the (genuinely) embedded indicative. For both treatments the sense of the sentence radical is given by the assignment of a truth-condition, in a style congenial to Davidson.

Which of these two analyses – both apparently adequate by the standards set – ought we to prefer? I think the answer is that, as judged by the constraints imposed, there is very little to choose between them; we seem faced by an embarrassment of riches. The attendant theoretical indeterminacy

may be but one instance of something more general: the joint availability of paratactic and operator treatments for certain constructions, e.g. modal operators²¹ and even truth-functional operators. The issue is large and the relevant considerations unclear; I shall not pursue it here. Suffice it to say that both analyses seem adequate to their job and both belong, relatively to other proposals, in roughly the same category of semantic analyses.

We seem therefore (by both treatments) to have satisfied requirements (i) – (iii) and at the same time respected Frege's conviction that nonindicatives do not themselves bear truth-value. The common semantic content remarked between different sentence types seems adequately captured and a uniform account of the recurrent contribution of words provided, thanks to the indicative sentence radical. We might, if we wished, impose a complete uniformity on the total semantic theory by availing ourselves of a *single* predicate, applicable indifferently to sentences of any mood, whose conditions of application would be recursively specified in the usual way. Thus, following Dummett, we might invoke a concept of *correctness*,²² and aim to derive theorems of the form 's is correct iff p', the truth and fulfilment predicates perhaps being regarded as restrictions of this general predicate of sentences. But I do not think we *need* to appeal to such a universal predicate to meet our objectives.

It is interesting to observe, in conclusion, that Davidson represented it as a *discovery* that the right filling for the meaning-giving 's ... p' schema is a truth-predicate and appropriate sentence connective; this was not part of the original motivation.²³ When we turn to consider nonindicatives seriously this point takes on a new significance: for what we require is a theory that pairs suitable meaning-giving conditions with every sentence of the language in a way which illuminatingly shows how those conditions result from the semantic properties of (primitive) sentence constituents, and this requirement does not itself enforce the assignment of *truth* conditions across the board.

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NOTES

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¹ Translated by M. Furth as *The Basic Laws of Arithmetic* (University of California Press, 1967).

² See 'Truth and Meaning', *Synthese* 17 (1967); note that Davidson does not expressly present his proposal this way. But cf. John McDowell, 'Truth Conditions, Bivalence and Verifications', in *Truth and Meaning: Essays in Semantics*, ed. by J. McDowell and G. Evans (Oxford University Press, 1976).

³ Thus in 'The Thought', reprinted in Strawson *Philosophical Logic* (Oxford University Press, 1967) Frege says, 'One does not want to deny sense to an imperative sentence, but this sense is not such that the question of truth could arise for it. Therefore I shall not call the sense of an imperative sentence a thought.' (p. 21) (He makes an exception for sentential questions, which do, he allows, express thoughts.)

⁴ Listing the outstanding difficulties at the end of 'Truth and Meaning' Davidson remarks that an adequate theory must deal with 'all the sentences that seem not to have truth-values at all: the imperatives, optatives, interrogatives, and a host more'. (p. 321).

⁵ Cf. some remarks of Dummett's on the necessity for a key semantic concept if justice is to be done to the way the meaning of a sentence depends upon the meanings of its parts, in *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (Duckworth, 1973), pp. 361ff.

⁶ Although I conduct my discussion apropos of Davidson's kind of semantics, it should be clear that the issues arising bear upon other types of theory in which a truth-definition occupies centre stage, e.g. that of Richard Montague.

⁷ See Chapter 10, 'Assertion', in Dummett *op. cit.*, esp. pp. 307ff.

⁸ In 'Assertion', reprinted in *Logic Matters* (Blackwell, 1972).

⁹ Frege insists that it must 'always be asked, about what is presented in the form of an indicative sentence, whether it really contains an assertion. And this question must be answered in the negative if the requisite seriousness is lacking.' 'The Thought' p. 22. Seriousness is plainly not a *semantical* feature of an uttered sentence.

¹⁰ Dummett's confusion on this point shows very clearly when he remarks, of Frege's view that sentences of different types are distinct in sense, that this was 'definitely wrong: that is, when taken in conjunction with Frege's distinction between sense and force for assertoric sentences [sic.]. *op. cit.*, p. 307. For, to repeat, Frege's whole point was that assertoric force is *not* an ingredient in the meaning of an indicative sentence, but a feature of the *act* of uttering one.

¹¹ See his 'General Semantics', Section VIII, in *Semantics of Natural Language*, ed. D. Davidson and G. Harman (Reidel, Boston, 1972).

¹² J. R. Ross, 'On Declarative Sentences', *Readings in Transformational Grammar*, ed. by R. Jacobs and P. Rosenbaum (Blaisdell, Boston, Mass., 1970).

¹³ See, e.g., G. Lakoff, 'Linguistics and Natural Logic', Section IV, in Davidson and Harman, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ See J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford University Press, 1962), *passim*. He took explicit performatives to be 'masqueraders' for ordinary indicative and nonindicative sentences, inheriting their semantic properties; Lewis makes the opposite assimilation. As I argue, neither assimilation is correct.

¹⁵ This multiple speech act account of the explicit performative has been (independently) suggested by K. Bach, 'Performatives are Statements Too', *Phil. Studies* 28, 229–236, (1975), Davidson in his unpublished 1970 John Locke Lectures, and the present author.

¹⁶ Lewis's 'General Semantics' account of the truth-conditions of nonindicatives clashes with the discussion in his *Convention: A Philosophical Study* (Harvard University Press, 1969) of conventions of truthfulness, conceived as constitutive of the actual language relation, as that notion pertains to imperatives (pp. 184ff); for in that work an imperative is held to be made true by an audience's intentional action in *obeying* it.

¹⁷ E. Stenius, 'Mood and Language-Game', *Synthese* 17 (1967), 254–274.

¹⁸ In 'On Saying That', *Synthese* 19 (1968), 130–146.

¹⁹ Here the imperatival predicate is regimented as one-place. This requires a suitable designation of the addressee in the demonstrated sentence (token); as in 'You have shut the door'. One might, alternatively, prefer to construe the predicate as two-place, itself

incorporating reference to the addressee; as in 'You make *that* the case. The door is shut'. There seems little to choose between these options.

²⁰ I use a predicate of fulfilment as distinct from obedience to mark the following difference: obedience requires that the addressee make the demonstrated/embedded indicative true intentionally under that description; fulfilment allows it to be made true unintentionally. Again, nothing much seems to hang on this choice, though fulfilment makes for greater simplicity on the right-hand-side of the biconditional and covers a wider range of cases.

²¹ Unpublished work by Peacocke suggests that a disquotational operator treatment of 'It is necessary/possible that' can be devised with sufficient care; but a paratactic treatment seems equally possible. This sort of situation poses some interesting, and perhaps disturbing, questions about Davidson's style of semantics.

²² See Dummett, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

²³ See, notably, 'Truth and Meaning', p. 310.