Holistic perspective of meaning and "radical interpretation"

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to outline the changes occurred within the philosophical analysis of language as a result of adopting the holistic perspective of meaning. These transformations are obvious as Donald Davidson's papers are taken into account, ever since the "Truth and Meaning" (1967), where he sketches a theory of meaning which appears under the paradoxical form of a theory of truth. But the grounds of this semantic program are even older, this being developed under the combined influence of Quine's holistic thesis and Tarski's truth theory. Using Quine's intuitions, Davidson develops the so-called "radical interpretation" theory, which is introduced as a radical reconstruction of Quine's semantic holism, lacking the concept of "meaning" and also the epistemological behaviorism approach. The "radical interpretation" contributes to freeing language theory from the burden of ontological decision and, at the same time, to transcending the dualism of "conceptual schema" and "empirical content" - which is in fact the third and the last dogma of empirism.

Keywords: meaning, holism, Quine, Davidson, "radical interpretation"

Since the end of the 1960s Davidson's semantic programme was outlined under the conjugated influence of Quine's holistic thesis and of the Tarskian theory of truth. Starting with "Truth and Meaning" ([1967] 1985) he points out a theory of meaning that occurs under the paradoxical form − of a theory of truth. For Davidson, this shift in attitude towards the theory of meaning is founded by the unsatisfactory character of the intensional concepts; as long as we need such a theory in order to nontrivially provide the meaning for the sentences in a language, meanings do not have a demonstrated use. In addition, they tend to be introduced as hypostasized, thus altering the concept of "reference".

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The preliminary principles claimed by Davidson are meant to meet such difficulties; *the principle of compositionality* states that the meaning should be determined by the syntactic and semantic contribution of the components of the linguistic parts; *the principle of holism* claims that the systematic contribution should cover larger structures, so that the general characterization of the meaning should determine the meaning of every sentence in language: "We have decided for a long time not to assume that the parts of a sentence have meanings only in the ontological neutral sense to systematically contribute to the meaning of the sentences in which they occur. Because postulating the meaning did not make any success, let's come back to that intuition. A direction that we may consider is a certain holistic perspective of the meaning. If the sentences depend on the structure for their meaning and we can see the meaning of every element from the structure only as an abstractization of the total amount of sentences in which it occurs, then we could give sense to every sentence (or word) only by providing the meaning to every sentence (and word) from the language" (Ibid, 94-95).

According to the holistic principle, an appropriate theory of the meaning should involve all the sentences in the form 's means m' (if m is a singular term) or 's means p' (if p is a sentence). But Davidson has already asserted that he wanted to build up a theory that should exempt from intensions and therefore he recommends treating the place held by 'p' extensionally. This relation can be defined as:

(T) s is A in language L if and only if p .

Therefore a theory of meaning for a language L has to clarify the predicate 'is A' so that it should involve all the instances of the relation (T) in language L. Davidson's conclusion consists in the fact that the predicate 'is A' can only be applied to true sentences from L, because only this way the material appropriateness to the above bi-conditional, which is essentially Tarski's Convention T is respected. Thus the theory of meaning for a language L is limited to provide a recursive definition of the truth-in-L (Ibid). But the connection between the concept of "meaning" and that of "truth", which belongs according to Quine to the theory of reference, should be specified; for Davidson this connection is just provided by the holist principle: "The definition works by providing necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of every sentence, and providing truth conditions is to give the meaning to a sentence. Knowing the semantic concept for a language is the

same with knowing the meaning for a sentence – any sentence – to be true and this leads […] to understand the language." (Ibid, 96)

It is important to notice that not only this definition that settles what a sentence is, does not use the notion of 'meaning', but also avoids to resort to the synonymy (usually) in the definitional activity; by this, Davidson would reject counterexamples under the form of:

(S)'Snow is white' is true if and only if the grass is green.

These counterexamples seize the issue known as extensionality [1]. Davidson's answer to this type of objections is that the holist principle represents the criterion of material appropriateness requested by Tarski ([1944] 1985, 63) for such definitions; the sentence from the right side of the biconditional has to be taken *in suppositio formalis* so that this does not signify that its meaning should determine the meaning of the sentence from the left of the biconditional, but the simple fact to be part of the same language which the theory is built for, and thus to comply with the same rules. The counterexample (S) is confusing because we have a "preanalytical" intuition, as Putnam would say, of the fact that the meaning of the two sentences is different; the correct thing to notice would be that (S) is true if and only if:

(S') 'The grass is green' is true if and only if the snow is white.

it is also true (that it is implied by the theory of truth for the Romanian language[2]). The extensional treatment has to be applied to the end; in the metaphor expressed by Davidson, this means that plays its role "by adding one more brush-stroke to the picture which, taken as a whole, tells what there is to know of the meaning of *s*; this stroke is added by virtue of the fact that the sentence that replaces *p* is true if and only if *s* is" (Davidson 1985, 97).

The advantages of this theory are emphasized in cases by what Davidson (1984) calls "radical interpretation". In fact the theory of translation that he develops here is only a generalization of the theory from "Truth and Meaning", its translation being finally only an attempt to reconstruct the meaning for a foreign language (Davidson 1985, 97).

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[1] See J. Fodor and E. LePore. 1994. "Meaning, Holism and the Problem of Extensionality". In G. Preyer et al. (eds.), *Language, Mind and Epistemology: The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, pp. 3-20.
[2] See Petre Botezatu (coordinator). 1981. *Adevăruri despre adevăr / Truths about Truth*. Iași: Junimea Press.

Davidson thinks that the method involving the translation manuals (Quine's favourite) is not satisfactory. A theory of interpretation involves not only two, but three languages (object language, subject language and metalanguage), that in certain extreme cases can be (considered) identical (Davidson 1984, 129) and they have to provide both the proper translation from the unknown language into the known one and the structural reasons to eliminate or at least diminish the indetermination that Quine spoke about; that is why, Davidson states, a theory of truth modified in order to be applicable to the natural languages could help us more than the translation manuals, that are unstructured. In addition, such a theory is empirically testable without any useless appeal to speakers' convictions and intentions as substitutes for meaning, because it is already a theory of meaning (Ibid).

A theory of interpretation logically involves a series of biconditional sentences of the form:

> (T) 'Es regnet' is true in German when it is uttered by x at the moment t if and only if it rains close to x at t.
> The empirical evidence for the truth (T) of the form:
> (E) Kurt belongs to the German community and Kurt states that it is true 'Es regnet' on Saturday afternoon and it rains close to Kurt on Saturday afternoon.
> But (T) is a universal sentence; so that we need more particular empirical evidence of the form (E) to support (T); actually, we really need a generalised evidence, of the form:
> (GE) (x) (t) (if x belongs to the German community then (if x states that 'Es regnet' is true at t if and only if it rains close to x at t)).

This method of empirical testing points out to pretty obvious difficulties that especially interfere when producing general evidences for an interpretation (T). Davidson asserts that these difficulties could be diminished by supplementing the theory of interpretation with the principle of charity, which should not be considered as a " charitable assumption about human intelligence that might be proven as being false", but as the minimal request of the consistency of the person's convictions whose words will be interpreted: "If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything." Ibid, 137)

Richard Rorty shows in his presentation (through Kant's less conventional interpretation) of the subjectivity reconstruction practiced

by Davidson to what extent the principle of charity involves a form of holism: it is useful to give up the essentialist notion of subject as something that *has* beliefs and desires and consider this network of beliefs and desires as representing the self, and moreover that "having a belief or a desire means having a chain of beliefs within a vast network. «The Self» assumed by any given representation is just the rest of the representations associated with the first one – associated not by «synthesis», but being parts of the same network, the network of beliefs and desires that have to be postulated as the internal causes of the linguistic behaviour of a single organism" (Rorty 1990, 19).

We can already notice a radicalisation of Quine's theory through what Davidson considers a wider use of the principle of charity; this helps us not only to interpret the functions of truth, as Quine (1964, 59) used to, but it also covers the sentences with the indexical (Quine's occasion sentences) and the rest of the sentences. Davidson (1984, 126) determines another difference: the strongly semantic character of the radical interpretation theory, unlike the behaviourism of the radical translation. The theory of interpretation can thus be introduced as a radical reconstruction of Quine's semantic holism, without the notion of "meaning" and without its epistemological behaviourism. The radicalization of Quine's theses has also as consequence, among others, the release of the theory of language from the burden of the ontological decision. I would like to appeal to the discussions between Davidson and Quine concerning the relativity of ontology, the conceptual schema and the dualism of conceptual schema – empirical content

Quine introduces the relativity of ontology as a consequence of the inscrutability of reference. Davidson agrees that the indetermination of the reference cannot be reduced by the extension of the principle of charity, or by the Tarskian theory of truth, but he does not believe that this argument should lead to the relativity of ontology (Davidson [1979] 2001, 228). Quine assets a double relativisation of the reference and ontology: as compared to the translation manuals and to the background language (theory), too. Davidson argues that the reference is not relativised to manuals, because the condition for "x refers to y relatively to TM" is "TM translates x as 'y'". But y occurs in an opaque referential context and consequently it cannot be quantified. The reference cannot be relative to the speaker's language, because it would imply that he should add "in L" every time in order to define it. "What cannot be defined in L is not made definable by adding a

parameter. Nor the truth in L, as defined in M, is anyhow relative to the truth in M, as defined in M. The predicate 'is true in L' as it occurs in M has a meaning that, if wanted, we could state in another language. But how could this determine the truth in L relative to this third language – or even to M?" (Ibid, 233).

As Quine himself suggests the analogy of reference with the predicate 'is true that', the argument of the ontological relativity would lead to the establishment of the reference, when, after enough decisions, we assign a scheme of reference. Davidson ([1979] 2001, 234) thinks that the paradox of the cultural relativism, which cannot be announced without being overtaken, is also valid for the relativity of ontology towards a background theory or language. Therefore he asserts that by relativisation only "the way in which we answer questions about reference, not the reference itself" (Ibid, 239) can be established by relativisation, meaning that the speaker is just using a language or another.

Davidson's argument against the relativity of ontology combines with the dualism between the conceptual scheme and the empirical content, that is abusively introduced afterwards in order to stand in for the absence of a clearer distinction between language and facts, as the analytic-synthetic dichotomy; he insists that "this second dualism of the scheme and content, of the organisation system and of something that needs to be organised, cannot be made intelligible and justifiable. It is a dogma of the empiricism itself, the third dogma. It is 'the third', and probably the last one, because if we give it up then it is not clear that something distinct to be called empiricism should remain" (Davidson [1973-1974] 1984, 189). Donald Davidson understands the conceptual scheme as something distinct from a language but associated with it and which mediates the relationship between this one and the experience (reality or sensorial stimulation) in the sense of organisation, prediction or appropriateness. But he considers that the authors concerned (Quine, Whorf, Kuhn, Feyerabend and Strawson) are not clear either concerning the relationed entities, or concerning the relationship; this negligence being the foundation of their assertion that the translation (partial or complete) from one conceptual scheme into another is impossible.

Davidson notes that this vagueness are gathered within the two families of metaphors (organisation – adequacy and reality - experience) that fails when combined; for example, 'organisation' implies plural or composite entities, but how could we assert about

'reality' or 'experience' that they are compound? "Someone who sets out to organize a closer arranges the things in it. If you are told not to organize the shoes or shirts, but the closet itself, you would be bewildered. How would you organise The Pacific Ocean? Straighten out its shores, perhaps, or relocate its islands, or destroy its fish?" (Davidson [1973-1974] 1984, 192). If the predicates of two languages do not extensionally overlap, but however, the ontology of the two is common, the individuation mechanisms of the mutual language are enough to allow the translation of both into the last one, and thus to ensure communication The principle of charity and the theory of truth, that provides, as seen, a theory of interpretation, succeed in this attempt. But on behalf of this theory we cannot state that the others have different convictions or concepts from ours, nor that all the people share the same convictions and concepts (Ibid, 197); therefore, Davidson considers that it is a mistake to discuss about identical or different conceptual schemes (incommensurable, untranslatable), as about an uninterpreted reality, that opposes the language. If we do not consider anymore that the reality systematically escapes science, it is guaranteed to have the minimal objectivity, through which the truth is only relative to the language, in the most proper sense possible. Furthermore, "by giving up the dualism of the scheme and content, we do not give up the world, but we re-establish the unmediated contact with the familiar objects whose pictures determine our sentences and opinions to be true or false." (Ibid, 198)

Quine answered this last reproach, asserting that he always aimed at another use of the collocation of 'conceptual scheme' than that imputed by Davidson: "I inherited it 45 years ago by L.J. Henderson from Pareto, and I understood it as a usual language, without any technical function. There is no, as the architects claim, a reinforcing element. A triad – a conceptual scheme, language and world – is not something that I consider. I sooner think, as Davidson in terms of language and world. I reject that tertium quid as being a myth from a museum of unlabelled ideas. If I spoke about a very foreign conceptual scheme I would be pleased, Davidson would be glad to know, that I spoke about a strange language or difficult to translate" (Quine 1981, 41).

This answer seems to be valid, if we think at the tendency to replace the collocation by 'background language', tendency that seems to be previous to Davidson's objection. However, Quine's suggestion is not so obvious in the early texts, where the conceptual scheme occurs as

part of a language updated by a theory, because, as long as it speaks about incompatible conceptual schemes (Quine [1948] 1953, 17-19), it is to be understood that they are possible in the same natural language (English for example). Yet, the radical holism of the first period would lead to the conclusion that it would not be possible to update only a part of the language (by an individual at a certain time), and that the language is involved (implicitly, of course) by every update of one of its fragments (from words to the theoretical corpuses of the particular sciences), which would lead to the conclusion that two conceptual schemes accessible to the speaker of a language are not incompatible. In relation to the possibility of a moderate semantic holism, it is less clear, as it is assumed that every use of the language would involve a "relatively small" part of the language; but, it is just this last collocation that is not clear: it means that it only implies all the potential uses of a linguistic form within a language (that, though finite, do not surely exhaust the possibilities of a language), or does it mean that it involves only some of these potential uses? In the first case, the holistic structure of the language itself is threatened, because it would involve that some of its parts would be disconnected from the rest arbitrarily (it would be reasonable to assume that it would not happen); if the moderate epistemological holism is reasonable, not the same thing can be stated about the moderate semantic holism. In the second situation, a form of localism or semantic molecularism would be involved, and the poetical discourse would be impossible; more clear, the following question would have a meaning "Rabbits, in what sense of 'rabbit'?"; a domestic rabbit, as fearful as a hare, Easter rabbit, bunny. The radicalization of Quine's holism asserted by Davidson solves out these problems, as they did not exist for Quine, at least the meaning of Davidson's critic is to set this clear.

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