

24.251 – Intro to the Philosophy of Language

Problem Set 3: Davidson on Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages

1. On the first page of ‘Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages’, Davidson claims that ‘it must be possible to give a constructive account of the meaning of the sentences in [a learnable] language.’ What is meant by ‘constructive’ here?
  - (a) That the account not be under the grip of an empiricist epistemology.
  - (b) That it be possible to specify what every sentence in the language means on the basis of purely formal considerations.
  - (c) That the account be free from the distinction between sense and reference.
  - (d) None of the above.
2. Davidson thinks that a difficulty arises in attempting to capture the account of quotation suggested by Tarski in the passage quoted on page 10 as part of a theory of meaning. Why is this?
  - (a) Because a language with infinitely many semantic primitives would not be learnable.
  - (b) Because Tarski’s account does not provide even the kernel of a theory.
  - (c) Because we must give up the idea that quotations are syntactically composite expressions.
  - (d) None of the above.
3. On page 7, Davidson claims, that thinking of a language ‘as an organic whole’ imposes constraints on the sorts of languages that are learnable. Why is this?
  - (a) Because it imposes constraints on the sorts of languages there could be.
  - (b) Because part of a language cannot be fully learned unless the entire the language is partly learned.
  - (c) Because an entire language cannot be partly learned unless a part of the language is fully learned.
  - (d) None of the above.
4. Which of the following is true according to Davidson?
  - (a) A theory of language acquisition should be careful to abide by the constraints of an empiricist epistemology.

- (b) It must be possible to extract a truth definition from any adequate theory of meaning.
- (c) Unless a language could have infinitely many semantic primitives, it would be impossible to have languages containing infinitely many sentences.
- (d) None of the above.