

Truth-Deflationism and Truth-Theoretic Semantics:

One Way to Make Them Clash

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Abstract: Deflationism about truth is often said to be incompatible with truth-theoretic semantics. However, both of these labels are ambiguous, making the truth of the incompatibility claim dependent on interpretation. I provide one pair of natural interpretations, on which both views relate essentially to grounding and on which they are indeed incompatible. This result has some intrinsic interest as well as paving the way for further needed clarifications in the debate about the relationship between the views.

Keywords: truth, semantics, deflationism, grounding, Donald Davidson, T-sentences.

This note is about whether deflationism about truth is compatible with truth-theoretic semantics. Many important writers have answered in the negative, notably Michael Dummett, Donald Davidson, and Paul Horwich.¹ The question, unsurprisingly, turns out to depend on what exactly is meant by these labels, and,

¹ Michael Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1978): 7, Donald Davidson, "The Structure and Content of Truth", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 87 (1990): 279–328, Donald Davidson, "The Folly of Trying to Define Truth", *The Journal of Philosophy* 93 (1996): 263–278, Paul Horwich, *Truth* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998): §22, Paul Horwich, "Davidson on Deflationism", in *Donald Davidson*, edited by Urszula M. Zeglen, London: Routledge (1999): Chapter 2.

indeed, quite many things have been meant by both of them. I present a pair of natural, if optional, precisifications on which these theories come out as incompatible. This result has some intrinsic interest and serves as a further piece of the general puzzle concerning the relationship between these popular views, and how one may or may not understand these theories if one wants endorse both of them (or only one, or neither).

I define deflationism about truth as the view that the totality of, or some generalization over, the instances of some simple truth equivalence schema is “exhaustive” of truth. On a propositional version of deflationism, the schema will be

(PT) (The proposition) that p is true iff p ,

and on a sentential or “disquotational” version, it is rather

(DS) (The sentence) ‘ p ’ is true iff p .

It is important to distinguish between deflationism and the “base truth-theory” it takes to be “exhaustive” of truth. The former is much more controversial than the latter and the former is a claim *about* the latter.

The question whether deflationism is incompatible with truth-theoretic semantics must be investigated relative to a choice of primary truth bearers, for propositionalism and sententialism have very different import concerning this

matter. I have previously² argued at length that deflationists should take the primary truth bearers to be propositions, but I will not spend much time here discussing this option. Suffice it to note that there is a strong argument for the claim that the mere view that propositions are the primary truth bearers (whether combined with deflationism or not) is incompatible with truth-theoretic semantics. Very briefly, this is because on this view, an ascription of truth to a sentence *S* must be seen as elliptic for the claim that the proposition expressed by *S* is true. But if truth-ascriptions are interpreted this way, T-sentences come out as saying:

(TP) The proposition expressed by '*p*' is true iff *p*.

The right-hand side now refers to the notion of a proposition being expressed, which is very close to the notion a semantic theory is meant to shed light on. On this view of the relationship between truth and meaning, the former cannot very well be used to explain the latter, since it presupposes it. I will therefore focus on sentential deflationism, or disquotationalism.

Among adherents of disquotationalism, T-sentences are thought to be immediately derivable from the base theory. This is in contrast with the way T-sentences are derived, in Davidsonian truth-theoretic semantic theories, from semantic axioms concerning the sentences' constituent expressions and their mode of combination. However, there is of course no contradiction in saying that T-sentences can be derived from both. But I will propose a natural way of

² Arvid Båve, "Deflationism And the Primary Truth Bearer," *Synthese* 173 (2010): 281–297.

understanding disquotationalism and truth-theoretic semantics, on which they involve claims about grounding, and on which they are incompatible.

Deflationist theories, in the sense defined here, say that the base theory is “exhaustive” of truth. This is naturally spelt out in terms of grounding. How exactly to do so will depend on whether one takes one’s base theory to simply be the totality of schema instances³ or whether one takes it to be some generalization over those instances (most other deflationists⁴). On the first option, one will naturally take the truth-schema instances to be fundamental, i.e., ungrounded. On the second choice of base theory, one will rather take the generalization to be fundamental and take the instances to be directly grounded by it. (Note that the latter would violate the popular idea that logically complex facts are always grounded in logically simpler ones. If this cost as seen as too high, and if one also want the axioms of our theories to state fundamental facts, this is reason to adopt Horwich’s infinitary theory.)

Consider now truth-theoretic semantics. One of the main motivations for this theory is that it promises to account for the compositionality of meaning. The pre-theoretic conception of compositionality is the idea that the meanings of complex expressions like sentences are determined by the meanings of their constituents and their mode of combination.⁵ Now, it is natural to see this determination claim as a grounding claim. Indeed, grounding theorists take grounding to be just another word for “determination”, as the latter is typically

³ This is the “Minimal Theory” of Paul Horwich, *Truth* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998).

⁴ See Arvid Båve, “Formulating Deflationism”, *Synthese* 190 (2013): 3287–3305.

⁵ Peter Pagin, “Compositionality I: Definitions and Variants”, *Philosophy Compass* 5 (2010): 250–264.

used by philosophers. (Still, the idea of taking the compositionality of meaning to be a matter of grounding is surprisingly absent from the literature.)

Further, the way in which typical truth-theoretic semantic theories are supposed to explain the compositionality of meaning is by statements of truth-conditions (i.e., T-sentences) being *derivable* from semantic axioms concerning the semantic values of constituents plus semantic axioms about modes of combination. This means that they must see T-sentences as statements of—or proxies of statements of—the meanings of sentences, and this was also Davidson’s original proposal.⁶

Taken together these claims suggest that truth-theoretic semantics is committed to the view that the fact expressed by a T-sentence is partially grounded in the facts expressed by the semantic axioms from which it can be canonically derived. In any case, this is a natural claim to take as definitionally tied to “truth-theoretic semantics”, on one interpretation.

Now, we can see a real conflict between disquotationalism and truth-theoretic semantics, spelt out as above. For the claim that T-sentences are ungrounded or directly grounded by some direct generalization over them is of course incompatible with the view that they are partially grounded by claims about the semantic values of their constituents.

There are three main ways of resisting this conclusion:

- (1) denying the reality/intelligibility of grounding,
- (2) saying there are several grounding relations and that distinct

⁶ Donald Davidson, “Truth and Meaning”, *Synthese* 17 (1967): 304–323.

grounding relations are involved in the two theories,

- (3) accept grounding theory but deny the alleged commitments of truth-theoretic semantics and/or disquotationalism.

(1) seems overly radical: critics of grounding theory normally don't reject grounding *tout court*, but rather argue that there may be several grounding relations (which grounding theorists conflate). This brings us to (2), which is the more common criticism of grounding theory. However, the central relations here, i.e., claims about the truth conditions of sentences, are involved in both views. This is in contrast to the relationship between, say, purely logical grounding relations like the one holding between instances and their existential generalizations, on the one hand, and the way the psychological is thought to be grounded in the physical, on the other.

Also, even if there are several grounding relations, there may still be a single such relation, R , such that one interesting conception of disquotationalism takes (what is expressed by) T-sentences to bear R to nothing or to their generalization, while an interesting form of truth-theoretic semantics takes R to hold between what is expressed by T-sentences and what is expressed by semantic axioms about constituents. There could thus still be a case to be made for the relevant kind of incompatibility, although it is of course premature to discuss those theories until we know more about the alleged multitude of grounding relations.

(3), finally, seems hard to sustain, given the arguments above. Thus, if one agrees that there is a single grounding relation, it is hard to deny the assumptions I make. This may seem more obvious for the case of compositionality than for

deflationism. But suppose the disquotationalist denies that the base theory is ungrounded. If so, its axiom(s) must be grounded in some other claim(s). But then, surely, one should take the latter as one's base theory instead. In sum, then, while propositional deflationism is arguably incompatible with truth-theoretic semantics on independent grounds, we have seen that, at least if we accept grounding theory, disquotationalism naturally understood in such a way that it, too, is incompatible with truth-theoretic semantics.

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