

The Semantic Switching Theory of Truth

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ABSTRACT

My starting assumption is that truth is a semantic concept. Semantics is a linguistic discipline that deals with certain relations between *expressions* of a language and *the objects* represented by those expressions. Based on this characterization, it is natural to think that truth is the main focal point at which our language and the world meet, because most of us would take our language to be *about* the world we live. By acquiring true expressions in our language, we seem to gain access to the world, or more precisely, to have access to the objects in the world. By virtue of true expressions, the world is said to be mirrored or represented by our language. So, if someone is attempting to construct a semantic theory for the concept of truth, she would feel obligatory to provide some metaphysical perspective with respect to what the world is like. When she further introduces entities like objects, facts, or states of affairs to define the concept of truth or to explain why expressions of a language are true, the debate between realism and antirealism can easily arise.

However, semantics and metaphysics are different. Semantics as characterized above is considered as a linguistic subject that deals with the meanings of linguistic expressions. Metaphysics, on the other hand, is a philosophical enterprise that purports to explore the nature of the world and to describe the structures and constituents of it. We may also say that semantics has its eyes primarily on language, while metaphysics has its focus on the world. Because the two distinct areas can merge so intimately together, some philosophers feel like to approach linguistic issues from the metaphysical perspectives and construct the theses of

philosophical semantics based on their metaphysical positions. The problem is that this practice and procedure result in various confusions of semantic and metaphysical issues. It is important to explore the sources of the confusions that lie between semantics and metaphysics, and to realize that we can have a linguistic conception of truth based on a pure semantic project without taking up the traditional metaphysical perspectives and issues. A new model *cum* schema will be suggested at the end of this paper to show how our languages can be properly confronted with the world.

Metaphysical issues and debates have always had a great impact on epistemology and semantics as well. It should be called a scandal in philosophy that most of controversies in epistemology and semantics suffer from the infection of a metaphysical virus. The current realism-antirealism debate on the concept of truth is a very good example of how a metaphysical virus affects the discussions of linguistic issues. Issues concerning what the nature of truth is and what role the concept of truth can play in our understanding of the world have drawn philosophers' attention from the fields of both metaphysics and semantics. The construction of a theory of truth is often viewed as a metaphysical project as well as a semantic one. Unlike metaphysics, projects in semantics usually aim to answer the questions as to why expressions of our language are true and what the meanings of expressions of our language are. When philosophers attempt to construct such a semantic theory, they keep looking for a metaphysical rescue. They hope that philosophical semantics can give an answer to the question of why linguistic expressions are true by appealing to some kind of truth-maker in the

world. They also seek an explanation of what the meanings of linguistic expressions are by referring to some kind of entities in reality. They then follow with the question as to whether the so-called truth-makers or entities referred to really exist independently of human perceptions or conceptions. So, the realism/antirealism debate is revived in the field of semantics.

Michael Lynch, in the "Introduction" to his anthology *The Nature of Truth*, distinguishes various kinds of "Robust theories of truth" from the "Deflationary theories of truth" based on the starting point (or question): "Does truth have a nature?" So, it is immediately obvious for him that we should sort out various theories depending on whether the attitudes toward the starting question are positive or negative. It is very easy to recognize the distinction made by Lynch between "robust theories" and "deflationary theories" is based on a metaphysically oriented question or starting point. The central concern of these different sorts of theories of truth is still the concept of truth, or more specifically speaking, the nature of truth (if any). A theory of truth based on this kind of concern is a theory at the metaphysical level. However, Lynch also notices that "there is a growing consensus among some philosophers that neither traditional robust theories nor deflationary theories are right." If this is so, then he claims that "we must find new ways to think about this old concept." (Lynch, 2001: 5) Instead of following the starting (metaphysical) question, it is my claim that we do have, and should begin with, "a new way to think about the old concept of truth in general". So, instead of asking "whether truth has a nature", we should ask "what truth can contribute to a semantic theory", or "what we need a theory of truth for in semantics". I want to argue that we can view the concept of truth from a

semantic theory based on a linguistic perspective, and use truth to help us explain how various semantic phenomena can work in the ordinary language.

The concept of truth has always been an ambiguous philosophical jargon. The ancient problem of truth was leveled on the metaphysical platform, and both Plato and Aristotle tried to face the problem by providing some robust conceptions of truth. The modern problem of truth has been lifted by semantic ascent, and philosophers like Frege, Russell, Tarski and Quine all want to find a logically precise and clear expression for explicating the semantic concept of truth. However, as we have also witnessed, most contemporary discussions regarding the concept of truth have been loaded with traditional metaphysical burdens, and many varieties of theories of truth are metaphysical in nature. Most philosophers now will agree that when we talk about the concept of truth we are talking about the truth predicate of a language. That said, some will treat it as a genuine semantic predicate which ascribes the property of truth to what instantiates it, and some will deny it to be a genuine predicate or refuse to admit that the predicate picks out a substantive property.

Since Tarski showed how we can avail ourselves of the truth predicate by his theory of truth, the concept of truth has been understood and applied in many different ways. Most of these ways try to make use of Tarski's T-schema and develop some kind of theory of truth in which the concept of truth is hoped to be better accommodated. The idea of Tarski's T-schema is to provide a minimal condition of adequacy of any theory of truth. The theory must entail all instances of the following schema:

(T) 's' is true if and only if p ,

where "s" is replaced by a systematic description of any sentence 's', and ' p ' is replaced by a translation of 's' into the language of the theory of truth.

Setting aside Tarski's further claims about truth, the concept of truth involved in the schema T can be interpreted and has been applied in two fundamentally distinct ways. On the one hand, the truth predicate involved in the T-sentences, say "'snow is white' is *true* if and only if snow is white", can be interpreted as truth for (or relative to) a particular language. The concept of truth is indeed understood as a relative concept that the truth predicate for some particular language $L1$ (or "*true-in-L1*") and the truth predicate for the language $L2$ (or "*true-in-L2*") are two different predicates, and so stand for two different concepts. Even if some theory of truth this kind did successfully provide a definition for the concept of truth, it would not be a definition for the general concept of truth for all languages, but many definitions for various different concepts of truth, or more accurately speaking, different definitions for the concepts "truth-in-L1", "truth-in-L2", "truth-in-L3", and so on. The question remains: do these different truth predicates have anything in common that would constitute the nature of the concept of truth in general?

On the other hand, as I will argue, the truth predicate involved in the T-sentences presupposes a more general concept of truth that should be interpreted as a concept applied to all languages. That is to say, the concept of truth in question should be understood as a trans-linguistic concept that can be applied to any particular language. Moreover, it seems that the

relative concepts “truth-in-L1”, “truth-in-L2”, “truth-in-L3”, etc. have some common feature that can lead us to generalize a more thorough concept with some trans-linguistic essence. The question is what the presupposed concept is like and how the trans-linguistic truth can be constructed based on the various relative truths.

Quine has made use of Tarski’s theory and developed his own disquotational view regarding the concept of truth. However, Quine recognizes that the disquotational feature of truth has to be *immanent*: to call a sentence true is just to include it in our language. The disquotational feature of truth gives the extension of a truth predicate only for a particular language, and what is being defined is nothing but the concept like “*truth-in-L1*”. If we ask what all such different immanent truth predicates have in common, it is something that the disquotational account cannot answer. But the concept of truth we understand and use is not relative to any specific language, nor is it regulated and determined by it. Our language cannot fix truth. Quine knows that truth should hinge on reality but not language, and that our theory of the world can be proven wrong. It seems to be this concern that leads Quine to puzzle over a *transcendent* sense of truth, and allows the kind of truth to be something that scientists are always in quest of, or something that “looms as a heaven that we keep steering for and correcting to”.

Quine’s immanent sense of truth amounts to the relative concept, such as “*truth-in-L1*”, in Tarski’s theory, and the transcendent sense of truth can be identified as the trans-linguistic concept of truth which is supposed to be applied to all and any particular language. But the

question is: are the immanent sense and the transcendent sense of truth two different kinds of truth? Is there a tension between two of them: one transparent and the other relatively mysterious in nature? I want to argue that both of Quine's immanent and transcendent senses of truth can be accounted for on the linguistic level and should be accommodated with a semantic project, rather than viewing them from a metaphysical point of view. In addition, I also want to argue that there is an important aspect of the immanent sense of truth which is involved but ignored in Quine's discussions of semantics: the notion of semantic ascent. The notions of disquotation together with semantic ascent will constitute what I call "the semantic switching theory of truth".

In conclusion, I propose that a semantic theory based on the model and the new schema will have the following features:

- 1) It will link a semantic switching approach to the immanent truth together with a translational (or interpretational) approach to the transcendent truth.
- 2) It uses "holding-true" and "true" as the primitive concepts and to provide the basis for a satisfactory account of translation or interpretation.
- 3) It has no infection of metaphysics.
- 4) It will avoid the semantic paradox.