



Meaning Without Truth

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review by Alessandro Rizzo

As Strawson points out, something acknowledged by many is that a fundamental part of the meaning of any natural language can be ‘explicable either in terms of truth-conditions or in terms of some related notion’ (Strawson, 2004, p. 178). A clear instance where the notion of truth plays an obvious role is when we account for the meaning of descriptive language – i.e., language used to convey and exchange information about the world. Semantic theories that centre on this notion conceive of the meaning of a linguistic expression as a contribution to the truth-conditions of the sentence in which it occurs.

Even though language is frequently used as a descriptive device, and truth-conditional semantics is a powerful and productive theoretical tool, it is neither the case that a descriptive function exhausts the expressive potential of a natural language, nor that the notion of truth can aspire to model every facet of linguistic meaning as a whole. In fact, there is a vast realm of linguistic phenomena that evade explanation in terms of truth-conditions. It is easy to recall expressions, or even sentences, that are clearly meaningful but recalcitrant to considerations of truth or falsehood. Interjections like ‘hurray’ or ‘alas’, for example, are meaningful expressions that seem to lack any interesting truth-conditional profile, and since compositionality is usually a dogma of semantic theory, it is hard to see how such expressions would contribute to the truth-conditions of the sentences in which they occur.

Predelli’s book, as made explicit in the title, is concerned with non-truth-conditional meaning: the residual of meaning left untouched by truth-conditional semantics, and specifically that which is embedded at the semantic level. The aim of the book is to provide a fruitful theoretical framework to account for some seemingly heterogeneous non-truth-conditional linguistic phenomena. Predelli does not, then, seek to construct a theory of non-truth-conditional

meaning, but rather a collection of interrelated concepts within which singular theories of specific non-truth-conditional phenomena can be stated and articulated. Rather than discussing the plausibility of his framework or the philosophical concerns that it could raise, Predelli's argumentative strategy consists in showcasing how his framework performs when applied to apparently different linguistic phenomena. The reader is, then, to appreciate the framework by its fruits.

The main idea of the book is to account for non-truth-conditional meaning in terms of constraints on appropriate contexts of use. If for truth-conditional semantics meaning equals truth-conditions, then for non-truth-conditional semantics meaning exceeds truth-conditions, and can be found also in usage. An expression contributes to the truth-conditions of the sentence in which it occurs in the same way that it contributes to the use-conditions of that sentence. In the former case, an expression constrains contexts in which a sentence is true, while in the latter case it constrains contexts in which a sentence is appropriately used. Predelli holds that this two-fold dimension of meaning is encoded at the semantic conventional level such that an expression can be represented as a pair character-bias, where 'character' is the usual Kaplanian function from contexts to intentions that accounts for truth-conditional meaning, and a 'bias' is the element that encodes the non-truth-conditional contribution.

The book is divided into three parts: In the first, Predelli briefly presents a truth-conditional theoretical framework and introduces the notion of 'settlement'. This sets the stage for the second part, which is devoted to the concept of 'bias', and which contains the main part of the book and his proposal. The third part deals with the concepts of 'obstinacy' and 'recruitment' and is intended as an extended case study – a further testbed for his framework with the case of demonstratives. In what follows I will make a critical summary of the contents of Predelli's book, and I will then make a very brief overall evaluation. For my starting point I will take the concept of settlement, as presented in part one.

The concept of settlement can be understood as a generalization of the concept of 'truth in any context' in which the concept is relativized to a type of use. For example, the sentence 'it rains or it doesn't rain' is truth in all contexts, while the sentence 'I am speaking now' is true when uttered by a speaker in a genuine face-to-face conversation, but is clearly not true in all contexts. Still, it manifests a similar 'penchant for truth' (45). Indeed, the sentence is true in all contexts that belong to the above type of use.

To understand how Predelli manages to account for such a phenomenon it is helpful to look at his conception of linguistic use. A use, for Predelli, is a pair expression-context, where a context is the familiar Kaplanian n-tuple comprising at least a possible-world, a time, a location, and an agent. While every use is associated with such a pair, not every expression-context pair represents a use.

For example, a silent context in which no expression is used cannot represent a use of that expression. Only contexts of use – a proper subclass of the class of all contexts – can do that. A context belongs to the class of ‘context of use’ if it meets certain necessary conditions, such as the existence, at some point in time, of tokens of a certain expression, or the existence of an intentional agent.

Considerations regarding such constraints amount to a theory of ‘generic’ use of an expression. Uses can be classified, then, in types – like face-to-face, text messaging, etc. – simply by distinguishing type-specific constraints on the context. For example, a face-to-face type of use would require that the speaker exists in that context and actually tokens the articulation of that expression.

Predelli only sketches a theory of use for this or that type of use because such enterprise is only peripheral to his project. What he wants to show is that, given a type of use individuated by negotiable necessary constraints on contexts of use, we can find some sentences to be always true within that use and that this is due to constraints and not to reasons concerning character. So, in our previous example, the sentence ‘I am speaking now’ is settled, i.e., always true, in a face-to-face type of use because in such contexts the speaker must both be present and uttering the sentence.

I think that Predelli’s concept of settlement is very interesting for a non truth-condition-centred semantic theory. In fact, if meaning is also use, such a theory ought to account for use-specific regularities, like truth-conditional theory of meaning does with regularities having to do with truth-conditional features of language. After all, the notion of settlement resembles the notion of tautology. For example, a settled sentence for a specific type of use, like a tautology, has null semantic informative status. That does not mean that such sentences cannot be used to impart information on a different, perhaps a pragmatic, level, but only that the semantic information they purport is already built on the constraints of that specific type of use, and is thus redundant.

One side of the moral of part one of the book is a piece of negative methodological advice: Do not confuse evidence of penchant for truth compatible with cases of mere settlement for evidence of truth by virtue of character only. Predelli labels this methodological mistake ‘the fallacy of misplaced character’ and it is committed whenever we let truth-conditions dominate our understanding of meaning.

Throughout part one Predelli considers constraints on specific types of use without further investigation into where those constraints come from. Part two advances the hypothesis that in some cases constraints on contexts of use of a specific expression or on sentences containing that expression are to be found at the semantic level, embedded in the very conventional meaning of that expression. Interjections like ‘hurray’ and ‘alas’ are clear examples. These expressions lack any interesting truth-conditional profile but are meaningful and determine

the proper contexts of use of sentences in which they occur. For example, in the sentence 'Hurray! John got the job!', 'hurray' is to count as properly used only if the speaker is favourably disposed towards the fact that John got the job. This constraint is not type-specific, but expression-specific. In other words, the constraints for a context of use to count as a proper context of use of that expression is part of the semantic parcel of that expression. As already stated, it is this dimension of the meaning of an expression – distinct from the character and directly connected to the use of a sentence – that Predelli calls a 'bias'. In this way the conventional meaning of an expression exceeds its character and should be represented as a pair character-bias.

Predelli's hypothesis is very intriguing. He deals with non-truth-conditional aspects of meaning basically by extending truth-conditional semantics in a way that preserves the semantic compositionality and semantic *innocence* (constant semantic import across all contexts) of an expression even when the expression has no truth-conditional profile. Even more promising, he sketches an example of logic for biased expression – like 'hurray' – where traditional logic concerned with truth-preserving relations is enriched with considerations about a broader notion of 'meaning encoded' interactions. Furthermore, his distinction is cogent in that, at the explanatory level, neither character nor bias can do alone what they can when combined. In fact, just as there are expressions without an interesting truth-conditional profile, there are expressions without an interesting non-truth-conditional profile, such as proper names. Indeed, in what sense would the meaning of a proper name constrain a proper context of use? When a proper name is properly used?

In the two central sections of part two Predelli shows us how to deal with expressions that are not purely biased, that is, biased expressions of a non-trivial character. The phenomena he elects as representative concern questions of register and coarseness; child directed speech, and honorifics, and slurs. These last kind of expressions occupy a whole section and prove particularly fertile ground for non-truth-conditional explorations.

The third part focuses on the notions of obstinacy and recruitment as preliminaries, to show how Predelli's notion of bias can provide a novel account of certain puzzles involving demonstratives. Obstinacy is, for Predelli, a phenomenon that arises when an indexical expression behaves context insensitively. Borrowing Predelli's own example, in the sentence 'oh Maury, you're in your second childhood' the indexicals 'you' and 'your' should be context sensitive, but in this particular case the vocative at the beginning of the sentence fixes the contextual parameter needed for saturation, making them, at all effects, context insensitive.

According to Predelli, vocatives are biased expressions, but they are not pure-biased, since they have an interesting truth-conditional profile. They are peculiar expressions because their bias is determined by their character: in fact, tak-

ing our previous examples, the vocative can be represented as something like *voc(name)*, and a context of use is appropriate if and only if the addressee of the speaker is 'name'. Predelli names such linguistic devices 'recruitment devices' and the linguistic phenomenon they generate 'recruitment'.

In the remainder of part three Predelli deals with cases of demonstratives, for which the demonstratum is given by the sentence itself. Examples are semaphores – like in Quine's *Giorgione* sentence – and pure quotations. To exemplify his approach I will now briefly turn to his treatment of quotations.

In his section on 'Davidsonian quotations' Predelli deals with two seemingly contrasting intuitions about pure quotations: on the one hand, Davidson's intuition that pure quotations behaves (roughly) as demonstratives – they point to the 'content' within the quotation marks; on the other hand they display a clear context-insensitivity that is counterintuitive for a demonstratives. To conciliate these two intuitions, Predelli shows how his analysis of non-truth-conditional meaning in terms of bias can get the work done. Predelli argues that q-terms manifesting context-insensitivity is actually a case of obstinate indexicality. Specifically, it is a case of context-insensitivity derived from the q-term's monogamous concern for whatever happens to occur in its 'internal structure' (173).

Overall, I find Predelli's project highly interesting both in terms of originality and applicability. As he himself describes it, it is more of an empirical enterprise than a philosophy book in the strict sense. However, it should prove a rewarding read for both linguists and philosophers, and for anyone interested in non-truth-conditional meaning and natural language semantics in general.



References

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