

Truth, Metaphor, and Indeterminability  
Forthcoming (in German translation) in

## Introduction

This essay is an exposition, defense, supplementation, and elaboration of Donald Davidson's account of metaphor. The first section outlines some features of Davidson's account of language. The second section shows how Davidson's account of metaphor as rhetorical fits with his general conception of language. The third section discusses the semantic indeterminacy that arises as a consequence of Davidson's account of metaphor. This indeterminacy is a consequence that goes well beyond anything that Davidson explicitly acknowledged. Davidson's account is committed to the thesis that the line between the metaphorical and the literal is sometimes indeterminate in principle. In effect this means that the semantics of most idiolects is indeterminate. I argue that this is a result that should be expected, given that there is indeterminacy in applying the intentional scheme and given that truth is the central concept of the intentional scheme.

The fourth and fifth sections defend this conclusion against two kinds of objections. The fourth section argues that, unless a surprising reduction of semantics to neurophysiology is possible, there is no empirical criterion for a determinate line between the metaphorical and the literal. The fifth section meets the objection that a truth-conditional semantics cannot tolerate indeterminacy of truth-values.

## I Predication, Truth, and Reference

For Davidson, following Quine, the fundamental connection between language and the world is the sentence, an item with a truth-value. More precisely, for Davidson, the unit of contact is an individual's utterance or inscription on an occasion. Ascribing references to singular terms and extensions to predicates is then a matter of, as it were,

organizing the truths, or what are taken to be truths, of the speaker's over-all theory. Taking sentences to be the unit of contact means taking truth to be the fundamental semantic notion. The conception that sentences, not singular terms, are primary in a language-user's interactions with the world makes truth, rather than reference, the notion in which other semantic concepts are explicated. Other semantic notions, such as reference and predication, are analyzed in terms of their contribution to the truth of sentences, rather than vice versa. Davidson's picture, inherited from Quine, is that ontology in effect organizes the truths.<sup>1</sup>

For most contemporary metaphysicians and philosophers of language, the semantic dependency is reversed. Whereas for Davidson and Quine, Being is supervenient on Truth, Truth is supervenient on Being for the vast majority of contemporary philosophers. On the majority view, utterances are true in virtue of some array of beings—individuals and properties, elements and sets, and so on. Correct predication is then explained by some kind of connection between an individual and a property. An account of such a connection has been extraordinarily difficult to give.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Because Davidson holds that there is no "given" (see Davidson's "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*), he is not a global relativist. Of course, Davidson does allow that a person could have a predicate or family of predicates that truly applied to objects but did not correspond in application with any predicates in another person's idiolect. (Both of these languages would, of course, have to be learned by triangulation, that is, by social interaction that would establish the distinction between belief and truth.) People from different societies would have large areas of disagreement of this sort. After some mutual language-learning, disagreements could arise about whether any of the sentences using "mana," for instance, were true. This could happen even though one speaker had learned the terms by triangulation. If that were the case, the later learner of the term might reject part of the theory, and explain his acquired ability to detect mana as detecting something entirely different in nature from what his interlocutor held to be the case.

In other cases, the two people could hold that there was no issue, but just a difference, as we do when we recognize that the French "mouton" has the extension has the extension "sheep or mutton." That we English speakers accept that there is an extension to the French term, I suppose, depends on the naturalness of the mereological sum.

<sup>2</sup> Plato's *Parmenides* raises the fundamental problem, that any relation between a property and the individuals the property attaches to is itself a relation, a feature of the pair. Over the millennia, other versions of this regress have appeared.

For Davidson, on the other hand, predication is just the satisfaction or “true of” relation, a generalization of the notion of truth. So predication is “explained” by the formula, “Predicate P is correctly applied to individual A if and only if P is true of A.” Correct application of a predicate to an individual is explained in terms of truth, rather than truth being explained in terms of referents of predicates and names. Since predication is not a relation among entities, there is no problem of how to characterize that mysterious bond. For Davidson, properties and individuals supervene on the truths, rather than vice versa.

To the question what “makes” a sentence true, Davidson answers “Nothing,” in the sense that there are no entities corresponding to the true sentences such that the sentence is true in virtue of the existence of the entity.<sup>3</sup> There are no pieces of the world making sentences true, so thus no “facts” or “states of affairs” to which sentences as wholes correspond. Of course the world as a whole “conforms” to the true sentence as a whole, in the sense that “snow is white” is true if and only if snow is white. This formula does not express a relation, since the sentence on the right does not designate an entity.

The alternative formulation of the traditional correspondence account of truth is that truth is the meaning of the sentence fitting the situation, so that what an expression means corresponds to what is the case. On this picture, the situation is given, and the meaning is something attached to the terms that makes those terms fit the individuals and properties in the given domain. For objective fit, these meanings will have to correspond

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<sup>3</sup> This opinion is supported by an argument, ascribed to Frege, developed by Church and Godel, and applied for many purposes by Quine, that if we allow substitution of co-referential terms to preserve reference, and suppose that sentences have referents, then all true sentence have the same referent. This argument has come to be known as the Slingshot. For the state of the art, relative to this argument, see Stephen Neale’s *Facing Facts*, Oxford UP, 2001.

in nature to the entities with which they are matched. The history of philosophy since Plato has come up with numerous accounts of what these meanings could be.<sup>4</sup>

Davidson's account of meaning likewise makes truth primary. The meaning of an utterance is its truth-conditions. Truth-conditions, though, are not expressed in terms of configurations of entities corresponding to parts of sentences, but rather purely in language. Meanings are given in language by giving truth-conditions. Truth-conditions, that is, sentences in the language of the interpreter, give all the information there is to give about what the world has to be like for the sentence to be true. There is no medium of meaning that is more directly connected to reality than language itself.

That there is no such medium of meaning is the central point of connection between Davidson's discussion of metaphor and those of Derrida and De Man. Since "meanings" are given in language, there is nothing "behind" language to be "metaphorical meaning." Thus, on such accounts, there is little room for anything other than a rhetorical account of such figures of speech as metaphor.<sup>5</sup>

For Davidson the "literal" meaning is just the meaning, the truth-conditions, and the literal truth of an utterance is just its truth. If meaning is nothing but words giving the truth-conditions of other words, there is nothing strictly called meaning available to be "metaphorical meaning." Of course Davidson accommodates the ways metaphorical speech acts "mean" something other than their literal sense in some sense of "meaning."

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<sup>4</sup> In various articles in my *Deconstruction as Analytic Philosophy* (Stanford UP 2000) I discuss this "magic language" that has characterized theories of meaning.

<sup>5</sup> If meanings are given in words, then the "transport" of meanings would have to be a transport from words to words. If metaphors could be paraphrased, and there were a systematic way of coming up with such paraphrases, perhaps a semantic mapping would explain metaphors. But such an account would still be rhetorical, in the sense that there would need to be some cue that the utterance was not an assertion of its ordinary sense, but that the interpreter was supposed to apply the conventional mapping.

Treating (systematic) truth-conditions as the semantics of the language means that, relative to other conceptions of semantics, Davidson's semantics is minimalist. This means that other aspects of language-use that some would treat as parts of meaning are instead construed by Davidson as the result of interpretation of a speaker's or writer's presentation of an utterance with truth-conditions for some purpose. The "meaning" in an expanded sense, of the utterance is then the interpretation of the person's action, what the person was trying to communicate with the utterance.

Davidson is a minimalist about semantics because he holds that semantics must give an account of how a person understands an unlimited number of sentences in his language. Given that humans are finite creatures, a semantics must constitute an algorithm, a recursive procedure, for understanding new sentences on the basis of understanding a limited vocabulary. On such a conception of semantics, very rich notions of meaning cannot be delivered by a semantic theory, but are rather products of interpretation.<sup>6</sup> Of course, Davidson does recognize phenomena that could be called "meaning" which go well beyond truth-conditions. On a Davidsonian account, these rich notions of meaning are the result of human communication by means of utterances with truth-conditions. People use sentences with truth-conditions for a variety of purposes, and the "meaning" of those speech acts is their purposes. But purposes are idiosyncratic and varied. Thus a systematic, recursive theory will not give an account of this kind of

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<sup>6</sup> Davidson's view rests on other considerations as well. Economy of means would dictate that the minimum we must ascribe to semantics in order to explain language capacity would be the optimal theory. The empirical basis for supposing that there is more to knowledge of language would require showing that there is something truth-conditions plus interpretation cannot supply. Another consideration is that we are very far from achieving a semantics that satisfies even the minimum requirements that a semantics deliver truth-conditions.

meaning. However, the fundamental, truth-conditional semantics will describe the equipment with which speakers produce these meaningful actions.

To leave aspects of the richness of meaning out of semantics is to abandon the idea that such aspects of meaning are systematizable or reducible to sets of rules. The more that a theory attempts to make aspects of language-use subject to rules; the less room the theory allows for creative and original applications of language. Davidson's account of language, by making the rule-governed structure that language-users employ the minimum required for systematic communication, leaves maximum room for innovation and creativity. Thus Davidson's account accords with the widespread literary intuition that language is an extraordinarily flexible and malleable tool for speakers and writers generally, but especially for the great innovators, such as Joyce. As a philosopher who began his academic career as a student of literature, Davidson views this feature of his theory as one of its great strengths.

For Davidson, language-interpretation is a species of action-interpretation. Interpreting language is interpreting actions done with particular instruments, namely sentences with truth-conditions. Those instruments have "standard" as well as non-standard applications. Standard applications include, for instance, informing an audience that the truth-conditions of the utterance obtain, inducing an audience to make it the case that the truth-conditions obtain, or asking an audience whether the truth-conditions obtain, that is, asserting, commanding, and asking yes-no questions.<sup>7</sup> But these are only a few of the kinds of speech-actions that speakers perform with their utterances and texts. Interpretation of a text or utterance, then, is figuring out what action the speaker is trying

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<sup>7</sup> As Davidson argues in "Moods and Performances" (in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford UP 1984), these purposes are independent of grammatical mood. An utterance of "The building will be empty tomorrow" can be a command; an utterance of "John has left" can be a question.

to accomplish—both what kind of action, and what particular action of that kind. So interpreting “The building will be empty tomorrow” is figuring out that the utterance is a command and that its content is that the building will be empty tomorrow. No set of rules will tell the interpreter when it is a command; rather the interpreter has to use knowledge that the speaker is an officer, that there is some reason to empty the building, and so on. The “and so on” says that there is no algorithm for determining what the speaker is doing.

Typically, a speaker is trying to communicate with an audience. To do so, the speaker must have ideas about how his words will be interpreted by his audience, and uses these ideas in order to bring about the desired understanding. So, for instance, a use of sarcasm is the presentation of a sentence that is obviously false, in the belief that the audience will recognize that it is obviously false and so could not be a serious assertion.

Such “strategic” use of language can be termed “rhetorical.” Much of the understanding and communication that results from speech and writing is, in a sense, rhetorical. The interpreter grasps the point of the speech-act, which may well be different from conveying to the hearer that the truth-conditions obtain. A simple example will illustrate: When a person says something like “Bush is an idiot,” and his hearer says “I agree,” the literal content of the remark is false, the hearer knows this, and interprets the speaker as using hyperbole. The hearer’s agreement is with the thought that was communicated, not with the truth-value of the utterance.

## II Literal and Metaphorical

According to Davidson, a metaphor is an utterance that is false, but presented for another purpose than saying what is the case. Typically, this other purpose will be to

illuminate something about the object predicated, or to draw attention to some feature. (I will discuss below the account that would treat metaphors as elliptical similes.) Being a metaphor can thus be called a rhetorical property of an utterance, not a part of its semantics. Davidson's account thus agrees with Paul de Man's in this respect. More generally, the role of the rhetorical, the force or intention with which something is said, plays a large role in both accounts.

Davidson's minimal semantics rules out otherwise plausible accounts of the truth-conditions of metaphorical utterances. For instance, the idea that a metaphor is a compressed comparison seems quite plausible, since generally speaking one interprets a metaphorical expression as bringing one's attention to some interesting and relevant similarity that obtains between the object and its metaphorical characterization. But if we state the truth-conditions of a metaphorical utterance such as "Juliet is the sun" as "there is some resemblance between Juliet and the sun," the truth-conditions are trivially met, and the metaphorical remark is true.

Of course, in the concrete situation, the interpretation by the hearer will be assisted by knowledge of what is relevant, appropriate, and the like. For many familiar figures of speech, there are stereotypes and commonplaces such that most interpreters can come up with in interpretation, and they will usually get interpretation right. Using such normal, standard interpretations, one could define a non-minimalist sense of meaning such that the utterance was "true" or "false" depending on whether the situation made the metaphor appropriate relative to the current stereotypes and commonplaces.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Such commonplaces may be completely mistaken. A common English simile for sweating profusely is "sweating like a pig." But in fact pigs don't sweat at all, having no sweat glands. Having dealt with pigs in my days as a farm worker, I can say that most of the commonplaces about their character and intelligence are mistaken.

It is difficult to see how such a quasi-conventionalist account could deal with innovative metaphors. What the person meant, and what might be seen in interpreting a metaphor, might be none of the familiar resemblances that could be laid out in any systematic theory. The context may be astronomers specializing in solar studies, and the speaker might have meant that Juliet is nearly spherical, but with some bulges, etc. Such an intended resemblance could be successfully communicated by “Juliet is the sun.” Briefly, if metaphors were really elliptical similes, they would all be true, as similes are.

Suppose there were syntactic or neurological evidence that metaphors were in fact elliptical similes. Little would change in a Davidsonian theory, except that, instead of saying that metaphors were trivially false, one would say that, like similes, metaphors are trivially true. The phenomenon that makes metaphor and simile useful is rhetorical, and rests on the intention with which such figures are produced. Similes are always true, but their truth-value is not their point. Similes, though they are true, are not uttered or written in order to alert the hearer to that truth-value.

### III Intention and Indeterminacy

The difference between metaphors and “regular” “literal” predication is rhetorical, in the sense that the difference is purely a matter of the communicative intention with which the utterance is produced. The intention is quite clear when a new and innovative metaphor is in question. But most metaphorical language is not new and innovative, but rather familiar and routine. For speed and convenience of communication, you might say, metaphors and figures with standard interpretations are probably to be preferred.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The distinction between innovative and familiar figures would not be between poetry and prose, or between fine writing and banal writing. Many ancient literatures had stocks of routine figures. A familiar example is the kenning of Norse literature, for instance.

Such metaphors, with familiarity, can become additional senses of words of the language. Other times, metaphors become catch-phrases or idioms that survive the extinction of the original word. For example, in the English idiom “hoist on his own petard,” probably fewer than one in a hundred English speakers know what a petard is. For another example, very few speakers of English know that the “shrift” in the common phrase, “given short shrift” has anything to do with making a confession.

Metaphors and other figures sometimes become independent words, when the words of which they are figural extensions pass away or are unfamiliar to most speakers. The etymologies of English words show that their history is often that of metaphorical applications of terms becoming routine, and then becoming the literal meanings of terms. Figures can become literal, sometimes passing beyond the “dead” stage, where the “literal” meaning is still present to speakers, to the stage where the figuration is available only to the scholar.<sup>10</sup> Other metaphors become distinct senses of words. “Berth” was originally a space for a ship to pass at sea. This sense is still present in English, at least in the metaphorical extension, “giving X wide berth.” “Berth” now means a place for a ship to dock, and most frequently, now a place on a train, boat, or other transport in which a person can sleep. The English speaker plausibly has three distinct words, about which he might speculate that they have something to do with one another historically.

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<sup>10</sup> “Fornicate” was originally a metonymy, an indirect way of alluding to activities in fornication, the arches. Examples could be multiplied at dictionary length. “Sobriquet,” now meaning “nickname,” originally was a chuck under the chin. “Futile” comes from flowing, by the flowing of words from the foolish, then, by another turn, “hopeless.”

These speculations by speakers about the connections among their words are often quite erroneous. A speaker of English might conjecture that since “halter” is a device one can seize to halt animals, it is derived from the verb “to halt.”<sup>11</sup>

Let us focus on those metaphors that are dying while, intuitively, there is both a “metaphorical” and a “literal” sense to the words. For our purposes, following the model of Quine’s Web of Belief, we can think of a “sense” of a word as characterized by a vague set of truisms, or warranted inferences associated with a term. For example, “If X has been crushed, then X has been destroyed”<sup>12</sup> will be a sentence connected to occurrences of “crush” that will support inferences. Let us consider two kinds of cases:

1) In the first kind of case, it appears that the extension of a single word is enlarged. Suppose that “launch” as applied to projects or enterprises, is no longer a metaphor, but once applied literally only to boats. Then the sentence “We launched the fund drive” was at first being used for a purpose other than asserting it to be true of an event.

At the end of this process, such sentences had become literal. There are two interpretations of what has occurred. On one interpretation, the single predicate “launch” came to correctly describe a much larger class of events than before. The inferences associated with “launch” originally, for instance “If X is launched, then X enters water.,”

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<sup>11</sup> The Rev. A. Smythe Palmer’s nineteenth century compilation, *Folk Etymology* (Henry Holt & Co. 1883, Greenwood reprint 1969) has numerous such examples, many of which historically affected pronunciation and even spelling. A familiar example is the Jerusalem artichoke, misunderstood from the Italian “girasol,” or sunflower. Another example of how such speculations can be very wide of the mark: Most English speakers would think that “swim” in the phrase, “makes your head swim” has some figural or historical connection with “swim” as a mode of motion through the water. “Swim” meaning “dizzy” goes back to an indo-European root, whereas “swim” meaning motion through water (cognate with “sound” as in Long Island Sound) has another root.

<sup>12</sup> Let us ignore the complication that “destroyed” can be used metaphorically as well, ruining the test. Perhaps a paraphrase such as “reduced to smaller fragments” would capture this implication of the “literal” sense of “cursh.”

will be relativized to kinds of object. That is, just as the inference from “That is tall” to “that is over five meters high” holds when said of buildings but not when said of people, so “launch” would be supposed to have different implications when said of different kinds of objects.

On another interpretation, we could regard “launch” as having become two distinct predicates. Since ships are physical objects and projects and enterprises are not, it is difficult to think of a case in which both of these predicates could apply to a single object, and so difficult to think of a case where one predicate applied and a member of the contrast set of the other predicate applied. That is, only if ships were entities like projects, and could be launched but not put in the water would there be a difficulty in thinking of “launch” as a single predicate.

2) In the second kind of case, thinking of the predicate as having merely widened its extension would appear to allow contradictions. Consider “crush” as it occurs in “The players of Manchester United crushed the Arsenal players” and in “The collapse of their hotel crushed the Arsenal players.” Since the players of Manchester United could have crushed Arsenal in the same way as the hotel’s collapse did, perhaps by using bulldozers, the term “crush” seems to have to have become ambiguous between an original “pulverized” sense and a literalized metaphorical sense.<sup>13</sup>

How can this phenomenon be understood if metaphoricity is rhetorical? The familiar notion of the “dead” metaphor is usually conceived as a cultural phenomenon, something that happens to a language as a cultural entity that develops over time. While

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<sup>13</sup> Even “crush” might be treated as having just one sense, if a different kind of relativization is appealed to. John can be a good carpenter, but not a good father without contradiction. Yet we can hardly hold that “good” corresponds to an indefinite number of distinct words. Various strategies have suggested themselves for “good.” In the case of “crush,” perhaps one could posit “respects” or the like so that the appearance of contradiction is removed.

there can be routine rhetorical devices in a culture, those routine devices still are distinguished by intentions if they are still genuinely rhetorical. Prima facie, if intention is the distinguishing feature of metaphor and some other kinds of figuration, the issue whether an occurrence of a predicate is metaphorical must be a matter of whether the appropriate *individual* intention was present. A metaphor can be a metaphor only relative to an idiolect at a time.

This accords with Davidson's conception of what a language is. For a Davidsonian, each person's language is slightly different from anyone else's, so there is no useful precise concept of "language" that non-arbitrarily groups dialects as "one language."<sup>14</sup> For semantical purposes, then, the idiolect is the primary phenomenon. Lack of metaphoricity and therefore loss of metaphoricity, is a matter of the intention with which a particular person's speech act is produced. So, the death of a metaphor in an individual idiolect must be a matter of that individual coming to use a predicate with the intention of saying something true.

The vast majority of metaphorical utterances are copied speech-acts. When a speech-act is copied, sometimes the copier is copying the speech-act with its intention, while sometimes only the intended communication is copied. An imitator wants to imitate "what was said" and "what was said" can be taken in at least these two ways. When the intention of the speaker is unclear to the auditor, the auditor can take the metaphorical utterance to be intended as literal. Then the imitation will be literal, i.e. the speech-act will be an assertion.

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<sup>14</sup> Davidson famously say (in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" in *Truth and Interpretation*, Basil Blackwell, 1986, page 446) that there is, "no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many linguists and philosophers have supposed." The idiolect at a time is what matters in interpretation and understanding.

Such a death of a metaphor will amount to the splitting of a single predicate into two predicates with different senses. When the intention to say something false but rhetorically effective becomes the intention to say something true, the metaphor for the individual will have died.

The semantics for the person's language would undergo a change at this point. Whereas before, there was a single predicate, with a single truth-condition, after the split there are two distinct predicates with two predicate clauses giving different truth-conditions.

The intentions that define different rhetorical forces are sometimes hard to detect. The speaker's intentions can be hard to detect for the auditor. The auditor can entertain both the hypothesis that the utterance is metaphorical or literal, by making an adjustment in the semantics. However, this will be a matter of little moment, since both hypotheses yield the same result, practically, in terms of information conveyed.

The auditor may be no more clear about his own intentions when he applies the (perhaps former) metaphor again. Certainly the existence of the appropriate intention is phenomenologically obscure. When a metaphor is familiar and routine, it can be indeterminate whether a metaphorical communicative intention exists. This is as a Davidsonian should expect.

According to Davidson's philosophy of mind, intention is one of the family of concepts that are applied holistically and non-reductively in interpretation. Intention, that is, is part of the network of concepts that we apply in interpreting physical events of other agents as actions. Intentions are not independently identifiable occurring states inhabiting the mind, but are rather ascribed as part of a theory of action interpretation, both of

ourselves and of others. In many cases, we have “privileged access” to our intentions and can know the intentions of others. It is usually no mystery what a person intends when that person puts a key in a lock.

When the speech-action we are interpreting would make sense under the ascription of either of two intentions, and would amount to the same physical utterance, it often happens that even the speaker himself has no idea what the intention was with which he spoke. Much of our speech is harmlessly rhetorically indeterminate even to ourselves.

Indeterminacy of interpretation, in the examples used by Davidson and Quine, assigns disagreement either to disagreement in meaning or disagreement in belief. The present kind of indeterminacy of interpretation, indeterminacy of intention, is an indeterminacy between truth-conditions and speech-act intentions. The constraints of interpretation permit, as it were, a trade-off between assignments of truth-conditions to an utterance and assignments of intentions to speech-actions.

A serious problem with Davidson’s account of metaphor in “What Metaphors Mean” is that, by concentrating on great poetic metaphors, he misleadingly presumes intention to be transparent to the speaker in the general case of metaphorical speech-acts. For the clear examples of metaphoricity Davidson discusses, the intention is clear, and the metaphors are clearly metaphors. When metaphors are tired, however, both the intention and the truth-conditions of the utterance are indeterminate. The truth-conditions can be ascribed differently by reinterpreting the predicate, with a corresponding reinterpretation of the intention.

This indeterminacy from familiarity and routine use is the usual situation with ordinary metaphors. For very many of our applications of terms, we know the truth-conditions of the sentence in the “trivial” sense, know that it is appropriate to apply the term in the circumstances, know the connections to other sentences, but do not have an opinion about whether the utterance we have produced is true or false. We intend to say something, but it is indeterminate what we intend to say, even though it is completely determinate what we wished to communicate.

In a borderline metaphor, it does not practically matter which interpretation is applied. The interpretation of the actual speech act can go either way without a practical difference, or a difference “from the inside.” When a metaphor is moribund, whether the rhetorical force is metaphorical or not is immaterial for communicating and reporting what is happening.

This indeterminacy of intention is an every-day occurrence. It causes no practical problems, because there is complete practical agreement between the speaker and hearer. So, there is no difficulty in determining what the speaker intends to communicate, but the truth-value of the utterance is indeterminate. If interpreted metaphorically, then the utterance is false. If interpreted as using a term in a different sense, then the utterance is true, and there are two distinct predicate-clauses in the appropriate truth-definition.

#### IV Is Figuration really indeterminate?

Could there be a test for when an application of a predicate had crossed the line from metaphorical to literally true? There are two kinds of reasons that might be given for holding that the line is physiologically determinable.

A) First, since we do often agree and disagree with routine metaphorical utterances, these agreements and disagreements could be taken to indicate the truth and falsity of the utterances. When someone says, “The Lions crushed the Bengals,” an interlocutor may say “They sure did.” Thus, speaker and hearer treating the utterances as true or false could be an indication that those utterances really are truth or false, and so, on the rhetorical account, literal.

One complicating feature of familiar metaphors confounds this indicator of literalness. While this *prima facie* seems to indicate that the utterance is true according to the interlocutor, a little thought shows that this need not be the case. Consider the miniature conversation, “I believe it’s raining,” “Yes, indeed.” The first utterance has the truth-conditions of a report on the speaker’s cognitive state, but the agreement is with the message that the speaker was communicating. Something similar can happen with, for instance, hyperbole, in the example above, where the interlocutor agrees with the utterance “Bush is an idiot.” Agreement, on reflection, turns out not to be a very good guide to whether either the speaker or the interlocutor holds that the truth-conditions of an utterance obtain.

B) Another possibility for finding an objective line between figures and literal speech might be some neurophysiological difference between metaphorical and literal use and understanding. In particular, there might be distinctive neurological marks of a word having several literal senses as opposed to a single sense and metaphorical extensions.

There are a number of remarks to make about this idea:

1) First, actual psychological experiments seem to show that processing times for metaphors and literal applications of terms, in clear cases, are identical.

2) Second, if Davidson and Quine are right about the nature of intention, that intentions are parts of interpretation rather than phenomena that constitute neurophysiological kinds, and if the difference between figural and literal language use is a matter of intention, then it would be truly remarkable if there were a neurophysiological difference between, for instance, hyperbolic uses of a predicate and literal uses. That is, when a person, under the impression that Bush meets the psychometric criterion for idiocy, says “Bush is an idiot,” there would be a neurophysiological difference between that utterance for him and a hyperbolic utterance.

3) The main reason people might think that there is an objective difference between a word having two senses and having routine metaphorical application is that it is plausible that some objective difference obtains in neurological correlates of homonyms such as “bank” in its various meanings. Presumably these words are stored differently and interpretation of a sound as one or the other of them activates different brain-areas.

That this is plausible for very clear cases of distinct words does not make it plausible that there are neural correlates indicating differences in these borderline cases. If the difference between a dying metaphor and a dead metaphor is rhetorical, then there should be a neurological marker only if other rhetorical phenomena, such as hyperbole and sarcasm, were also so marked. This would mean that a marker for the intention to say something true on the given occasion would be either present or absent.

The picture such a view implies is of a very strong isomorphism between the predicates of the “mental” description-scheme and the physiological. For a Davidsonian, this is quite implausible.

Davidson's views on the relation between the mental and the physical are well-known.<sup>15</sup> Davidson's argument that there will not be detailed neurophysiological correlates of mental states, including intentions involving speech acts, is part of his anomalous monism. This is the thesis that, while every mental event is identical with some physical event, there is no systematic relation of mental, that is intentional predicates to physical predicates. Given anomalous monism, and given that the difference between metaphorical and literal use depends on the intentional content of a particular intention, the possibility that such differences would be physically definable and so determinate disappears.

Davidson's anomalous monism gets independent support from philosophers like Paul Churchland, who argue from results in brain physiology that intentional concepts, the categories and kinds of the "intentional stance"<sup>16</sup> correlate with nothing in the brain. Churchland takes this to be an argument that intentional concepts, which collectively constitute "folk psychology" do not designate anything real.<sup>17</sup> This conception of the consequences of the lack of fit between the physiological and the psychological is shared with thinkers like Quine and Dennett. Churchland's proposal is to reform the language of psychology and to abandon "folk psychology."

Davidson's view on the reality of the mental follows from his conception of interpretation. There is no possibility of adopting a language that gives up the idea that we and others are agents, since the very idea of a language as something interpretable

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<sup>15</sup> The classic presentation of anomalous monism is in "Mental Events," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford UP, 1984.

<sup>16</sup> We owe the term "intentional stance" to Daniel Dennett's *Content and Consciousness*, Oxford, 1968.

<sup>17</sup> The disparity between the "architecture" of the brain and the logic of the concepts of folk psychology has been a long-standing theme of Churchland's work. See his *Neurophilosophy: Toward a Unified Science of the Mind-Brain*, (Bradford Books: MIT Press, 1986.)

presupposes that speech acts are acts, that is, things done by agents with beliefs and desires. Churchland's arguments on the lack of fit between the brain and the "linguaformal" account of reasons, beliefs, and desires is thus, for Davidson, an empirical argument that supplements the a priori arguments about rational constraints on application of predicates.

V Unknowable truth-values:

I have argued above that truth-values and propositional contents of moribund metaphors are indeterminate. Bearing in mind that Davidsonian semantics takes truth to be the central concept, what can a Davidsonian say about indeterminacy? (I should point out that the following is not what Davidson ever actually proposed.) I argue that in fact it is in the spirit of Davidson and Quine to construe all such sentences as having truth-values, but unknowable truth-values.

Let me give in detail one more example of a tired or extinct metaphor: Suppose that in twenty-two moves, Lputian defeats Akopian in a game of the Armenian chess championship. I say to a colleague, "Lputian crushed Akopian." I don't know whether this is literal or metaphorical. A twenty-two move defeat is definitely not a borderline case. If it is metaphorical, I have said something false, but illuminating. If it is literal, then my idiolect has two words "crush," and what I said was true. It makes no practical difference, and I can't tell from the inside. The options are:

- 1) The utterance is literally false, and the speaker is using a familiar metaphor to indicate the outcome of the game.
- 2) The utterance is literally true, and "crushed" has (at least) two senses in the speaker's idiolect, one applied to people who have been thoroughly defeated and one applied to

things that have been pulverized. This option would interpret the speaker as having two truth-definition clauses for “crush.”

It is important here that, whatever interpretation we choose, the utterance must have a truth-value. Notice again that both of the above interpretations come to the same thing, as communication. While it does not matter which of these hypotheses we choose, it does matter that we hold that one or the other obtains. The utterance must be meaningful, and to be meaningful is to have truth-conditions. The indeterminacy is not due to wondering whether the defeat was of a degree sufficient to constitute a crushing. So, to say that the utterance has an indeterminate truth-value, or that it is neither true nor false, is unsatisfactory because of the complication in logic that would result. We do not have a borderline case of crushing, but we have a borderline case of intending that we be understood in either of two ways.

If it is a metaphor, its working as a metaphor requires that the utterance have a truth-value, since it is only by rejecting the “literal” truth-conditions as false and then interpreting the utterance that the metaphorical understanding takes place. So, if “crush” is used metaphorically, the utterance must have a truth-value. On the other hand, if the term “crush” has come to have a second meaning, that second meaning applies to this case literally, i.e. Akopian really was crushed. On either hypothesis of interpretation, then, the utterance is true or false. So, although we don’t need to know what truth-value an utterance has, we do need to suppose that it has a truth-value. Otherwise, neither interpretation can be right.

A simple way to preserve a concept of the literal that will serve Davidson’s purposes is to invoke a notion of truth-value that admits in principle unknowable truth-

values.<sup>18</sup> This is a small cost, for a Davidsonian. Whereas for a correspondence theorist who takes truth to be supervenient of being, a sentence is true just in case the particular designated by the subject term instantiates the universal designated by the predicate term, no such prior arrangements exist for a Davidsonian. Utterances don't designate.

Utterances are not true or false in virtue of a match between the predicates and designated properties and between singular terms and particulars. Meanings, truth-conditions and truth-values do not have an existence behind or beyond the patterns of utterance of a speaker or speakers.

On either hypothesis in interpreting the sample utterance, having a truth-value is required for the meaningfulness as speech-act of the utterance. Since an utterance of "Lputian crushed Akopian" is a meaningful speech act, we should say that, even when there is no possible evidence supporting one truth-value or another, a meaningful utterance has a truth-value. Such truth-values are unknowable.

Nothing prevents holding that every utterance has a truth-value, as long as we abandon the idea that sentences and predicate-terms refer. If there are no ontological correlates to true sentences and applicable predicates, then a sentence can be legitimately held to have a truth-value for theoretical reasons. In this case the Quinean theoretical reason is that having truth-values universally makes a better and simpler theory, and allows meaningful utterances to be meaningful.

The thesis that indeterminate utterances have truth-values, albeit unknowable ones, for purely theoretical reasons is analogous to the set-theoretical claim that the null

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<sup>18</sup> Roy Sorensen first urged the acceptability of unknowable truths as a solution to the Sorites in a series of articles in the 1980's. For his developed view, see *Vagueness and Contradiction*, (Oxford 2001) and earlier papers. In this paper I have adapted his idea, modified it along Davidsonian-Quinean lines, and extended it to other indeterminacies. Tim Williamson's *Vagueness*, Routledge 1994, adopts a similar line.

set is a subset of every set. That the null set is a sub-set of every set is likewise counted as true for purely theoretical reasons. Intuitively, given the naïve notion of set, it would not occur to us to include a set with no members as, say, a subset of my mother's offspring. Of course, the thesis that the null set is a subset of every set simplifies set-theory. We can say that  $\forall x \forall y (x \subseteq y \leftrightarrow \forall z (z \in x \rightarrow z \in y))$  without having to add a clause to deal with the case where  $z$  has no members, by  $\forall x \forall y (x \subseteq y \leftrightarrow (Ew (w \in x \wedge \forall z (z \in x \rightarrow z \in y)))$ , among other adjustments.

Another example of a true “pure theoretical” claim would be the truth that there is just one zero-tuple of objects. This thesis is assigned truth so that names can be assimilated to function-names and sentences to 0-place predicates. Likewise the thesis that  $x$  to the zero-power equals 1 is true so that  $x$  to the  $y$ - $z$  power can be regarded as  $x$  to the  $y$  power divided by  $x$  to the  $z$  power. In the latter example, “our intuitive concept” would tell us that there is no such thing as multiplying a number by itself 0 times—that the notion is senseless, and the expression “ $x^0$ ” is necessarily vacuous.<sup>19</sup>

Importantly, there is no cost to holding that the null set is a subset of every set. Every other truth about sets that matters is still true, and the over-all theory is better with the addition of the thesis that every set has the null set as subset, that there is exactly one zero-tuple, and that  $N^0 = 1$  for all  $N$ .

In a similar way, the thesis that every utterance with truth-conditions has a truth-value simplifies the logic of our over-all theory and is cost-free. All that has to be abandoned is the idea that we can, in general, know what those truth-values are. With a Davidsonian-Quinean semantics that eschews truth-making facts or states of affairs, there

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<sup>19</sup> I owe the last two examples to Scott Lehmann.

are no ontological costs to epistemicism and no speculations about the inaccessible concepts or thoughts need be invoked. Also, we need invoke neither “context” as a pre-linguistically available theoretical explanatory device, nor “meanings” behind our words.

The formal features of other epistemicisms are preserved by harmless Davidsonian epistemicism: It is true, on this account, that any predicate has an extension such that every entity is either in the extension or not. It is also true that every predicate fits the entities to which it applies, given that a predicate fits an entity if and only if it is true of it.

The fundamental difference is that this kind of epistemicism assumes the correctness of a Davidsonian conception of truth. Truth is not a matter of correspondence to facts, but corresponds to what is the case in nothing beyond the truth-definitional sense. Likewise, truth-of is not a matter of a predicate fitting an object in any but a truth-definitional sense. The predicate “is a frog” fits Fred if and only if Fred is a frog. Truth and true-of are, while systematically related to other important concepts, not reducible to those concepts.

The extension of this idea to sorites vagueness and more familiar kinds of indeterminacy of interpretation should be apparent.<sup>20</sup> We keep bivalence but need not

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<sup>20</sup> The one kind of problematic truth-value assignment where it is not obvious how it would be handled on a Davidsonian epistemicist basis is what to say about paradoxical sentences. These failures to be true or false do not lend themselves to either assignment. However, it is not clear that the phenomena behind the paradoxical sentences are of the same kind at all as what is behind indeterminacy and vagueness. The indeterminacies of indeterminacy of interpretation and of vagueness seem to take place where, as it were, mind meets the world. The slack between the requirements of the mental system of concepts and the irreducibility of the mental to the physical make indeterminacy of interpretation predictable on Quinean-Davidsonian grounds. The necessity for communication to take place on a foundation of medium-sized objects makes vagueness predictable.

The Liar, on the other hand, seems to be a difficulty internal to the concept of truth. So I won't speculate about the Liar.

suppose that there is any thing in the world “making” a sentence or its negation true. One of the conditionals in a sorites sequence is false.