

Inferential Roles and Truth

Towards Conceptual Foundations for Modest Inferentialism*

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1 Introduction

The landscape of inferentialist positions can be divided into *modest* and *strong* versions. The latter eschew truth as an explanatory notion in semantic theorising (cf. Dummett, 1991; Brandom, 1994), usually opting for an assertibilist semantics instead, while the former embrace it. Thus, modest inferentialism provides an attractive combination of use-theoretic metasemantics with truth-conditional semantics (cf. Murzi and Steinberger, 2017, 200). Despite this, modest inferentialism appears to lack any foundations in the literature. For the required semantic premises – chiefly: rules of inference ought to preserve truth – are merely added, without any argument as to their coherence with the assumed metasemantics (e.g. Rumfitt, 2000, 806). This paper will provide the starting points for such foundations and argue that all inferentialists, *qua* use theorists, ought to be modest. Furthermore, it will investigate differences between the presented account and other truth-conditional approaches, and conclude that while modest inferentialism *does* incorporate truth-conditions, it is not merely a proof-theoretic reconstruction of mainstream formal semantics.

2 Assertion and Truth

The inferentialist’s starting point in elucidating linguistic meaning is the speech act of assertion. Typically, this involves the study of the conditions under which an assertion of a declarative sentence is correct and what follows correctly from such. This is usually referred to as the *two-aspect model of meaning* (e.g. Brandom, 2000, 62), and the set of rules determining these conditions as the sentence’s *inferential role* (cf. Peregrin, 2014, sect. 3.4). The basic tenet of inferentialism hereby is that the material validity of inference rules is explanatorily basic (cf. Brandom, 2000, sect. 1.V). They confer propositional content onto a sentence by stating the aforementioned two aspects of its role in discourse, hence are constitutive of the sentence’s meaning.

Given this focus on assertions, inferentialists incur a commitment to explain our locutions about assertions involving the “platitudinous” (cf. Miller, 2002, sect. VIII.f.) notion of truth, however. For they appear to explicitly link the notions of propositional content, assertion and truth. First, assertions and their contents are simply the paradigm objects that can be qualified as true or false (Glock, 2003, 122), hence must possess truth-conditions. Second, the central reading of correct assertion understands correct as *true* (cf. MacFarlane, 2009, 86; Miller, 2002, 364f.). For even if I managed to gain perfect warrant for my assertion, if the statement turns out to be false, I am barred from asserting it further. Last but not least, if two sentences differ in their truth-values in a given situation, they cannot be synonymous (cf. Cresswell, 1982, 69). Such observations lead to the conclusion that the notions of assertion, asserted propositional content and truth are intimately tied.

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Since inferentialists accept the basic claim that use fully determines meaning, they must take these conceptual ties seriously. For according to their own basic metasemantic premise, these uses are *determinative* of what meaning, *qua* assertoric content, means. Now, it is a general fact that conceptual matters antecede matters of fact: theorising about *F-ness* requires an already given notion of *F-ness*, which accordingly defines the topic of investigation (Glock, 2017, 95). Thus, on pain of facing the charge of changing topics, inferentialists must incorporate these conceptual ties into their semantic theorising. For that reason, this paper submits that all inferentialists, *qua* use theorists, must be ‘modest’ in this sense.

It could be argued that this is true of certain forms of strong inferentialism, such as Brandom’s variant. His account claims that truth only plays an ‘expressive task’, i.e. making antecedently given inferential commitments explicit (cf. Brandom, 1994, ch. 5). Apart from the fact that prosentential theories of truth – such as the one presented in Brandom (1994) – face criticism (cf. Kühne, 2003, sect. 2.2.4), it may lead strong inferentialism to collapse into a modest variant. For example, if truth is just a “nickname” for a correct assertability (cf. Peregrin, 2014, 83), then rules of inference *eo ipso* supply truth-conditions – assuming this theoretically primitive notion of ‘correct assertability’ to be intelligible without reference to the notion of truth in the first place. While these points do not settle the matter, they motivate an investigation into properly modest forms of inferentialism.

3 Inferential Roles and Truth

Rumfitt (2000), in his attempt to solve Carnap’s problem for propositional logic, i.e. the fact that the usual inference rules fail to determine each connective’s classical truth-table, relies on a crucial semantic premise, namely that rules of inference preserve truth. However, he simply assumes this, without further argument about *why* rules should preserve truth, or whether this is coherent with his assumed inferentialist (meta)semantics (cf. *ibid.*, 806). Unfortunately, the modest inferentialist literature appears to be silent on the issue (e.g. Rumfitt 2022).

Fortunately, our previous observations provide conceptual foundations for modest inferentialism. If inference rules determine under which conditions an assertion of a sentence is correct, as given by the two-aspect model, yet the standard of correctness is that of truth, then these rules must be determining *truth*-conditions. Specifically, the customary introduction and elimination rules invoked in inferentialist semantics must state sufficient and necessary conditions for a statement’s truth, respectively. Hence, sentence-meaning – its inferential role – determines truth-conditions for statements made with that sentence. Thus, Rumfitt’s central semantic premise is far from being ‘inferentialism-betraying’. It has a natural embedding in the project of modest inferentialism, provided we take the conceptual ties of truth and assertion seriously.

This identification of sentence-meaning with its inferential role, and the accommodation of truth via seeing introduction and elimination rules as supplying sufficient and necessary conditions, respectively, has many advantages. First, it avoids many category mistakes, which otherwise loom. For example, it is what a sentence *says* that can be called true or false, not its meaning (cf. Glock, 2003, 154) or the sentence itself (cf. Strawson, 1950, 326). If we treat sentence-meanings as inferential roles, this is indeed avoided, for it makes no sense to call such a role true or false. Second, this route retains inferentialism’s strength of allowing for exceptionally fine-grained sentence-meaning. For example, the meaning of ‘ $1 + 1 = 2$ ’ and ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’ will arguably not coincide – after all, the calculations needed to establish these claims (i.e. their introductions) differ. Hence, the respective sentences are not treated as synonymous, as opposed to possible world semantics, for instance. This is further reinforced by allowing rules to do more than just fix truth-conditions. If an elimination

rule for a sentence B licenses an action, for example (cf. Peregrin, 2014, 7), it would make little sense to count such an action among the truth-conditions of B . In general, a sentence A 's metalinguistic specification of truth-conditions will feature only those sentences B that appear *both* as a free-standing premises in an introduction rule for A and as the single conclusion of an elimination rule for A . A third main advantage is the account's inherent flexibility. Apart from accommodating rules beyond determining truth-conditions, such as rules linking statements to actions, even those that do supply truth-conditions are not required to always be both individually necessary and jointly sufficient. They could also state presuppositions or merely defeasible criteria (cf. below). Furthermore, the rules themselves can contain contextual and other fine-grained parameters and side-conditions, thereby incorporating phenomena such as indexicality or exceptions in special circumstances.

4 Differences to Other Truth-Conditional Approaches

What I have provided so far is a general account of why and how rules of inference fix truth-conditions, and how the resulting modest inferentialism avoids certain pitfalls of (truth-conditional) semantic theorising. This naturally raises the question of the relationship between the account presented here and other truth-conditional approaches, such as mainstream formal semantics. Despite incorporating truth-conditions, modest inferentialism as developed here will *not* just be a proof-theoretic reconstruction of mainstream truth-conditional semantics, merely adding an additional (meta)semantic story to the pre-existing formal accounts. One reason for this has already been elaborated. Rules are not merely in the business of determining truth-conditions, as they can also link statements to actions or serve other semantic purposes. Furthermore, sentence-meaning itself is not identified with some set of truth-conditions. These circumstances already constitute a major difference to many other truth-conditional approaches, even if they do not necessarily constitute an objection to the latter. After all, it may not be difficult to reformulate other accounts to avoid such conceptual clangers.

In any case, even the assigned truth-conditions themselves will differ, however, at least for certain areas of discourse. A striking example is the use-theoretic approach to analysing mental language (cf. Ryle (1949), Wittgenstein (1953), Hacker (2013)). As Ryle points out, it is an important yet *defeasible* criterion for someone believing that p to behave as if p (cf. Ryle, 1949, 34f.). It also matters whether the use of *believe* is first-person or third-person, since the former is *criteria-less* in its introduction into discourse (cf. Hacker, 2013, 237). In addition to this, attitude ascriptions such as knowledge are context-sensitive (cf. Hanfling, 2000, 96ff.), since they have slightly altered ascription conditions depending on whether we are predicting someone's behaviour on the basis of what facts they are aware of or whether we wish to find out what they know.

Therefore, modest inferentialism will not supply an account of attitude ascriptions as a relation between an agent and an object, be it a proposition, as standardly assumed in intensional semantics, ever since Hintikka's work (cf. Hintikka, 1969), or something else (cf. e.g. Moltmann, 2020). This should be embraced, not lamented, however. For the inferentialist can state genuinely informative truth-conditions for sentences that go beyond Tarskian T-sentences, and consequently not merely deal with formal representations of such conditions (cf. Peregrin, 2014, 65). Moreover, it does so while retaining at least some compositionality, since rules are inherently schematic in nature. However, as the example of attitude ascriptions also demonstrate, modest inferentialism must be able to accommodate defeasible criteria and contextuality, if it is to do justice to the complexity of linguistic use. As I have argued above, however, the flexibility inherent in such 'rule-based semantics' allows for this.

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