Truth and the F-game: 
Assertion, Denial, and Interpretation

(2964 words)

Abstract

It is a cross-linguistic fact that in daily conversation we “aim at truth”. This fact may lead us to assume that assertion-based communication is the only possible communicative system for truth-apt information exchange. This assumption is encapsulated in three traditional doctrines: that assertion is a basic notion, in terms of which we can define denial; that to predicate truth of a sentence is to endorse the content it expresses; and that a radical interpreter should try to maximize the truth of what foreigners believe or utter. However, I challenge the assumption via a thought experiment: imagine a language game in which everyone aims to speak only falsehoods. I argue that information exchange is possible in this game, and so denial-based communication is conceptually on a par with assertion-based communication. As a consequence, we should reject the three doctrines, based as they are on the conceptual priority of assertion-based communication.

Introduction

In our linguistic communication, the typical vehicles for exchanging truth-apt information are declarative sentences, uttered with assertoric force. And we operate with the background assumption that, in general, we aim at truth. But can’t we imagine a community of speakers who successfully convey information by uttering only falsehoods? Their vehicles for conveying information are also declarative sentences, but for this community the presumption is that speakers aim at falsehood, not truth. In this paper, I argue that this is a conceptual possibility.

What consequences, if any, does this conceptual possibility have for our central notions of truth, assertion, denial, and interpretation? There are, I will argue, three significant consequences:

• Assertion and denial are on a par – neither is conceptually more basic than the other. So, we should reject the Frege-Geach account of denial, according to
which the notion of denial is derivative, definable in terms of assertion and negation.

- One popular form of deflationism about truth is false.
- The principle of charity cannot be formulated in terms of truth.

In Section 1, I argue for the conceptual possibility of what I will call the ‘F-game’, played by speakers who successfully convey information by uttering only falsehoods. In Section 2, I argue that the possibility of the F-game shows that, contra Frege and Geach, assertion is not conceptually prior to denial. In Section 3, I argue that the possibility of the F-game refutes one version of deflationism about truth – what I call ‘illocutionary deflationism’ – according to which to predicate ‘true’ of a sentence is to endorse that sentence. In Section 4, I argue that Davidson’s Principle of Charity should not be characterized in terms of truth.

1. The F-game

Suppose that I utter ‘It’s false that zero is odd’. If you trust my sincerity and reliability, you can infer that zero is even. If I utter ‘That’s wrong!’ as a response to someone’s utterance ‘Zero is odd’, you can draw the same information. Now, consider this case: I announce that by uttering my next sentence, I am going to tell you a falsehood.

(Z) Zero is odd.

Again, you can infer from this utterance the same content. Here I am not asserting the content that is expressed by (Z); rather, I am denying that content, just as I do when I said ‘It’s false that zero is odd’, and ‘That’s wrong!’. Clearly in the case of (Z), however, my
negative attitude towards that content is not expressed by (Z) itself. So, if you are unaware that I was intending to tell a falsehood, you may mistake my denial for an assertion. Nevertheless, communication of truth-apt contents is possible even in the case of (Z), provided that you understand that I aim to produce a falsehood.

How can we articulate the conversational norms governing our usual communication? Let’s begin with four maxims of Grice’s. I shall call Grice’s four maxims ‘the Truth rules’, or just ‘the T-rules’. Also, I shall call the communicative practice governed by the T-rules, ‘the T-game’.¹ Then, what can the rules for the opposite game be? We can first replace every occurrence of the truth/falsity predicate by the falsity/truth predicate in the quality maxim. We obtain what I call the variant maxim of quality.

**Variant Maxim of Quality**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variant Supermaxim</th>
<th>Try to make your contribution one that is false.</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Do not say what you believe to be true.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variant Submaxim 2</td>
<td>Do not say that for the falsity of which you lack adequate evidence.</td>
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¹ Here is the original maxim of quality (Grice 1975).

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As to other maxims, I am content with these simpler formulations:

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<tr>
<th>Maxim of Quantity</th>
<th>Don’t say too much or too little.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Maxim of Relation</td>
<td>Be relevant.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maxim of Manner</td>
<td>Be perspicuous.</td>
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Call this variant maxim, together with the other three maxims which remain unchanged, ‘the F-rules’. Following the F-rules, one should try to put forward a sentence that one believes to be false. For instance, one might utter, ‘Snow is black’, ‘Snow is yellow’, ‘Snow is gray’, and so on, while knowing that snow is in fact white. One can also utter, ‘Snow is not white’; and, in general, one can utter the negation of a sentence $s$, where one believes $s$ to be true with some evidence. I shall argue that the F-game, despite its unfamiliarity, is playable, in the following sense: if every player of the F-game sincerely follows the F-rules, they can exchange truth-apt information.\(^2\)

In a regular conversation, everyone knows that everyone follows the T-rules. Suppose that Spencer utters a sentence $s$, and thereby expresses the propositional content $p$. Suppose also that the utterance is proper in terms of the T-rules. Then we may assume that $s$ and $p$ are in fact true, setting aside the question as to which is the primary truth-bearer. Now Audie hears $s$ and understands that it expresses $p$. If she trusts Spencer’s sincerity and reliability, she may infer:

(1) $p$ is true.

(2) The speaker believes $p$ to be true.

For, Audie assumes that Spencer tries to put forward true utterances (by Supermaxim),

\(^2\) In a nutshell, I’m using the Maxim of Quality for capturing the normative aspects in truth-apt information exchange. But I’m not arguing that the Gricean approach is the best account for capturing the normative aspects of assertion. In particular, my argument is not committed to the truth account – ‘assert $p$ only if $p$ is true’ – espoused in Weiner (2005) and Whiting (2013). They employ the Gricean model to challenge the knowledge account – ‘assert $p$ only if one knows that (it is true that) $p$’ – championed by Williamson (2000). If one prefers the latter, one can use, instead of the Variant Maxim of Quality, this formulation: ‘utter $p$ only if one knows that it is false that $p$’. As to the connection with the broader literature on assertion, see footnote 6.
and avoids conveying what he believes to be false (by Submaxim 1), based on certain evidence (by Submaxim 2).

What about the case of the F-game? We start with the alternate assumptions: Spencer utters $s$, which expresses $p$; and the utterance is proper in terms of the F-rules. Then, we may assume that $s$ and $p$ are false. Now Audie hears $s$ and understands that it expresses $p$. If she trusts Spencer’s sincerity and reliability, then she is likely to infer:

(3) $p$ is false;

(4) The speaker believes $p$ to be false.

Again Audie knows that Spencer is putting forward a falsehood (by Variant Supermaxim), avoiding conveying what he believes to be true (by Variant Submaxim 1), based on certain evidence (by Variant Submaxim 2). So she can infer that $p$ is false, and not-$p$ is his belief content.

It might be objected that an utterance can be false in too many different ways. Suppose that in some context of the T-game the most appropriate thing is to utter ‘Snow is white’. In this context, the following utterances are inappropriate: ‘Snow is black’, ‘Snow has a color’, ‘A swan is white’, ‘Snow is white and snow is white and …’, and so on. In the T-game, the number of appropriate utterances is nicely constrained compared with the number of inappropriate utterances – which seems to be infinitely many. But the F-game, the objection goes, allows the players to utter what are inappropriate to utter in the T-game — so the ratio is reversed. This may seem to compromise information exchange via the F-game. But this line of objection is based on a confusion of inappropriateness and falsity. In the F-game, speakers are also constrained by other three
maxims. When the most appropriate content to convey is that snow is white, then the most appropriate utterance in the F-game is also fixed, that is, ‘snow is not white’. These three maxims are still operating, so the number of permissible utterances is not unduly proliferated in the F-game.³

Accordingly, it is as viable to exchange truth-apt information in the F-game as it is in our ordinary situation. So, sincerity need not consist in presenting only truths or manifesting what one actually believes, but rather consists in following the shared set of coherent rules.⁴ The F-game player is not insincere since a speaker’s saying something false is actually what the audience does expect, which leaves no room for deceit.⁵ If we

³ One might object further. In the above context, an F-game player should utter ‘Snow is not white’. But still, it is true that the last utterance is more roundabout, compared with uttering ‘Snow is white’ in the T-game. The F-game player has to use a negative linguistic term. To this extent, the F-game is more complicated, compared with the T-game. As to this objection, I agree that F-game communication often requires additional labor to convey the same information. But, first, notice that sometimes the F-game is more efficient, as when in the T-game one wants to produce a negation: ‘Joe is not on time’. In the F-game, one can say more simply ‘Joe is on time’. Second, efficiency as a communicative tool is not my concern here. My point is that even in the F-game people can exchange the same truth-apt information as in the T-game. It is precisely in this sense that the F-game is *playable*. The substantial impediments to conveying truth-apt information are eradicated in virtue of the latter three maxims; and thus the concern about inefficiency has no effect on the claim that the F-game is an alternative practice for exchanging truth-apt information.

⁴ In the pragmatics literature, the norm that one should assert what one believes is considered to be a norm of sincerity (e.g. Lowlor & Perry 2008; Green & Williams 2011). In a discussion of deflationism, Huw Price in (2011) also takes it to be the norm of sincerity that one should manifest what one has in mind. According to Price, this norm is not the genuine norm of assertion because this claim also applies to the case of other mental states such as desire. One should follow the norm of sincerity just described not only in the case of expressing beliefs or propositional contents one has in mind, but also in the case of expressing desires or other non-propositional contents. I agree with Price that manifesting what one actually believes is not the norm of assertion for this reason. But I think, as against Price, that trying to manifest what one disbelieves may count as a sincere act in a special case, as in the F-game. See the next footnote for illustration.

⁵ Consider again the case in which I tell you whether zero is odd or even. If we are playing the F-game and I utter ‘Zero is even’, I am deceiving you since, trusting me, you would infer that zero is odd, which is false. In short, intentionally uttering a truth in the F-game counts as a form of deception.
confine ourselves to the feasibility of communicating truth-apt information, the two games are essentially no more different than driving in the U.S. and in the U.K.

2. Conceptual parity of assertion and denial

There are several approaches to characterize the illocutionary act of assertion. However we characterize assertion, what an F-game player performs is an opposite illocutionary act, that is, a denial.\(^6\) If people play the F-game, then they express a negative attitude towards certain content.\(^7\) A proper F-game utterance expresses the speaker’s disbelief in the expressed content. The speaker will be responsible for the falsity of the uttered sentence; otherwise the audience will be misinformed. Thus, in the F-game, the primary

\(^6\) According to MacFarlane’s classification, there are four types of theories of assertion – the attitudinal account, the common ground account, the constitutive rule account, and the commitment account (MacFarlane 2011; the labels are from (Goldberg 2016: 9)). My claim that the normal utterance in the F-game is regarded as a denial is basically compatible with any of these accounts; for, whatever characterization one gives to assertion, I may ask for the corresponding account of denial, and then argue that the denial with that characterization becomes the normal move in the F-game.

\(^7\) In his “Truth” (1959), Dummett famously compares our linguistic practice with playing a game of chess, claiming that this normative aspect is part of our concept of truth, but is not captured by Frege’s theory:

\[
\text{Likewise, it is part of the concept of truth that we aim at making true statements; and Frege’s theory of truth and falsity as the references of sentences leaves this feature of the concept of truth quite out of account. Frege indeed tried to bring it in, afterwards in his theory of assertion — but too late; for the sense of the sentence is not given in advance of our going in for the activity of asserting, since otherwise there could be people who expressed the same thoughts but went in instead for denying them. (Dummett 1959: 2; emphasis added)}
\]

To reconstruct this passage as a simple reductio form, suppose that Frege’s theory is correct. It follows that the proposition or thought expressed by a sentence would be identifiable independently of our activity of assertion. Then we should be able to express that content while performing the opposite speech act, i.e. denial. But this is absurd, as contended in the italicized clause. So it is concluded that the starting supposition is wrong. Given the playability of the F-game, however, this reductio doesn’t work, as it is possible that everyone expresses thoughts in order to go in for denying them. The F-game refutes the last line of the quote from Dummett I italicized, as the case is not conceptually absurd.
Illocutionary act is not assertion, but denial. And denials in the F-game need not involve negation. This leads us to question the Fregean conception of denial.

According to Frege and Geach, denial does not form a *sui generis* category, since it is definable in terms of assertion and negation (Frege 1919; Geach 1965):

\[
\text{denying } p \text{ is asserting not-}p.
\]

Given this, denial is a derivative notion, to be characterized by assertion and negation. So it seems that all we need for constructing a logic system, according to Frege and Geach, is assertion and negation.\(^8\)

However, recall that an F-game player denies that zero is odd by uttering ‘zero is odd’. In this act of denial, there is no use of negation. Moreover, in the F-game, in order to inform her audience of zero’s being even, the player can utter ‘Zero is not even’. Thus, in the F-game, the primary illocutionary act is denial, rather than assertion. That is, the following equivalence obtains:

\[
\text{asserting } p \text{ is denying not-}p;
\]

\(^8\) Geach writes:

But if we regarded [denying] a proposition as different from asserting the negation of a proposition, we should have here two quite different logical forms; we might write these as follows, using Lukasiewicz' sign \(\vdash\) for a [denial] [as] opposed to Frege's assertion \(\vdash\):

\[
\vdash \text{If not } q, \text{ then } r; \vdash \neg q; \text{ ergo } \vdash r.
\]

\[
\vdash \text{If } p, \text{ then } r; \vdash p; \text{ ergo } \vdash r.
\]

Plainly this is a futile complication. All we need in logic for assertion and negation is two signs—the assertion sign, and a negation which does not convey [denial] (as in ‘if not \(q\ldots\)’); whatever is more than these, as Frege says, cometh of evil.

(Geach 1965: 455)

(A terminological point: where I use “denial”, Geach would employ the term “rejection”). Smiley (1996) characterizes such a ‘Frege-Geach’ point in terms of Ockham’s razor.
where assertion is characterized in terms of denial and negation. Thus, from the fact that assertion and denial can each be characterized by the other plus negation, we cannot draw the conclusion that assertion is more primitive in the definitional or explanatory order.

Note that the possibility of the F-game exposes a tacit assumption in Geach’s remarks that introducing a denial sign in a standard logic system is ‘a futile complication’. His point can only be true when we have already introduced the assertion sign. But, just as we can dispense with $\neg$ in the T-game, the F-game players can successfully dispense with $\neg$.\(^9\)

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\(^9\) Here’s how such an ‘F-logic’ would look in comparison with the standard one, ‘the T-logic’. First, let’s stipulate that if a sentence follows the reverse turn style $\neg$, it means that the sentence is produced while following the F-rules. So,

$\neg$ Snow is black,

represents my denouncing the content that snow is black.

The F-game allows the players to generate only falsehoods. So the rules of the F-logic must be falsity preserving in the sense that they allow the F-game players to draw from known falsehoods some new falsehood. Let’s start with conjunction. Consider the sentence that snow is white and snow is not white. It is false, and so we can state it in the F-game. However, we may not eliminate the conjunction and isolate each conjunct, since the first conjunct is true in isolation. So the standard Conjunction Elimination rule does not obtain. Instead, we know that the whole conjunction is false whenever one conjunct is false. So, given that $p$ is false, we can infer any conjunction $p \& q$ with an arbitrary $q$. The F-logic has the following introduction rules for conjunction:

$\frac{\neg p}{\neg p \& q} \quad \text{[& Intro1]}$ \hspace{1cm} $\frac{\neg q}{\neg p \& q} \quad \text{[& Intro2]}

These are the ‘upside-down’ versions of the standard Conjunction Introduction. And similar reasoning shows that the F-logic has the Disjunction Elimination as follows:

$\frac{\neg p \vee q}{\neg p} \quad \text{[\vee Elim1]}$ \hspace{1cm} $\frac{\neg p \vee q}{\neg q} \quad \text{[\vee Elim2]}

Thus, the behavior of conjunction governed by its introduction rules in the F-logic is just like that of disjunction governed by its introduction rules in the T-logic; and the behavior of disjunction governed by its elimination rules in the F-logic is just like that of conjunction governed by its elimination rules in the T-logic. Now consider this sentence:

$p \& \neg p$
3. The truth predicate in the F-game

According to one version of deflationism, the truth predicate is characterized as a tool for making an assertion.¹⁰

Assertion & Truth  To predicate ‘true’ of s is to assert that p

where ‘p’ is the proposition expressed by the sentence s. I shall call such a performative viewpoint on truth illocutionary deflationism, in that it appeals to the notion of a speech act in order to develop the doctrine of deflationism about truth.¹¹

The characterization of illocutionary deflationism is not yet complete, since, as it stands, it cannot handle the case of blind ascriptions. Also, as Quine famously argues,¹² one can predicate ‘true’ of the sentential nominalization ‘every sentence of the form “p or not p”’, and thereby affirm infinitely many sentences of this form. Even in these cases, one can put forward the content whose linguistic expression is not known to her. So, Assertion & Truth does not fully explain the utility of using the truth predicate.

This is a logical falsehood, and so we can produce it with the reverse turn style. But, with the variant introduction and elimination rules, the sentence above does not generate explosion. This suggests that the F-logic is no more inconsistent than the T-logic.

¹⁰ A classic proponent is Ayer, who says (1946: 88-9), ‘Thus, to say that a proposition is true is just to assert it, and to say that it is false is just to assert its contradictory. And this indicates that the terms ‘true’ and ‘false’ connote nothing, but function in the sentence simply as marks of assertion and denial’. Ayer reduces the use of the truth predicate to the making of an assertion. He goes on to say, because of the equivalence of asserting a sentence with predicating truth of its nominalization, ‘the phrase “is true” is logically superfluous’ (ibid. 88).

¹¹ The terminology is from (Bar-On & Simmons 2007: 73). But note on the direction of the conceptual tie between assertion and truth; illocutionary deflationism explains the role of the truth predicate in terms of assertion. Unlike Bar-On and Simmons, I am not arguing for (or against) the claim that the concept of truth is needed to explain the concept of assertion.

¹² Quine says (1970: 146), ‘We may affirm the single sentence by just uttering it, unaided by quotation or by the truth predicate; but if we want to affirm some infinite lot of sentences that we can demarcate only by talking about the sentences, then the truth predicate has its use. We need it to restore the effect of objective reference when for the sake of some generalization we have resorted to semantic ascent’.
The utility of the truth-predicate under discussion has been widely recognized in the literature, whether one is for or against deflationism. For example, Crispin Wright captures this role of the truth predicate in terms of *endorsement*.

Since the defining thesis of deflationism is that ‘true’ is merely a device of disquotation—a device for endorsing assertions, which we need only for the purposes of indirect (‘Goldbach's Conjecture is true’) or compendious (‘Everything he says is true’) such endorsements […], a deflationist must of course insist that the only substantial norms operating in assertoric practice are norms of warranted assertibility and that the truth predicate can indeed mark no independent norm.

(Wright 1992: 18)\(^{13}\)

Thus, it seems that endorsement is a good candidate for extending *Assertion & Truth*, in that we can endorse some content that cannot be explicitly articulated and so is un-assertible.

*Endorsement & Truth* To predicate ‘is true’ of \(s\) is to endorse that \(p\).\(^{14}\)

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\(^{13}\) Here are two other passages in which assertion and endorsement are clearly contrasted.

As a device for semantic ascent, the truth predicate allows us to endorse or reject sentences (or propositions) that we cannot simply assert, adding significantly to the expressive resources of our language.

(Williams 1999: 547)

It is widely accepted that we use ‘true’ to endorse propositions that we cannot assert directly.

(Scharp 2013: 63)

Note that Williams’ characterization also states that the truth predicate allows us to refuse some content. I take this to mean that we can deny what another person said by uttering, ‘What you said is not true’, without repeating the actual sentence.
There are other candidates that seem close to endorsement, e.g., confirmation. These alternatives, however, may have implications with respect to temporality, whereas endorsement seems free from them. Accordingly, I shall take *Endorsement & Truth* as the appropriate formulation of illocutionary deflationism.

My objection is simple: *Endorsement & Truth* is false since F-game players do not endorse a proposition when they attach ‘true’ of the corresponding sentence. Suppose that Clara utters ‘p’. She is not endorsing that p, since she, as a proper player of the F-game, is trying to make her contribution one that is false, while avoiding saying what she believes to be true and what she lacks the evidence for the falsity thereof. Rather, she is

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14 The relation between assertion and endorsement is asymmetric: the former entails the latter, but not *vice versa*. This fits our ordinary conception of assertion and endorsement.

15 Consider Strawson:

[T]he sentence ‘What the policeman said is true’ has no use *except* to confirm the policeman's story […] the sentence does not say anything further *about* the policeman's story or the sentences he used in telling it. It is a device for confirming the story without telling it again. So, in general, in using such expressions, we are confirming, underwriting, admitting, agreeing with, what somebody has said; […] but we are not making any assertion additional to theirs; and are never using 'is true' to talk *about* something which is *what they said*, or the sentences they used in saying it.

(Strawson 1949: 93; emphasis in original)

This passage clearly suggests that the notion of confirmation, or any of Strawson’s other candidates, intimates that somebody *(has) said* something. There are three concerns here. First, as long as there are infinitely many instances of ‘sentence of the form “p or not p”’, we cannot incorporate such a past-tense implication. Second, there is no intrinsic problem with attaching the truth predicate to a phrase such as ‘What Clara will say’. Third, the same problem may arise from empty descriptions, such as ‘the present King of France’. That is, sentential nominalization might be an improper description. Suppose that I say ‘What Clara said last night is true’ but Clara made no utterance yesterday. This is a problem for the theory of reference, not for the theory of truth. The truth predicate may be applied to the sentential nominalizations that have not been produced or that lack denotations. For those reasons, we should avoid the view that, when one uses the truth predicate, the object that she takes to be true is already given in the past. Endorsement, in the sense I have defined, is neutral with respect to such temporality or even the existence of the nominalized.
denying that \( p \). But then she may also utter “\( p \) is true’. In this utterance as well, she is not endorsing the content that \( p \). The point applies everywhere in the F-game. Consider the sentences such as ‘What the police officer said is true’ or ‘Any sentence of the form \( \neg p \land \neg \neg p \) is true’. In these instances, ‘true’ still retains its generalizing role. But, again, the contents expressed by the corresponding sentences are not endorsed.

One may regard illocutionary deflationism as an empirical claim, maintaining that to predicate ‘is true’ of \( s \) is \textit{usually}, or \textit{more often than not}, to endorse that \( p \) in our actual practice, to which I have no objection. However, as a conceptual claim, it is false.

\textbf{4. Interpreting F-game players}

It is conceivable that there is a linguistic community for whose members following the F-rules is as normal as the practice of following the T-rules is for us. This possibility invites us to examine issues of interpretation in a radical situation.

Suppose that German is a completely foreign language for an English interpreter Eddy, and also that, unknown to him, people in Germany follow the F-rules. Suppose further that the German speaker Greta utters, ‘Schnee ist nicht weiss’. As explained in section 1, we meta-thinkers know that Greta, if sincere and reliable enough, utters that sentence when and only when she believes that snow \textit{is} white. But the question is how Eddy interprets Greta’s utterance. For a Davidsonian truth-conditional theory of meaning, this is to ask what kind of T-sentence Eddy will produce for Greta’s utterance.

Let us stipulate that Eddy can only avail himself of the resources that are observable to him, which presumably are reducible to the data concerning when and only when foreign speakers utter a sentence. He presupposes that Greta by and large believes
only truths, and expresses them by assertion or endorsement. Thus, as long as his interpretation is subject to the principle of charity, Eddy considers the uttered sentences are largely true. Then, given that Greta only utters that sentence when and only when snow is white, it is reasonable to expect Eddy to produce:

‘Schnee ist nicht weiss’ is true in German if and only if snow is white.

Then, Eddy fails to specify the meaning of the sentence Greta used, since it means, as opposed to the right hand side of the biconditional, that snow is not white. Despite this failure of meaning specification, however, what Eddy can identify as Greta’s belief content is the proposition that snow is white, the very content Eddy specifies on the right hand side. So, the success of mental content ascriptions does not depend on the

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16 And the misinterpretation of the negation ‘nicht’ may lead to the misinterpretation of compositionality in the target linguistic community. As outlined in footnote 9, the logic of the F-game is falsity-preserving. Now assume that Eddy observes Greta’s inference from (i) to (ii).

(i) Schnee ist nicht weiss.
(ii) Schnee ist nicht weiss und p.

(where ‘p’ is an arbitrary German sentence). The inference is correct with respect to the F-rules, in the sense that Greta’s inference is falsity preserving. Also, as we’ve just seen, Eddy translates (i) into (iii).

(iii) Snow is white.

Now Eddy observes that Greta and other German speakers, following the F-rules, always allow to draw a new disjunction by ‘und’. This performance coincides with our Disjunction Introduction. Thus, Eddy seems likely to conclude that ‘und’ in German means ‘or’ in English. Then, (ii) is translated into (iv).

(iv) Snow is white or p.

In a similar vein, he would mistake ‘oder’ for ‘and’. Thus, Eddy may completely mistake conjunction(disjunction) in English for disjunction(conjunction) in German, and vice versa. 17 One might think that Eddy understands the use meaning of that sentence, inasmuch as Eddy is supposed to recognize when and only when he can also utter that sentence. But then, the
appropriateness of the meaning that the T-sentence specifies.

Therefore, the principle of charity should not be characterized in terms of truth. The formulation of the principle usually maintains, directly or indirectly,¹-eight that the interpreter should trust that the subject is trying to generate truths. But, as we’ve just seen, Eddy fails to give the meaning of the sentences that Greta utters in the F-game, as long as he expects that Greta tries to utter only truths. Hence, in order that the Davidsonian strategy of interpreting rational subjects can be adopted for such a radical (a way more radical!) scenario, one cannot characterize the principle in terms of truth. Other formulations also employ the notions of sincerity and rationality. Those notions still seem feasible, inasmuch as Greta and all other F-game players can be sincere and rational. As to sincerity, recall section 1.3 (and footnote 5); as to rationality, they are (at least minimally) rational because there is no inconsistency among the utterances they produce.¹-nine This suggests that truth, on the one hand, and sincerity and rationality, on the other hand, are not inseparable. The Davidsonian program is an empirical task, whereas the principle of charity is sometimes considered to be the a priori constraint for launching

¹-eight For example, The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy (Blackburn 2008) characterizes the principle as the constraints on the interpreter ‘to maximize the truth or rationality in the subject’s sayings’ (see the entry, “charity, principle of”). Notice that it mentions the truth at the level of sayings, not at the level of doxastic attitudes. So, in general, if the formulation forces the interpreters to maximize the truths of utterances, then the F-game is a direct counterexample. Another type of formulation appeals to the truth in foreigners’ beliefs. For example, Ludwig characterizes the principle as that ‘a speaker’s beliefs, particularly those that are responses to his environment, are largely true’ (Ludwig 2004: 353). Then, this formulation itself is not problematized by the F-game. There remains a problem, however, insofar as it is supposed to follows from the belief formulation that when a speaker holds true a sentence, by and large the sentence is true (ibid.). Hence, in general, if the formulation would lead the interpreters to maximize the truths of utterances, then the F-game is an indirect counterexample.

¹-nine Here I take consistency in utterances to be a hallmark of (minimal) rationality. The F-game players keep producing false sentences, but such a practice itself does not generate any inconsistency in what they say, as illustrated in the footnote 9.
such a program in the first place. But, given the playability of the F-game, we cannot conceptually postulate that foreigners’ utterances are by and large true.20

The problem of radical interpretation I raised here is how to discern the communicative norms which foreign speakers are actually obeying. This leads to another associated assumption about the available resources that a radical interpreter can exploit. One might contend that we can confine them to the data observable by interpreters, the ones concerning when and only when foreign speakers utter the sentence in question.21 But, as it stands, it is not clear whether accumulating data of this sort is actually sufficient for the present purpose.

We may ask, for example, how the T-game has survived in human communities. Then it seems natural to address the question by appealing to empirical studies, assuming that they would help ensure that the F-game is quite unlikely to emerge, let alone to prevail, within the community of those members, whose physiological constitutions, cognitive mechanisms, etc., the characteristics reproduced through their selective history, are largely similar to ours. If so, considerable differences in those respects, if any, may serve as a clue for suspecting the similarity in the practical norms. The consideration is no more than a hypothesis. Whatever resources are available, they go beyond those attained by investigating when and only when the foreigners utter a sentence.

20 So, the principle of charity, which forces or leads interpreters to assume that foreign utterances are largely true (see footnote 18), cannot be an a priori condition for interpretation. The F-game provides a way to show this point. As to more detailed discussions about the epistemological and metaphysical status of the principle, see (Glüer 2006; Pagin 2006).

21 Davidson himself later replied to his critics that, although he sometimes used the term “radical interpretation” to refer to “the special enterprise of interpreting on the basis of a limited and specified data base”, he “has never argued, specified, or assumed […] that the data on which the special enterprise is based exhaust the data available to actual interpreters” (1994: fn. 2).
5. Summary

I have argued that the possibility of the F-game yields serious consequences to three traditional doctrines: the Frege-Geach account of denial, illocutionary deflationism, and the Davidsonian truth conditional theory of meaning. All three doctrines take for granted the problematic assumption that the T-game has conceptual priority.

References


