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*From J. L. Austin to Ch. Travis :
A Pragmatic Account of Truth ?*

Tufts University, Medford

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In Philosophy of language nowadays it is generally agreed that the meaning of a sentence can be analyzed in terms of a proposition determining its truth-conditions. Meaning would thus allow us to determine straightforwardly the conditions in which the utterance of a sentence having that meaning would be true. By criticizing radically such an approach, often attributed to Frege¹, Ch. Travis means to delink the meaning of words from their truth-conditions in order to show, by means of contextualist arguments, that truth is not a semantic property, but rather a pragmatic dimension of the evaluation of utterances, which is contextually assessed. In that process, Travis does not so much contest the Fregean account but rather retains some of its aspects that he associates with the radical anti-Platonist ideas of J.L. Austin.

Indeed J.L. Austin is well-known for having proposed in the fifties a very original account of truth, according to which truth is not a property but rather a « dimension of assessment » of certain utterances. Yet his conception is rarely endorsed by contemporary philosophers, apart from Ch. Travis. Indeed, that conception directly conflates with those current views about the relation of truth with meaning that I will call, for brief, “truth-conditional analysis” (or “truth-conditional semantics” as T. Burge calls it), and according to which the meaning of a sentence can determine its truth-conditions (and reciprocally, knowing when a sentence is true can allow to identify what it “really” means). The main purpose of that account is, following a Fregean line, to delineate the content of what is communicated by a given sentence, whatever its uses. In short, such a conception is closely linked to a view of meaning in terms of a “proposition”, according to which, whenever it is used, a sentence expresses a timeless proposition that determines its truth-conditions, so that it is easy – and immediate – to know in what circumstances it is true. The meaning of a sentence is thus supposed to determine the conditions for its being true : when the world is as is the sentence says it is. No further conditions are needed.

1. See T. Burge, *Truth, Thought, Reason: Essays on Frege*, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 16.

According to Austin, this conception does not work because of the “descriptive fallacy” that lies behind it. First of all, it forgets the pragmatic conditions of the use of a sentence as aiming at saying the truth – that is as a “statement.” For not all sentences have a descriptive function and it is only when they have one that they can be considered either true or false. In other words, statements are speech acts and not all speech acts are statements. This is the first pragmatic aspect that matters to determine the truth of a sentence : one must take into account the “felicity conditions” of the particular speech acts that aim at truth, in order to be able to know whether they can be assessed as true or false. But another (important) aspect matters : according to Austin, truth is not a semantic property – it is not a property at all (Austin agrees with Frege on this point). Truth is the name of a certain “dimension of assessment” (among others), that is: a dimension according to which one judges whether a sentence, used as a statement (a description), fits the world. Now that dimension, being a dimension of judgement, essentially is contextual and depends on the aims of the speaker : a statement is not true because it corresponds to what its alleged truth-conditions establish, but only because it contextually fits the world, given the way it is described by the words used in these circumstances. This is the path followed by Ch. Travis, developing Austin's seminal ideas and criticizing any representational conception of meaning and truth.

Of course, the dimension of truth is not the only dimension of assessment and, depending on how the words are used (depending on which speech act is performed), words may have to be judged according to any other dimension (for instance, the dimension of sincerity, of relevance, of originality, etc.). It is only when a sentence is used as a descriptive speech act that the dimension of truth can apply. Otherwise it does not make sense – which implies that the meaningfulness of a sentence does not depend on its truth-conditions. I thus concur with A. Baz when he says that too much attention has been paid – even by contextualists such as Ch. Travis – to the supposed descriptive use of the sentences². Austin's entire work is devoted to criticizing this descriptive fallacy : not all sentences are used descriptively ; most of them are not and one does not give a correct analysis of them if one supposes they are³. But I would like to stress that Austin and Travis's account of truth is an

2. See his *When Words Are Called For*, Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 2012 ; see also A. Baz, “The Reach of Words”, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 16 (1), p. 31-56.

3. According to Austin, even sentences which are assertions may have other business than that of being true. See J.L. Austin, “Truth”, p. 131 : “even genuine statements have other businesses besides that of so

important mean to show precisely why not all sentences must be assessed as true or false.

In fact, the analysis Austin gives of truth as a specific dimension of assessment allows him to put the concept of truth “upside down” (so to speak), showing that it cannot be what the partisans of the truth-conditions analysis want it to be. Therefore, Austin's (and Travis') analysis shows how that latter view is limited. Indeed, his/their analysis reveals that in order to evaluate a sentence as true, first one must know whether (and how) it is used descriptively, and second one must take into account the situation in which it has to be assessed. In other words, one must take into account the uses of words, or their pragmatics. That is to say that pragmatics prevails over semantics concerning truth itself ! In that sense, the Austinian and Travisian analysis of truth is important since it demonstrates why one cannot offer a proper analysis of language in terms of its truth-conditions – or so I hope to show.

I will begin by exposing how Austin inherits certain ideas of Frege in building his pragmatic account of speech acts and of truth as a dimension of assessment. Then I will present Travis' criticism of any representationalist conception of truth (including Frege's), showing how it inherits Austin and why his contextualist account of truth is in fact a pragmatic account (and not a pragmatist one – as I will explain) that offers a new way of challenging the descriptive fallacy.

1. Frege's account of meaning and truth.

I won't expose Frege's whole story about truth, which would take a paper of its own – but only some parts which matter to illuminate Austin's conception by contrast. As you know, Frege wanted to establish an “ideography”, that is an ideal language aiming at exhibiting the laws of truth⁴. This ideography was supposed to become the language of science. But there is a problem with natural languages, since their sentences can be used to carry many meanings – they seem to be equivocal. How then to grasp their definite content and establish if they are true ? According to Frege, one must first identify the “thought” any sentence conveys.

To explain his point, let me take the following example : the English expressions “the morning star” and “the evening star “ do not have the same

corresponding”.

4. G. Frege, “Thought: A Logical Enquiry” (trans. M. Black), *Mind*, Vol. LXV, n° 259, 1956, p. 289 : “To discover truths is the task of all sciences; it falls to logic to discern the laws of truth”

meaning yet they refer to the same thing – the same star. They do not have the same meaning (what Frege calls “the sense”) yet they have the same reference⁵.

As Frege puts it :

The reference of a proper name is the object itself which we designate by its means [...] A proper name (word, sign, sign combination, expression) *expresses* its sense, *stands for* or *designates* its reference. By means of a sign we express its sense and designate its reference. (Frege, “On Sense and Reference”, p. 60-61)

The same kind of phenomena shows up with complete sentences : two different sentences, composed of different names, may mean the same thing if the names have the same reference ; for instance the two different english sentences “The president of the United States is Barack Obama” (a=a) and “The president of the United States is the Democrat candidate who won the elections in 2012” (a=b) are different ((a=a)#(a=b)) but they speak of (or refer to) the same state of affairs. They have different linguistic forms and attribute different properties to the same subject but may nevertheless express the same “content”. How is it possible ? Frege's answer is that, concerning sentences, their sense (or meaning) corresponds to what he calls a “thought” :

We now inquire concerning the sense and reference for an entire declarative sentence. Such a sentence contains a thought*. Is this thought, now, to be regarded as its sense or its reference? Let us assume for the time being that the sentence has reference. If we now replace one word of the sentence by another having the same reference, but a different sense, this can have no bearing upon the reference of the sentence. Yet we can see that in such a case the thought changes; since, e.g., the thought in the sentence 'The morning star is a body illuminated by the Sun' differs from that in the sentence 'The evening star is a body illuminated by the Sun.' Anybody who did not know that the evening star is the morning star might hold the one thought to be true, the other false. The thought, accordingly, cannot be the reference of the sentence, but must rather be considered as the sense. (Frege, “On Sense and Reference”, p. 62)

Thus Frege considers that any assertive sentence contains or expresses a “thought” [*Gedanke*], that corresponds to what is thought or meant in asserting that

5. See G. Frege, “On Sense and Reference” (trans. M. Black), in P. Geach & M. Black, *Translations From The Philosophical Writings of G. Frege*, Oxford : Blackwell, 1960, p. 57.

sentence, that is to its objective content, which functions as “a mode of presentation of that which is designated”⁶. This thought is not reducible to the subjective representations that belong to a singular subject – what Frege calls “ideas” – ; it is rather shareable by any thinker⁷. “Sense” (or “meaning”) and “thought” become the same : a thought is the objective sense expressed by an assertion. One can also say that an assertion expresses a “proposition”, that is a unit of meaning which, when time and location are fixed, is timeless in the sense that its truth-value does not change. It also is a unit of meaning that can be expressed by different linguistic forms. Thus a thought corresponds to a timeless proposition expressed by an assertion and graspable by anyone who understands that assertion, that is anyone who understands its sense and its reference.

But what is the reference of such a sentence which has a sense ? First, according to Frege, not any sentence has a reference. Only utterances used in contexts allowing to completely determine the thought – or the proposition – expressed have a reference. It is only when a sentence manages to express a full proposition that it has a reference. That is the case with (complete) assertions (but not with exclamations, orders, etc.). Indeed, any full assertion corresponds to the making of a judgment. Thus any assertion expresses a thought. But the judgement adds something to the thought expressed : “in every judgment, no matter how trivial, the step from the level of thoughts to the level of reference (the objective) has already been taken”⁸ That reference is precisely the truth-value of the sentence⁹.

Indeed, a judgement asserts what is said in a proposition : it takes the form of a predication but is not a predication, since it adds nothing to the predicated thing. Judgment does not add anything to the sense of an assertion (the content of an assertion does not change, be it judged true or false). That's precisely because the judgement contained in an assertion only gives it a *reference* : its truth-value. Thus an assertion expresses the judgement of a thought that gives a truth-value to it as its reference.

Frege explains it this way :

Therefore two things must be distinguished in an indicative sentence: the content, which it has in common with the corresponding sentence-question, and the

6. Frege, “On Sense and Reference”, art. cit., p. 57.

7. See Ch. Travis, « Thought's Social Nature », *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2010, pp. 1-22.

8. G. Frege, “On Sense and Reference”, p. 64.

9. . G. Frege, “On Sense and Reference”, p. 63-64.

assertion. The former is the thought, or at least contains the thought. So it is possible to express the thought without laying it down as true. Both are so closely joined in an indicative sentence that it is easy to overlook their separability. Consequently we may distinguish:

- (1) the apprehension of a thought-thinking,
- (2) the recognition of the truth of a thought-judgment,
- (3) the manifestation of this judgment-assertion.¹⁰

He adds :

We declare the recognition of truth in the form of an indicative sentence. We do not have to use the word " true " for this. And even when we do use it, the real assertive force lies, not in it, but in the form of the indicative sentence and where this loses its assertive force the word " true " cannot put it back again. This happens when we do not speak seriously. As stage thunder is only apparent thunder and a stage fight only an apparent fight, so stage assertion is only apparent assertion. It is only acting, only fancy. In his part the actor asserts nothing, nor does he lie, even if he says something of whose falsehood he is convinced. (G. Frege, " Thought: A Logical Enquiry", p. 294)

In that sense, truth is not a property of sentences. That's why Frege will add, in his ideography, the sign of assertion (|-) whose function is to express the judgement that a thought is true, without thereby saying anything new. It only shows it (so to speak).

In any case, Frege considers that the reference of a thought is not the state of affairs that would make it true, but rather the truth-value determined by the judgment about that thought. One can say that what is at stake in the reference of an assertion, is a judgement and therefore a certain kind of relation between the utterance and the world : an assertion is precisely the act by which a proposition expressed by a sentence is considered, or judged, as true or false and then is given a reference.

But, if Frege does take it that the sense of an assertion is closely tied to a determinate and invariable proposition ; if, in that sense, a proposition has the same truth-value forever once judged ; and if a proposition, in that sense, determines its truth-condition ; nevertheless truth is not a property of the proposition, nor a

10. G. Frege, " Thought: A Logical Enquiry", art. cit., p. 294.

property of the assertion. It is not a property at all. One might even say that truth does not depend (only) on the semantics of an utterance, since it depends on the act of judgement made through an assertion. We will now see how, in a certain sense, Austin elaborates upon this idea, proposing a more radically pragmatic conception of truth.

2. Austin and the speech act of assertion : what is true is an utterance, not a sentence.

Austin begins his famous paper "Truth" by looking for what truth can be attributed to : what "is true" can be predicated of ? He rejects both the idea that a "proposition" can be true and that a "sentence" can be true. Only a "statement" can be said to be true, that is a certain kind of utterance or again a "sentence *as used by a certain person on a certain occasion*"¹¹.

He explains it as follows :

A statement is made and its making is an historic event, the utterance by a certain speaker or writer of certain words (a sentence) to an audience with reference to an historic situation, event or what not.

A sentence is made *up of* words, a statement is made *in* words. A sentence is not English or not good English, a statement is not in English or not in good English. Statements are made, words or sentences are used. We talk of *my* statement, but of *the English* sentence (if a sentence is mine, I coined it, but I do not coin statements). The *same* sentence is used in making *different* statements (I say 'It is mine', you say 'It is mine'): it may also be used on two occasions or by two persons in making the *same* statement, but for this the utterance must be made with reference to the same situation or event. We speak of 'the statement that S,' but of 'the sentence "S" ', not of 'the sentence that S'. (Austin, "Truth", p. 119-120)

A statement, or as Austin also admits "an assertion", thus corresponds to what is said in a given use of a certain sentence – to what is stated. As such it is an utterance or what he will call "a speech act". In any case, it is not a sentence, nor a proposition in the Fregean sense. One main feature of an utterance is that its content – what is said – changes in function of the occasion of utterance : what you say in a given context by a certain sentence is not the same as what you say by the same

11. J.L. Austin, "Truth", in his *Philosophical Papers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3rd ed. : 1979, p. 119.

sentence in another context. It is then a first departure from Frege : what is true, an assertion, is something that changes from occasion to occasion.

Furthermore, he suspects that some statements may not be true at all :

Not merely is it jejune to suppose that all a statement aims to be is 'true', but it may further be questioned whether every 'statement' does aim to be true at all. The principle of Logic, that 'Every proposition must be true or false', has too long operated as the simplest, most persuasive and most pervasive form of the descriptive fallacy. (Austin, "Truth", p. 130-131)

Why would not such statements be true or false ? Because they would not be used in order to describe the world. Indeed, according to Austin in his later theory, an utterance can only count as making a description if it is used as such. In other words, an utterance only counts as descriptive if it aims at describing something – if it has the "illocutionary force" of a descriptive utterance.

The descriptive fallacy thus is the tendency of philosophers that believe that all utterances are real statements and then can all be explained according to their truth-value. This is a double mistake : not all utterances are statements ; statements themselves cannot be explained solely in terms of their truth-value. What Austin shows in *How to Do Things With Words*¹² is that utterances can be used to do many things and that many of them do not (and cannot) purport to be true. They are what he calls "performatives". Performative utterances, such as promises, orders, wishes do not claim to describe the world, nor to represent it : they perform an action ; as such, they can be said to change the world. So they cannot state the truth.

Not only does Austin remind us that not all utterances are statements ; he also generalizes the dimension of "performativity" to every utterance, even the descriptive ones. Saying something is always, in the same time, doing something. That is true in many senses, but what is important is the distinction Austin draws between "locutionary act" and "illocutionary act" : a locutionary act is "an act of saying something"¹³; an illocutionary act is an act performed "in saying something"¹⁴. He adds :

To perform a locutionary act is, in general, we may say, also and *ipso facto* to perform an illocutionary act, as I propose to call it. Thus in performing a

12. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2nd ed.:1975. *HTD*

13. *HTD*, p. 100.

14. *HTD*, p. 99.

locutionary act we shall also be performing such an act as:

asking or answering a question,
giving some information or an assurance or a warning,
announcing a verdict or an intention,
pronouncing sentence,
making an appointment or an appeal or a criticism,
making an identification or giving a description,
and the numerous like. (*HTD*, p. 98-99)

For instance, when one utters the sentence "I promise to make the laundry", one may perform the locutionary act of saying that one promises to make the laundry and the illocutionary act of promising to do it. To say something by means of words is thus also to do something ; among other things, it may be to assert something (rather than to promise, apologize, order, etc.). As Austin says : "Surely to state is every bit as much to perform an illocutionary act as, say, to warn or to pronounce"¹⁵. A sequel is that someone must already have performed an action in uttering words before her words be liable to tell the truth. It means that the "meaning" of the utterance does not suffice to make it an assertion, since it also needs what Austin calls an "illocutionary force"¹⁶, echoing the Fregean "assertive force".

I won't try to explain here what the illocutionary force is. What is important is that an illocutionary act, as an act, needs to fulfill some "felicity conditions"¹⁷ in order to have an illocutionary force and to be achieved. Otherwise an act can fail :

In the case of illocutions we must be ready to draw the necessary distinction, not noticed by ordinary language except in exceptional cases, between

(a) the act of attempting or purporting (or affecting or professing or claiming or setting up or setting out) to perform a certain illocutionary act, and

(b) the act of successfully achieving or consummating or bringing off such an act.

This distinction is, or should be, a commonplace of the theory of our language about action' in general. But attention has been drawn earlier to its special importance in connexion with performatives: it is always possible, for example, to try to thank or inform somebody yet in different ways to fail, because he doesn't listen, or takes it as ironical, or wasn't responsible for whatever it was, and so on.

(*HTD*, p. 105-106)

15. *HTD*, p. 136.

16. *HTD*, p. 100.

17. *HTD*, p. 14.

An illocutionary act, whatever its kind, is successful only if it meets certain conditions. What are these conditions ? Austin never explained what the felicity conditions of illocutionary acts were, but he made clear that he was thinking of the same as those of the performatives, which are :

(A. 1) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further,

(A. 2) the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.

(B. 1) The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and

(B. 2) completely.

(Γ. 1) Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further

(Γ. 2) must actually so conduct themselves subsequently. (*HTD*, p. 14-15)

What matters here is that these conditions are pragmatic conditions : they are conditions of use and practice, taking into account context features which are not semantic features. Most of them are conventional and define a kind of social ritual that must be accomplished to perform such an act. In that sense, an illocutionary act must respect these pragmatic conditions to be performed. And if an assertion is an illocutionary act, then it must respect these pragmatic conditions, which have nothing to do with truth.

This is what Austin claims when he notes that statements are also subject to many kinds of infelicities when they do not meet these pragmatic conditions :

On mere inspection, 'I state that' does not appear to differ in any essential way from 'I maintain that' (to say which is to maintain that), 'I inform you that', 'I testify that', &c. [...]

(2) Moreover, if we think of the second alleged contrast, according to which performatives are happy or unhappy and statements true or false, again from the side of supposed constative utterances, notably statements, we find that

statements *are* liable to every kind of infelicity to which performatives are liable. Let us look back again and consider whether statements are not liable to precisely the same disabilities as, say, warnings by way of what we called 'infelicities'—that is various disabilities which make an utterance unhappy without, however, making it true or false. (*HTD*, p. 136)

A statement may thus fail for pragmatic reason and thus be unable to even tell the truth or the false. That is to say that a statement must first have succeeded as an act before being able to be said true or false. It must qualify as a statement before being able to say something true or not.

Let us agree that all these circumstances of situation have to be in order for me to have succeeded in stating something, yet when I have, *the* question arises, was what I stated true or false? And this we feel, speaking in popular terms, is now the question of whether the statement corresponds with the facts' (*HTD*, p. 140)

In other words, a statement can only establish the truth of something if it has already managed to be successful as an act, that is in respect of pragmatic and contextual reasons. If someone does not respect certain felicity conditions, one cannot not even manage to tell the truth¹⁸. In that sense, pragmatics prevails over truth – at least in the sense that the truth of any assertion depends on pragmatic conditions to be obtained¹⁹. Truth-conditions are even absent of the picture.

Nevertheless, Austin does not wish to reduce truth to some kind of pragmatist achievement : truth is neither eliminable in favor of some kind of performative force (as Strawson once wanted to do in reducing truth to confirmation or granting), nor is it the mere result of a successful act. According to Austin, truth is not a property of what works (as some versions of pragmatism may maintain) ; truth is a “dimension of assessment”.

3. Austin and the contextual assessment of truth.

Once an assertion has been made – that is once a speech act with a descriptive illocutionary force has been successful – then it is liable to tell the truth or the false. But the attribution of the predicate “is true” is not, for Austin, the attribution of a property – let alone a semantic property. Rather it is the result of a certain kind of

18. See the examples Austin gives in *HTD*, pp. 137-139.

19. For a detailed account of truth which adopts the same pragmatic perspective, see R. Kukla & M. Lance, '*Yo!*' and '*Lo!*': *The Pragmatic Topography of the Space of Reasons*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2009.

judgment, comparing what is said (in a speech act of assertion) and the world. In that sense, Austin maintains a certain correspondence-conception of truth. What does he mean exactly ?

First of all, Austin rejects any temptation to understand truth as a strict one-to-one correspondence between words and the world ; that would be an idealist fallacy willing to find in the world what the language says about it.

There is no need whatsoever for the words used in making a true statement to 'mirror' in any way, however indirect, any feature whatsoever of the situation or event; a statement no more needs, in order to be true, to reproduce the 'multiplicity,' say, or the 'structure' or 'form' of the reality, than a word needs to be echoic or writing pictographic. To suppose that it does, is to fall once again into the error of reading back into the world the features of language. (J.L. Austin, "Truth", p. 125).

In fact, in order for a statement to be true, it *needs* not mirror the world – in that sense it is not be a mere representation of it. As Austin reminds us, a perfect painting or a picture of the world is not "true" : it is accurate, precise or lifelike. In order to be true, there must be something like a "distance" or "a gap" between the thing represented and the representation, so that it allows the possibility of a comparison. This is possible because of two kinds of conventions :

Descriptive conventions correlating the words (= sentences) with the *types* of situation, thing, event, &c., to be found in the world.

Demonstrative conventions correlating the words (= statements) with the *historic* situations, &c., to be found in the world.

A statement is said to be true when the historic state of affairs to which it is correlated by the demonstrative conventions (the one to which it 'refers') is of a type with which the sentence used in making it is correlated by the descriptive conventions. (J.L. Austin, "Truth", p. 121-122)

These two kinds of conventions relate words to the world in different manners : the former kind is some kind of lexical conventions which gives sentences what can be called their "meaning", which itself corresponds to some idealized situations. The latter kind comprises conventions of use that allow the utterances (that is, the declarative speech acts) to gain some reference in the world, when they are used in a

certain situation, a certain context, etc. The sentence “The cat is on the mat” may thus be used to speak about Silvester who is soaking wet on a Bayeux tapestry, depending on the historic situation in which it is used. As we already noticed, what is said here might have been different in other circumstances – but that content is what may be true or false. Then, now, is that utterance, so used, true ? It depends on whether *we* decide to consider that the situation to which it refers, in those circumstances, is of the same type as the situation meant by the sentence “The cat is on the mat”. As Austin specifies it :

Thus, for a statement to be true one state of affairs must be *like* certain others, which is a natural relation, but also *sufficiently* like to merit the same ‘description’, which is no longer a purely natural relation. To say ‘This is red’ is not the same as to say ‘This is like those’, nor even as to say ‘This is like those which were called red’. That things are *similar*, or even ‘exactly’ similar, I may literally see, but that they are the *same* I cannot literally see—in calling them the same colour a convention is involved additional to the conventional choice of the name to be given to the colour which they are said to be. (J.L. Austin, “Truth”, p. 122 n.2)

In that sense, truth is not a natural relation : it is the dimension according to which we human beings decide that a given situation, in given circumstances, merits to be designated by a sentence having a certain meaning. It is both a matter of conventions and of judgement.

One then understands that, if the relation of truth is not a one-to-one relation between the elements of the world and the elements the language is made up with, and if human beings decide whether a given description is truly attributed to a certain situation, then a given statement is always liable to be more or less correctly said to be true, according to how human beings understand it.

Is it true or false that Belfast is north of London? That the galaxy is the shape of a fried egg? That Beethoven was a drunkard? That Wellington won the battle of Waterloo? There are various *degrees and dimensions* of success in making statements: the statements fit the facts always more or less loosely, in different ways on different occasions for different intents and purposes. What may score full marks in a general knowledge test may in other circumstances get a gamma. And even the most adroit of languages may fail to ‘work’ in an abnormal situation or to cope, or cope reasonably simply, with novel discoveries: is it true or false

that the dog goes round the cow? (J.L. Austin, "Truth", p. 130)

Austin here reminds us that sentences can be used in many different ways and for many different purposes, and that as such, they may be evaluated in many different ways. Truth is just one way of evaluating some of them : utterances. But he also shows that the way declarative utterances are evaluated is itself dependent on the situation in which they are used. In certain contexts, a certain description will be counted as true ; in other ones, it won't – depending on what degree of precision is required. Again, truth seems to depend on pragmatic requirements, since one judges an utterance as true only if it is contextually relevant to count it as true in the way it is used. It does not mean that there is no truth ; it means that truth is a human predicate, as much dependent on human practices and conventions as on the way the world actually is.

We thus understand that, according to Austin, truth is a dimension of assessment of those speech acts that are descriptive. In that sense, it needs that some felicity conditions which are not truth-conditions be fulfilled. Therefore, truth is a dimension of assessment which is submitted to a prior pragmatic success. One does need to make a successful assertion before one's assertion can possibly be evaluated in terms of truth. But there is still another pragmatic dimension lying in the truth-assessment, since the correct attribution of truth to an utterance always depends on the context of evaluation and on the aims of the evaluators, the way they are using their words, the practices they are engaged in, etc.²⁰.

Now we are going to see how Travis develops some Austinian ideas in a more radical way, claiming, against Frege, that no representation (or no "proposition" in that sense) can ever be true.

4. Travis : a radical contextualist account of truth.

Travis is well-known for defending a radical contextualist conception of truth. Admittedly he only focuses on assertions and do not take into account other kinds of

20. Austin's conception of truth is in fact much more complicated than the brief sketch I have just given. For more details, see J.-Ph. Narboux, "'There's many a Slip between Cup and Lip': Dimension and Negation in Austin", in R. Sorli & M. Gustafsson, eds., *The Philosophy of J.L. Austin*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 204-239.

speech act and other dimensions of assessment. However I take it that he can be read as developing a strategic attack against the central part of the traditional conception of truth and meaning, attempting to show that telling the truth is part of certain human practices and is, as such, subject to many conditions that matter for humans practices.

4.1. What is said : the contextual determination of the descriptive content of a statement.

Travis fully rejects the Fregean suggestion that propositions could be truth-bearers. Following Austin and Wittgenstein, he claims that only what is said in an utterance can be said to be true ; and what is said is not equivalent to the non-temporal meaning of the sentence uttered. I won't develop this point here : you can find the whole story in a complicated book called *Unshadowed Thought*²¹. What I am going to try to explain is how, for Travis, one can still say the truth, even if that truth is relativized, first, to what is said by a given sentence on a certain occasion.

Let's take the sentence "(1) The leaves are green"

First of all, one can certainly identify the content of an utterance of it by a speaker on a given occasion. This content is not eternal, but relative to the use that a speaker makes of that sentence. The audience can understand what a speaker means on that occasion : the understanding her words require in such a context. Indeed words – or sentences – have meanings ; but meanings are not enough to determine how they must be understood. As Travis reminds us [I do not read the whole quotation] : "what [a sentence] says on a speaking, of given leaves, etc., is not determined merely by what it, or its parts, mean"²² : one has to distinguish between what is meant (given by lexical conventions) and what is said. And to know what is said by a given sentence on a certain occasion, is to interpret it in a certain way. Now that interpretation depends on the context of the utterance of the words – so that one cannot interpret a sentence in any kind of way. In any context a sentence has to be understood as required by the way it is used. That context determines the understanding of that sentence. Of course, a sentence admits of many understandings ; but in a context, she only admits of the one understanding that its use requires. Then an audience has to understand how a speaker uses a sentence to

21. Ch. Travis, *Unshadowed Thought*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000.

22. Ch. Travis, « Pragmatics », in *Occasion-Sensitivity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, , p. 113.

grasp how to understand it in that context²³. A definite understanding is thus relative to its context.

However, by “understandings” one should not understand that there exist, behind or above the semantic structures of words, any other kind of “representations” : understandings do not add up to form the whole set of understandings that sentences can admit. There is no definite set of understandings that a given language, or even a given sentence, can admit. As Travis puts it :

There is no reason to think that there is any limit to possible understandings of *that*, each of which might be invoked by some words which spoke on that topic. There is not only an understanding on which painting might make it so, but also one on which painting might make it so, as long as it is not in too loose a pointillist style, or too shiny. And so on, *ad infinitum*. If ‘green’ has, say, thirteen senses, there are, for each of them, various possible (and invokable) understandings of what it would be for leaves to be green in *that* sense. (Ch. Travis, “Pragmatics”, p. 113)

An understanding is always the result of a certain use in a certain context and it is not calculable in advance. Then how can we specify the content thus generated, if that content, in certain context, has to be true (or false) ?

In fact, the context in which a sentence is used may be enough to give reasons to understand its utterance in a way rather than another – so that the context is (often) enough to fix what is uttered. Given the meaning of the words used, and given a certain context, one may understand what a given speaker has said by her words in that context. The context adds something to the words' semantics in order to fix what they speak about. Indeed the “context” here includes the reasons for which the words are used are they are used, the aim of that use, the *point* of their use. It also includes environmental features, past and future events and expectations, etc. It then helps to secure the understanding.

Let's now take sentence 2. : “The lake's water is blue”. In a vacuum, many different and even contradictory things can be understood by this sentence : it may say many different things about the world. But, in a given context, given certain circumstances, some understandings are more justified than others : they fit the situation. Travis puts it this way, using Wittgensteinian terms :

23. See Ch. Travis, *Unshadowed Thought*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

being blue is a condition of things which admits of understandings. (In fact, a lake is the sort of thing highly likely to be blue on some such understandings and not on others.) Precisely how, then, is Sid's statement to be understood, *given* that it said Lac Lemane to be blue? Precisely what concrete cases of a lake's being as it is (was) would count, on this understanding, as its being blue? That is a matter to be settled by, as Wittgenstein puts it, 'agreement in judgement'. (It is that which calls for that agreement in judgement which §242 mentions.) The matter is settled, that is, by relevant parochial perceptions as to how Sid's words ought to be understood; which is to say, in the terms just used, as to what *ought* to count as a lake's being blue in that sense. (Ch. Travis, *Thoughts Footing*, p. 145)

Here Travis speak of an "agreement in judgment" – I don't have the time to completely express his analysis of that expression here. But we must understand that the context gives the "parochial" reasons why people can agree on what must be understood by a given sentence. In fact, the context imposes one precise understanding – and if not, one can ask for more precisions (which again will need to be understood). For instance, let's someone tell me, about the Lake Michigan, that it is blue. If I know that this person is a chemist who analyses the water after the colour-factory near the lake has leaked into it, I can understand his words as saying that the lake is coloured blue (by some kind of paint) – and not that it appears blue under the sun, even if his sentence could admit of that interpretation in another context. How I understand what is said is thus fixed by the informations I have about the context of utterance. Only certain understandings are reasonable or pertinent enough, given the circumstances and what one is doing in using language.

We can thus say that the practices (notably the linguistic practices) in which one is engaged when one speaks helps to determine the content of what one says on an occasion of utterance²⁴. Travis summarizes it that way :

Saying the things we do is part of the way we conduct our lives. Given the sorts of lives we conduct, and the ways our words are woven into them, there may be policies that are (or are by our perceptions) right, whether a given speaker, and his audience, have done anything like opting for them or not. Such facts might fix an understanding for given words. And what that understanding is – when, on it, things would be as said to be – may not be specifiable independent of the

24. See Ch. Travis, *Unshadowed Thought*, *op. cit.*, p. 90-93.

particular cases of what, on it, does, and what, on it, does not, so count. (Travis, *Unshadowed Thought*, p. 24.)

So, this conception seems to make the human beings and their practices decide what is said in words. Now, how do we know if what is said is true ? Is it still possible to know it ?

4.2. A contextual attribution of truth to contextual understandings.

Again, I won't be able to explain Travis' rather complicated conception of truth in all its details. For short, one could say that on Travis' account truth itself becomes radically contextualized, since truth becomes a relation between three factors rather than two : truth becomes a relation between the content of words (as it has just been specified), the way the world is and the circumstances of an utterance. For stating the truth cannot consist in giving, *a priori*, a determined content to words and then look for the conditions in the world that make it true. One cannot presuppose a certain understanding and then checks whether it corresponds to the world, precisely because that understanding cannot be specified out of context : it is in context that a content is identified and then assessed as fitting or not the world.

What determines our ways of speaking about the world is precisely the way in which, on an occasion, we choose to describe it – that is our aim, our interests, our motivations, etc. Our knowledge of the world and of how other people live also play a role in this choice.

The way there are for things to be varies from occasion to occasion for thinking of the way things are. What count, on one occasion for viewing the world, as the ways there are for things to be, and so what count as the distinctions to be drawn between one thought and another, may not be what so count on another occasion.

The ways of describing the same state of the world thus vary from occasion to occasion, as much as the way to understand them. But the contextual data do constitute reasons to speak of the world in a certain way and thus to understand our speaking in a certain way. These reasons allow to identify, to quote Travis, “what counts, on one occasion, as the way there are for things to be”. In fact, that depends

on our shared “forms of life” and on the ways they determine how we act according to the way we understand the words. One thus assesses the “value” of an information, or a description, depending on our interests, our aims, etc. There is a set of expectations, depending on the context, that determine how, on that occasion, we understand our words (even if one cannot make in advance a definite list of these expectations). In a certain sense, they work as kinds of normative criteria that discriminate how a given utterance can be correctly understood.

Now how does that work on a precise occasion of uttering an assertion ? How to be sure that what I say about the world is correct – that I tell the truth about the world?

Let us suppose that, on a given occasion, I perform an assertion and thus aim at saying the truth. The truth of that utterance will then be precisely about what that utterance is about on that occasion. Why ? Because the context of my utterance will allow one to understand what I say, how I say it and what I am speaking about. The context will also allow one to understand how one intends to qualify what one refers to, according to which criteria and to which degree of finesse. For instance, suppose I am saying “The lake's water is blue”, speaking of Lake Michigan, in replying to my sister who wants to know its color. Do I tell her the truth ? Is my assertion true ? Is it possible to say correctly that it is true that the lake's water is blue ? It depends on the context. If my sister wants to know whether she can take a swim, then what I say is not true : there's chemical paint in the lake. But if my sister wants to know what color has been leaking in the lake, then I am telling the truth. I thus need to take into account what my sister wants to do in order to decide whether my assertion, uttered in this context, is true. Of course, one can refine the context, multiply the features that must be taken into account or the ways of understanding them, etc. There are many ways of assessing the truth of an assertion, depending on what one takes to be relevant to assess it.

Does that mean that truth is relative ? No, if one thereby means that there is no truth at all. Truths can be assessed and they certainly are about the world. But there is neither one way of describing the world, nor one way of understanding how one uses a given sentence to describe it. So, in order to know whether a given assertion is true, one needs to know 1) what it means, 2) how to understand it in that context, 3) what it then claims to refer to, 4) how the world is – and 5) whether it makes sense to

describe the world in that way in this context. If so, one can maybe assess this assertion as true or false. (In fact, it is even more complicated than that, since there are many ways of being true or false ; but I'll pass on this.)

In fact, there is one central thing to understand in Travis' examples. In uttering an assertion, one is thereby taking a certain form of responsibility for what one is saying – that is one must be able to explain what one wanted to say, how one understood one's words, and one must act according to that understanding. One cannot claim to want to know whether the lake is blue in the sense of being coloured blue if one does not care about the colour of the water. In other words, people take commitments in using words in a certain way. These commitments are the ones which secure a possible common understanding among speakers : one cannot say everything about the world.

the content of our words—that which makes the truth-evaluable, if they are—derives substantially from what they are rightly held responsible for; and that can only be seen from the purposes they would reasonably be taken to be serving on some particular, parochial, occasion of their use. On that model, we have no hope of speaking truth or falsehood without the content of our words depending on something beyond just the concepts we employ (or what those words mean). Words cannot have that kind of content except where there is (parochial) practical import the *ought* to have. (Ch. Travis, *Les liaisons ordinaires*, p. 193)

These commitments secure the possibility of truth-evaluation. Indeed, to say that an assertion is true is to undertake a commitment – a commitment to the reality and to the way one describes the reality as being. In that sense, a certain kind of objectivity is attained in evaluating the truth of an assertion. To say that an assertion is true is to take a certain responsibility : a responsibility towards what is the case and towards the way one describes what is the case as true.

It even is, according to Travis, my parochial way of telling what is the case that allows human people to agree with me about its truth, because they are able to share my parochial criteria. In that sense, it is precisely because we are human beings, inserted in a certain time, located in certain places, with certain interests and aims, that we are able to tell the truth – however paradoxical this result may appear.

As Travis says,

Deprive us of our roles in fixing what it would be for a judgment to be true, and

with that genuine answerability—an intelligible distinction between being right and merely seeming so—vanishes. It is thus removing us from that picture that in fact loses us judgment altogether. (Ch. Travis, *Les liaisons ordinaires*, p. 202)

Indeed, there must be some criteria allowing to judge what is true and what is not and which, as such, warrant objectivity. These criteria constitute standards of correction of knowledge which are necessarily parochial, local, indexed to human practices. But it is precisely their parochiality in that sense that makes them shareable and that secures a certain kind of objective knowledge. Travis concludes :

The parochial, on Wittgenstein's view, is precisely what allows responsibility, commitment, to accrue to words, so that, correspondingly, they can give entitlements—ones to take things to be one way or another that they may be or not. It is precisely these that allow the world to decide whether things are as were said. Far from abolishing it, the parochial is thus, in that way, precisely the *source* of objectivity. (Ch. Travis, *Les liaisons ordinaires*, p. 195)

Conclusion :

To tell the truth is to use a certain sentence in order to make an assertion that can be evaluated in a certain way : in function of how it says the world is and how this fits the world. This isn't the only way of speaking about the world. But this way is itself determined by many pragmatic conditions : an utterance is not true when the world corresponds to its truth-conditions ; it is true when what it says on an occasion can be understood as aiming at saying how the world is and when what is thus said fits the world. In other words, an utterance must first be understood in context before being able to be assessed as true or false. We thus witness, in Austin and Travis' works, a kind of reversal of the pragmatics over the semantics (at least if it is understood in a truth-conditional way). It is the way the sentences are used, with respect to their function (the illocutionary act they perform) and their contextual understanding, that makes them able to be of a certain kind , to have a certain content and to be possibly evaluated as true or false.

Finally, what I wanted to show in this (too schematic) presentation is that, in a sense, to explain truth and meaning in this way (like Austin's or Travis'), is to stress the very determining role of human practices even in relation to truth itself. It reminds us that pragmatics has priority over semantics and over questions of truth.

So, it is a way of explaining how and why, to understand what we mean by our words, we need first to understand and specify what practices we are engaged in.

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