

# Against Truth-Conditional Theories of Meaning: Lessons from the Language(s) of Fiction

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Australasian Association for Philosophy  
04 July 2016

[Image of Santa Claus]

Santa Claus lives at the North Pole.

[Image of Santa Claus lying on a beach]

Santa Claus does not live at the North Pole.

[image of Santa Claus surrounded by children]

Many kids believe Santa Claus lives at the North Pole.

[Russian icon of Nicholas of Myra]  
Santa Claus was a real person.

[cartoon of Santa and reindeer]

Santa Claus is a figment of imagination.

[cartoon of Santa with a slashed ring on top]

Santa Claus does not exist.

- ① A sentence's meaning along with the totality of all the facts determines the truth value of that sentence.
- ② A sentence's meaning is at least a function from possible worlds to truth values.
- ③ Such a function is a truth condition.
- ④ Therefore, a sentence's meaning is at least a truth condition.

[adapted from Lycan 2010, p. 101]



- Fictional statements do have facts in the world that they correspond to.
- They are facts about properties not facts about objects.
- Some properties are 'representation-dependent' and some are not.
- A property is representation-dependent if it depends “upon the fact that the object is being represented in some way: in thought, language, pictures, and so on”
- Examples: “being a mythical horse” or “being a fictional character.”
- Solution: Rewrite fictional discourse.

[Crane 2013, p. 68, following McGinn]



Anadûnê zîrâ hikallaba  
Êphal ê phalak îdôn hi-Akallabêth.

Anadûnê zîrâ hikallaba  
Êphal ê phalak îdôn hi-Akallabêth.

Numenor the beloved, she fell down  
Far, far away now is She-that-hath-fallen.

[Tolkien's map of Numenor]

- Quenya, Sindaran, Adûnaic: constructed language.
- Single authority on meaningfulness/correctness, due to constructed nature.
- Treated as potential objects of serious study.
- The Elvish Linguistic Fellowship, *Vinyar Tengwar*, *Parma Eldalamberon*, *Tengwestië*, *Tolkien Studies*.

- Outside the scope of theories of meaning?
- But, we treat them as if meaningful, e.g., via translation, composition.
- Problem of re-writing.
- Corpora: Adûnaic has no coherent text, only scattered words and fragmentary sentences.
- if we consider our behavior with respect to these languages, we treat them as if they are meaningful, and this activity must be accounted for and explained.

[image of “face” on Mars]

[http://www.buzzfeed.com/arielknutson/  
people-who-found-jesus-in-their-food#.nnBr0JX0Je](http://www.buzzfeed.com/arielknutson/people-who-found-jesus-in-their-food#.nnBr0JX0Je)

[Screen shot from film]

[http://brianandkarl.tumblr.com/post/107986801888/  
our-short-film-skwerl-was-featured-on-bbcs-qi](http://brianandkarl.tumblr.com/post/107986801888/our-short-film-skwerl-was-featured-on-bbcs-qi)

[Image of three minions]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvKmSNxFHyQ>



- Not real languages?
- English-to-Minion Language dictionaries.
- Subtitling.
- Being an adequate speaker vs. being an adequate hearer.

- ① *Categorizing*: recognizing certain language tokens as certain types.
- ② *Chunking*: ability to form sequential units through repetition and practice.
- ③ *Rich memory*: ability to store detailed information from experience.
- ④ *Analogy*: allows us to expand the initial information we have stored in our heads.
- ⑤ *Cross-modal association*: ability to link form and meaning.

[Ibbotson 2013].

- Meaning cannot be merely truth-conditions.
- Truth-conditional accounts explanations cannot be the whole story.
- Linguistic proficiency is a complex adaptive system involving non-truth-functional cognitive aspects, cultural aspects, etc.

- Tim Crane, *Objects of Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2013).
- Paul Ibbotson, “The Scope of Usage-Based Theory”, *Frontiers in Psychology* 4, no. 255 (2013): 1–15.
- William G. Lycan, “Direct Arguments for the Truth-Conditional Theory of Meaning”, *Topoi* 29, no. 2 (2010): 99–108.
- Sara L. Uckelman and Phoebe Chan, “Against Truth-Conditional Theories of Meaning: Three Lessons from the Language(s) of Fiction”, *Res Philosophica* 93, no. 2 (2016): 1–19.