I. THE CONTRAST BETWEEN THE THEORY OF REFERENCE AND THE THEORY OF MEANING IS SPURIOUS

In the philosophy of logic a distinction is often made between the theory of reference and the theory of meaning.¹ In this paper I shall suggest (inter alia) that this distinction, though not without substance, is profoundly misleading. The theory of reference is, I shall argue, the theory of meaning for certain simple types of language. The only entities needed in the so-called theory of meaning are, in many interesting cases and perhaps even in all cases, merely what is required in order for the expressions of our language to be able to refer in certain more complicated situations. Instead of the theory of reference and the theory of meaning we perhaps ought to speak in some cases of the theory of simple and of multiple reference, respectively. Quine has regretted that the term ‘semantics’, which etymologically ought to refer to the theory of meaning, has come to mean the theory of reference.¹ I submit that this usage is happier than Quine thinks, and that large parts of the theory of meaning in reality are – or ought to be – but semantical theories for notions transcending the range of certain elementary types of concepts.

It seems to me in fact that the usual reasons for distinguishing between meaning and reference are seriously mistaken. Frequently, they are formulated in terms of a first-order (i.e., quantificational) language. In such a language, it is said, knowing the mere references of individual constants, or knowing the extensions of predicates, cannot suffice to specify their meanings because the references of two individual constants or the extensions of two predicate constants ‘obviously’ can coincide without there being any identity of meaning.² Hence, it is often concluded, the theory of reference for first-order languages will have to be supplemented by a theory of the ‘meanings’ of the expressions of these languages.

The line of argument is not without solid intuitive foundation, but its implications are different from what they are usually taken to be. This

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¹ W. Davis et al. (ed.), Philosophical Logic. All rights reserved.
whole concept of meaning (as distinguished from reference) is very unclear and usually hard to fathom. However it is understood, it seems to me in any case completely hopeless to try to divorce the idea of the meaning of a sentence from the idea of the information that the sentence can convey to a hearer or reader, should someone truthfully address it to him. Now what is this information? Clearly it is just information to the effect that the sentence is true, that the world is such as to meet the truth-conditions of the sentence.

Now in the case of a first-order language these truth-conditions cannot be divested from the references of singular terms and from the extensions of its predicates. In fact, these references and extensions are precisely what the truth-conditions of quantified sentences turn on. The truth-value of a sentence is a function of the references (extensions) of the terms it contains, not of their 'meanings'. Thus it follows from the above principles that a theory of reference is for genuine first-order languages the basis of a theory of meaning. Recently, a similar conclusion has in effect been persuasively argued for (from entirely different premises and in an entirely different way) by Donald Davidson. The references, not the alleged meanings, of our primitive terms are thus what determine the meanings (in the sense explained) of first-order sentences. Hence the introduction of the 'meanings' of singular terms and predicates is strictly useless: In any theory of meaning which serves to explain the information which first-order sentences convey, these 'meanings' are bound to be completely idle.

What happens, then, to our intuitions concerning the allegedly obvious difference between reference and meaning in first-order languages? If these intuitions are sound, and if the above remarks are to the point, then the only reasonable conclusion is that our intuitions do not really pertain to first-order discourse. The 'ordinary language' which we think of when we assert the obviousness of the distinction cannot be reduced to the canonical form of an applied first-order language without violating these intuitions. How these other languages enable us to appreciate the real (but frequently misunderstood) force of the apparently obvious difference between reference and meaning I shall indicate later (see Section VI infra).

II. FIRST-ORDER LANGUAGES

I conclude that the traditional theory of reference, suitably extended and