2 Approaches to ‘Non-Truth-Conditional’ Meaning

2.1 ‘Non-truth-conditional’ meaning in truth-conditional frameworks

Although truth-conditional approaches to linguistic meaning have dominated the literature in linguistics and the philosophy of language over the last century, many theorists have recognised the existence of ‘non-truth-conditional’ expressions. This, as noted in the Strawson quote at the beginning of Chapter 1, is as true of those who are primarily interested in the abstract semantic properties of language as it is of those who focus on the meaning that sentences acquire when uttered in a context. In both cases, the most common response to the existence of linguistic expressions that aren’t amenable to truth-conditional treatment has been to supplement essentially truth-conditional frameworks with some new notion, or notions, to capture ‘non-truth-conditional’ meanings.

It is the aim of this chapter to give an overview of a number of approaches to ‘non-truth-conditional’ meaning within basically truth-conditional frameworks. Even though my ultimate suggestion will be that sentence and utterance meaning can (and should) be accounted for in primarily cognitive terms, much can be learned from the attempt to accommodate ‘non-truth-conditional’ meaning in otherwise completely truth-conditional semantic theories.

I start with a discussion of the views of theorists interested in sentence meaning rather than utterance meaning: Frege and Kaplan are both interested in sentence meaning, but the ways in which they account for it differ greatly. The second part of this chapter is devoted to the views of those more interested in what speakers mean when using sentences. These are essentially the speech act theorists Austin, Searle, Bach and
Harnish, Grice and Bach. An intermediate position is occupied by presuppositional approaches and these are discussed between the other two. Throughout, I pay attention to whether all ‘non-truth-conditional’ meaning is accounted for along the same lines and whether it is assumed that the ‘truth-conditional’/‘non-truth-conditional’ distinction is of a semantic nature.

2.2 Frege: sense, reference, tone and force

Thus the content of a sentence often goes beyond the thought expressed by it. But the opposite often happens too; the mere wording, which can be made permanent by writing or the gramophone, does not suffice for the expression of the thought.

(Frege, 1918, in McGuinness, 1984, pp. 357–8)

This quote could be seen as Frege’s recognition of the two biggest problems for truth-conditional approaches to linguistic meaning, as mentioned in Chapter 1: the existence of ‘non-truth-conditional’ expressions, and linguistic underdeterminacy. Bearing in mind that for Frege a thought is in fact a truth condition,¹ the second sentence shows that Frege recognised that, often, the linguistic meaning of a sentence does not yield a fully propositional form which can be given truth conditions. Given that he wanted to see natural language as parallel to logical languages as far as possible and that he attempted to give a strictly compositional account of natural language sentences, this recognition of underdeterminacy is highly significant. However, it is, of course, the first sentence of the quote which is of greater interest to the concerns of this book. It indicates that Frege also recognised that there are elements of linguistic meaning which cannot be captured in truth-conditional terms.

In examining Frege’s treatment of language, it is important to keep in mind that he was not just, and not primarily, a philosopher of language, but a mathematician and logician. In this capacity, he was only interested in those aspects of language which are needed for mathematical and logical exposition. Since the logician needs language to capture facts about the validity of arguments, that is, to show how the truth of a conclusion follows from the truth of the premisses, it follows that Frege’s main concern was with truth-conditional meaning. However, as Dummett (1981, p. 83) points out, in his capacity as a philosopher, Frege wanted to give an analysis of language not just as it is used for the