

Conceptual Role and Truth-Conditions

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Conceptual role semantics, as Gilbert Harman has called it, consists in taking the meaning of a linguistic expression to be a matter of the content of thoughts or concepts it can be used to express, the content of a concept or thought consisting in its functional role in a person's psychology. On the face of it, this is quite different from a truth-conditional approach to meaning, but Harman supposes that whatever is intuitive about the latter can be explained within conceptual role semantics. Harman's various illuminating treatments of this subject ([4]-[7]) constitute one of the main reasons for the current importance of conceptual role semantics; they lucidly elaborate its various connections with other key issues in the philosophy of language. I believe that Harman's general thesis and many of his principal points are essentially correct, except for this: his account of the relation between conceptual role and truth-conditions seems to me to be underspecified, and perhaps to suggest a wrong assessment of the dependence of truth-conditions on conceptual role. In this paper I shall lay out how it seems to me that conceptual role and truth-conditions are related in the theory of meaning.

1 Use theories of meaning Conceptual role semantics can be classified as a "use" theory of meaning. In a sense, any theory that attempts to say what it is for an individual or a population to use a language could count as such, for each sentence's meaning would then be a matter of that use or potential use of it. But virtually any theory of meaning will attempt that, and there is a somewhat narrower, more convenient, sense of "use theory". On some accounts, the ascription of truth-conditions, reference-conditions, and references (relative to the actual world or to all possible worlds) constitutes the foundational level of semantic description, whether of sentences, utterances, sentential attitudes, or thoughts.¹ But others invoke rules, practices, conditionings, verification procedures, and patterns of inferential dispositions, whose specification does not overtly involve truth-conditions, reference-conditions, or propositions.²

Received January 22, 1982