

**TRUTH AND CORRESPONDENCE**  
**IN HARTRY FIELD'S**  
**PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE**

*Degree thesis in Philosophy*  
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**ABSTRACT**

◆ INTRODUCTION

The object of the present work is the correspondence theory of truth, and in particular the way in which this conception has been formulated and defended by one of its most radical supporters in contemporary philosophy of language: Hartry Hamlin Field (Boston, Massachusetts, 1946). Field's name is bounded to a wide variety of researches, that go from philosophy of language to philosophy of mathematics, from epistemology to philosophy of mind, researches that officially start with his paper *Tarski's theory of truth* (1972). In philosophy of language Field is well-known, as we have noted, for his resolute defense of correspondence theory of truth<sup>1</sup>, but also for "conceptual role semantics" in the explanation of meaning; in philosophy of mathematics he is committed to a radical nominalism, that finds a systematic formulation in his book *Science without numbers* (1980). In epistemology, his position is that of a firm naturalist, even if his fundamental naturalism does not bring him to be eliminationist in regard to the semantical or to the mental (unlike famous naturalists, such as Quine); in philosophy of mind he has in fact argued for a naturalistic account of intentional notions such as 'belief', 'desire', etc. (*Mental Representation*, 1978).

Whatever the sphere Field is concerned with, clearly results – from a first glance to his works – his *physicalistic* assumption, i.e. the idea that "there is an important sense in which all facts depend on physical facts and all good causal explanations depend on good physical explanations"<sup>2</sup>. Field thinks that physicalism has had an important methodological role in the development of science, so that it is a reasonable methodology to adhere to it as a work-

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<sup>1</sup> This is particularly true of his early papers.

<sup>2</sup> *Physicalism* (1992), p.271.

hypothesis. It is to be noted, however, that the physicalistic assumption taken alone is not sufficient to argue for a correspondence notion of truth; in fact many philosophers naturalistically-oriented (such as Quine) are totally hostile to the classical view of truth as “correspondence to reality”, just *because of* their fundamental physicalism. One reason of the originality of Field’s work consists, by my opinion, in showing that we can be naturalist regard to semantics without giving up a “strong” notion of correspondence; clearly, this thesis depends on a second assumption (separated from physicalism) that Field adopts: a *realist* attitude towards semantics, that is not to be intended as the existence of a sphere of “semantic phenomena” beyond the physical world, but rather as *objectivity* of semantic relations (reference, truth).

#### ◆CHAPTER ONE

The first chapter is almost fully dedicated (except the last paragraph) to a discussion of the first of Field’s papers, *Tarski’s theory of truth* (1972), in which he gives a first formulation of a correspondence theory of truth, making use on one hand of the tarskian definition of truth in formalized languages, on the other of the results of Kripke (and others) concerning the so-called “causal theory of reference”; Field’s idea is that of utilizing these two theoretic components to give a complete explication of truth for natural languages. The tarskian definition, in fact, constitutes only one (important) part of a theory of truth physicalistically acceptable; it only explains one of the two aspects of the phenomenon of truth<sup>3</sup>: given an utterance of “ $\alpha$ ”, to explain its truth is to explain (i) that  $\alpha$ ; (ii) that the utterance of “ $\alpha$ ” is connected to the fact that  $\alpha$ . The first clause is explained by the tarskian definition, but the explication of the second requires a separate theory of “primitive reference” (i.e. of the reference of the simple parts primitively given in the language), to be developed just in terms of “causal networks” (this part of the theory wants to explain what we could call the “linguistic externalism”, i.e. the property of language to bring beyond itself). In discussing these matters Field is led to cast light on what it is in his opinion the real philosophical interest of the tarskian theory (the fact that it reduces the notion of truth to three other semantic notions), interest that is better stressed by his reformulation of the definition given by Tarski.

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<sup>3</sup> It seems to me that in Field’s view the problem about truth is not merely the problem of *defining* a concept, but also the problem of *explaining* a phenomenon.

Are also taken into consideration some of the most meaningful criticisms that have arisen from Field's 1972 paper: those of Putnam, Leeds, McDowell<sup>4</sup>; each one is very different from the others, and this is testimony of how Field's work is pregnant and interesting.

The last paragraph of the first chapter is an illustration on Field's ideas about meaning; in this ambit also he holds a quite original position, i.e. a "two-factors theory of meaning", a theory for which meaning is constituted by two parts: the truth-theoretic component (objective) and the conceptual-role component (subjective) that, taken together, succeed in giving an adequate account of sameness (difference) of meaning. In the present work the problem of meaning takes little space, and this depends on two factors: first, Field itself is more concerned with theory of truth than with theory of meaning; second, that correspondence theory (as he conceives it) is absolutely independent from any consideration about meaning, being a "non epistemic" theory (as he says), where meaning is bounded – for the conceptual-role component at least – to subjective, epistemic considerations. That also explains for the absence – in this work – of another philosopher that have made a massive use of the tarskian theory in his researches about language: Donald Davidson; in fact Davidson's interest is totally directed to a philosophical use of Tarski's work for a theory of meaning, not for the theory of truth, whereas in Field's case holds the latter.

## ◆CHAPTER TWO

The problem discussed in this chapter is that of semantic indeterminacy, and in particular the threat it represents for a correspondence theory of truth. For the reasons mentioned in the previous paragraph, Field is primarily interested in extensional indeterminacy (which concerns the notions of truth and reference), and not in the intentional one (which concerns the sense, or meaning, of linguistic expressions). He shows that a certain indeterminacy of reference (i.e. the idea that in many cases there are no facts in virtue of which we can assume the denotation of a term as determinate) is revealed to us both by considerations in philosophy of science (such as the paradigmatic passage from the Newtonian physics to relativistic one), and by theoretic reflections on language: in this latter case are central the works of Quine.

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<sup>4</sup> Respectively in: *Meaning and the moral sciences* (1978), *Theories of reference and truth* (1978), *Physicalism and primitive denotation: Field on Tarski* (1978).

The quinean thesis of indeterminacy, in Field's opinion, forces us to give up not only the absolute notions of denotation and signification, but also the relativized notions that Quine has proposed as their surrogates; so Field gives, in one sense, a stronger reading of indeterminacy thesis than that given by Quine himself. Nevertheless, Field's main idea is that the acceptance of indeterminacy thesis does not preclude us in principle the possibility of a correspondence theory of truth, because on his view indeterminacy of translation does not imply ontological relativity; that is, in other words, the fact that the reference of our terms is indeterminate does not entail the impossibility (on principle) of a comparison between our language (theories) and the objects (or sets of objects) it is about. The philosophical significance of indeterminacy, then, is not that we must abandon correspondence theory, but that we have to revise the classical notions of semantics (such as denotation), i.e. that correspondence theory will be more complex than we expected. Field's intuitive idea is that as far as many schemes of reference (though different each other) are adequate<sup>5</sup> in the description of the referential semantics of a certain language, it would be wrong to choose arbitrarily only one of them (as Quine proposes): in this situation we must take all of them, because each one correctly describes one aspect of the actual semantics of that language.

To integrate this intuitive idea within a rigorous characterization of truth Field introduces the technical notion of "partial denotation" (or, in the case of general terms, "partial signification"): this notion allow him to expand the class of reference schemes to be taken into consideration in defining correspondence truth for a given language: a term like 'gavagai', indeed, will partially signify both the set of rabbits, and the set of undetached rabbit parts, and the set of temporal rabbit stages, and so on (each one of these sets will be called "partial extension" of the term). The sentence containing that term, then, will be (correspondentistically) true if it comes out true relatively to each reference scheme that correctly describes one aspect of the actual semantics of the object language.

We can say that in this way Field raises the ambiguity (vagueness) of a term to technical notion of semantics: the ambiguity of terms, instead of being a problem, an exception for formal semantics, becomes its core-concept; and it is on the basis of the new notion of partial denotation (signification) that we have to build the correspondence theory of truth (and not on the old notion of denotation, that becomes a limit-case of partial denotation).

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<sup>5</sup> Consistent with the behavioral evidence of a given speaker.

### ◆ CHAPTER THREE

The third chapter is concerned with a comparison between the notion of truth as correspondence and the so-called “deflationary” conception of truth, expression that indicates a family of theories which often differ a lot each other, and which go under different names, even if they all share the idea that truth does not have any “nature” that goes beyond its logical-expressive function; in particular, according to such theories, truth is not a naturalistic property and the word ‘true’ does not indicate an aspect of the world or an ingredient of reality. From this point of view, then, truth is not the kind of thing to theorize about (in a strong sense of “theorizing”), nor it is possible a deep philosophical analysis of this notion, because such “depth” does not exist.

On the contrary, Field conceives truth as a property which is *naturalistic* and *complex*; in that naturalistic it can be treated by the language of physics (or in general by a language about things and their causal relations); in that complex it is susceptible of analysis, in the same way in which predicates like ‘magnetic’ or ‘diabetic’<sup>6</sup> are susceptible of analysis. According to Field, then, truth is a non-semantic (in the sense of “semanticalism”<sup>7</sup>) and non-primitive property. He has offered a detailed analysis of deflationism in *The deflationary conception of truth* (1986), aiming to investigate the perspectives for such a conception of truth, and pointing out the contrast with the correspondence position. It results the image of a notion of truth that has some role (a logical-expressive one), but which does not carry out that “explanatory function” in which Field recognizes the peculiar trait of the correspondence notion of truth; such an explanatory function concerns a great variety of phenomena that go from the correctness of prediction in scientific theories, to the reaching of practical goals, to the success of a quarterback in a football match.

Horwich’s *Truth* (1990) represents a sort of *summa* of the deflationist view-point, even if the author works out a peculiar deflationist theory, which he calls ‘minimalist theory’ of truth (owing to its exiguous ontological commitment and its conceptual simplicity); Horwich tries to show how we can explain every fact about truth on the basis of the sole minimalist theory. Nonetheless, in a 1992 answer to Horwich’s book, Field points out some limits of the formulation of the minimalist theory given by Horwich, arguing that such a theory results

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<sup>6</sup> Using an example from Horwich (1990).

<sup>7</sup> Field (1972).

trivial if it's formulated for propositions, and that it loose explicative power if it's formulated for utterances.

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The attempt to give an organic image of Field's work on the theory of truth is not dictated by the will to impose a "philosophical system" on a philosopher that – owing to his tradition, formation, method – cannot be called systematic; but it depends on the effort of following those "ontological assumptions", those "nervatures of thinking" that pass through many of his papers.

The three chapters try to follow a way which is chronological and thematic at the same time; they have a certain grade of independence each other.