

### Essay no 3. John StGeorge

No one can ever know for certain whether a given statement is true. Therefore, the concept of truth cannot play a substantial role in an account of how language works. – Is that a good argument?

“No one can ever know for certain whether a given statement is true. Therefore, the concept of truth cannot play a substantial role in an account of how language works.” This argument, taken literally, seems to miss the point since the satisfactory working of language need not be dependent on its truth. Knowledge of the meaning of a proposition can also be knowledge of the conditions for its correct assertion. As pointed out in this unit on truth conditions, the encapsulating of the knowledge of meaning can provide sufficient sense for the language to work as an acceptable or understandable concept.

Perhaps the certainty of truth for language to work in discourse is a step too far for every day language use. People will and do put forward unverifiable and empty hypotheses, inevitably. However, the truth conditions of these statements are open and subjected to the reality and judgement principles of our fellow language users. The presentations of standard first-order predicate logic provides a means of establishing truth conditions for statements of the unverifiable and empty hypotheses class. These truth conditions are a part of how language works and would suggest that the concept of truth does play a substantial role in language workings.

However, this is not a definitive role and so the certainty of truth in every utterance is not a prerequisite for the compilation of every-day language use. The illustration by Chomsky of random use of concept words, “colourless green eyes sleep furiously”, highlights the absence of correspondence to sense and truth conditions in language. For me, there resides a determinate connection between truth and sense among the plethora of concepts and propositions. The defining factor seems to be whether these utterances make sense, rather than truth, that is, aiming at conditions for the correct assertion. To assert that the concept of truth cannot play a substantial role in the account of how language works is to render truth redundant in language workings.

We may diminish the level of account from substantial to contingent; however, I am not convinced that redundancy obtains in language workings. It sounds rather like the emperor without his clothes. The skeptic may ripost, “whose truth and what sense?” This question is well answered in the reality and judgment principles available to those wishing to make that commitment to rational and logical thought in discourse.

Should each and every statement be required to contain the necessary ingredients for truth it may be that speech itself is rendered redundant rather than truth. Truth cannot play a substantial role in how language works if aiming at truth in our language is not on the agenda. A language lacking that agenda may well qualify for not possessing an ability to play a substantial role in how language works.

If statements can be understood to have a good chance of not containing some concept of truth, by intention, then it does seem like a good argument. However, if truth in statements is a problematic event, then perhaps we are all in the same dilemma and the argument is contingent.