The mathematical core of Tarski’s truth definition

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Alfred Tarski gave a mathematical description of the set of true sentences of a fully interpreted logic. The basic work in 1929; published in Polish in 1933. Model-theoretic version published with Vaught in 1956.

A general feature of mathematics:

The underlying structure often comes to light after the results have been proved.

Our first intuitions can be quite different from our later ones.

(A big problem for teaching mathematics.)

Forthcoming in Alfred Tarski: Philosophical Background, Development, and Influence, ed. Douglas Patterson, I argue that Tarski

- had no programme for defining semantic notions,
- wouldn’t have known what to try if he had such a programme,
- reached his truth definition by purely technical manipulations of other things in the Warsaw environment.
Tarski’s setting (around 1930):
We have a language $L$, all of whose sentences are meaningful.
We do know, but only intuitively, what the sentences mean; in easy cases we recognise which are true and which aren’t.
We must analyse this intuition into a mathematical form.

Up to the 1930s it was generally believed that to recognise the meaningful constituents, we need to know the meanings.
True even in Bloomfield’s *Language* (1933).
For logicians in the early 20th century, syntax was concatenation of symbols; e.g. in Quine’s *Mathematical Logic* (1940).

A very old doctrine:
Sentences are constructed by building up meaningful constituents, starting from atomic expressions with known meaning.
For example Al Fārābī (10th century):
... the imitation of the composition of meanings by the composition of expressions is by [linguistic] convention ...

But the sentences in the logics of Tarski’s 1933 paper are all built up by a set of ‘fundamental operations’, viz. truth-functional compounds and quantifications. The resulting components can be recognised from the syntax alone, allowing definitions and proofs by recursion on syntax (new in the 1920s).
We can derive a general form of Tarski’s truth definition by formalising the facts just mentioned.
Definition. By a constituent structure we mean an ordered pair of sets \((\mathbb{E}, \mathbb{F})\), where the elements of \(\mathbb{E}\) are called the expressions and the elements of \(\mathbb{F}\) are called the frames, such that the four conditions below hold.

\((e, f \text{ etc. are expressions. } F, G(\xi) \text{ etc. are frames.})\)

1. \(\mathbb{F}\) is a set of nonempty partial functions on \(\mathbb{E}\).

\(\text{('Nonempty' means their domains are not empty.)}\)

2. (Nonempty Composition) If \(F(\xi_1, \ldots, \xi_n)\) and \(G(\eta_1, \ldots, \eta_m)\) are frames, \(1 \leq i \leq n\) and there is an expression

\[ F(e_1, \ldots, e_{i-1}, G(f_1, \ldots, f_m), e_{i+1}, \ldots, e_n), \]

then

\[ F(\xi_1, \ldots, \xi_{i-1}, G(\eta_1, \ldots, \eta_m), \xi_{i+1}, \ldots, \xi_n) \]

is a frame.

Note: If \(H(\xi) = F(G(\xi))\) then the existence of an expression \(H(f)\) implies the existence of an expression \(G(f)\).

3. (Nonempty Substitution) If \(F(e_1, \ldots, e_n)\) is an expression, \(n > 1\) and \(1 \leq i \leq n\), then

\[ F(\xi_1, \ldots, \xi_{i-1}, e_i, \xi_{i+1}, \ldots, \xi_n) \]

is a frame.

4. (Identity) There is a frame \(1(\xi)\) such that for each expression \(e\), \(1(e) = e\).
The lifting lemma

Let $X$ be a set of expressions (for example the sentences) and $\mu : X \to Y$ any function.

We will define a relation $\equiv_\mu$ so that

\[ e \equiv_\mu f \]

says that expressions $e$ and $f$ make the same contribution to $\mu$-values of expressions in $X$.

Definition

We write $e \equiv_\mu f$ if for every 1-ary frame $G(\xi)$,

(a) $G(e)$ is in $X$ if and only $G(f)$ is in $X$;
(b) if $G(e)$ is in $X$ then $\mu(G(e)) = \mu(G(f))$.

We say $e$, $f$ have the same $\equiv_\mu$-value, or for short the same Fregean value, if $e \equiv_\mu f$.

We write $|e|_\mu$ for this Fregean value
(determined only up to $\equiv_\mu$).

Leaving out (b), we get a purely syntactic equivalence relation, viz. $e \sim_\mu f$ if for every 1-ary frame $G(\xi)$,

(a) $G(e)$ is in $X$ if and only $G(f)$ is in $X$;

Immediately by the definitions,

\[ e \equiv_\mu f \Rightarrow e \sim_\mu f. \]

The function $\mu$ is relevant to $\sim_\mu$ only through its domain $X$; hence not at all if $X$ is syntactically definable.
By assumption $F(e)$ is an expression, $H(F(e))$ is in $X$ for some $H(\xi)$, and $e \sim \mu f$.

By Nonempty Composition $H(F(\xi))$ is a frame $G(\xi)$.

Since $e \sim \mu f$ and $G(e)$ is in $X$, $G(f)$ is in $X$.

But $G(f)$ is $H(F(f))$, so $F(f)$ is an expression.

In Tarski’s 1933 truth definition, we can take formulas as the constituents, and $X$ the set of sentences (= formulas with no free variables).

Then $e \sim f$ if and only if $e$ and $f$ have the same free variables.

(a) By assumption $F(e)$ is an expression, $H(F(e))$ is in $X$ for some $H(\xi)$, and $e \sim \mu f$.

By Nonempty Composition $H(F(\xi))$ is a frame $G(\xi)$.

Since $e \sim \mu f$ and $G(e)$ is in $X$, $G(f)$ is in $X$.

But $G(f)$ is $H(F(f))$, so $F(f)$ is an expression.

(b) Let $G(\xi)$ be any 1-ary frame such that $G(F(e))$ is an expression in $X$.

By Nonempty Composition $G(F(\xi))$ is a frame $J(\xi)$.

Since $e \sim \mu f$ and $J(e)$ is in $X$, $J(f)$ is in $X$.

[This proves the Lemma with $\sim$ for $\equiv$.]

Since $e \equiv f$ and $J(e)$ is in $X$, $\mu(J(e)) = \mu(J(f))$.

This proves $\mu(G(F(e)) = \mu(G(F(f))$ as required. □
We say that $X$ is cofinal if every expression is a constituent of an expression in $X$.

In Tarski’s languages, the set of sentences is cofinal.

Assume $X$ is cofinal. Then by (b) of the Lemma, if $e_i \equiv_\mu f_i$ for each $i$ then $F(e_1, \ldots, e_n) \equiv_\mu F(f_1, \ldots, f_n)$ provided these expressions exist.

So $F$ and the fregean values of the $e_i$ determine the fregean value of $F(e_1, \ldots, e_n)$.

Hence there is, for each $n$-ary frame $F$, an $n$-ary map $h_F : V^n \rightarrow V$, where $V$ is the class of $\sim_\mu$-values, such that whenever $F(e_1, \ldots, e_n)$ is an expression,

$$|F(e_1, \ldots, e_n)|_\mu = h_F(|e_1|_\mu, \ldots, |e_n|_\mu).$$

We call $h_F$ the Hayyan function of $F$.

Abu Ḥayyān al-Andalusī (Egypt, 14th c.) argued that such functions must exist, from the fact that we can create and use new sentences.

**Definition** Let $\omega$ be a function defined on expressions. A definition of $\omega$ is called compositional if for each expression $F(e_1, \ldots, e_n)$,

$$\omega(F(e_1, \ldots, e_n))$$

is determined by $F$ and the values $\omega(e_i)$. So fregean values are compositional.
We say an expression \( e \) is atomic if \( e = F(f_1, \ldots, f_n) \) implies \( F \) is \( 1(\xi) \).

We say a frame \( F \) is fundamental if it is not \( 1 \) and is not the result of Composition or Substitution.

We say the language \( L \) is well-founded if every expression of \( L \) is got by applying fundamental frames (any number of times) to atomic expressions.

**ABSTRACT TARSKI THEOREM** Suppose \( L \) is a language with a constituent structure in which sentences are cofinal, \( L \) is well-founded and each sentence \( \phi \) has a truth value \( \mu(\phi) \).

Let \( \nu \) be the restriction of \( |.|_{\mu} \) to atomic expressions. Then \( \mu \) is definable by recursion on the complexity of constituents as follows:

- If \( e \) is atomic then \( |e|_{\mu} = \nu(e) \).
- \( |(F(e_1, \ldots, e_n)|_{\mu} = h_F(|e_1|_{\mu}, \ldots, |e_n|_{\mu}) \).
- If \( e \) is a sentence then \( \mu(e) = p(|e|_{\mu}) \).

**PROPOSITION.** Suppose \( e \equiv_\mu f \) and \( e \) is an expression in \( X \). Then \( f \) is in \( X \) and \( \mu(e) = \mu(f) \).

**Proof.** This is immediate from the definition, by applying the identity frame \( 1(\xi) \).

So on \( X \) the relation \( \equiv_\mu \) is a refinement of the relation \( \mu(\xi_1) = \mu(\xi_2) \).

This guarantees there is a function \( p_{\mu} \) (the read-out function) so that for each \( e \) in \( X \),

\[
\mu(e) = p_{\mu}(|e|_{\mu}).
\]

One can easily give necessary and sufficient conditions for \( p \) to be the identity. These conditions are met for Tarski’s languages.
For Tarski’s truth definition the required value \(|e|_\mu\) is the set of those assignments to free variables of \(e\) which satisfy \(e\).

In 1933 Tarski defines instead the relation assignment \(\alpha\) satisfies formula \(e\).

The reason is technical: it allows a more elementary truth definition. In work with Kuratowski in 1930, Tarski had defined the set of assignments.

The abstract Tarski theorem shows that every ‘reasonable’ language has a Tarski truth definition.

Nothing is assumed about reference or satisfaction. In fact Hintikka’s Independence-Friendly languages have Tarski truth definitions by this theorem, but provably these languages have no truth definition based on satisfaction.

For Tarski’s 1950s model-theoretic truth definition the value of sentence \(e\) is the class of structures in which \(e\) is true.

In 1933 Tarski’s assignments are to all variables, not just those free in the formula. The set of these assignments is not the Fregean value, because it doesn’t determine \(\sim_\mu\).

E.g.

\[ P(x_1), \quad P(x_1) \land (x_2 = x_2) \]

have the same ‘meaning’ but different Fregean values.

Even in natural languages, most discrepancies between Fregean value and intuitive ‘meaning’ seem to be of this kind; the meaning plus the \(\sim_\mu\) class gives the Fregean value.

We can apply the same machinery to syllogistic logic.

The naturalness of the resulting truth definitions can be used to assess syntactic analyses of syllogistic sentences.

An old discredited theory about ‘every man’ referring to the class of all men turns out provably correct if we replace ‘reference’ by ‘Fregean value’.

\[ 31 \quad 30 \]

\[ 29 \]
In principle the theorem extends to natural languages too.

Three complications (among others):

- The choice of a constituent system.
- Truth need not be a suitable classifier of sentences.
- Finding Fregean values with some cognitive content.