THESIS

DAVIDSON AND THE IDIOLECTIC VIEW

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ABSTRACT

DAVIDSON AND THE IDIOLECTIC VIEW

In this thesis, I defend and expand Donald Davidson's view of language and linguistic

meaning. I begin by looking at two positions that appreciate the sociality of language and

linguistic meaning in two different ways. One view, as exemplified by Michael Dummett, sees

the meaning of words as a feature of a language that holds independently of any particular

speaker, while the other view, as exemplified by Davidson, sees meaning as depending on

particular speakers and interpreters, their intentions, and their interactions. I find a serious

tension in the former view and side with the latter, which I dub the idiolectic view of language.

In the second chapter, I analyze Davidson's claim that understanding gives life to

meaning. Using this analysis as a jumping off point, I outline the primary features of the

Davidsonian idiolectic program. Finally, I conclude that the idiolectic features of this position

place a special emphasis on the moment at which two people's personal understanding of

language overlap and that such an emphasis is best understood in terms of events as particulars.

In the third and final chapter, I argue that an ontology that countenances events as

particulars is required for the idiolectic view of interpretation to get off the ground. First, I

outline some of Davidson's classic arguments in favor of an ontology of events for action

sentences and expand them to the case of what I call second-order language sentences, sentences

about communication. Next, I discuss the importance of a criterion of event identity and

individuation, working from some of Davidson's own arguments. I then extend Davidson's

analysis of action sentences to second-order language sentences in order to determine the

essential features of the linguistic event-type. Finally, I conclude that some basic notion of a

language is required by this idiolectic view despite what Davidson originally thought. However,

it is not the notion of a shared language that Dummett originally had in mind.

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Chapter 1

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory,'" Alice said.
Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't –
till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"
"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.
"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone,
"it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean
so many different things."
"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all."[1]

Introduction

In this chapter, I will first briefly consider a troubling philosophical question that was

originally raised by Ludwig Wittgenstein – what is the difference between correctly following a

rule and merely thinking one is? – that I believe shows language to be essentially social. Next, I

consider two ways to appreciate language's sociality: one is given by Donald Davidson and the

other by Michael Dummett. In the end, I find the debate over which position best appreciates this

characteristic of language to be an intractable one. However, I side with Davidson over

Dummett, since I find a serious tension in Dummett's account, and I think that Davidson's

account can be modified to meet Dummett's central worries.

Wittgenstein's Challenge

In his later work, Ludwig Wittgenstein famously raised one of the most troubling

questions in contemporary philosophy of language: what is the difference between correctly

following a rule and merely thinking one is following a rule? Or, as Donald Davidson has

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1. Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, (Raleigh, NC: Hayes Barton Press, 1872), 72.

applied it to meaning, what is the difference between using words correctly and merely thinking that one is?[2]

While this is a difficult question, a simple answer might seem ready at hand; namely, Platonism. Platonism is the view that the correctness of a rule informed judgment or action is a matter that holds independently of our thoughts or attitudes about that correctness. So, for the Platonist, rules are to be understood as abstract entities that transcend, and act as a standard of correctness for, particular uses; the Platonist sees rules as "rails to infinity,"[3] which hold independently of what we happen to think about them and for which our past correct applications represent some section of these infinite rails.

Wittgenstein considers, and ultimately rejects, the Platonist understanding of rules with his example of the student who is told to continue a series following a "+ 2" rule, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10..., but when the student arrives at 1000 she continues the series as 1000, 1004, 1006, 1008....[4] With this example, Wittgenstein shows that, among other things, the student's understanding of the rule "+ 2" comes from the teacher's having written out the beginning of the series and asking the student to continue the series, and that this way of teaching the rule to the student applies equally well to the "+ 2" rule as it would to the "add 2, until you reach 1000, and then add 4" rule. So, the teacher cannot say that the student has misunderstood or misinterpreted the rule, since it seems that the only way the student could reasonably be expected to use the rule as the teacher intended was if the teacher had written out the entire (infinite) series himself. Thus, through this example, Wittgenstein aims to show that there are infinitely many correct interpretations of any

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2. Davidson, "Social Aspect," 7-8.

3. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §218.
4. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §185

one rule, given a finite set of particular applications, and so "no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule."[5]

If we follow Wittgenstein in thinking that the Platonist account is problematic, we might instead opt for an account that sees the correctness in application of a rule as determined by some mind-dependent criterion of correctness rather than the Platonist's mind-independent rules as 'rails to infinity.' A mind-dependent factor would be some communal or social aspect. So, when the student asks "why count '1000, 1002, etc.', rather than '1000, 1004, etc.,' ?" the teacher can look to the consensus of the community of adders (of which both the student and teacher are members) to determine that it is appropriate for members of their adder-community to count by 2's in such a way: "2, 4, 6...1000, 1002, 1004, etc." Thus, this way of adding would be appropriate for them qua members of their adder community, while other interpretations of the "+ 2" rule would be inappropriate.

When we appeal to the consensus of the community of adders, we then can keep distinct what seems as to be a correct interpretation of the "+ 2" rule and what is the correct interpretation of the "+ 2" rule. This is impossible for the student in isolation since, without recourse to a Platonist sense of rules and without a community of rule-followers to check herself against, she does not have any way of distinguishing, for herself, that she is correctly following a rule and not merely thinking that she is correctly following the rule.

Further, it is easy to see how this discussion maps on to our linguistic case. Language understood as involving the correct, meaningful use of words is a rule-governed activity. As in the general rule-following case above, words that lack definite standards of correctness for their use cannot be meaningful; for utterances to be meaningful, it must be, at least in principle, possible to subject those utterances to a public standard of correctness at the risk of collapsing

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5. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §201.

the distinction between 'is correct' and 'seems correct'. Wittgenstein thinks, for this reason, that

a private language for which the words "refer to what can only be known to the person speaking;

to his immediate private sensations... [s]o another person cannot understand the language," will

not be a genuine language.[6] Thus, Wittgenstein shows us that language, like all rule governed

activity, is essentially social. However, when it comes to language, we now must determine

exactly how social and in what way we should understand the sociality of linguistic activity.

Dummett and Davidson Debate

Wittgenstein's challenge can be understood as imposing a restraint, or requirement, on

philosophical accounts of language: all language – all meaningful verbal action – involves,

essentially, some social aspect that must be accounted for. The question now becomes how best

to account for this social aspect, or how social is language? That is, what constitutes the social

aspect of language given the fact that we must be able to account for a difference between being

correct and merely thinking one is correct.

I will consider two possible avenues of response to this issue that surface in a debate

between Michael Dummett and Donald Davidson. This debate is contained in a series of four

essays, two from each philosopher. In his essay "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," which

marks the beginning of this controversy, Davidson rejects what he takes to be the commonly held

notion of language, and argues that a concept of a shared language is not helpful in a

philosophical account of language; that a coherent account of the sociality of linguistic activity

does not require a set of shared linguistic conventions. Dummett replied to Davidson in his "A

Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking" by accepting

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6. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §243.

certain parts of Davidson's account and the linguistic phenomena that interest Davidson (errors that do not impede communication), but, Dummett argues, that Davidson is too quick in his rejection of a shared language and that he fails to sufficiently account for the Wittgensteinian requirement that language be a social activity. Davidson replied with "The Social Aspect of Language" where he answers Dummett and tries to make good on the Wittgensteinian ban on private languages but here also argues that giving the shared language conceptual priority, as Dummett does, misplaces the social aspect of language. Dummett replied to this with his "Reply to Davidson" where Dummett accepts Davidson's charge that linguistic conventions are irrelevant to successful communication but argues that this claim does not entail that the linguistic conventions are necessary for a philosophical explanation of linguistic activity. In the end, it is this key difference about what constitutes the best philosophical account of language – whether a concept of a shared, conventionally determined, language is needed in a philosophical account – that divides Dummett and Davidson.

For Davidson, appealing to social convention does not play a founding role in our linguistic practice. Instead, we can build up a social setting, which is sufficient to answer Wittgenstein's query, completely out of idiolects – the speech habits and understanding of a language unique to a particular person – and communicative intentions of speakers. Davidson thinks that misuses of language are powerful counterexamples to the philosophy of language that sees linguistic conventions as necessary and (or) sufficient for successful communication. Dummett, on the other hand, thinks that a notion of a shared language plays a very important role in explaining this social aspect, which is an aspect that cannot be fully appreciated, for Dummett, except in terms of shared conventions or norms.[7] While I think that, at its core, this problem is

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7. He also thinks that Davidson's rejection of a shared language would require the claim that most people are operating under a serious delusion in thinking their language makes up the core of their cultural identity

intractable I also think there is a serious tension in Dummett's account of language and that there is much that lends itself to a Davidsonian, bottom-up approach to language.

What is convention?

Before jumping into the debate between Davidson and Dummett we should be very clear about the central concept for which the debate concerns – convention. When we use language we are often said to participate in certain linguistic conventions or a set of social norms, but what exactly do these social norms amount to? In "Communication and Convention," Davidson specifically quotes[8] David Lewis' understanding of convention as Lewis articulated it in his "Languages and Language"[9]: a convention is a regularity R in action, or action and belief, a regularity in which more than one person must be involved. The regularity has these properties: (1) Everyone involved conforms to R and (2) believes that others also conform. (3) The belief that others conform to R gives all involved a good reason to conform to R. (4) All concerned prefer that there should be conformity to R. (5) R is not the only possible regularity meeting the last two conditions. (6) Finally, everyone involved knows (1)-(5) and knows that everyone else knows (1)-(5), etc.

The notion of "regularity" carries a lot of importance for Lewis' notion of convention. Notice that, for Lewis' definition, nothing could be a convention unless it was a regularity. However, it is also important to note that we could have a convention – a rule to be followed – and even a disposition to follow it, but one that is or has not yet been actualized in human

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(Dummett, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some comments on Davidson and Hacking," 465). A commitment that is, I believe, difficult to maintain with a straight face.
8. And therefore I take Davidson to have in mind Lewis' definition of convention throughout his subsequent essays on language and convention
9. Lewis, David. "Languages and Language," 3-7.

behavior. So it seems that this notion of convention requires an actual regularity (a regularity "in action, or action and belief"), and ought not be confused with another weaker notion of convention as a regularity that has not yet been realized in practice or belief.

Theories of Meaning and the Meaning of "Meaning"

Apart from the concept of convention, there are other crucial concepts that need to be made clear prior to our main discussion. First, it should be noted that Dummett uses the term "theory of meaning" to refer to a general account of the workings and practice of language – not a language, but verbal practice broadly construed. Dummett describes the task of a "theory of meaning" as giving "an account of how language functions, in other words to explain what, in general, is effected by the utterance of a sentence in the presence of hearers who know the language to which it belongs... I use the phrase 'theory of meaning' as coordinate with 'the theory of knowledge' to designate a branch of philosophy."[10] Thus, a "theory of meaning" for Dummett involves much more than just a theory that supplies the meaning of words and sentences.

For the theory that provides the meaning of words and sentences, Dummett uses the similar yet different term, "meaning-theory," to refer to a Tarski-style truth theory which gives biconditionals of the form

$$S \text{ is true if and only if } P$$

where S is a variable representing, in the meta-language, a sentence of the object language; and, where P is a sentence in the meta-language that gives S's truth-maker. So, for Dummett, a meaning-theory is only part of a theory of meaning and must be enriched with a theory of sense, which explains what the knowledge of a meaning-theory consists in; a theory of force, which

10. Dummett, *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics,* 21.

explains the capacity to use the language to do things like command or question; a theory of tone, which accounts for literary devices such as metaphor. And one of the important differences that divide Davidson and Dummett is the role that a meaning-theory plays in a theory of meaning.

However, their many deep philosophical differences notwithstanding, there is an important terminological difference between Davidson and Dummett. What Davidson refers to as a "theory of meaning" is what Dummett refers to as a "meaning-theory" – namely, the above mechanism for generating biconditionals that give us truth conditions for sentences of some particular language. This difference in term usage can be misleading and so I will adopt Davidson's usage and employ "theory of meaning" uniformly to refer to the Tarski-style truth mechanism above and use terms like "general account of language" or "theory of language" to capture what Dummett's usage of a "theory of meaning."[11]

Another important and technical term that Davidson uses is "first meaning," which he distinguishes from "conventional or established" (think dictionary) meaning.[12] Davidson is interested in a specific conception of meaning: a "deeper notion of what words, when spoken in context, mean; and like the shallow notion of correct usage, we want the deep concept to distinguish between what a speaker, on a given occasion, means, and what his words mean."[13] The latter here – what the words mean – is literal meaning. However, since the term 'literal meaning' is often associated with conventional meaning, Davidson prefers to use 'first meaning' when referring to what a speaker's utterance means on a particular occasion. Further, first meaning sets the meaning that the words of the utterance will have in later use, perhaps within

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11. I return to the Tarski-style theory of meaning, in greater detail, in the second chapter.
12. Davidson, "Derangement," 434-435.
13. Davidson, "Derangement," 434.

the same communicative exchange. As Davidson describes it, first meaning is meant to come "first in the order of interpretation."[14]

However, order of interpretation can be tricky, since there might be cases where we first guess at the imagery of, say, a poem and then puzzle out the first meaning of its words. We use a word (or words) in order to elicit some understanding in our hearers. And it is this communicative intention, plus the intention to use that word (or words), tied to our words, and the meaning they form that Davidson refers to as first meaning.[15] So, it is best to describe first meaning in terms of the communicative intentions – the intentions to be understood in a certain way by an interpreter– of the speaker, since, according to Davidson, normally the intentions with which a linguistic act is performed are, usually, unambiguously ordered by the relation of means to ends, where a particular use of words will be the means to the end of eliciting a particular understanding in the interpreter.[16]

Non-first meanings (or non-literal meanings) always play off of and depend upon first meanings. In other words, we understand the first meanings of words before we can begin to understand their intended meanings in non-standard or non-first meaning uses. For example, the intended meanings of words used in word play, metaphor, irony, sarcasm, and malapropisms. Because there are such non-standard uses of words, we must have, according to Davidson, the distinction mentioned earlier: the distinction between first meaning and established or

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14. Davidson, "Derangement," 435.
15. Davidson, "Derangement," 435.
16. Davidson, "Derangement," 435.
    Davidson's use of first meaning and literal meaning as synonyms can be confusing, since, as mentioned above, we often think of the literal meanings of words as the meaning that is established by convention, that is, the meanings given by the dictionary; however, Davidson chooses to use "first meaning" as a synonym for "literal meaning" because he is concerned with the meaning that is connected to the speaker's intentions, which are used to set the meaning of the word(s) that comprise the linguistic interaction in question. Another cause for confusion is that first meanings will at times, and perhaps at most times, be the same as the meaning that is established and conventional; for example, when a speaker intends and succeeds to use a word exactly as it is defined in the dictionary. However, because there are instances when first meaning will not coincide with literal meaning, it is important to distinguish the two.

conventional meaning. Davidson is particularly interested in deviant cases of language usage which are incompatible with standard – as in conventionally or socially established – grammar rules and dictionary definitions but yet do not hinder communication; specifically, Davidson relies on malapropisms and verbal errors, generally, to make the point that intended meaning often "takes over" the meaning of words. That is, Davidson believes the fact that malapropisms and other errors in language, which do not hinder communication, exist and are ubiquitous demonstrates that speaker meaning determines word meaning.[17]

In "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," Davidson focuses on malapropisms. A malapropism is the misuse of a word or words that are phonetically similar, often with humorous results. The misuse of words is so radical and ridiculous that the meaning that the speaker intended for her worlds to convey is obvious to the hearer. A few examples that Davidson gives are "hitting the nail right on the thumb," "the pinochle of success," and "[w]e need a few laughs to break up the monogamy"; note that "[w]hat is interesting is the fact that in all these cases the hearer has no trouble understanding the speaker in the way the speaker intends."[18] It is easy to explain how the hearer can successfully interpret (i.e., grasp the speaker's communicative intentions) the malapropism of a speaker: the interpreter recognizes that the standard or conventional way of understanding the sentence would not make sense, and also recognizes that the misused word or words sounds similar or reminds the listener of another word, a word which would make better sense in the context.[19] As Davidson himself puts it, "[t]he absurdity or inappropriateness of what the speaker would have meant had his words been taken in the

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17. Davidson, "Derangement," 434.
18. Davidson, "Derangement," 433-434.
19. Davidson, "Derangement," 434.

'standard' way alerts the hearer to trickery or error; the similarity in sound tips him off to the 'right' interpretation."[20]

However, it is not only malapropisms that Davidson is interested in. Davidson is looking at all types of verbal errors. Further, Davidson sees the case of the introduction of new words, or new uses of old words, as similar instances that are even more ubiquitous than error. Examples of non-standard uses of language– intentional or unintentional – in which communication succeeds are not unique eccentricities rarely found outside of literature and comedy; in fact these types of 'errors' abound in everyday life. Take for example the child who drops her ice cream cone and shouts "oh, the huge manatee!" The surrounding adults and competent speakers might chuckle at the mistake but only because they realize that the child in fact meant to exclaim "oh, the humanity!" We can also think of examples where this is done on purpose to affect one's audience in a certain way; "a nice derangement of epitaphs" is clearly meant to be comedic but can only succeed to be so if the audience is able to first comprehend the intended literal meaning. Thus, communication often succeeds in spite of gross accidental and purposeful revision of grammatical rules and vocabulary, but only when the interpreter is able to see through the surface grammar and conventional meaning to the speaker's intended meaning.

We can compare examples of verbal errors, as above, where the misuse of a word (by the linguistic standards/conventions) is intentional and unintentional. When it is intentional the speaker relies on prior knowledge of the interpreter, but also the interpreter must recognize that the speaker wants to convey something beyond what is literally meant by the words. When it is

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20. Ibid.
   Davidson's title, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," – a malaprop itself – is taken from a comedic play called *The Rivals* by Richard Brinsley Sheridan. The terms "malapropism" and "malaprop" are actually derived from Sheridan's play and particularly the character Mrs. Malaprop, who frequently misspeaks and commits the eponymous malapropism "a nice derangement of epitaphs" when intending to convey 'a nice arrangement of epithets.'

unintentional the speaker gets his message across despite the fact that the audience has to use more than just what the words conventionally mean (that is, the meaning determined by the convention of the linguistic community). .

However, Dummett would say that the unintentional malapropism or unintentional verbal error occurs when the speaker attempts to use a shared language and fails to say exactly what she in fact meant; that is, what she intended to be understood as meaning. Think of the example of the little girl who says "oh, the huge manatee!" She has made a mistake because she has not fully grasped the English idiom "oh, the humanity!" yet and so did not have clear intentions regarding the conveyance of information in this particular situation. Dummett would think that this girl is simply too young to fully grasp our shared language and so has made a mistake in use. Davidson, on the other hand, says that we attribute meanings to the speaker in accordance with what the speaker intended to be taken to mean on pain of failing to see the speaker as having the intentions characteristic of a language user.

According to Davidson, the existence of non-standard linguistic utterances that do not impede communication supports the aforementioned distinction between first meaning and conventional meaning. If on the occasion the speaker, and the audience are normal or standard, and the speaker speaks consistently with linguistic norms, her first meaning will coincide with conventional or dictionary meaning. But the speaker might use utterances (either intentionally or inadvertently) with which the speaker intends to mean something that does not correspond to the convention or dictionary meanings. In which case, the speaker's intended meaning and conventional meaning would come apart. This is an important distinction for Davidson, since first meaning is necessary for successful communication, and if we do not distinguish speaker meaning from conventional meaning, then we might make a mistake and think that conventional

meaning is also necessary for successful communication – a claim that requires a separate and additional argument if the distinction between conventional meaning and first meaning holds fast.

The Irrelevance of Linguistic Conventions

For Davidson, the existence of linguistic mistakes, such as malapropisms, that do not impede the flow of successful communication tells us a number of things about language. Specifically, Davidson opposes a certain notion of language for which learning a language, in this sense, requires acquiring an ability to act in accordance with a set of rules and that successful communication requires that the speaker and hearer share this ability.[21] The existence of malapropisms acts as a counterexample to this view of language. Thus, while Davidson is not denying that in practice we might depend on learned linguistic devices and use these devices in similar ways as other speakers, he does not think that such sharing is either necessary or sufficient for successful communication.[22]

Davidson sees knowledge and mastery of a set of conventionally determined grammar rules and vocabulary as neither necessary nor sufficient for communication. The argument for the latter claim, that such knowledge and mastery is insufficient, appeals to the facts used to distinguish first meanings from conventional meanings, where first meanings are necessary for all communication and conventional meanings are not necessarily required for communication. Examples such as malapropisms show that people do misuse words (vis-à-vis social or

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21. "Social Aspect," 2.
22. Ibid.
    Davidson does not explicitly make this claim in his first essay in this series, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs." However, he does outline how only a "passing theory" – how the interpreter interprets the speaker – must be shared for successful communication, while a shared "prior theory" – how the interpreter is prepared to interpret the speaker – is not required (442). This discussion, I believe, foreshadows the stronger claim made here in "The Social Aspect of Language."

conventional norms) without the hearer interpreting the speaker as meaning what the misused words actually mean according to the social linguistic norms (i.e., what is in the dictionary) and instead correctly interprets the speaker as meaning what the speaker intended to be taken as meaning.

If this is true, and as ubiquitous as Davidson thinks, then knowledge of conventional meaning is not sufficient for (does not guarantee) correct interpretation according to the view of language as a set of vocabulary and grammar rules determined by the social conventions of a linguistic community. Correct interpretation occurs when the interpreter realizes that the speaker is using a word (or words) with non-conventional (or conventional) meaning(s), and is able to tease out the speaker's intended meanings which deviate from (or follow closely) the linguistic norms. This happens all the time and is an obvious and incontrovertible fact of verbal communication, and so there seems to be good reason to think that conventions do not guarantee, or are insufficient for, successful communication.[23]

The other component of Davidson's claim is that linguistic conventions are not necessary for successful communication. Davidson seems to have anticipated this position in his earlier essay "Communication and Convention":

> "[i]f his [the speaker's] first words are, as we say, English, we are justified in assuming he has been exposed to linguistic conditioning similar to ours (we may even guess or know differences). To buy a pipe, order a meal, or direct a taxi driver, we go on this assumption. Until proven wrong; at which point we can revise our theory of what he means on the spur of the moment. The longer talk continues the better our theory becomes, and the more finely adapted to the individual speaker. Knowledge of the conventions of language is thus a practical crutch to interpretation, a crutch we cannot in practice afford to do without – but a crutch which, under optimum conditions for communication, we can in the end throw away, and could in theory have done without from the start."[24]

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23. It is not clear in Davidson's work whether he meant to argue that mastery and knowledge of linguistic conventions was insufficient for successful communication or just that the existence of linguistic conventions themselves was insufficient; the latter claim entails the former but not vice versa. One of Davidson's commentators (see P. M. Pietroski, "A Defense of Derangement,"104-105) has defended Davidson as targeting the claim that mastery of linguistic conventions is insufficient for communication, and by extension the claim that the existence of such conventions is also insufficient. On this view, there is only one thing that interpreters bring prior to a communicative exchange that guarantees interpretive success and that is rationality or general intelligence.
24. Davidson, "Communication and Convention," 278-279.

It is not clear whether Davidson thinks that we could interpret others with only shared prior knowledge of linguistic convention without expanding our cognitive capacities. So the question is whether shared knowledge of prior linguistic conventions is necessary for interpretive success, which is interpreting the speaker as meaning what the speaker intended to be interpreted as meaning. To answer this question all that is required is that speaker and interpreter share prior knowledge of the same conventional meanings. Examples of this are people like Davidson who have the passive mastery of certain languages – listening and understanding – and can answer letters written in "German, Spanish and French in English" but who do not possess the active skills – speaking and writing – associated with those languages.[25] Further, it is not difficult to imagine two people who do not speak the same language and have no prior experience with the language of the other speaker and yet can still devise a theory on the spot of what the utterances of the other speaker mean by relying on general knowledge about people and their common communicative intentions.[26]

If we are meant to suppose that we could communicate with each other without any prior linguistic knowledge, Davidson's claim seems very incredible. One may worry, as several of Davidson's opponents (including Dummett) have, is that Davidson's position is just the Humpty Dumpty Theory of Meaning: the theory of meaning given in the discussion over semantics and pragmatics that Humpty Dumpty has with Alice in Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass quoted in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter. It is the complaint that Davidson has tied

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25. Davidson, "Social Aspect," 7.
26. Another example has been given by Jennifer Hornsby: imagine two god-like creatures that are able to know the other's dispositions to behave and to be interpreted simply by cogitating on them. These creatures would not need any knowledge of prior linguistic conventions or norms to communicate successfully; nor would they need a shared vocabulary or set of grammar rules, since when the other spoke the listener would immediately know the speaker's intentions to be interpreted no matter what the speaker said. In this case, clearly, knowledge of shared linguistic conventions is not necessary for successful communication. (Jennifer Hornsby, "Davidson and Dummett on the Social Character of Language," in *Knowledge, Language, and Interpretation: On the Philosophy of Donald Davidson,* ed. Maria Cristina Amorettis and Nicla Vassallo, Epistemiche Studien, volume 14, page 113)

meaning so tightly to communicative intentions that, we may reasonably worry, his position makes linguistic meaning out to be no more than our intentions-to-be-understood; that our words, as Humpty Dumpty claims, mean just what we choose them to mean and nothing more. In which case, it seems we must rely on the belief – or maybe the hope – that others will follow linguistic conventions as we do, so that our intentions are best understood and that we may best understand the intentions of others. But if this is the case, then linguistic conventions seem necessary for successful communication. This makes Davidson's claim that conventions are unnecessary sound quite outlandish.

Davidson's actual claim, however, is less outrageous: the speaker must have adequate reason to believe that the hearer will succeed in interpreting him as he intends.[27] Reasonable belief is a flexible concept, so Davidson adds the restriction that there must be people who would understand him – the speaker – as he intends to be understood, and that the speaker reasonably believes to be addressing such an interpreter. The concept would have no application if there were not lots of cases of successful communication. So Davidson is not endorsing the Humpty Dumpty theory of meaning ('words have the meanings I choose them to have') like Dummett, Hacking, and others have accused him of doing, since Davidson is including this reasonableness proviso. This is an important claim for Davidson to make, since we would probably never intentionally say or write anything if we had no expectation that the other person would pick up on what we intend for them to pick up on, but we would if we had a good reason to think the interpreter would pick up on what we intend to convey.[28]

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27. Davidson, "Social Aspect," 13.
28. However, what about cases when a speaker expects or hopes to be understood in a certain way and isn't? This is not troubling to Davidson, since his notion of meaning is a theoretical concept that does not explain communication but rather explains how meaning depends on the understanding or interpretation that the hearer and speaker bring to the communicative exchange and not the other way around. Now, if the speaker reasonably believes he will be interpreted in a certain way then, on this definition, he would have meant what he intended to mean if he had been understood as he expected.

Conceptual Primacy

Davidson thinks the ultimate concern of philosophy of language is giving an account of communication through natural language,[29] and this assumption coupled with evidence that implies linguistic conventions are not relevant to an account of successful communication leads Davidson to conclude that the concept of a shared language is redundant in that it is only an uninteresting grouping of idiolects, or the individual unique patterns of language usage; so, the idiolect should be given primacy over language conventions, in the order of explanation.[30] For this reason, Davidson understands the sociality of language in terms of the norm that determines correct or incorrect interpretation provided by the speaker's intentions for using words; but appealing to this norm does not imply that the speaker's words mean whatever he intends or wants them to, i.e., this is not the Humpty Dumpty Theory of Meaning. As we saw earlier, this is because for the speaker's words to mean what he intends them to, it must be possible to succeed in communicating with a reasonable interpreter when the speaker uses words in accordance with his intentions. So, in this sense, communication is the source of meaning and, while intention is essential to meaning, the sociality of communication supplies meaning's normative element.

Dummett's Response

For Dummett, the concept of a shared language is a very important one, a concept that he thinks plays a central role in the explanation of verbal practice but also of how language can act

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(Davidson, "Social Aspect," 12).
29. Davidson, "Convention T," 71.
30. As mentioned in footnote 22, Davidson distinguishes between two personal understandings of language: the passing theory (how the interpreter interprets the speaker) and the prior theory (how the interpreter is prepared to interpret the speaker). Davidson normally thinks of the idiolect as prior theories, I however think of the idiolect as a passing theory, since it is the passing theory that must be shared in successful communication and I, in chapters 2 and 3, am interested in the moment of successful interpretation or understanding. This is a slight change to Davidson's idiolectic approach but one that I believe is helpful in understanding the special status that meanings achieve on this view.

as a vehicle for thought. Further, Dummett finds Davidson's attempt to reduce language to idiolects unhelpful and problematic. The shared notion of language afforded us an easy answer to Wittgenstein's query: it is the linguistic community's consensus that determines the shared language, and the fact that coherent sense of the language is prior to particular instances of use gives us a standard of correctness. By expelling the concept of a shared language, Davidson has made the work of the philosopher of language much more difficult, especially when Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations are brought to bear.

In his reply to Davidson's "The Social Aspect of Language," Dummett accepts Davidson's claim that verbal conventions are neither necessary nor sufficient for communication but disagrees with Davidson that other philosophers or linguists have ever held such a position. Dummett even doubts Davidson's claim that he himself ever held this position.[31] Dummett also thinks that the issue of the conceptual primacy of the idiolect over the shared language and the issue of whether conventions are necessary and sufficient for successful communication come apart from each other.[32] For Dummett, malapropisms and the like may be relevant to a claim about communication, and while communication is the primary purpose, communication is not the only purpose of language. Language is also a vehicle for thought and so it is a mistake to focus exclusively on communication in the way Davidson does.[33]

Dummett does not see himself, or any philosopher of language for that matter, as engaged in an empirical or descriptive or causal account of the functioning of language, since he does not think such an account can be useful: stimulus response models of interpretation miss the point, and a successful account must see utterances as rational actions.[34] Further, Dummett thinks we

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31. Dummett, "Social Aspect" Reply, 257.
32. Ibid.
33. Dummett, "Comments on Davidson and Hacking," 470-471.
34. Dummett, "Social Aspect" Reply, 257.

cannot make a sharp distinction between the linguistic practice and the creation of a theory of the workings of a language. Dummett is committed to the linguistic priority thesis as the defining principle of analytical philosophy: "first, that a philosophical account of thought can be attained through a philosophical account of language, and, secondly, that a comprehensive account can only be so attained."[35]

Dummett thinks that there are several important features that an adequate philosophical account of language must appreciate: (1) the use of language is a rational activity; (2) since it is rational we need to be able to explain the use of language in terms of motives and intentions (and this, it is claimed, requires a distinction between why a speaker says something and what the words he uses mean); (3) to explain language use as intentional we need to be able to distinguish hidden linguistic regularities from the ones that the speaker voluntarily makes use of.[36] (1)-(3) suggests that Dummett sees the philosophy of language as a kind of armchair linguistics in which we give an account of the practice of speaking and understanding a language for a rational agent. He implies that there are certain principles inherent in language, and it is the philosopher's job to disclose and explain these principles that are at work.

When it comes to the explanation of linguistic communication, Dummett argues that the understanding which an interpreter achieves can be modeled in terms of first and second order theories. The interpreter will have a first order theory (or something like it) about what the speech of the speaker means, but he can also have a theory about that theory – a second-order theory.[37] Now, the question is, for Dummett, where to locate the languages for which these theories can relate, since without such languages, the apparatus of the above model has nothing to refer to. We can make this choice narrowly, as Davidson has done, by choosing the personal

35. Dummett, *The Origins of Analytical Philosophy,* 4.
36 Dummett, *The Seas of Language*, 104.
37 Dummet, "Comments on Davidson and Hacking," 468.

idiolect or we can do it more broadly, understanding the idiolect as a "partial, and partly incorrect, theory about what the meanings of the expressions are in the common language."[38] This, Dummett thinks, is the most natural choice, since it retains much of our ordinary and common sense thoughts about shared languages. Dummett thinks this is a natural way to view language because, as mentioned above, he believes that we need to appreciate both language's purpose in communication but also its ability to act as a vehicle for thought.

Dummett points out that, in the philosophy of language, philosophers tend to fall on one of two sides when it comes to meaning: some see words as carrying meaning independently of speakers and the others see the speaker as attaching meaning to the word "by some mental operation."[39] Dummett argues that Davidson's view falls on the latter side but because he ties meaning so closely to intentions he fails to appreciate the way in which language is a vehicle for our thoughts; as Wittgenstein pointed out (PI 510), the difficulty in saying "it's cold in here" and meaning it is warm in here, "does not lie in the presence of an audience, but is just as great if you are saying it to yourself."[40] This difficulty is just that the words "it is cold in here" simply don't mean it is warm in here.

In this way, Dummett opts for the view of language that sees the meaning of words as something that holds independently of particular speakers, rather than the view that sees the speaker's intentions as determining the meanings of words. Dummett is adapting Alice's view of language (in her discussion with Humpty Dumpty above): "words have meanings in themselves, independently of speakers...[t]hey have them in virtue of belonging to a language... [b]ut they have them independently of any particular speakers."[41] For Dummett, meanings are senses to be

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38 Dummet, "Comments on Davidson and Hacking," 469.
39. Dummett, "Comments on Davidson and Hacking," 470.
40. Dummett, "Comments on Davidson and Hacking," 471.
41. Dummett, "Comments on Davidson and Hacking," 473.

grasped, but which cannot be grasped without the vehicle of language and the association that the language creates between those senses and particular sentences.[42]

However, Dummett, like Davidson, has been heavily influenced by Wittgenstein's argument against private language. Specifically, Dummett thinks that Wittgenstein is right to connect meaning with use and reject the view that meanings are private mental items. This influence reveals itself in Dummett's work as his manifestability constraint: meanings must be publicly manifestable uses of words or expressions, his interpretation of Wittgenstein's 'meaning is use' dictum. Davidson prefers (as we shall see) to characterize meaning in terms of truth conditions. However, Dummett's approach is different from Davidson's: "[r]ather than characterizing meaning in terms of truth-conditions, and then explaining how the use of a sentence depends upon its meaning as so characterized, this approach requires us to give a direct description of its use: this will then constitute [sic] its meaning."[43]

Siding with Davidson

In the end, as I said at the beginning, I think this debate revolves around an intractable problem over what constitutes the best style of explanation. One view sees the meanings of words as determined by the speaker's intentions and the other sees the meanings of words holding independently of the individual speakers' idiolects. Davidson holds a version of the former, while Dummett holds to a version of the latter.

However, Dummett's argument in favor of the primacy of the shared language fails to be convincing, since there is a deep tension in Dummett's position that meaning must be manifested in use and, at the same time, that language is a social entity that transcends the particular verbal

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42. Ibid.
43. Dummett, *The Origins of Analytic Philosophy*, 21.

actions of individuals. If meanings are senses to be grasped, senses that are associated with words by the patterns of communication we call language, it doesn't seem like those meanings could also be manifested or constituted in use. In this way, Dummett sees language as two distinct sets of patterns of use: one set is an idealized pattern of use that is independent from the pattern of actual language use. However, it is not clear, in Dummett's work, how these two patterns of use interact.

I find this to be a troubling issue and one I do not think that Dummett ever addresses in a clear and satisfactory way. A possible reply on Dummett's behalf might be that this problem arises from trying to assign content to beliefs before assigning content to language. Dummett understands the analytic tradition to be giving a philosophical account of thought in terms of a philosophical account of language, and that a comprehensive account of thought can only be had through an account of language.[44] The internal states of the actual individual are perhaps quite messy and we may only be able to give an imprecise account of the content of those states; the same sentences are used to speak of the world and to assign belief contents to speakers and prelinguistic thinkers. We have to understand the content of those sentences differently. Frege, for example, made the distinction between intensional and extensional operators. For Frege, thinkers and speakers only have beliefs about things under modes of presentations, in cases of assigning beliefs what looks like an extensionally equivalent substitution may in fact make the sentence false.

However, this strategy itself, I think, still runs into the problem of positing an inherent sense or meaning in language independent of use. As we saw above, Dummett accepts something like this Fregean view, that there is some coherent sense in language transcendent of any particular use, and yet, at the same time, Dummett makes meaning beholden to practice and

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44. Dummett, *The Origins of Analytical Philosophy*, 4.

actual use with his manifestability constraint. It seems to me that this tension is created by trying to marry a Fregean notion of sense with a Wittgensteinian ban on private language; a project that, I believe, fails to be convincing. Therefore, because this tension is not clearly resolved in Dummett, and I think gives us good reason to side with the Davidsonian who focuses on communication and builds up an account of language from the idiolect out, and does a much better job integrating actual use into a theory of language.

However, I think Davidson's arguments do leave room for a respectable notion of language that he does not seem to have fully appreciated. Davidson only gives us good reason to reject a notion of language that requires knowledge and mastery of linguistic conventions for successful communication yet he concludes that there would be no "use" or utility for a notion of language understood at the overlapping and converging of idiolects.[45] This not only seems unmotivated by Davidson's argument, it seems incorrect. There is a great deal of explanatory utility in maintaining a notion of language as born out of idiolects contemporaneously with understanding. When communication succeeds, meaning is transacted, idiolects converge, a language of sorts is created and having this understanding of language, I think, is helpful in explaining language as a dynamic and complex social institution. Furthermore, as we shall see by the end of this thesis, Davidson's theory of interpretation may in fact presuppose a very basic notion of a shared language – a language with a very basic syntax and semantics – since this theory seems to assume, at the very least, concepts of truth and sentence.

Finally, if we side with Davidson's idiolectic explanatory project, if meaning's life is given through particular individual utterances and we disallow ourselves any appeal to a transcendental notion of meaning or any other notion of meaning that transcends the idiolectic occasion, we will need to determine the source of the semantic content on these particular

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45. Davidson, "Derangement," 445.

occasions and how the content itself is determined. Most importantly, we will need to get clear about how exactly idiolect convergence or understanding gives meaning life on these particular occasions. These are topics I take up in the next chapter.

Chapter 2

"Where understanding matches intent we can, if we please, speak of 'the' meaning;
but it is understanding that gives life to meaning, not the other way around."[46]

<u>Introduction</u>

By the end of the first chapter, we found that there was good reason to accept a Davidsonian view of language. On this view, idiolectic understanding, and the particular instances of successful communication are seen as fundamental to the philosophy of language; language and linguistic meaning happen where idiolects converge, understanding occurs, and hearers correctly grasp the communicative intentions of speakers. In this picture of language, what is explanatorily fundamental are particular actions – utterances – at particular times, performed by particular speakers.

As Davidson himself puts it: "[w]here understanding matches intent we can, if we please, speak of 'the' meaning; but it is understanding that gives life to meaning, not the other way around."[47] However, it is not entirely obvious what this passage is meant to convey. What exactly is "'the' meaning" of an utterance and how exactly does understanding give it life? What does it mean for meaning to have "life"? And, even if we can answer these questions, what is it to understand a linguistic utterance? That is, what exactly is understanding and what will an account of understanding amount to?

Figuring out what Davidson intends to communicate with this passage, and answering these attendant worries will serve a dual purpose in this chapter. First, it will illustrate the core features of the Davidsonian idiolectic view of language; a project that attempts to bridge a formal theory of meaning and an informal theory of interpretation or understanding. In building such a

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46. Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," 12.
47. Ibid.

bridge, the Davidsonian approach importantly appreciates language's dual nature by showing how language's formal, abstract, recursive character maps onto, and depends upon, an informal account of successful interpretation. Second, in answering these questions, the idiolectic view of language that emerges is one that places a special importance on those moments where and when understanding is achieved; occasions that are individual and unrepeatable. Such a theory, I shall argue, presupposes an ontological commitment to particular occasions; an ontological position that I give fuller analysis and defense of in the third chapter.

How Meaning Gets Its Life

When analyzing the quote "it is understanding that gives life to meaning,"[48] it is important to note that Davidson uses 'understanding' and 'interpretation' interchangeably. In this way, Davidson is not using 'interpretation' in Wittgenstein's sense, for whom the interpretation of a word or expression is always another word or expression, since words are not offered as *the* interpretation in Davidson's view but only as a way to help describe the understanding that the listener achieves in the practice of linguistic communication.[49]

Interpretation is cashed out, for Davidson, in an account of communicative success that focuses on the experiences of an interpreter and his ability to correctly grasp the intended meanings of alien utterances spoken by an alien speaker. With this in mind, "understanding," in the aforementioned quotation, could refer to either particular successful bits of communication (specifically, on the part of the interpreter or hearer) or it could refer to a philosophical account of such bits of verbal communication. Similarly for "meaning": either Davidson is referring to the particular contents of the particular utterances that have been successfully grasped by the

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48. Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," 12.
49. Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," 3-4.

hearer or Davidson is referring more abstractly to a general and abstract theory of meaning; that is, he is referring to a formal semantics for natural language.

Finally, and perhaps most cryptic of all, is Davidson's talk of 'giving life.' I take it that Davidson could mean two things depending on which interpretation of 'meaning' – either the particular contents or the abstract theory for natural language – that one chooses. If it is particular contents for particular utterances, it could be that moments of successful communication (interpretation or understanding) 'give life' to these contents in the sense that the contents are given a certain status. That is, they are defined, relatively in space-time, by a particular state of affairs. Under this interpretation, the meaning of a particular utterance is born out of its particular instance, and is not 'alive' before or after that moment has passed. The other interpretation is for an abstract theory of meaning; namely, that a formal theory of semantics is given purpose, or 'life', in service to the explanation of particular instances of successful communication (i.e., the particular convergences of idiolects). As Davidson might say, formal semantics for natural language are given purpose, or function, or import, in service to an informal theory of interpretation or understanding.

I therefore think that the claim "it is understanding that gives life to meaning,"[50] yields two plausible interpretations, the first of which concerns the status given to particular linguistic actions and the other is more abstract and concerns the relationship between theories:

(1) The intended meanings of particular utterances of a speaker are given a certain status when they are correctly interpreted (i.e., the way the speaker intended) by the hearer.

(2) A theory of meaning (a formal semantics for natural language) is given purpose in

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50. Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," 12.

service to an account of successful communication (i.e., an account of interpretation or understanding).

I think that there is an important sense in which both of these interpretations capture parts of the Davidsonian picture of language and linguistic practice; more importantly, the first brings out an ontological commitment that, I argue, the Davidsonian picture of language presupposes by holding the idiolectic understanding as foundational; namely, there exists events, and a particular type of event, that can be described as instances of successful communication.

Convention-T as a Theory of Meaning

In order to fully appreciate and contextualize the two interpretations above within Davidson's body of work, it is necessary to determine exactly how 'meanings' and a 'formal theory of meaning' are defined in the Davidsonian program. However, first it is important to note that a formal theory of meaning for a natural language will not be the same thing as a theory of interpretation for successful bits of communication, since this difference might not be immediately obvious. A theory of meaning will be the same as a formal theory of semantics for natural language. It will determine the semantic values for sentences of any given language but, like language itself (as we saw in the first chapter), a theory of meaning will be a pure abstraction that can assign semantic values to an infinity of possible languages. So, since there are no such things as languages but "only people and their various written and acoustical products," a formal semantics describes and supplies values for a theoretical notion; on the other hand, a theory of interpretation will account for those successful instances of communication –

the "various written and acoustical products"[51] – by supplying the correct understanding (the understanding intended by the speaker) of a speaker's words.

Despite his focus on giving a theory of meaning, Davidson is an anti-realist when it comes to 'meanings'; that is, he doesn't think 'meanings' as ontological entities exist. In other words, Davidson takes a non-propositional approach to formal semantic theories. A great deal of modern theorizing about formal semantics and logic understands meanings as propositions and sees the job of a semantic theory as systematically pairing linguistic expressions with these entities (sometimes called senses or semantic contents instead of propositions). It is this propositional view that Wittgenstein mocked and rejected in his Philosophical Investigations: "[p]eople say: it's not the word that counts but its meaning, thinking of the meaning as a thing of the same kind as the word, even though different from the word. Here the word, there the meaning. The money, and the cow one can buy with it."[52] Davidson shares Wittgenstein's disinclination toward a propositional account ("meanings as entities"), but Davidson does not doubt that we can give a positive, systematic, semantic account of natural language. Davidson thinks that natural language is the main concern when studying meanings: "[t]he inevitable goal of semantic theory is a theory of natural language couched in a natural language (the same or another)."[53] However, our next question is: what exactly does Davidson have in mind for a theory of meaning?

Davidson thinks that a systematic theory of the meanings of the sentences of a natural language can be given in the form of an abstract theory of truth for language generally construed. In this way, Davidson eschews talk of meanings as such (as entities) but rather prefers to talk of meanings as truth-conditions, since, for Davidson, "no stronger notion of meanings is called for"

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51. Davidson, "The Second Person," 108.
52. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §120.
53. Davidson, "In Defence of Convention T," 71.

in order to explain successful convergence between idiolects; the foundational notion in an idiolectic view of language.[54] However, we might wonder whether a semantic theory that makes no direct appeal to meanings, and instead appeals to a concept of truth, ought to be called a semantic theory at all? Can a theory of truth even do duty as a theory of meaning? Davidson, as we shall see, thinks that while knowledge of such a truth-conditional theory of meaning will not be necessary to understand a language, it will be sufficient to do so; more importantly, a speaker will only have to satisfy the theory of meaning to understand the language, whether he explicitly has the theory of meaning in mind or not.[55]

However, now our question becomes: what sort of theory of truth should we expect to do duty as a theory of meaning? Davidson wants to use a theory of truth that Alfred Tarski originally devised for formal (as opposed to natural) languages, such as symbolic logic.[56] Tarski was interested in "the notion of truth [sic]," and "giving a satisfactory definition of this notion, i.e., a definition which is materially adequate and formally correct. [sic]"[57] The extension of the predicate 'true' is a little tricky to define and, since the notion of a proposition is highly debated, Tarski prefers to talk of 'true sentences'[58]; however, the extension of 'true sentence' – the set of true sentences – will vary depending on the language that the sentence in question is formulated in, since it is possible that a sentence, which in one language is true, could be false, or simply nonsense, in another language.[59] Thus, Tarski's approach will define a predicate "true-in-L," where L is some particular language – often called the 'object language' – and the definition

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54. Davidson, "Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages," 8.
55. Donald, Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," 438.
    "To say that an explicit theory for interpreting a speaker is a model of the interpreter's linguistic competence is not to suggest that the interpreter knows any such theory."
56. Tarski,, "The Semantic Conception of Truth: And the Foundations of Semantics."
57. Tarski, "The Semantic Conception of Truth: And the Foundation of Semantics," 341.
58. Tarski, "The Semantic Conception of Truth: And the Foundation of Semantics," 342.
59. Ibid.

itself will be formulated in a language that is not identical to the object language and is called the 'metalanguage.'

Tarski's original goal was to give a compositional account of truth for formal languages (e.g., higher order logics); that is, Tarski wanted to be able to give the truth of the simplest sentences (open sentences) in terms of the truth of their relevant sub-sentential parts, and he wanted it to be able to give the truth-value of more complex sentences (closed sentences) in terms of those simplest or open sentences. The sub-sentential parts would be required to meet what is sometimes called the Material Adequacy Condition or, more simply, Convention-T.

For Tarski, a definition (formulated in the metalanguage) will be formally adequate if, for every sentence in an object language (L), a sentence is entailed of an "equivalence of the form (T)"[60] or, as I shall refer to it, of a T-sentence form:

$$s \text{ is true if and only if } p$$

where *s* is a sentence in the object language that is true in the object language and *p* is a translation of the object language sentence *s* into the metalanguage. Further, in order for the definition to be materially adequate, the objects that satisfy *p* must be ones that would intuitively count as true in the object language, and this claim must be provable with only the axioms and other constituents of the metalanguage theory, which contains a copy of the object language in question. Thus, Tarski's Material Adequacy Condition requires that a T-sentence be entailed in the metalanguage for every truth-bearing sentence of the object language in question.

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60. Tarski, "The Semantic Conception of Truth: And the Foundation of Semantics," 344

Theories of Truth for Formal Languages as Theories of Meaning for Natural Languages

Our next concern is whether or not a Tarski-style truth theory for formal languages can act as a theory of meaning for natural languages. At first blush, it seems unlikely that a theory of truth could be sufficient for a theory of meaning; it seems that meaning is a much richer notion than truth; it seems like a sentence's truth or even the conditions under which the sentence can accurately be said to be true are not the same thing as what the sentence means. Two sentences – "snow is white" and "grass is green" – could easily have the same truth value – both are true – and not mean the same thing. Further, we could even imagine sentences that have the same truth conditions ("Hesperus is a planet" and "Phosphorus is a planet," are both true and have the same truth condition: Venus's being a planet) and not mean the same thing (Hesperus refers to Venus seen in the evening and Phosphorus refers to Venus seen in the morning). So, at least at first blush, it seems that meaning is a richer notion than truth or at least different from the sameness of truth value or truth conditions.

This difference, as Gottlob Frege pointed out, shows that meaning creates non-extensional or intensional contexts. The "means that" operator is sensitive to more than just truth values or truth conditions, since, for example, "snow is white" means that snow is white and yet it is co-extensional with "grass is green"; that is, these sentences have the same truth values. However, this does not entail that "snow is white" and "grass is green" have the same meaning, but only that meaning seems to have some non-extensional component. Furthermore, the truth table for '...is true if and only if...' shows that we can allow for the substitution of co-extensive sentences *salva veritate*: 'snow is white is true if and only if grass is green.'[61] Thus, a theory of meaning looks like it should be composed of M-sentences ('means that …') but Tarski's theory

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61. Davidson, "Truth and Meaning," 25.

is composed of T-sentences ('… is true in L if and only if ...'), and T-sentences need not necessarily capture the meaning of the sentence in question. And so the initial worry is that if we are to reduce meaning to truth, we are going to end up with a rather impoverished notion of meaning. Tarski's Convention-T is purely extensional, since co-extensional sentences, sentences with the same truth value, can be substituted salva veritate. But co-extensional sentences do not always mean the same thing, and therefore it seems that what we will need for meaning are not T-sentences but M-sentences; sentences that give the meaning of an object language sentence rather than its truth value.

However, a purely extensional account of meaning has several advantages despite these apparent differences between truth and meaning. If we were able to account for meaning sufficiently with an extensional account, we would avoid a great deal of metaphysical headache. Specifically, propositional semantic theories – such as those of Gottlob Frege or Bertrand Russell – require an extra metaphysical or theoretical layer, so to speak. These theories took seriously the need to explain the intensionality of language and postulated entities such as a Fregean sense, or Russell's proposition, or intension, or semantic content, etc., and then gave a theoretical mechanism that assigned content, in addition to a referent, to each sentence. Davidson and others, following Wittgenstein, have seen this extra layer as unnecessary and theoretically clunky. If we can explain how an interpreter could successful understand a speaker just by reference to the interpreter's knowledge of a theory of truth for the sentences of the speaker's language, then it seems that appealing to Fregean senses or Russellian propositions is metaphysical overindulgence.

Furthermore, Davidson thinks that one requirement for any theory of meaning for a natural language (L) is that it "shows 'how the meanings of sentences depend upon the meanings

of words' if it contains a (recursive) definition of truth-in-L."[62] This is because it is a

requirement for all languages that they be learnable; if a grouping of symbols was not organized

systematically, it would not be a language but only a mere grouping of symbols, since it would

not be learnable and something that all known natural languages have in common is their

learnability.[63] If it is not possible to give a "constructive account of the meaning of the sentences

in the language," then the language is not a learnable one and theories of meaning that conflict

with this condition cannot be a theory of natural language, since to create such a theory "fails to

deal with something central to the concept of a language," i.e., their learnability.[64] However,

natural languages can produce infinitely many unique sentences. So, since all languages (if they

are legitimate natural languages) are learnable, and since one feature that is constitutive of a

learnable language is that one can give a systematic account of it, but since natural languages can

produce infinitely many unique sentences, a systematic account of language will have to be

recursive so that it can systematically produce an infinite number of unique sentences.

What Davidson aims to do with his implementation of Tarski's Convention-T is

substitute the "means that" operator for "is true if and only if,"[65] and yet as we saw above, we

might end up with a deviant T-sentence like "'snow is white' is true if and only if grass is green"

but, Davidson argues, if such a sentence "followed from a characterization of the predicate 'is

true' that led to the invariable pairing of truths with truths and falsehoods with falsehoods – then

there would not, I think, be anything essential to the idea of meaning that remained to be

captured."[66] Davidson seems to think that the problem of deviant T-sentences like "'snow is

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62. Davidson, "Truth and Meaning," 23.
63. If it was a language that was in principle not learnable, it would not be a natural language since all natural
    languages are developed naturally in use. If it was not learnable, it would be unusable, and therefore, not a
    natural language.
64. Davidson, Donald, "Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages," 3.
65. Davidson, Donald, "Semantics for Natural Language," 60.
66. Davidson, Donald "Truth and Meaning," 26.

white' if and only if grass is green" arises only when we look at sentences in isolation from other sentences. And this is Davidson's holism: a theory of meaning for a language must address the totality of sentences for that language, but this holism, as we shall see in more detail, applies not only to meanings but to beliefs and attitudes. Finally, he also points out that what we learn from convention-T, when it comes to meaning, is brought out by the proof of its biconditional; the proof of how the "truth value of the sentence depends upon a recursively given structure," and how this recursive structure could be used in a recursive account of meaning, and thereby, a sufficient account of meaning for natural languages.[67]

It is important to note that, when it comes to Tarski's truth theory, the material adequacy condition acts as a criterion for theories of truth:[68] this condition requires that we have true T-sentences but also that the true T-sentences are entailed by the theory; that is, they are provable from the axioms that give satisfaction conditions for the sentences of the language (*L*) which fit consistently with other true sentences of *L*. Thus, T-sentences will come in holistic networks and in order to determine the correct T-sentences one will have to be able to show how they are entailed by the theory given in the metalanguage; further, this proof will involve the axioms of the theory and the consistency of the truth of sentences with the other sentences of the object language, which is contained in the metalanguage theory. So the theory is going to have to generate T-sentences in such a way that, for example, "snow is white" comes in conjunction with sentences like "clouds are white," "snow is the same color as clouds," and "grass is not the same color as snow," etc. We will need these other sentences to know what "snow is white" 'means.' So, the constraint of holism for whole masses of T-sentences that is given by the Tarski-style

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67. Davidson, Donald, "Semantics for Natural Language," 61.
68. Davidson also sees it acting as a criterion of success for theories of meaning (Davidson, "Semantics for Natural Language," 61).

theory will reduce the proliferation of deviant and false T-sentences at the level of the formal semantics for natural language.

Davidson admits that there can be more than one true T-sentence for any given object language sentence, and so for some indeterminacy in meaning. However, this indeterminacy of T-sentences given by the theory of meaning is a much less dramatic problem, since one of the constraints built into the theory is a requirement to maximize agreement, or that the "totality of T-sentences should … optimally fit evidence about sentences held true by native speakers... what Tarski assumed outright for each T-sentence can be indirectly elicited by a holistic constraint," and if that holistic constraint is sufficient, then each true T-sentence should churn out an adequate interpretation all without a metaphysical notion of meaning.[69] Finally, while there may be some extra, extraneous T-sentences, beyond a certain point of reduction, it does not make a (pragmatic) difference and we will be getting at something sufficiently like the idealized meaning represented by M-sentences.[70]

This discussion implies that any notion of meaning more determinate than the one outlined above is either metaphysically bloated or, at the very least, makes meaning out to be something far more grand and mysterious than it in fact needs to be in order to explain the explanandum – namely, in Davidson's view, the fact that we succeed as interpreters of speakers. By limiting ourselves to explaining what we would need to know to correctly interpret a speaker, we are able to give a simple, clean, extensional account of meaning that maps onto, and gives a recursive account of, the meanings of all possible sentences for a natural language (L). So it is not a failure in one's theory of meaning if one does not get determinate meanings, but rather it is a failure with, or characteristic of, the notion of meaning itself.

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69. Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," 139.
70. Ibid.

Thus, Davidson takes Tarski's theory of truth to build up and capture, via a theoretical criterion, a notion of meaning. However, unlike Tarski who applied his theory only to formal languages where meanings are given preemptively, Davidson has to rely on holism, allowing for a minimum of indeterminacy, in order to reduce the proliferation of deviant T-sentences.

The Presupposition of Meaning

However, besides the potential for deviant T-sentences, there is another potential shortfall in Davidson's attempt to appropriate a Tarski-style truth-theory as a theory of meaning: the Tarski theory, and constraints that it puts on a theory of truth, presupposes the meanings of the terms involved. For Tarski, T-sentences are true because it is assumed that the right branch of his biconditional is a correct translation of the left branch; but Davidson proposes "to reverse the direction of explanation: assuming translation, Tarski was able to define truth; the present idea is to take truth as basic and extract an account of translation or interpretation."[71] Tarski's semantic conception of truth presupposes that we have the meaning of s and p before we can ever be sure that "s is true in L if and only if p" is true. In other words, you cannot have deviant T-sentences for Tarski, since we must already know – before we make any claims about the truth of a T-sentence – that p gives the meaning of s. That is why a theory of truth can only be given for formal languages in Tarski's view: formal languages stipulate their meanings in advance.

It is important to notice how much is embedded in these Tarski-style theories, since sometimes T-sentences can come off sounding rather trivial and uninteresting. Tarski's formulation relies on rather clear intuitions about T-sentences. It seems that we would need to know the meanings involved in "'snow is white' is true in language L if and only if snow is white" before we formulated this T-sentence in order to be sure that this is the correct T-sentence

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71. Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," 135.

for 'snow is white.' In other words, it seems that it is only once we know what 'snow' and what 'white' refer to that we can know we have correctly formulated the true T-sentence using these terms. If we do not know what 'snow is white" means, how can we pick out the correct T-sentence?

This presupposition is especially damaging for Davidson because, as we have seen, Davidson's aim is to appropriate Tarski's theory in order to give an account of meaning. However if a Tarski's theory presupposes meaning, then Davidson's argument seems question begging. This is why, as mentioned above, Davidson wants to invert the Tarski stratagem: presuppose truth as a basic notion in order to solve for meaning.

By inverting Tarski's strategy, Davidson has to rely on – i.e., assume – a basic notion of truth. He does this by trying to relate truth to the very non-semantic data about speaker's behavior that provide the determination base for meaning. In other words, what Davidson actually presupposes is not the meaning of the sentences but rather that we can grasp when someone else, as well as ourselves, is holding a sentence true.[72] This is a key assumption of the Davidsonian program: that there exists a non-question-begging procedure for telling when others believe a sentence is true, and that you can know when someone is holding a sentence is true without necessarily knowing what that sentence means. So, all the radical interpreter needs is the ability to identify the attitude of 'holding true' in the language users around him, and this does not assume meaning but only that we can identify the 'holding true' attitude in others.[73]

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72. Davidson, Donald, "Three Varieties of Knowledge," 211.
73. Similarly, Quine thought that the linguist, who is attempting to create a translation manual of a hitherto unknown language, can identify assenting and dissenting behavior. However, note well that assenting and dissenting attitudes are not the behavioral ground zero; there is an even lower lever of pure behavior or pure environmental input and behavior output, where there is a mechanical behavior response to environmental input. For example, imagine the wind blowing through the trees – environmental input – and the trees makings creaking noise – behavior output. But even interpretation from scratch cannot operate with only physical description of behavior as evidence for the meanings of others. Davidson thinks that the minimal level that we must start with, for interpretation of language to even get off the ground, is a bit richer than just this purely mechanical matching of behavioral output to

Thus, our two main worries for Davidson when it comes to the question of whether or not a theory of truth can do justice as a theory of meaning – the problem of deviant T-sentences and the presupposition of meaning – can at least be managed within a Davidsonian program. However, as we shall see below, Davidson's 'holding true' attitude is not without its own issues.

Can a Formal Theory Capture Natural Language?

So far, it looks as though a theory of truth for a formal language could potentially do justice as a theory of meaning for a natural language; however, now the Davidsonian must show, or at the very least give us good reason to hope, that natural language can, in principle, be captured in a formal system. The question is: do we have reason to think that we can give the logical form[74] of natural language?

This is because, if the logical form could be given for a sufficiently large portion of natural language, then a Tarski-style theory could give a theory of truth for a large portion of natural language, since it can already give a theory of truth for formal systems and since first order logic is a formal system. This is because Tarski's Material Adequacy Condition was originally intended to apply to languages where we would know the semantic values of all of the open sentences, in advance; unlike in the case of natural languages where we do not stipulate the meanings of open sentences in advance, where meanings might change, and where meta-linguistic expressions and semantic predicates ("means that") might be used. Natural languages are said to be "semantically closed": natural languages contain not only their stock of

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environmental input. We must have, in order to begin to understand others, some very basic level of intentionality that is presupposed; there is still some level of meaning – a notion of 'holding true' at least – that we can get at even if we do not presuppose or stipulate in advance our meanings.

74. To give the logical form of a bit of natural language is to show how that type of natural language can be expressed in symbolic logic and, thereby, make it amenable to logic analysis and operations to be performed on and with it.

expressions, but also names for these expressions as well as semantic terms like the predicate "true," which refer to sentences in the language itself. This self-referential potential of natural languages is the source, in Tarski's view, of many semantic paradoxes, and so we need to exclude such semantically closed languages, thinks Tarski, from our analysis.

However, Davidson thinks that this is not as fatal to his project as it might first seem. Davidson argues that if we can capture a fragment or adjunct of natural language, say English, with a formal theory, then "[w]herever there are sentences of old English with the same truth conditions as sentences in the adjunct we may extend the theory to cover them."[75] So, Davidson thinks, as long as we can tame a large enough portion of natural language to fit into a formal logic, which we have good reason to think we can, then we have good reason to be optimistic that this project will succeed in giving the formal semantics for natural language.[76]

Radical Interpretation and Practical Use of a Theory of Meaning

Now that we have seen how a theory of truth can do duty as a theory of meaning – that is, the formal aspect of Davidson's program – we need to know how to determine which actual theory is correct. A theory of meaning is a mere abstraction, but in practice we need a way of figuring out which theory, given the bit of language we are interested, is the correct theory of meaning; a mechanism for determining the T-sentences for particular utterances.

So now the question becomes what evidence can we appeal to in determining whether we have gotten the correct theory of truth and, thereby, the correct theory of meaning? We need to

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75. Davidson, "Truth and Meaning," 29.
76. While Davidson is optimistic (in fact, he thinks there is "no alternative"), he does admit that some serious obstacles lie on the path to such a taming; namely, "we do not know the logical form of counterfactuals or subjunctive sentences; nor of sentences about probabilities and about causal relations; we have no good idea what the logical role of adverbs is, nor the role of attributive adjectives; we have no theory for mass terms lie 'fire', 'water', and 'snow', nor for sentences about belief, perception, and intention, nor for verbs of action that imply purpose," and any "comprehensive theory of meaning for natural language must cope successfully with each of these problems" (Davidson, "Truth and Meaning," 35-36).

test whether the theory is correct on the basis of data that does not presuppose that we already understand the target language in question. Davidson thinks in order to do so we can appeal to data that is available only to the radical interpreter – the person who is trying to interpret the speech of an alien speaker without making any assumptions about meanings.[77] This is because we need to avoid smuggling in any assumptions about the language under interpretation, and so "it will help keep assumptions from going unnoticed to focus on cases where interpretation is most clearly called for: interpretation in one idiom of talk to another."[78]

Davidson owes a great deal to W.V.O. Quine, the philosopher who originally devised the thought experiment of the radical translator, and it is helpful to look at Quine's original example. Quine, similarly to Davidson, rejects the traditional notion of "meanings" as entities but, unlike Davidson, prefers talk of "stimulus meaning." In Quine's Word and Object, the theory of "stimulus meaning" gives a special role to sensory stimuli – Quine's example is the pattern of irradiation on one's eyeball – in the determination of the semantic content of our sentences. This account understands the meaning of sentences in a given situation as determined by the speaker's occasional patterns of stimulation,[79] which constitute evidence for assenting (or dissenting) to that sentence. For Quine, stimulus meaning of an observation sentence will be an ordered pair of the set of all of the stimulations that would prompt assent to the sentence and the set of all of the stimulations that would prompt dissent.[80]

Quine thinks that a great example of the process of semantic determination is the radical translator (or interpreter in Davidson's case[81]) who translates the meaning of an observation

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77. Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," 142.
78. Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," 125-126.
79. By "occasional patterns of stimulation" I mean those patterns of sensory stimulation that occur on a given occasion where an occasion is defined as involving a particular place at a particular time.
80. Quine, *Word and Object*, 32-33
81. As Davidson says, "[w]hat a fully informed interpreter could learn about what a speaker means is all there is to learn; the same goes for what the speaker believes." (Davidson "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,"

sentence of a speaker of a unknown language. In this case, all there is to meaning is what can be transacted between speaker and listener each prompted by the same or similar stimuli to pass verdicts (assent or dissent) on sentences of their respective languages. By observing the native speaker's use of observation sentences in a shared environment, this linguist matches observation sentences of the speaker with those sentences of his own language and thereby creates a translation manual. The linguist does this by noticing just those circumstances that the speaker assents to, in Quine's example, "Gavagai" for which the translator would assent to "Rabbit"; in this way, the translator determines the stimulus meaning of the observation sentence "Gavagai."[82] Thus, on Quine's view, the linguist, by selecting one of his own sentences to match with one of the speaker, would settle on an approximation of the speaker's stimulus meaning.[83] As a student of Quine, Davidson is very complimentary of what he sees as an ingenious and "clever compromise... to tie meaning and content to the firings of sensory nerves."[84] Davidson appreciates Quine's attempt to pave a path for doing semantics, and subsequently epistemology, in a scientifically rigorous way by doing without traditional 'meanings'.

However, the radical interpreter's project will differ slightly from the radical translator, since, radical interpretation places a much greater emphasis on what is "explicitly semantical" [sic] and radical interpretation requires that the formalized structure of language be constrainable to first order logic (or generally, quantification theory).[85] Further, radical interpretation leaves no role for a notion of stimulus meaning. This difference in data that is available to the interpreter and translator may look like a purely terminological difference, but it in fact runs much deeper. For Quine, the translator appeals to the assenting and dissenting behavior of the person being

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148.)
82. Quine, *Word and Object*, 30.
83. Quine, *Word and Object*, 40
84. Davidson, "Meaning, Truth and Evidence," 68.
85. Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," footnote p126 and footnote p136.

translated; behavior that is a response to sensory experience or stimulation. For Davidson, it is an attitude of 'holding true' that the interpreter recognizes in the behavior of the person to be interpreted, and that this attitude is a response to certain states of affairs obtaining in their shared world.

However, as Davidson notes, when it comes to a theory of interpretation "there is the obvious difficulty in telling when a person accepts a sentence as true."[86] The problem is that we suppose we know when the speaker holds a sentence true in order to figure out what the speaker means and believes.[87] We could know when he holds sentences true if we knew enough about his beliefs and intentions but this presupposes what we wanted to find out – his intentions and beliefs. In other words, the capacity to identify assent or a 'holding-true' attitude, presupposes that the interpreter and the speaker already engage in a certain level of mutual interpretation or understanding; so, the starting point is not truly radical.[88]

In order to deal with this problem, Davidson switched his evidential base in his later writing from 'holding true' to 'preferring true.' In doing so, Davidson's radical interpreter becomes an interpreter in the widest sense: he ascribes meaning, beliefs, and desires in one single procedure. The problem was that the interpreter must solve for two unknowns – belief and meaning – and he solves this by holding beliefs as constant as possible in assuming speakers share most of the interpreter's beliefs. Further, the radical interpreter looks to the preferential attitude that a speaker has for the truth of one sentence over another as his evidential base in determining the meanings, beliefs, and desires of the speaker. In this way, "support for the explanation doesn't come from a new kind of insight into the attitudes and beliefs of the agent,

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86. Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning," 147.
87. Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning," 145.
88. Glock, "Quine and Davidson on Language, Thought and Reality," 191.

but from more observations of preferences of the very sort to be explained."[89] Thus, by looking to the history of the speaker's preferences for true sentences, the interpreter can crack the safe, so to speak, and safely estimate which sentences the speaker prefers true; and so, in one fell swoop, the interpreter discovers the speakers meanings, beliefs, and desires, and thereby the speaker's intentional actions.

Davidson is not building up meaning from something completely a-semantic; there is a basic semantic element and there is an assumption of meaning but not anything that is very specific or detailed. In order to have a notion of preferring true, Davidson is presupposing a very basic concept of truth and a concept of sentence which bears that truth, since we simply can't develop theory of meaning from nothing (just as every theory must have some primitive concepts). But for Davidson, this is all we need to get a theory of meaning. The data available to an interpreter which is the preference for the truth of certain sentences over others.

Now suppose that someone holds that sentence "the tennis ball is oval" is true because of what the sentence means and what that speaker believes. Knowing that he holds this sentence to be true, should we interpret this sentence as meaning that the tennis ball is oval? It seems that we could only do so if we had access to his beliefs in addition to his preferring-true attitude. If he believes that the actual tennis ball is really round rather than oval, either "is oval" means "is round" in his idiolect or "tennis ball" does not mean tennis ball but refers to something else in our shared world. If, by his behavior, he shows he thinks "the tennis ball is oval" is true, we cannot read off of his behavior the belief the tennis ball is round, since that depends upon what the words means and, as mentioned earlier, we cannot beg the question about what his words mean. On Davidson's view, what one believes and what one intends to be understood as

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89. Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning," 146.

meaning, depend on each other, and truth depends on both. [90] So, when it comes to determining what others intend to communicate, it looks as though the radical interpreter will have two unknowns to solve for, one without assuming the other, on a criteria that doesn't completely beg the question.

It is at the point that Davidson's principle of charity comes in to play. The point of the principle of charity is to counsel rational creatures to make an assumption about beliefs of those they interpret and speak with. Davidson's principle of charity involves two features: "one… endows the speaker with a modicum of logic, the other endows him with a degree of what the interpreter takes to be true belief about the world. Successful interpretation necessarily invests the person interpreted with basic rationality. If follows from the nature of correct interpretation that an interpersonal standard of consistency and correspondence to the facts applies to both the speaker and the speaker's interpreter, to their utterances and to their beliefs."[91] And this is this method works by holding "belief constant as far as possible while solving for meaning...[and] [t]his is possible by assigning truth conditions to the alien sentences that make native speakers right when plausibly possible, according, of course, to our own view of what is right."[92]

In the case where we have the sentence "the tennis ball is oval," we have to make an assumption about the speaker's beliefs: we must assume that his beliefs are similar, in the main, to ours; he believes that tennis balls are round and not oval; he is in a physical state relatively similar to our own (he is not hallucinating or intoxicated or has impaired sense organs, etc.); and then solve for his meaning on the basis of these assumptions and his 'preferring true' evidence. Thus, giving a non-standard interpretation to one or more of the components of this particular sentence will require taking into serious consideration a number of interconnected assumptions

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90. Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," 134-135.
91. Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge," 211.
92. Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," 137.

about the speaker and about ourselves. Thus, unlike Quine, Davidson thinks that we aren't going to be able to get at the meaning of the words of others with only behaviorist data; we are going to need a fairly large, complex, and charitable set of assumptions about those we interpret.

However, despite the importance that the principle of charity plays in Davidson's philosophy, "[n]o single principle of optimum charity emerges."[93] The principle of charity is simply an informal guide for the radical interpreter; a guide that advises the interpreter to always strive for truth by his own lights. We, as interpreters, should assign "truth conditions to alien sentences that make native speakers right when plausibly possible, according, of course, to our view of what is right."[94] Of course the interpreter can make mistakes, and sometimes it is best to assign truth conditions in a way that makes the speaker's beliefs come out largely coherent even if those beliefs do not correspond to reality as the interpreter perceives it; in other cases, the interpreter will need to assign truth conditions in a way that makes the speaker's belief correspond to reality by the interpreter's lights, even at the expense of consistency of belief. In this way, the principle of charity acts as a kind rule of thumb that guides the process of interpretation for the radical interpreter.

Conclusion

The Davidsonian picture of language operates with two parts: on the abstract level, a theory of meaning is given in terms of a formal theory of truth conditions, and holism operates to constrain the creation of T-sentences; on another level, a theory of interpretation implements the principle of charity operating as an informal constraint on the determination of correct

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93. Davidson, "Truth and Meaning," 27.
94. Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," 137.

translation. These two parts are bridged by the identification of the non-semantic preferring-true attitude.

However, let us now consider the original two interpretations of Davidson's claim that understanding gives life to meaning:

(1) The intended meanings of particular utterances of a speaker are given a certain status when they are correctly interpreted (i.e., the way the speaker intended) by the hearer.

(2) A theory of meaning (a formal semantics for natural language) is given purpose in service to an account of successful communication (i.e., an account of interpretation or understanding).

At the beginning of the chapter, I said that I think both are right in different senses. (2) I think is correct in that it captures, generally, the vision of the Davidsonian idiolectic approach to language: formal theorizing and concept formation should always serve the descriptivist and explanatory goal of making sense of particular communicative transactions. In other words, we should begin, or operate from, a descriptive stance and then work to capture the constitutive features of our practice, rather than the other way around.

The first (1) however, is a much different claim that concerns the reality of meaning for particular utterances. As we saw earlier, Davidson is skeptical about the ontological status of meanings as themselves ontological entities, however, unlike Quine, he does not reject the notion of meaning completely. Davidson has never been completely clear exactly what the status of meanings should be, but I think he is right that meanings are conferred a special status by moments of understanding. I want to suggest that a good way to understand this status that meanings are given in the moment of a particular idiolectic communicative transaction is ontological and one of identity with particular events.

When we succeed in communication, when our idiolect properly converges with that of another, meaning is born at that moment; it is given life in the understanding that the interpreter achieves, and I think that "life" should be understood in terms of an ontological status that meaning has in its close association with particular type of event. That is, the moment of understanding or successful interpretation is individuated, in some way, and thereby given a reality or distinctness. It is individuated insofar as we can talk about the moment of understanding and comprehension of another's intention to mean something with his words. This reality is conferred on meanings by the fact that meanings, and the particular understanding that is achieved by the interpreter that give them this reality, name the same moment. But it is a unique occasion whose status has not yet been articulated within the Davidsonian program.

This will, I believe, requires an ontology of events as particulars and not universals, since each meaning will, keeping with the idiolect understanding, be unique to the particular idiolects involved. The meaning m that is identical with event e, will be unique to that moment of understanding achieved by a particular interpreter, listening to a particular speaker, at that particular location in time and space. And so the meaning m will not be merely a universal that is instantiated at many different times, but unique and unrepeatable.

Luckily Davidson has done a great deal of work on the individuation of events in relation to the logical form of action sentences, and I think with slight modification, we can expand this account of events as particulars to more actually capture the way in which particular events give meanings their reality.

Chapter 3

"Strange goings on! Jones did it slowly, deliberately, in the bathroom, with a knife, at midnight. What he did was butter a piece of toast."[95]

Introduction

By the end of the second chapter, we found that Davidson's idiolectic view makes an implicit commitment to an ontology of particular occasions, since it is in virtue of the particular unrepeatable occasions of successful communication that meanings get their special status – what Davidson calls "life." In this way, the idiolectic view of language requires a defense of an ontology that sees linguistic occasions as particular, individuatable, and unrepeatable, since these idiolectic occasions will themselves be unique moments. This, I believe, must be done in terms of events. However, in addition to this ontological argument, we must also figure out exactly what type of event this fundamental linguistic event must be. So, the goal of this final chapter will be to identify the particular linguistic event type that gives meaning its life within the Davidsonian, idiolectic view of language. Further, I will show that the individuation and identification of the type of fundamental event that gives meaning life can be done within Davidson's own account of actions and events.

As we mentioned in the last chapter, it is the idiolectic occasion – the moment when the idiolects of the speaker and of the interpreter converge in understanding – that gives particular meanings their life. This occasion, within the framework of radical interpretation, involves a speaker and an interpreter, where the speaker performs a linguistic action that has an underlying communicative intention; the interpreter correctly grasps the intention of the speaker in light of the speaker's behavior. It is this grasping, this understanding, that gives meaning its life. In this

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95. Davidson, "The Logical Form of Action Sentences," 105.

way, this linguistic event is a complex of a number of features. This understanding is a particular, singular, and unrepeatable event, and so we will need a clear way of individuating events but also a clear account of the features that make up the linguistic event type.

My discussion will follow in four parts: (1) I answer the worry that this ontology of events is unmotivated, and outline some of Davidson's own reasons in favor of an event-semantics; (2) I will give a defense of an ontology of events as particular and unrepeatable or unique; (3) I will give an analysis of the linguistic event type that gives meaning its life, looking to Davidson's own work on the logical form of action sentences as a guide; (4) I conclude with the consideration that, despite his claims to the contrary, some concept of a language, albeit very basic, is required by Davidson's idiolectic view, although not the concept of language that Dummett originally had in mind in our first chapter.

Three Arguments for Events Semantics

Davidson has given a number of interesting and important arguments in favor of an event-semantic logical analysis of language besides the fact, as I will show, that such an analysis is required in the idiolectic view of language. However, Davidson's arguments give us good reason to countenance events into our ontology no matter our view of language, idiolectic or otherwise.

In "The Logical Form of Action Sentences," Davidson offers three classic arguments for the event-semantic logical form. In these arguments Davidson focuses on the form of action sentences and postulates events as ontological entities in order to improve the simpler predicate logic. This new logical form adds an extra argument place to verbal predicates such as "kill" or

"drink" or "butter" or "kick".[96] This additional argument has the value of a particular event. On this view, action sentences are going to be ones that are about people, object, etc., but will also, and always, concern quantification over events. For example, the sentence "Brutus killed Caesar" is normally interpreted as a 2-place predicate – "kill" – and two arguments – "Brutus" and "Caesar" – where the first argument is the subject or agent of the predicate and the other is the object (the victim). But if we understand the sentence as quantifying over an event, then we add an argument, and the sentence is understood as "there was an event which was a killing of Caesar by Brutus".

Davidson's first argument in support of an ontology of events for action sentences is to note that logical entailments for sentences involving adverbs are often extremely difficult, if not impossible, to get without positing events which the predicates of a given sentence can quantify over. To take Davidson's example, in the sentences

1. Jones buttered the toast with a knife in the bathroom at midnight.

2. Jones buttered the toast in the bathroom at midnight.

3. Jones buttered the toast at midnight.

4. Jones buttered toast.

each successive removal of an adverb makes the sentence a little less informative and for this reason the simpler, less informative versions – 2, 3, and 4 – are entailed by the most informative sentence – 1. Similarly, 3 and 4 are entailed by 2, and 4 is entailed by 3.[97]

With an event semantic approach, we suppose that there is some event, e, that was a buttering by Jones, and each additional adverbial clause quantifies over this event. So, "some event (e) was performed with a knife (F) and in the bathroom (G)", all of which could be

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96. Davidson, "The Logical Form of Action Sentences," 118.
97. Davidson, "The Logical Form of Action Sentences," 108-109.

represented in symbolic logic as "Ae(Fe & Ge) ." If the sentence "Ae(Fe & Ge)" is true, then "Jones buttered toast with a knife" and "Jones performed that same action in the bathroom." Without the event variable representing the Jone's buttering event, the "with" and the "in" of the sentence would be completely independent: "Jones buttered toast with a knife in the bathroom" would be symbolized such that "AxFx & AxGx." However, by simplification, "AxFx & AxGx" implies that "there was some particular thing done with a knife" and "there was some particular thing done in the bathroom," but it need not be the same thing that was done with the knife. Clearly, the former paraphrase, and not the latter, captures the logical entailment relation of sentences with adverbial modification. That is, if "Jones buttered toast with a knife in the bathroom" is true, then the truth of "Jones buttered toast with a knife" follows by entailment. Yet, this is not necessarily the case in "AxFx & AxGx." Thus, with the non-event semantic predicate logic "we obliterate the logical relations between these sentences, namely that… [1] entails the others."[98]

The second argument that Davidson offers in favor of this logic analysis of action sentences is a negative one: non-event-semantic analysis is ill equipped to deal with the problem of variable polyadicity.[99] Without an event-semantic form – without implementing an event-variable – the analyses of sentences like 'Jones buttered the toast with a knife in the bathroom at midnight' expresses butter (a verb here) as a five place predicate. In other words, 'there is some buttering ([1] it is done by Jones, [2] it is done to the toast, [3] it is done with the knife, [4] it is done in the bathroom, [5] it is done at midnight)'.

One of the problems with this style of analysis, as Davidson notes, is precisely the problem mentioned in the earlier paragraph: we are unable to draw inferential relations

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98. Davidson, "The Logical Form of Action Sentences," 107.
99. Davidson, "The Logical Form of Action Sentences," 108.

(entailments) between sentences that have an additional adverb.[100] In other words, there is no logical connection between (a) 'Jones buttered toast' and (b) 'Jones buttered toast in the bathroom,' since the first says something like (a') 'there was some buttering (it was done by Jones, it was done to toast)' while the latter says something like (b') 'there was some buttering (it was done by Jones, it was done to toast, it was done in the bathroom)'. In (a'), 'buttering' is a two place predicate, whereas in (b') 'buttering' is a three place predicate.

However, the problem that Davidson highlights is variable polyadicity: if we add an infinite number of adverbs successively to an action sentence, we would end up with an infinite number of independent predicates. As in the example just given, every time we add a new adverb or adverbial clause to the sentence we get in our analysis a new predicate that has $n + 1$ arguments where n is the number of operands that the previous predicate/function took. In other words, (a') takes two arguments, an agent and an object, (b') takes three, agent, object, place, and for every adverbial phrase that we add we must add one more argument place. Yet, the use of an event-variable allows for the validity of the inferential move from 'Jones buttered toast in the bathroom' to 'Jones buttered toast' without any additional logical mechanism over and above traditional predicate logic; all that is required is the addition of an extra argument place for the event-variable that ranges over the individual dated happenings.[101]

The last reason that Davidson offers for holding an event-semantic approach to the logic formulation of action sentences as opposed to the traditional approach is only noted in passing at the beginning of "The Logical Form of Action Sentences" and later on in a consideration of J. L. Austin's dealings with anaphora: "Jones did it slowly, deliberately, in the bathroom, with a knife, at midnight" (emphasis mine) and "[t]he 'it' here doesn't refer to Jones or the knife, but what

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100. Ibid.
101. Davidson, "The Logical Form of Action Sentences," 116-117.

Jones did – or so it seems."[102] The anaphora 'it' has nothing to which it can refer in the traditional predicate logic formulation. However, in the Davidsonian logical form, the 'it' does have a referent; namely, the content of the event-variable. An event-semantic analysis of action sentences solves an earlier issued raised; specifically, that a true sentence containing an anaphora, if true, has something to which the anaphora can refer and if not true, then finds the referent lacking, as in non-existent. Therefore, the Davidsonian logical form is able to easily account for the relation between the truth-value of the sentence and the reference of an anaphora: no such referent exists if the sentence is false and vice versa; but if the sentence is true, then there is a referent for the anaphora or, conversely, if there is no referent, the sentence is false.

In "The Logical Form of Action Sentences," Davidson has, it seems to me, presented strong motivation for holding to the existence of events as ontological entities,[103] and so we have good reason to countenance the existence of events no matter our view on language. However, now one may wonder how an event-semantic approach, rather than some alternative, best supports the idiolectic view. I think that we can extend one of Davidson's arguments in favor of events to the more specific case of linguistic analysis in order to show that we need a specific linguistic event.

Event Semantics and the Idiolectic View

The idiolectic view of language also requires an event-semantic analysis of language for reasons that resemble the arguments Davidson gives in favor of an event-semantic ontology for

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102. Davidson, Donald, "The Logical Form of Action Sentences," 105, 109.
103. That is, this event-semantic approach to linguistics and action sentences has ontological consequences. For the reasons given in the above discussion, Davidson follows his teacher's lead in reasoning for the existence of events: "To be is to be the value of a variable. There are no ultimate philosophical problems concerning terms and their reference, but only concerning variables and their values; and there are no ultimate philosophical problems concerning the existence except insofar as existence is expressed by the quantifier '(∃)' ['A' above]" (Quine, *Methods of Logic*, 224).

action sentences. In order to see this point, compare two competing analyses of the same sentence "Jones successfully interpreted Smith's linguistic behavior B." One way to understand this sentence would be simply as "x successfully interpreted y" where x will always be an interpreter like Jones and y will be a speaker like Smith. The other option is an event-semantic approach: "there was an event that was x's successful interpretation of y's linguistic behavior B."

One strategy employs an event variable in the analysis of the above sentence, while the other does not. However, the latter analysis is superior to the former for similar reasons to those Davidson gave for the event-semantic analysis of action sentences paraphrased above. Specifically, it seems that the problem of variable polyadicity arises in the non-event semantic analysis of the sentence. Without an event to quantify over, we end up with two variables: one for the interpreter's correct interpretation of the speaker, and one for the speaker's being correctly interpreted by the interpreter, which seems to confuse the issue since clearly there is only one interpretation and two ways of describing it: "Jones's interpretation of Smith's linguistic behavior B" and "Smith's linguistic behavior B being interpreted by Jones" are two ways of describing the same interpretation, not two different interpretations.

On the other hand, no such problem arises for the event-semantic approach to this sentence. There is simply one event that was the successful interpretation of Smith's linguistic behavior B performed by Jones. We can describe this event in different ways – 'Jones successful interpreted Smith's linguistic behavior B' or 'there was a successful interpretation by Jones of Smith's linguistic behavior B' – without creating a new variable to stand in for each different way of describing the interpretation.

So it seems we need the concepts of events, and events under descriptions, to make sense of two ways of talking about the same interpretation. Without an events and an event variable it

looks as though we have at least two separate interpretations going on when we say "Jones successfully interpreted Smith's linguistic behavior B," a rather counter-intuitive outcome.

<u>Davidsonian Ontology</u>

My extension of the Davidson's theory of events to linguistic events is motivated by the fact that events allow us to make sense of a great deal of linguist phenomena.[104] Furthermore, without positing the existence of events we are unable to give an account of the meaning of action sentences and adverbial modification more generally, within the resources of first order logic (as explained in the previous sections). However, no matter the reasons for holding events, as a kind of entity, exist, if we have no clear set of conditions for telling events apart, then the claim that events exist is pointless.[105] Without clear individuation of events, one could refer to an event at two separate times and not be able to say whether one has referred to the same event twice or whether one has referred to two different events. This problem crops up for linguistic events as well: if there is no way to tell one linguistic event apart from others, then there is no point of talking of particular linguistic occasions. Thus, we need an account of event identity in order to get the event-semantic analysis of sentences about interpretation off the ground.

Luckily, Davidson has proposed a criterion for event individuation. "Events are identical," claims Davidson, "if and only if they have exactly the same causes and effects," and he goes on to say that "events have a unique position in the framework of causal relations between events in somewhat the way objects have a unique position in the spatial framework of

104. Additionally, Davidson thinks we cannot have a coherent theory of action unless we can talk about the same action (an event) under different descriptions (Davidson, "The Individuation of Events," 164); explanation requires events so that we may re-describe an event to better understand its cause (Davidson, "The Individuation of Events," 165); identity theory of mind (or any opponent theory for that matter) requires that we be able to (or in principle unable to) identify mental events with physical events and individuate these events (ibid); and, as we saw in the last chapter, we need events to make sense of the special life understanding confers on meanings.
104. Imagine a small child insisting that unicorns exist but that there is no way to tell them apart from regular horses. You might explain to the child that, if that is the case, it seems his "unicorns" simply *are* horses.

objects."[106] Davidson holds that this identity criterion and the identity criterion for material

objects are analogous.[107] Just as we can uniquely determine a material object in terms of its

spatiotemporal coordinates, so can we uniquely determine an event by its causes and its effects.

Thus, it seems reasonable to think that space and time might make a good criterion for events as

well as material objects. Indeed one may wonder why choose a cause and effect criterion for

events over a spatiotemporal one?

The problem with spatiotemporal identity conditions is, as Davidson notes, that they do

not leave room for two different events (think changes[108]) to happen at the same time in the same

space.[109] Davidson uses the example of a metal ball heating up at the same time as the ball is

turning. One event is the speeding up of the particles that compose the ball, and the other event is

the rotation of the sum of all of those particles. These two different metal-ball-related events are

happening in the same space at the same time, yet they are considered the same event under the

spatiotemporal identity conditions. They are clearly not the same event for Davidson, for whom

it seems obvious that two events could happen at the same time, just as it is obvious to say that

one event could happen before or after another event. Further, events seem to be causes of other

events. The event of me throwing a brick causes the event of a window breaking. Thus,

according to Davidson, events seem to stand in causal and temporal relationships to other events

and, therefore, cause and effect make for a reasonable criterion of event identity.

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106. Davidson, Donald, "The Individuation of Events," 179.
107. Davidson, Donald, "The Individuation of Events," 179.
107. Many events essentially are changes in substances. Therefore, if two different events are identical and one
    event is a change in a substance, then the other event must be the same change in that substance (Davidson, "The
    Individuation of Events," 173). It should be mentioned at the outset that while at times Davidson contrasts
    changes with states or dispositions (Davidson, "Actions Reasons, and Causes," 12) and phrases the question of
    whether events exist as "are there such things as changes?" (Davidson, "Events as Particulars," 181), events
    could be understood as states or non-changes insofar as they are the "onslaught of a state or disposition"
    (Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," 12).
109. Davidson, "The Individuation of Events," 178-9.

One issue that emerges when holding cause and effect as identity conditions for events is that it seems to lead to a problem about event-time identity. Namely, it seems indisputable that if two events are identical, then they should take up the same expanse of time. But if this is so, then it also seems that there could be a killing before a death. For instance, if I placed a bomb on a plane and even though that bomb did not explode for several hours after I placed it on the plane, it would be reasonable to say that I blew up the plane and reasonable to hold me responsible for the deaths of everyone on board. Now, the death of everyone on the plane is an event distinct from the event of my placing the bomb on the plane. The latter causes the former, but when does the event of my killing everyone on board belong? If when the bomb exploded is when I killed everyone on board, then there is not a strong causal connection between my bomb-placing action (an event) and the plane-blowing-up (an event). If when I place the bomb on the plane is when I am killing everyone on board, then I have killed everyone before the bomb ever explodes or anyone ever dies.[110]

However, we do not normally refer to an action as a killing until it results in a death. Further, the larger the distance is in time between my action[111] and the resultant event,[112] the weaker the causal connection between the action and the event, and the less reason we have for saying that my action of placing the bomb on the plane was the sole cause of the passengers deaths. That is, the event of my placing the bomb on the plane can also be described as my blowing up of the plane or my killing of everyone on board. Further, it is this event (described as my bomb-placing action) that caused the event of the plane blowing up or described in another

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110. Davidson gives his own example to this effect on page 177 of "The Individuation of Events."
111. My placing the bomb on the plane, my blowing up the plane or my killing of everyone on board – all of which are descriptions of the same event
112. The death of everyone on board or the plane blowing up – again, descriptions of the same event, though different from the event of my placing the bomb on the plane

way, the deaths of everyone on board. However, according to Davidson, it would be a mistake to say that my putting the bomb on board caused my killing of everyone on board, since these are descriptions of the same event and the same event cannot cause itself. Thus, the Davidsonian is able to avoid the seemingly paradoxical nature of having a killing before a death (or the problem of event-time identity generally) by distinguishing between events and events under a description: the event of my placing the bomb on the plane (or my killing everyone on board or my blowing up the plane) causes the event of the plane blowing up (or the deaths of everyone on board), yet while the first event causes the second, the first event is not appropriately described as a killing until the second event occurs and therefore I could not have killed everyone on board before the bomb goes off (or everyone dies).

For Davidson, if our best (as in coherent and comprehensive) theory of the conditions for true beliefs requires events, then we would have good reason for claiming that events exist, assuming that theories which operate without events do not work as well as our current event-positing theory.[113] However, Davidson's claim that events are identical if and only if they have exactly the same causes and effects seems to have, as he admits, "an air of circularity about it."[114]

As Quine noted in "Events and Reification," while this is not a circular definition itself, since the defining expression contains no identity sign, there is circularity in the individuation: "[Davidson's event individuation criterion] purports to individuate events by quantifying over events themselves."[115] Quine points out that while impredicative definitions – definitions given in terms that require quantification over a range that includes that which is to be defined – are not without value, they are useless in individuation: "we can define impredicatively but we cannot

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113. Davidson, "Events as Particulars," 182.
114. Davidson, "The Individuation of Events," 179.
115. Quine, "Events and Reification," 166.

individuate impredicatively."[116] In other words, if events stand in causal relation to other events, then the 'if and only if' claim does not seem to be a good criterion of event individuation nor is it analogous to the spatiotemporal criterion. While it is undeniably true that two events will be identical if they have the same causes and effects, those causes and effects are themselves events. For this reason, Davidson's criterion for event individuation is not as good a criterion as the spatiotemporal criterion is for material objects, since time and space are not themselves material objects.

In other words, to say "two events are identical if and only if they have exactly the same causes and effects" is like saying "two material objects are identical if and only if they have exactly the same material objects surrounding them." But this clearly would not work to pick out, exclusively, one material object since we would have no way of individuating the other material objects which surround the object we are trying to pick out. To put it still another way, a criterion of identity for a sort of entity that implements that very kind of entity in question in its conditions is no more informative than saying "entities are identical if and only if they are identical," while it is true, it does not supply a useful apparatus for telling entities apart.

In the response to Quine's objection, Davidson has said "[Quine] says my suggested criterion for individuating events is radically unsatisfactory, and I agree... and I hereby abandon it."[117] Quine's criterion for event individuation is the spatiotemporal one: events are identical if and only if they occur in the same time and place. Originally, Davidson had considered this criterion for events and rejected it because it seemed to conflate events that he considered clearly distinct,[118] as in the aforementioned metal ball example: must we say that the heating of the metal ball and the sum rotation of its particles are the same event if they happen at the same time

116. Ibid.
117. Davidson, "Reply to Quine on Events," 309.
118. Davidson, "Individuation of Events," 178.

in the same space? Quine's answer is a resounding 'yes' since the consequential, counter-intuitive cases that are created (such as equating a gum chewing with a walking across Bologna) "seem harmless to science, for they imply no causal connection between warming and rotation in general, nor between locomotion and chewing gum."[119]

However, Davidson is hesitant to accept the spatiotemporal criterion for event individuation, since it seems to conflate material objects and events. If material objects are identified and individuated by their space-time coordinates and so are events, then events, it seems, are to be considered material objects. This is a result that Quine is happy to accept: "I have been wont to view events simply as physical objects in this sense..." as "the material content of any portion of space-time, however small, large, irregular, or discontinuous."[120] Davidson, on the other hand, claims that "our predicates, our basic grammar, our ways of sorting" distinguish objects from events and therefore we should try to give a clearly articulated distinction between events and material objects.[121] Our grammar, Davidson points out, clearly differentiates events from the objects for which those events are changes. Furthermore, Davidson, concerned with the "metaphysics implicit in our language," opts to distinguish events from material objects again since "our predicates, our basic grammar, and our ways of sorting do."[122] Davidson's fundamental goal is to make sense of the world and the ways we talk about it; starting from a descriptivist foundation and make a consistent philosophical system through and about language.

However, for the purposes of this thesis, the idiolect view of language requires that we have a linguistic event type that is particular and unrepeatable and that can be individuated. The

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119. Quine, "Events and Reification," 167.
120. Quine, "Events and Reification," 166
121. Davidson, "Reply to Quine on Events," 311.
121. Ibid.

particular linguistic events will have a number of features that allow us to distinguish and individuate and differentiate them more easily with Davidson's original causal view than with the spatiotemporal view. First, however, we must highlight these features that make the linguistic events unique.

The Fundamental Linguistic Event

Davidson has done a great deal of work in the area of the logical analysis of language, which I think adds strong support to the ontology of events as particulars; an ontological position that allows us to make sense of how understanding gives meaning life in the idiolectic view. Furthermore, this work in the analysis of action sentences can act as a helpful guide in determining the fundamental event that gives meaning its life. However, one problem that the Davidsonian must deal with, given the fact that events are particular unrepeatable occasions in idiolectic linguistic interactions, is the relationship between singular referring terms, sentences, and the truth-values of those sentences in which the singular terms appear, because singular terms appear to refer to terms in a way that sentences do not; namely, they refer to events.

Singular terms are collections of linguistic items that, when ordered correctly, refer distinctly to one thing. Since we will need to account for events as particulars (unique and unrepeatable), collections of linguistic items that refer to events will also, normally, be singular referring terms. Further, these singular terms are often embedded in sentences – "I drank my roommate's last beer" – where the singular referring term refers to the object or event in question and so does the sentence as a whole, though clearly in a different sense. That is, we would not say that "I drank my roommate's last beer" refers to the last beer my roommate owned in the same way as "my roommate's last beer" does. The former refers to an agent, an action and an

object that the action was performed on, while the latter refers only to the object – the beer. It is important to note, that it must be singular terms that pick out events, for the idiolectic view of language, since our goal is event particularity. That is, if sentences picked out events and singular terms picked out particulars items, then events would no longer be particulars but universals (or non-events or something analogous), since sentences are clearly different from singular terms. Thus, the idiolectic view must insist that it is singular terms that make reference to events and not sentences.

Davidson proposes we get around this problem by way of paraphrase mentioned above: we can understand the sentence "Bill and Joanne were divorced" as "there was an event that occurred that was the divorce of Bill and Joanne." If no event took place that was the divorce of Bill and Joanne, then there can be no event for the singular term in the sentence "Bill and Joanne were divorced" to refer to and therefore the sentence is false. If there was something for it to correctly refer to, then the sentence must be true since some event that was the divorce of Bill and Joanne actually occurred.[123]

In "The Logical Form of Action Sentences," Davidson gives what he believes is a logical form of action sentences that is consistent with the entailment relations of non-action sentences that use the same "parts or words" as action sentences, as shown above.[124] Davidson showed the necessity of an ontology of events in parsing out the semantic relations in action sentences while retaining logical entailment relations, which gives us a good reason for allowing events into our ontology. Further, I extended this analysis to linguistic sentences arguing that, in order to give an account of second order sentences, sentences about linguistic interactions, we also need

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123. Davidson, "The Logical Form of Action Sentences," 117.
124. Davidson, "The Logical Form of Action Sentences," 105.

particular events; and these events will be of a special type and have a number of interesting features.

I think that the style of analysis that Davidson uses to determine the logical form of action sentences and to argue for an ontology of events can be used to identify the fundamental linguistic event that gives meaning its life. Take the sentence used earlier: 'Jones successfully interpreted Smith's linguistic behavior B.' This sentence seems to capture, rather simply, what happens in any idiolectic occurrence. Two idiolects – those of Smith and Jones – have converged on a particular occasion.

We might paraphrase this sentence as "there was an event such that Jones successfully interpreted Smith's linguistic behavior." In this sentence, the existential quantifier binds the occurrences of the variable representing the event in the sentence. Let e be the event of successful interpretation that was performed by Jones, J, on Smith's behavior, B. Thus, we can say there exists a complex event e such that e was an interpretation by Jones (Je) and it was of Smith's behavior (Be). Then the sentence can be symbolized into first order logic such that "Jones successfully interpreted Smith's linguistic behavior B" equates to "Ae (Je & Be)" and paraphrased as "there exists an event that was the successful interpretation by Jones and it was of Smith's linguistic behavior (B)."

From this analysis we can gather that the event type that will be the fundamental linguistic event, the event that will give life to meaning, will have a number of interesting features. It will involve two agents – an interpreter and a speaker – and an intentional action on both sides: the behavior of the speaker performed with the intention to be understood, and the interpretation of that behavior by the interpreter performed with the intention to understand.

Finally, the interpreter's action must be 'successful,' which is to say he interprets the speaker's linguistic behavior the way the speaker intended it to be interpreted.

As we noted in the second chapter, Davidson changed the evidential base of the radical interpreter from a 'holding-true' attitude to a 'preferring-true' attitude. The evidential base that the interpreter must work with is the preferring true attitude of the speaker at a particular point in space-time. This, as we saw, widens the theory of interpretation into a program of interpreting the speaker's beliefs, desires, and meanings in one single procedure. And so the evidential base shows that the process of interpretation is in part conative but also doxastic.

Furthermore the linguistic event will be essentially a social event. This is because, perhaps obviously, the event will always involve two agents: an interpreter and a speaker. We could not have, on this picture, a linguistic event with only one person. Further it is important to notice that the event is marked by the fact that it is an intentional action preformed in a social setting. It is the speaker's intention to use words to communicate coupled with her action of using those words, in the presence of an interpreter, that gives meaning its life on these occasions. So, the sociality given by the requirement that there be both an interpreter and a speaker, and the intentionality given by the evidential base of the preferring true attitude are the linguistic event-type's core features.

The Individuation of Linguistic Events

Now that we have seen two possible ways of individuating events in general, and we have noted the essential features that the linguistic event will have, we can look to see which criterion of individuation works best for linguistic events: the causal criterion or the spatiotemporal criterion.

The spatiotemporal view individuates events in terms of their location in space and time. This, as we saw, conflates events with objects in a way that our natural ways of speaking do not. While this is a bullet that Quine is willing to bite, Davidson is not as keen to disregard the metaphysics implicit in our grammar. Furthermore, the spatiotemporal view seems to be an insufficient criterion for linguistic event individuation. So, on the spatiotemporal view, the linguistic event described by the sentence "Jones successfully interpreted Smith's linguistic behavior B" is identified in terms of its location in time and space. That is, a linguistic event is identical if and only if it has the same space-time location. However, understanding is a difficult thing to assign a time or place. Is it at time t in Jones' brain? Or do we slice time and space a little thicker to include the entire interaction between Smith and Jones? Any answer to these questions would be arbitrary. Furthermore, no matter how we slice time, this criterion does not differentiate the linguistic event from the mass of matter that occupies the portion of space-time from the intentional linguistic actions. That is, this style of identification does not take into account the two-sided intentionality which is so essential to the linguistic event and therefore does not appreciate what makes a linguistic event a linguistic event, in the idiolectic view, as opposed to a non-linguistic event or object.

It seems to me that the causal view is much more promising. On the causal view, linguistic events are identical if and only if they have identical[125] causes and effects. These causes and effects would not, as they were in the above general account of events, be themselves linguistic events. Rather they would be the intentional actions of the actors involved in the linguistic event. Namely, in the example with Smith and Jones, Smith's intentional linguistic behavior ("B") coupled with Jones' intentional interpretation of Smith is the cause of Jones'

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125. The identity of linguistic events will involve the identity of mental events and so the issues of identifying mental events will arise in the identification of linguistic events.

understanding, which is the effect. This linguistic event will be particular and unique, since no other linguistic event will have exactly the same cause and effect. Each time Smith is correctly interpreted by Jones, both Smith and Jones will perform slightly different intentional actions in light of their current idiolects, which are always changing, and their beliefs about the idiolects of the other, which are similarly dynamic.

For the linguistic case, we can avoid the problem that Quine raised for Davidson's original causal criterion, since the linguistic event will be differentiated from its causes and effects insofar as those causes and effects cannot themselves be linguistic events. Linguistic events will always involve a speaker and an interpreter and so the speaker's intention to be understood, taken by itself, is not a linguistic event and the interpreter's intention to understand is also not a linguistic event. They will simply be the linguistic intentions with which the intentional actions of the speaker and interpreter are performed. These actions with these intentions make up the linguistic event, but they are not themselves linguistic events. For these reasons, I think that the causal criterion of event identity works best in the linguistic case, since it avoids one of the major problems for the more general case.

Is Some Language Still Required for Davidson's Account?

As we saw earlier, one important feature of the linguistic event type that gives meaning its life is that it involves the attitude of preferring true on the speaker's part, and the correct identification of this attitude on the interpreter's part. However, this attitude seems to bring with it, or assume, concepts that are normally associated with a language. If we are to think of the speaker as having an attitude of preferring the truth of one sentence over another and if we are to think of the interpreter as being able to identify this attitude, then it seems we first assume a

shared concept of a true sentence between the speaker and the interpreter. It seems that the speaker and the interpreter share notions of a syntactic category – a sentence – and a value that members of this syntactic category possess – truth or falsity.

This is strikingly close to a shared language. There is a shared syntactic structure, albeit a simple one, and there is a shared notion of truth; both idiolects must share these basic concepts in order for the process of interpretation to even get off the ground. We cannot conceive of a 'preferring true' attitude, which the speaker can have and the interpreter can pick up on, unless the speaker and the interpreter share a concept of a sentence and a sentence being true. So, it seems that Dummett was at least partially correct to say that we needed a shared language in order to give a philosophical account of language and meaning. However, it seems that he overstated his position.

As we saw in chapter one, Dummett thought that we needed a set of shared conventions to make sense of linguistic interactions. This was because Dummett thought that words had meanings in virtue of belonging to a language and held their meanings separately of what any particular speaker happened to think about those meanings.[126] Further, Dummett saw this language as a fully fleshed out and structured shared language of which our idiolects are only partial and partly incorrect approximations.[127] So, it seems that while we do not require a fully fleshed out and grammatically structured shared language in order for words to carry meaning as Dummett thought, we do need a very basic shared language; a language that has at least the concepts of a sentence and that sentence's being true.

126. Dummett, "Comments on Davidson and Hacking," 473.
127. Dummett, "Comments on Davidson and Hacking," 469.

Conclusion

As we have seen, we need events to exist in the ontological sense in order to give acceptable analyses of action sentences like "Shem kicked Shaun" or "Brutus killed Caesar" or "Marcus drank a beer in the shower at noon." But we also need events to make sense of the linguistic interaction that is foundational on the idiolectic view of language. Specifically, we need to countenance linguistic events so that we can give an unproblematic analysis of second-order language sentences and make sense of how particular occasions of understanding give meaning life. However, this makes it the responsibility of the Davidsonian event-particularist to supply an adequate criterion of event individuation, one that is consistent with the role that events play in event-semantics. I think we can rely on a causal criterion to identify linguistic events in terms of their causes and effects without needing to worry about the problems of utility originally raised by Quine.

Further the existence of events allows us to give a sound ontological basis for the idiolectic view of language which places a special importance on particular occasions where understanding occurs; that is, the moments where meaning gets its life. With this ontological category of linguistic events fleshed out, we have a much better picture of how understanding, in the Davidsonian program, gives life to meaning. These particular moments of idiolectic convergence are where meaning gets its life and our sentences about these moments are best analyzed in terms of particular events.

As we saw, the primary alternative to the idiolectic view, as represented in Dummett's work, was at least partially correct in positing the requirement of a shared language in order to give an acceptable account of language. In this way, Davidson is wrong to say that we can account for successful communication without any concept of a shared language; we need at

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least a basic shared syntactic and semantic structure, since interpretation requires a shared concept of truth and sentence. Yet, Dummett has overstated his position since interpretation requires no more than the identification of a preferring true attitude in the speaker's pattern of behavior. In this way, I think that Davidson's idiolectic view requires some basic notion of a language but this concession does not defeat his position, it simply weakens it; furthermore, as we have seen, Davidson's ontology can be extended, with only slight modification, to give a complete and thorough account of meaning and language within the framework he has already created.

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