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Knowledge, Language, and Interpretation

On the Philosophy of Donald Davidson



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INTRODUCTION

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Donald Davidson, one of the most original and influential contemporary philosophers, has made significant and contentious contributions to many different subjects within the analytic tradition: from decision theory to the philosophy of language, from metaphysics to the philosophy of action, from the philosophy of mind to epistemology. Such a wide range of philosophical interests is quite impressive, especially if we consider the rare unity and the systematic character of his writings. In his essays, arguments and ideas are deeply intertwined: they overlap, mutually refer to one another, and often presuppose earlier outcomes. As a consequence, it is sometimes difficult to understand just one particular thesis without considering the whole of Davidson's work. The main core of this complex and striking system can be identified with the notion of interpretation. In order rightly to appreciate the leading role of the interpreter, it is necessary to analyze some pivotal themes of Davidson's philosophy.

1. Theory of meaning

Davidson is by no means skeptical about the possibility of carrying forward a theory of meaning for natural languages, namely a theory able to specify a systematic interpretation of all the sentences in a given natural language. More precisely, he proposes employing an axiomatic theory. By way of a finite set of axioms we start defining the meaning of the words of a chosen language. Then, through suitable rules of inference, we derive a potentially infinite number of theorems—of the form “*s* means that *p*”—which describe the meaning of all the sentences of the language. The main trouble with this strategy is due to Davidson's rejection of any intentional entity. He actually endorses a rigid extensional approach, fearing that intentionality will involve just the kinds of problems about meaning that a theory of meaning was supposed to resolve. Moreover, he finds no use for

meanings as entities and maintains that they do no useful work in semantics.

Despite the difficulties, Davidson does not give up on the project of developing a theory to serve as a theory of meaning for natural languages. He needs an extensional way to pair sentences with the world, and a bold hypothesis is that this can be done by a predicate as “is true iff”. Thus, he thinks that it is possible to read what a sentence of a language means from a theory of truth *à la* Tarski, whose theorems take the form “*s* is true in *L* iff *p*”. Actually truth is an extensional notion, which obviously does not conflict with his overall extensional approach. Hence it is possible to have a theory of meaning for a given language—namely a theory which helps us to interpret the speakers of that language—without appealing to problematic entities such as intensions. The original Tarskian project, whose aim was to analyze truth by way of translation, and therefore of identity of meaning, has been reversed. Davidson, in fact, assumes the concept of truth as primitive (since he thinks it is simple, clear and irreducible), and then he tries to employ a truth theory as the vehicle for a meaning theory. His goal is not to reduce meaning to truth, but to shed light on the notion of meaning by making use of the concept of truth.

Nevertheless, if a truth theory has to be used for interpreting natural languages, it faces several difficulties. To begin with, finding a way to translate all the sentences of a natural language into first-order logic sentences is compulsory so long as Tarskian methods are used. Moreover, indexical and demonstrative terms also need to be dealt with. Finally, some further constraints are necessary for a truth theory to be used for interpreting a speaker: such a theory must be conceived as an empirical theory and, for instance, it must be capable of supporting counterfactual claims.¹

¹ According to Davidson axioms and theorems must be viewed as laws. For example, instances of “*s* is true iff *p*” have to be taken not only as true, but also as capable of supporting counterfactuals. The reason is that a sentence such as (1) “‘snow is white’ is true iff grass is green”—which is true but does not support counterfactuals—does not give us the meaning of the sentence “snow is white”. By contrast, (2) “‘snow is white’ is true iff snow is white” is not merely true but also capable of supporting a counterfactual hypothesis. Lawlikeness can then act as a way to filter out true but uninterpretative truth theories. See for instance (Davidson 1967).

2. Radical interpretation

The project of radical interpretation aims to determine what is needed to interpret a speaker without the help of any bilinguals. According to Davidson, in order to interpret a speaker, the interpreter must possess a theory of meaning shaped like a Tarskian theory of truth and confirmed by the speaker's external behaviour and further empirical evidence. The problem is understanding if and how it is possible to ascertain the empirical correctness of such a theory of meaning.

A radical interpreter—an interpreter who doesn't know anything about the speaker's language—must initially discover the speaker's attitude towards her own utterances, namely whether she holds a sentence true or not in particular circumstances. In other words, the interpreter must have access to the speaker's "hold-true" attitudes. Holding a sentence true is already a semantic attitude, but according to Davidson it can precede interpretation. For example, the interpreter may know that a subject holds the sentence "Sta piovendo" to be true without having recognized which specific truth it is. However, even if we take the interpreter to know that the speaker holds a sentence as true, he is still not able to determine what the speaker believes and what her actual sentence means. Let us imagine that during a storm the speaker utters "Sta piovendo": in order to interpret this utterance and find out that it means "It's raining", the interpreter must be able to ascribe to the speaker the belief that it is raining. However, in order to ascribe to the speaker the belief that it is raining, the interpreter must know the meaning of the speaker's words. To put it more generally, let us assume that the interpreter knows that the speaker holds a certain sentence true: if she knew the meaning of the sentence, she could establish what the speaker believes, and, conversely, if she knew what the speaker believes, she could determine the meaning of the sentence. The interdependence of belief and meaning is apparently inextricable. Hence it is crucial to find a way to break up the circle which binds them together. According to Davidson we can do this by defining a general theory of interpretation which could "deliver simultaneously a theory of belief and a theory of meaning" (Davidson 1974a: 144), which could yield "a method for holding one factor steady while the other is studied" (Davidson 1975: 167). The theory is that of radical interpretation, whereas the method is

supplied by the principle of charity (that, with some obvious differences, we can already find in Quine²).

As Davidson initially formulates it³, the principle of charity compels the interpreter to assume that, *ceteris paribus*, the speaker's beliefs are by and large true. To put it another way, the interpreter must presume that the interpretee is mostly right, and thus she must ascribe a great number of true beliefs to the speaker (beliefs that are true from the point of view of the interpreter). For instance, if the interpreter faced the twofold option of interpreting a speaker's sentence as if it expressed the belief that reindeer have two humps or, alternatively, the belief that reindeer have antlers, she should opt for the latter alternative.

More recently⁴, the principle of charity has been divided into two different strands: the principles of correspondence and coherence. The result above is achieved by the principle of correspondence, which breaks up the circle between beliefs and meanings: the only way out is to hold belief constant, and then solve for meaning. The first step towards interpretation has finally been taken. Actually, the attribution of attitudes to a subject is governed not only by those constraints imposed by the external world, but also by holistic constraints which connect all the speaker's beliefs with each other. This is what the principle of coherence prescribes. The interpreter must attribute beliefs and other attitudes to the speaker so as to make her out to be by and large rational. Hence the speaker's system of beliefs must be consistent, must respect the transitivity of preferences, and so on. However, in order to keep the overall coherence and rationality of the interpretee, sometimes it could be necessary to attribute to the speaker either false beliefs or beliefs very different from our own. As Davidson admits charity "is a confused ideal" (Davidson 1984a: xix), since the interpreter's goal is to maximize, not the agreement between himself and the interpretee, but rather her understanding of the

² Actually, in Quine's work we can already find many other ideas, but in terms of syntax (translation), not of semantics (interpretation).

³ In Davidson's essays it is easy to find several characterizations of the principle of charity which are slightly different from one another (see for instance (Lepore and Ludwig 2005: § 12)).

⁴ For more details, see for example (Davidson 1999: 343).

interpretee. Finally, the overall system of the speaker's beliefs must result largely true and coherent.⁵ The interpretations we should privilege are always those which optimize understanding.

Contrary to Quine's conception, the principle of charity is not merely a pragmatic constraint on translation. Davidson actually takes it not to be an option, but a constitutive element of interpretation, since there could be no interpretation at all without it. The two thesis of indeterminacy of translation (interpretation) and inscrutability of reference are accepted but also revisited. The thesis of indeterminacy—according to which it is always possible to obtain different interpretations of a certain linguistic behaviour from the same observational evidence—must obtain, but loses its relativistic character. Different interpretations can be compared to different measuring systems: as nobody would maintain that temperature is a relative concept just because there are various scales (Celsius, Fahrenheit, etc.), it is also absurd to insist that interpretation is relative. In fact, two interpretations can merely differ in the particular way they track the same empirical and holistic constraints. If “what a speaker means is what is invariant in all correct ways of interpreting him” (Davidson 1999: 81), then it is possible to conclude that there is no such thing as “the meaning”. Obviously, not only meaning, but also reference is a semantic concept featuring in a theory of meaning. According to Davidson, however, there is no independent account of what reference is. On the contrary, the concept of reference is actually subordinate to the notion of truth. The hypothesis of inscrutability is conceived as an ontological thesis that, as such, holds strong anti-relativistic potential. Indeed, since there is nothing to render relative, there could be no ontological relativity. Dismissing relativism, in short, does not lead to a stronger notion of reference and ontology, but rather to their complete dissolution.

⁵ It is possible, then, that the interpreter attributes to the speaker few false beliefs or even limited contradictions. On the contrary, it is impossible that the interpreter attributes to the speaker a great number of false and/or incoherent beliefs. If this happened, the interpreter would be forced to review her own interpretation, and not to opt for the speaker's irrationality. If the interpreter were faced with a fully irrational speaker, in fact, the interpretation could not begin. Rather, the interpreter could not recognize the speaker as a *speaker*.

According to Davidson, intersubjectivity and interpretability are two pivotal concepts that we must take for granted. In fact, if interpretation were not to be possible, there would be no possibility of analyzing meanings *ex parte interpretis*, and thus the whole Davidsonian project would simply fail (of course it is not necessary that the subject could always be interpreted in every single aspect and situation).

It is worth stressing that the principle of charity leads us to assume that the speaker has a coherent set of beliefs which is largely true, given certain conditions and rational constraints discovered by the interpreter. However, this principle does not by itself guarantee that those very conditions also specify the content of the speaker's beliefs.⁶

3. Ontological relativism

Davidson is well known for having firmly criticized ontological relativism and the dualism which, according to him, characterize it, that is dualism between conceptual scheme and empirical content (Davidson 1974b). More precisely, on the one hand there is an organizational scheme (which has been identified with the mind, a language, a natural language, a conceptual system and so on), on the other hand there is a neutral content (sense data, impressions, ideas, sensorial stimulations, propositions, mental representations etc.) waiting to be organized and carved up by the conceptual scheme. The crucial point is that different conceptual schemes could organize the very same content in incommensurable ways. And that would imply ontological relativism.

Arguing against the very notion of a conceptual scheme, Davidson identifies a conceptual scheme with a set of intertranslatable languages; thus, given two different languages, if we are not able to translate one into the other, then we can recognize two incommensurable conceptual schemes and come up with an example of ontological relativism. Accepting this identification, the notion of incommensurable schemes can be analysed through the notion of non-translatable languages. However, is it really possible to find a language which cannot be translated into our

⁶ For more details, see for instance (Lepore and Ludwig 2005: § 12).