

## A Nice Derangement of Theory

Robert M. Harnish  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Arizona

**Introduction** Davidson ends his difficult, but often cited (1986) article "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" with a number of controversial claims and conclusions, which can be given in short slogan form, or longer more qualified form. The slogans are more fun:<sup>1</sup>

[A] There is no such thing as a 'language', as ordinarily understood:

"I conclude that there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered or be born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases." (475)

[B] The notion of 'speaking the same language' is in trouble:

"We have just made a sort of sense of the idea of two people 'having the same language' though we could not explain what a language is." (475)

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<sup>1</sup> The full quotation for [A]-[C] is: "The problem we have been grappling with depends on the assumption that communication by speech requires that speaker and interpreter have learned or somehow acquired a common method or theory of interpretation --as being able to operate on the basis of shared conventions, rules, or regularities. The problem arose when we realized that no method or theory fills the bill. The solution to the problem is clear. In linguistic communication nothing corresponds to a linguistic competence as often described: that is, as summarized by principles (1)-(3). The solution is to give up the principles. Principles (1) and (2) survive when understood in rather unusual ways, but principle (3) cannot stand, and it is unclear what can take its place. I conclude that there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered or be born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases." (475)

[C] There is nothing corresponding to 'linguistic competence' or 'knowledge of language, as ordinarily understood:

"In linguistic communication nothing corresponds to a linguistic competence as often described: that is, as summarized by principles (1)-(3)." (475)

"It is easy to see that the idea of 'knowing a language' will be in the same trouble, as will the project of characterizing the abilities or capacities a person must have if he commands a language." (475)

[D] The notion of 'speaking the same dialect' is doubtful:

"I have been trying to throw doubt on how clear the idea of 'speaking the same dialect' is ..."  
(474)

The general argument implicit in the paper seems to be:

[1] There is a cluster of traditional notions concerning: (i) what a language, dialect, idelect is, (ii) identity conditions on languages, dialects, idelects, (iii) what it is to know or have competence in a language, (iv) what it is to acquire this knowledge or competence in language.

[2] This cluster of notions is must be given up in the face of the phenomena of malapropisms and the like.

[3] The traditional notions need to be replaced by other notions, and these will look very different from the originals, thus justifying [A]-[D] above.

It is frustrating, but perhaps not untypical of Davidson's style, that defenses for these claims are so hard to pin down definitively. So let's step back and look at this for a moment and ask:

[Q1a] What is "linguistic competence "as often described", as summarized in (1)-(3)?

[Q1b] What is the conception of language that "many philosophers and linguists have supposed" that we must give up?

[Q2a] What is the problem we have been "grappling with"?

[Q2b] Why must we "give up" this conception?

[Q3] What conception should replace the one "given up"?

**Q1** Davidson introduces (1)-(3) by calling them "three plausible principles" concerning "first meaning":

"(1) First meaning is systematic. A competent speaker or interpreter is able to interpret

utterances, his own or those of others, on the basis of the semantic properties of the parts, or words, in the utterance, and the structure of the utterance. For this to be possible, there must be systematic relations between the meanings of utterances. (2) First meanings are shared. For speaker and interpreter to communicate successfully and regularly, they must share a method of interpretation of the sort in (1). (3) First meanings are governed by learned conventions or regularities. The systematic knowledge or competence of the speaker or interpreter is learned in advance of occasions of interpretation and is conventional in character." (467)

What are "first meanings"? Davidson appears to introduce the term as a substitute for what is usually called '(literal) linguistic meaning', the latter being "too encrusted with philosophical and other extras to do much work" (466). Davidson adds various explications:

[FM1]

"The concept applies to words and sentences as uttered by a particular speaker on a particular occasion." (466)

It is not clear what concept of meaning this is supposed to be. The qualification "as uttered by a particular speaker on a particular occasion" suggests it is not linguistic meaning in the standard sense, which is normally taken to be context invariant, and so can be reported in dictionaries "based on usage". Davidson might have, helpfully, availed himself of Grice's (1969/1989) taxonomy of meaning, which Grice called "varieties of nonnatural meaning", and which included:

1. Timeless meaning of an utterance type (linguistic meaning)
2. Applied timeless meaning of an utterance type (operative linguistic meaning)
3. Utterance-type occasion-meaning
4. Utterer's occasion-meaning (speaker meaning)

The category of interest to Davidson seems to be 3. Grice explicates this variety of meaning by inviting us to consider the following sentence, and then goes on to comment:

(S) If I shall then be helping the grass to grow, I shall have no time for reading

"It might be true to say that when a particular utterer U uttered S, he meant by S (by the words of S):

(i) 'If I am then dead, I shall not know what is going on in the world ...

If it were true to say of U that when uttering S, he meant by S (i), it would also be true to say of U that he meant by the words 'I shall be helping the grass to grow' (which occur within S), 'I shall then be dead'." (1989, 89-90)

Grice says little more about how to specify the utterance-type occasion-meaning' of an utterance, but

he insists that it is not a type of timeless (linguistic) meaning. It is a kind of linguistic-meaning, speaker-meaning hybrid, but with the linguistic side dependent on the speaker side. What meaning it has is basically that "portion" of what the speaker means that can be linked to that utterance type on that occasion. But if this is the correct way of understanding this category, then the label is misleading, because calling it 'type' meaning suggests that the meaning attaches to the linguistic type. But a single speaker using a term on an occasion cannot endow a linguistic type with a meaning. Meaning of a type is not only meaning in the language, but meaning that various tokens can inherit from the type, yet this does not seem to be true of utterance-type occasion-meaning. Perhaps Grice should have called this 'utterance-token occasion-meaning'. We might then say that if a group comes to mean such and such by tokens of X, then the type X gains an 'utterance-type occasion-meaning'.<sup>2</sup>

[FM2]

"But if the occasion, the speaker, and the audience are 'normal' or 'standard' (in a sense not to be further explained here), then the first meaning of an utterance will be what should be found by consulting a dictionary based on usage ..." (466)

[FM3]

"Roughly speaking, first meaning comes first in the order of interpretation." (466)

[FM4]

"A better way to distinguish first meaning is through the intentions of the speaker ... intentions ... are ... usually unambiguously ordered by the relation of means to ends" (466).

"Suppose Diogenes utters the words 'I would have you stand from between me and the sun' ... with the intention of uttering words that will be interpreted by Alexander as true if and only if Diogenes would have him stand from between Diogenes and the sun ..." (466).

"In general, the first intention in this sequence to require this specific feature [self-reference] specifies the first meaning" (467).

It is less that clear that FM1-FM4 pick out a single phenomena, and at least there is serious tension between them in that the emphasis on "occasions" of use pulls against the reference to dictionaries (and presumably grammar) "based on usage". Davidson then makes a suspicious, but important, move:

[FM5]

"Because a speaker necessarily intends first meaning to be grasped by his audience, and it is grasped if communication succeeds, we lose nothing in the investigation of first meaning if

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<sup>2</sup> What would be an example of this? Perhaps the phenomena of indirect 'standardization' originally reported in Bach and Harnish (1979, chapter 9).

we concentrate on the knowledge or ability a hearer must have if he is to interpret a speaker."  
(467)

This is not an innocent conversion:

1. Is it true that a speaker necessarily intends his first meaning to be grasped by his audience? What if the speaker is not using language to communicate? What if the speaker knows a particular word, but doesn't want to bother spelling it out, so uses it with the expectation that the hearer will figure it out based on the rest of the sentence? (consider the lines of the ballad: "He was a man upon the land, he was a silky upon the sea")
2. And must first meaning qua FM2 be grasped in successful communication? Suppose you do not know what 'silky' means in the above and you infer it is some kind of boat, has communication failed? ('Silky' does not mean some kind of boat). Or consider the well supported (but not "established") 'metaphor interference effect', where there is evidence that the hearer of some (kinds of) metaphors get the metaphorical meaning without computing the 'literal' meaning. If this is correct does communication fail in these cases?
3. At best we are trading-in one notion (the traditional notion of meaning related to FM2) for another one (the ability to interpret), but they are different notions even if they were to be in some sense co-extensive. The move may be legitimate for some purposes, but it is not legitimate for others, and we want to know Davidson's purpose for the trade.

What sort of knowledge-ability is it that applies distinctly to language?

"The usual answer would, I think, be that in the case of language the hearer shares a complex system or theory with the speaker, a system which makes possible the articulation of logical relations between utterances, and explains the ability to interpret novel utterances in an organized way.

This answer has been suggested ... by many philosophers and linguists, and I assume it must in some sense be right. The difficulty lies in getting clear what this sense is." (467)

Although Davidson now presents his "three plausible principles" as principles of "first meaning" (see above), it also seems that these principles further characterize the "complex system or theory" that "many philosophers and linguists" assume to be right, but that Davidson does not. That is, it seems to be Davidson's strategy to make some other sense out of this system than all of (1)-(3).

**Q2** Davidson notes various "difficulties" with (1)-(3). Ambiguity is one (467), conversational implicature is another (468). In fact, there have been systematic critiques of this picture in the literature since at least 1979, known alternatively as 'the message model' (Akmajian, Demers and Harnish, 1980; see also Bach and Harnish, 1979, Introduction) or the 'code model' (see Sperber and Wilson, 1986, chapter 1). The basic problem behind this model is the implication in (1) that the ability to "interpret utterances" is exhausted by 'knowledge of language' in the sense of: (i)

knowledge of the principles of well-formedness at the levels of sound, syntax and meaning, or (ii) knowledge of the sound-meaning pairing over, potentially, all of the well-formed expressions in the language, or (iii) related characterizations, familiar in the literature. As this literature amply demonstrates, a whole range of communicative phenomena lies beyond 'grammar', and "linguistic competence" in this (narrow but legitimate) sense is only a part of "communicative competence". Who, after Grice, would have thought otherwise? But these are not Davidson's central concerns:

"I dip into these matters only to distinguish them from the problem raised by malapropisms and the like." (468)

What is this problem?

"Malapropisms introduce expressions not covered by prior learning, or familiar expressions which cannot be interpreted by any of the abilities so far discussed. Malapropisms fall into a different category, one that may include such things as our ability to perceive a well-formed sentence when the actual utterance was incomplete or garbled, our ability to interpret words we have never heard before, to correct slips of the tongue, or to cope with new ideolects." (468)

This is surely a mixed bag. Traditionally, and in the speech error literature (see Fay and Cutler, 1977), malapropisms are "exchange" errors at the lexical level where the exchange is contextually inappropriate but conditioned by a similarity in sound. As Davidson notes (465-6), because of the absurdity of the literal interpretation, the hearer hits on "the right interpretation", tipped off by "the similarity in sound" (466). This is all very Gricean. But no one that I'm aware of would say that perceptually correcting for ungrammaticality, interpreting words never heard before, or correcting "slips of the tongue" count as malapropisms. In the speech error literature malapropisms contrast with the vast majority of "slips of the tongue". So now we are in a terminological bind. When Davidson makes claims (as above) about "malapropisms", is it in the technical sense or in the broad sense? Above Davidson spoke of "malapropisms and the like"; perhaps we can save that expression for the broad class, even though it is not clear yet in what respect they are alike, other than not being a part of the language (in the narrow sense) and being figure-outable in the context. This of course covers (nonstandardized?) nonliterality and indirection as well.

**Q3** In the face of this "problem", Davidson seeks to "understand or modify (1)-(3) to accommodate malapropisms" (468). It is curious that although he lauds Grice's contribution to the study of communication ("interpretation"), he sees no need to investigate what a Gricean account of these phenomena might look like, and instead launches into his own.

Regarding (1) We are to understand the systematicity as based on knowing:

"the semantic role of each of a finite number of words or phrases" and the "semantic consequences of a finite number of modes of composition" (468)

This can be delivered, as Davidson has frequently argued, by:

"a theory of truth, more or less along the lines of a Tarski Truth definition." (468)

Regarding (2) The sharing amounts to this:

"the interpreter uses his theory to understand the speaker; the speaker uses the same (or equivalent) theory to guide his speech. For the speaker it is a theory about how the interpreter will interpret him" (469)

Davidson then adds:

"Obviously this principle does not demand that speaker and interpreter speak the same language. It is an enormous convenience that many people speak in similar ways, and therefore can be interpreted in more or less the same way. But in principle communication does not demand that any two people speak the same language. What must be shared is the interpreters and the speakers understanding of the speakers words." (469)

So the reconstrual of (2) is from (narrow) linguistic competence to a shared "theory" of interpretation. Davidson "assumes that there is no harm in calling such a method [of interpretation] a theory ..." (469), and he does try to take some of the sting out of postulating such a "theory" by saying that all he means by saying they share a "theory" is that they share some sort of "recursive" procedure:

"Why should a passing theory be called a theory at all? For the sort of theory we have in mind is, in its formal structure, suited to be the theory for the entire language ... Only a full recursive theory can do justice to these powers." (473)

It is worth keeping this stripped-down notion of a "theory" in mind. What else is involved in this interpretive "theory"? We come to that in dealing with (3).

Regarding (3) Davidson's plaint seems to be that correct interpretation is not and cannot be a matter of applying principles, conventions etc. learned in advance of current occasions of use and application:

"What is common to cases is that the speaker expects to be, and is, interpreted as the speaker intended although the interpreter did not have a correct theory in advance." (470)

Notice that nothing yet shows that language in the narrow sense might not be shared, only that language is not (always, ever?) enough. Although Davidson wants to investigate this common "theory", it seems more plausible to describe what is common in cases of communication that go beyond (narrow) linguistic competence as the use of general intelligence and problem solving i.e. the hearer uses whatever information he has that is relevant and accessible at the time, and applies it to

the case using whatever reasoning skills are relevant and available at the time. The inference will probably approximate a kind of default inference to the best explanation (see Bach and Harnish, 1979), and hence have the psychological features Fodor (1983) attributes to central systems phenomena --being "isotropic" and "Quinean". But Davidson does not take this route. Davidson says:

"I want to know how people who already have a language (whatever exactly that means) manage to apply their skill or knowledge to actual cases of interpretation." (471)

(It is good to keep this remark in mind when he later concludes "there is no such thing as a language ..." (475).) The heart of Davidson's proposal seems to be the distinction between a "prior theory" and a "passing theory":

"For the hearer, the prior theory expresses how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker, while the passing theory is how he does interpret the utterance. For the speaker, the prior theory is what he believes the interpreter's prior theory to be, while the passing theory is the theory he intends the interpreter to use." (472)

Davidson's contention is that if we accept this distinction, then there is a problem with the account summarized in (1)-(2) given before:

"According to that account, each interpreter (and this includes speakers, since speakers must be interpreters) comes to a successful linguistic exchange prepared with a 'theory' [NB scare quotes in the original] which constitutes his basic linguistic competence, and which he shares with those with whom he communicates." (472)

The problem arises because according to Davidson:

"What must be shared for communication to succeed is a passing theory. For the passing theory is the one the interpreter actually uses to interpret an utterance, and it is the theory the speaker intends the interpreter to use." (472)

"But the passing theory cannot in general correspond to an interpreter's linguistic competence." (472)

"Every deviation from ordinary usage, as long as it is agreed on for the moment ... is in the passing theory as a feature of what the words mean on that occasion. Such meanings, transient though they may be, are literal; they are what I have called first meanings." (472 emphasis added)

Well, yes and no. As for 'yes', we have already noted the moribund status of "message-model" theories such as (1)-(3). No "prior" or "passing" theories required. As for 'no', we were careful to exhibit "first meanings" as a cluster concept and here it fits some parts of the cluster (FM1, FM3-4)

but not others (FM2), which we viewed as central if first meaning is to explicate 'literal' (linguistic) meaning. Davidson gives us no reason to include utterance-type occasion-meaning in linguistic meaning. Grice chose not to, and for a reason; these meanings are derived from the speaker meaning on the occasion, so are not a part of the language. Furthermore, the literal-nonliteral distinction idles in these cases --what would speaking nonliterally (vs literally) amount to here? Davidson is surely correct to continue:

"A passing theory is not a theory of what anyone (except perhaps a philosopher) would call an actual natural language ... An interpreter's prior theory has a better chance ..." (472)

But this will not work either. Davidson's reasons, however, are a bit obscure:

"For prior theory has in all the features special to the ideolect of the speaker that the interpreter is in a position to take into account before the utterance begins." (473)

What are these "special features"? How does the interpreter know about them before the utterance begins? Davidson suggests things like the clothes one is wearing etc., but how much will this help with the kind of cases Davidson is worried about, for instance malapropisms? Furthermore, this does not seem to square with the way 'prior theory' was introduced, as "how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker" (472). Regardless, Davidson concludes that:

"Neither the prior nor the passing theory describes what we would call a language a person knows." (473)

One reason for concluding this might be that neither constitute a language, so a fortiori not one a person knows. But Davidson's reason seems different. Nothing along the traditional lines of (1)-(3) will work because:

"none of them satisfies the demand for a description of an ability that speaker and interpreter share and that is adequate to interpretation." (474)

And now we are in a position to see how Davidson reaches his startling conclusions [A]-[C], as well as subsidiary claims, such as [D]. The argument (apparently) goes like this:

- [1] The traditional conception of a language (1)-(3) cannot account for malapropisms "and the like".
- [2] We will need the notions of a prior and passing theory to do that.
- [3] But neither of these notions capture the notion of a language (dialect etc.), knowing a language, speaking the same language etc.
- [4] If the notions in [2] don't capture the notions in [3], then the notions in [3] are vacuous.

Against [4] we have been urging all along that what has been called the traditional notion of language, knowledge of language etc. is confused in two ways totally independently of malapropisms and the like: (i) it confuses a language with knowledge of language (ii) it confuses linguistic competence with communicative competence. Knowledge of language (narrowly construed) is only one component of communicative competence. Bach and Harnish (1979) proposed that certain inferential strategies, including Gricean maxims, are another component, as is general cognition and reasoning ability. Only illegitimate assimilation of language to communication allows one to conclude there are no languages, because they do not in themselves explain communication.

### References

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