

THE RELATION BETWEEN WORLD AND LANGUAGE  
IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF DONALD DAVIDSON:  
THE CRITIQUE OF CONCEPTUAL RELATIVISM

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

**TOTAL OF 10 PAGES ONLY  
MAY BE XEROXED**

(Without Author's Permission)

JOHN R. COOK









## INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

**The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.** Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

# UMI

A Bell & Howell Information Company  
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor MI 48106-1346 USA  
313/761-4700 800/521-0600



**The Relation Between World and Language in the  
Philosophy of Donald Davidson:  
The Critique of Conceptual Relativism**

by

John R. Cook

A thesis submitted to the  
School of Graduate Studies  
in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

The Department of Philosophy  
Memorial University of Newfoundland

August 1997

St. John's

Newfoundland



The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-25834-3

## **Abstract**

Donald Davidson, in his essay, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," presents arguments against what he calls the "the dualism of scheme and content." This dualism is the result of an argument that typically insists that language is a conceptual scheme, structured by a paradigm, ideology, or framework, that shapes or organizes empirical contents, usually manifested as representations, facts, sensory stimulations or experience. The result of this posited dualism is that different schemes, having different structures, constitute ontologically different worlds. Since it follows that speakers in those different worlds use languages that talk about radically different things, translation between those linguistic communities is impossible. This thesis of untranslatability is sometimes referred to as conceptual relativism or incommensurability.

Davidson argues, and this thesis is a defence of his claim, that such a dualism is based on an incorrect account of the relation between world and language. Through an analysis of truth, meaning, reference and interpretation, Davidson is able to show that the relation between world and language is unmediated. His analyses, I hold, pivot upon two claims: i) that the meaning of a sentence is the condition under which it is true; and ii) we have to obey the principle of charity, that is, when we interpret a speaker, we must necessarily count her right in most matters.

The arguments against the dualism of scheme and content are supplemented in this thesis with a comparison of Davidson and Hans-Georg Gadamer, a Continental philosopher. I compare claims made by both thinkers regarding understanding, interpretation and truth. I show that not only are there many undeniable convergences between them, but also that Gadamer's analysis of hermeneutics can be used to complement and illuminate some of Davidson's concerns.

The conclusion reached in this thesis is that the dualism of scheme and content is partly the result of attempts by some philosophers to define truth in terms of something more fundamental, *viz.*, reference. Drawing on some of Davidson's later work, supplemented with arguments by Arthur Fine's, "Natural Ontological Attitude," I show that truth is the most fundamental concept we have and escapes all attempts at general or absolute characterization. In consequence, I maintain: i) that the relation between world and language is unmediated; and ii) that Davidson's account of truth transcends the coherence/correspondence debate and the realism/anti-realism debate.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would first like to thank my supervisor, Dr. James Bradley, for his time, patience, advice and encouragement during the writing of this thesis. As well, I am grateful to all the faculty and students of the Department of Philosophy, especially Dr. David Thompson, Head of the Department, and Dr. Tyrone Lai, Graduate Coordinator. Dr. Thompson has provided me with encouraging advice and support throughout my undergraduate and graduate programs at Memorial.

I also wish to thank the School of Graduate Studies for awarding me fellowships during the 1995-96 and 1996-97 terms, as well as the Department of Philosophy and the Office of the Dean of Arts for securing me teaching assistantships for those years. In addition, I was appointed a teaching position for the Winter semester of 1997, and again am indebted to the Department of Philosophy and the Office of the Dean of Arts for this opportunity.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge my parents, John and Gail Cook, for their proud support, without whom this thesis would not have been possible.

## Table of Contents

	<u>Page</u>
Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Table of Contents .....	v
 Introduction .....	 1
 Chapter 1 – A Statement of the Problem: The Dualism of Scheme and Content	
1.1 Introduction .....	6
1.2 The Davidsonian Project .....	11
1.3 Quine’s Theoretical Dualism .....	15
1.4 Feyerabend’s Theoretical Pluralism .....	19
1.5 Kuhnian Incommensurability .....	22
1.6 Conclusion .....	28
 Chapter 2 – Truth and Meaning	
2.1 Introduction .....	32
2.2 Tarski’s Truth Definition .....	33
2.3 Davidson’s Notion of a Truth Theory as a Meaning Theory .....	38
2.4 Meaning Theory for a Natural Language .....	42



2.5 Tarski's Trivial Truth Theory .....	50
2.6 Michael Dummett .....	52
2.7 Conclusion .....	61
 Chapter 3 – Charity and Holism	
3.1 Introduction .....	63
3.2 Radical Interpretation .....	64
3.3 Holism .....	72
3.4 The Principle of Charity .....	82
3.5 The Primacy of the Idiolect .....	96
3.6 Conclusion .....	104
 Chapter 4 – Hermeneutics and Analysis: A Comparison of Davidson with Hans-Georg Gadamer	
4.1 Introduction .....	106
4.2 Semantics and Hermeneutics .....	109
4.3 The Problem of Reference .....	115
4.4 Understanding and Interpretation .....	121
4.5 The Verbal World .....	124
4.6 The Fusion of Horizons .....	131
4.7 Conclusion .....	140

## Chapter 5 – The Relation Between World and Language

5.1 Introduction .....	144
5.2 Truth, Explanations and Causes .....	147
5.3 Coherence and Correspondence Theories of Truth .....	152
5.4 Realism, Anti-Realism and the Natural Ontological Attitude .....	159
5.5 Conclusion .....	167
Bibliography of Works Cited .....	174

## Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to outline and defend Donald Davidson's arguments, classically presented in his essay, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,"<sup>1</sup> against conceptual relativism. Conceptual relativism, he argues, is entailed by a philosophy of language that adheres to the dualism of scheme and content. This dualism, or what has become known as "the third dogma of empiricism,"<sup>2</sup> states that there is a scheme or language that is structured by a paradigm, framework or ideology, etc., that organizes and shapes empirical content. Empirical content is here understood as experience, the totality

---

<sup>1</sup>Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 183-198.

<sup>2</sup>Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," p. 189. The first two dogmas of empiricism, those of the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements, and reductionism, were exposed by Willard Van Orman Quine in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in From a Logical Point of View (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Harvard University Press, 1953), pp. 20-46

of facts, sensory stimulations or surface irritations, etc. Because different languages cut up or organize the world differently, people from different linguistic communities live in ontologically different worlds. As a result, communication between speakers of these two different languages can be blocked, in principle, because such speakers could be talking about radically different things.

In chapter 1 of this thesis I give a brief sketch of why it is that some philosophers think this is the correct account of the relationship between world and language. I show that the idea of a world organized by linguistic structures harks back to Descartes' and Kant's emphasis on the subject as foundational in any articulation of first philosophy. Taking this emphasis into the twentieth century and into the linguistic turn, "subject" becomes replaced by "conceptual scheme" or "paradigm" in such thinkers as Whorf, Kuhn, Feyerabend and Quine. This replacement results in languages that are untranslatable or incommensurable.

For Davidson, incommensurability is, in principle, impossible. He argues for the rejection of incommensurability through an analysis of truth, meaning and interpretation. In chapter 2 I outline his position on the status of these concepts. Davidson adopts the work done by Alfred Tarski towards a characterization of a truth predicate for a formal language.<sup>3</sup> But for Davidson, the definition of truth is not all that can be achieved with a

---

<sup>3</sup>Alfred Tarski, "The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages," in Logic, Semantics, and Metamathematics, translated by J. H. Woodger (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1956), pp. 152-278.

truth theory. He argues, as I demonstrate in this chapter, that a truth theory, with some modifications, can be used as a meaning theory. That is, it can be used to state the conditions under which any arbitrary sentence of a language is true. Meaning, for Davidson, becomes truth condition.

Davidson continues his polemic against conceptual relativism by showing how it is that we develop truth theories for natural languages. This analysis, which is an extension of Quine's "radical translation,"<sup>4</sup> results in the articulation of several conditions for the possibility of interpretation between two speakers. I outline Davidson's conclusions from this analysis in chapter 3. One precondition of interpretation, which I see as central to his argument, is the "principle of charity." This *a priori* principle counsels that we must regard the speaker we are trying to communicate with or understand as a speaker of the truth. That is, we have to assume that an agent who possesses a language necessarily shares with us a large number of beliefs about the world.

With the results of the analyses of truth, meaning and interpretation in mind, I show how our conceptions of world, language, and the relationship between the two, must change. The change is radical. Davidson himself says in one of his later essays that "... there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many

---

<sup>4</sup>Quine, Word and Object (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1960), pp. 26ff.

philosophers and linguists have supposed.”<sup>5</sup> In chapter 4 I try to illuminate and expand on some of the results of Davidson’s arguments by comparing him with the hermeneutic philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer. I argue, for instance, that “world” has to now be interpreted as an horizon that is coextensive with the language that constitutes it but is always open to the possibility of new encounters and interpretations. In contrast, the thesis of incommensurability endorsed by Kuhn and Feyerabend, relies on the conception of language as a closed horizon. The openness and flexibility of language, maintained by Davidson and Gadamer, is the result, I argue, of placing primary emphasis on the concept of truth. Different languages mesh with others easily because they are, for the most part, concerned with the truth of the same subject matter. The mistake made by Kuhn and company is that they place primary emphasis on the wrong semantic concept, *viz.*, reference.

In chapter 5 I clarify why truth is the most basic concept we have by giving arguments to show that it cannot be defined in terms of anything more fundamental. Reference, of course, does play a primary role *within* different semantic theories of truth, but it can never be an explanation *of* those theories. Keeping this distinction in mind, we are able to see that coherence and correspondence truth theorists are chasing phantoms in their attempts to explain truth in terms of something more basic. Following Richard

---

<sup>5</sup>Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” in Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson, Ernest Lepore ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 446.

Rorty's suggestion<sup>6</sup>, I argue that we should adopt Arthur Fine's "Natural Ontological Attitude," which Fine utilizes in an effort to prevent us from the pseudo debates of the realists and anti-realists.<sup>7</sup> Those debates, Fine contends, also revolve around the mistaken belief that truth can be reduced to something more primitive or fundamental.

The conclusion I reach in this thesis is that conceptual relativism and theses of incommensurability are not acceptable results in a correct philosophy of language. Taking truth as basic, we can see that the relation between world and language is unmediated. That is, there are no epistemic intermediaries (schemes or contents) that play an explanatory role in how it is that we know the world or understand a language.

---

<sup>6</sup>Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth," in Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Volume I (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 150.

<sup>7</sup>Arthur Fine, "The Natural Ontological Attitude," in The Shaky Game (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 112-135.

## Chapter 1

### A Statement of the Problem: The Dualism of Scheme and Content

#### 1.1 Introduction

Descartes developed and emphasized several principles which came to be seen as cornerstones to the understanding and articulation of any future philosophy in the West. The basic principle, the foundation of all others, is that knowledge of the existence of the self is indubitable. The *cogito* is the most certain individual piece of knowledge we can have; it is the only belief that can survive a rigorous methodological doubt. Through a series of well-known deductions, Descartes claims that this *cogito*, a spiritual or mental substance, is radically distinct from the external world or material substance. As well as being distinct from material substance, spiritual substance is more well known than material substance. As a self, or *cogito*, the self has privileged access to itself. In addition, the means to knowledge of the external or material world is the spiritual substance. I am more certain of my perceptions of the world, which are a part of me, than



I am of the world itself. That is, I am certain that I have perceptions of the external world, but I am not certain that these perceptions are accurate representations of the world “in-itself.” By giving epistemological priority to the self and its components (i.e., perceptions), Descartes forever put into doubt the “thing-in-itself.” We can know ourselves directly, but the knowledge of the world is always mediated by our perceptions or representations of it.

It is commonly accepted that after Descartes, philosophy split into two separate schools: rationalism and empiricism. To put it crudely, it could be said that these schools were based (respectively) upon the two ideas that Descartes asserted were indubitable: the self, and the perceptions that this self has of the external world. For my purposes, it is important to emphasize the fact that both of these branches emphasize the mental (or aspects of it) over “the external.” The external world in-itself is cognitively inaccessible. This tendency to neglect the thing-in-itself in favour of the mental, and what is given to this substance, is again reaffirmed in the philosophy of Kant. Kant showed through a transcendental analysis that there is no cognitive access to the noumenal world. Our only cognitive access to the world is “filtered” through the forms of intuition and the categories of the understanding. These “filters,” so to speak, give us the only picture of the world that we can comprehend. What we consider to be “material” is a synthetic product of the intuitions and categories of the mind -- what Kant calls the phenomenal

world. Kant's famous metaphor is that we see the world as if through coloured glasses -- and, to continue the metaphor, there is no way that we can take the glasses off.

The start of the twentieth century saw a revolution in the history of philosophy that was tantamount to Descartes' meditations on the self. Since Gustav Bergmann, this revolution is usually known as the "linguistic turn."<sup>1</sup> This revolution emphasizes the importance of language in philosophical matters and sees language as the key to understanding, resolving, or sometimes even dissolving, philosophical problems. With this revolution, there is a new understanding of old concepts and debates.

One such "new understanding" is a reinterpretation of what the mind is. It came to be seen that a condition for rationality (or humanity) is the possibility of utilizing and understanding a language. Kantian philosophy, which tries to give the transcendental conditions of experience, was reinterpreted by this "turn" to language. The Kantian categories are now translated into linguistic concepts. Our only access to the world is through the mediation of these concepts. In the same way that Kant would have argued that an alien who had different categories or forms of intuitions would live in a different phenomenal world, so some new philosophers tried to argue that a change of concepts (essentially a change of language) results in a different understanding and experience of

---

<sup>1</sup>Gustav Bergmann, "Logical Positivism, Language, and the Reconstruction of Metaphysics," in The Metaphysics of Logical Positivism (Westport: The Greenwood Press, 1954), pp. 30-77. Richard Rorty has also collected a series of essays on semantics in a book under this title; Richard Rorty, ed. The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967).

the world. All access to the world is linguistically mediated. Language is the way we organize the world, and it is organized differently according to the language that one speaks. In the representative words of Benjamin Whorf:

... [T]he forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious. These patterns are the unperceived intricate systematisations of his own language -- shown readily enough by a candid comparison and contrast with other languages, especially those of a different linguistic family. His thinking itself is in a language -- in English, in Sanskrit, in Chinese. And every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyses nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

To follow Kant's metaphor, language is a set of coloured glasses, except for the fact that there are many pairs that we could possibly wear (many languages that we could possibly speak). This, at least, is what some argue.

The assumption that prevailed in this "turn" to language was that we still needed a first philosophy. In the Cartesian and Kantian philosophies, it is God, the self (*cogito*) or the transcendental categories that were the ground of all possible knowledge and experience. The revolutionary "turn" merely shifted this ground from God, the *cogito*, or the categories, to language. Language became the "conditionless condition" -- it became first philosophy.

Rorty argues:

---

<sup>2</sup>Benjamin Lee Whorf, "Language, Mind, and Reality," in Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf, ed. John B. Carroll (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1956), p. 252.

... [this] became necessary because, in the course of the nineteenth century, evolutionary biology and empirical psychology had begun to naturalize the notions of “mind,” “consciousness,” and “experience.”<sup>3</sup>

Language was one of the last domains that a philosopher could turn to that apparently escapes the naturalization processes of history and evolution. The concepts of “mind,” “consciousness,” and “experience” became replaced by concepts such as “language,” “meaning,” and “facts.” “Philosophy of language ... was supposed to produce conditions of descriptability, just as Kant had promised to produce conditions of experienceability.”<sup>4</sup> In the “linguistic turn,” the world is still a realm that is out of our reach except through some sort of mediation.

Rorty argues that the assumption that language is the proper subject of first philosophy is the result of the works of such thinkers as Frege and the *Tractarian* Wittgenstein. But language, as a transcendental enterprise, did not survive the scrutiny of the push for naturalization. The Wittgenstein of the Philosophical Investigations, for instance, sees language as a tool – a set of noises and marks that we use to get things done. As a tool, it has no determinate structure or meaning. Language is not absolute or necessary in any sense at all. It is a contingent, arbitrary and completely natural endeavour. With the Wittgensteinian notion of language, the world no longer becomes a

---

<sup>3</sup>Rorty, “Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the Reification of Language,” in The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 340.

<sup>4</sup>Rorty, “Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the Reification of Language,” p. 341.

by-product of the self or language. The world is now something that we are in unmediated touch with.

## 1.2 The Davidsonian Project

For the most part, the philosophy of language, in the second half of this century, has followed the later Wittgenstein in his attempt to naturalize language. In many respects, Davidson is a disciple of Wittgenstein in that he attempts to demonstrate the contingency of language and tries to restore our contact with the world. One of Davidson's endeavours, according to Rorty, has been to expunge from a naturalized philosophy of language any hidden assumptions or dogmas that hark back to the "heyday of meanings"<sup>5</sup> and the "reification of language."<sup>6</sup> Two of those dogmas were exposed by Quine, Davidson's teacher, in his famous essay, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism."

It could be argued that these dogmas were exposed after recognition of the fact that meanings of words are not determinate in any sense at all. The notion that there are determinate meanings "out there" with names as labels is what Quine calls the "museum myth of meaning." Against such a myth, Quine argues that there are two parts to

---

<sup>5</sup>Ian Hacking, Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 57ff. Hacking sees Russell and the early Wittgenstein as spokesmen for this heyday.

<sup>6</sup>Rorty cites Bjørn Ramberg as pointing out that "... Davidson's principal motive is to avoid the reification of language;" "Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the Reification of Language," p. 346. cf. Bjørn Ramberg, Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language: An Introduction (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 98ff.

knowing a word: knowing how to make the sounds (the phonetic part), and knowing how it is used (the semantic part). The meaning of a word is not some entity, but rather how a word is used in some language.

For naturalism the question whether two expressions are alike or unlike in meaning has no determinate answer, known or unknown, except insofar as the answer is settled in principle by people's speech dispositions, known or unknown.<sup>7</sup>

The first "dogma" Quine attacks is the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements. In traditional concepts of language, it was held that there was a clear distinction to be made between statements that were true by virtue of meaning alone, and statements that were true because of some experience or fact about the world. Examples such as:

(1) All bachelors are unmarried men,

were seen to be paradigmatic of the former, viz., analytic statements. In these statements, the predicate term exhausts all instances of the subject term. It is part of the meaning of the subject term to be subsumed under that predicate. What Quine subsequently showed was that, if there was no such thing as "meaning" (taken in the sense of an "obscure intermediary entit[y]"<sup>8</sup>), and if words were tools, as argued by the later Wittgenstein, then the distinction could not be maintained between analytic and synthetic. No statement is

---

<sup>7</sup>Quine, "Ontological Relativity," in Ontological Relativity and Other Essays (New York: The Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 29.

<sup>8</sup>Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," p. 22.

true in virtue of meaning or in virtue of fact. Meaning is how a word is used, and this usage is easily altered. Furthermore, in a holistically understood language, it is difficult to separate facts from meaning. To alter the meaning of a sentence or word is at the same time the alteration of the facts. Fact and meaning are not as independent of each other as some philosophers have argued.

The second dogma exposed by Quine was that of reductionism. Reductionism was the philosophy of the verificationists. They held that every statement was either directly about experience, or else, logically reducible to such a statement. But, argues Quine, to hold that statements can be confirmed by appeal to the facts (synthetically) is also to hold that there are other statements that can be confirmed by meaning alone (analytically). Quine opts for a holistic notion of language where it is not statements that are empirically significant, but whole theories (or languages):

If this view is right, it is misleading to speak of the empirical content of an individual statement -- especially if it is a statement at all remote from the experiential periphery of the field. Furthermore it becomes folly to seek a boundary between synthetic statements, which hold contingently on experience, and analytic statements, which hold come what may. Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system.<sup>9</sup>

Davidson holds that he has discovered a third dogma, viz., the dualism of scheme and content. To hold that there is a scheme (or language or structure or system) that organizes the contents of experience is to hold that language is a transcendent, reified

---

<sup>9</sup>Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," p. 43.

entity that is not a part of the world (or experience of the world), but a condition of it. Davidson's arguments against this third dogma apply, then, to a select group of thinkers: those that belong to the later Wittgenstein's naturalized philosophy of language and who do not adhere to the first two dogmas which Quine has exposed:

If we give up the dualism [of analytic and synthetic statements], we abandon the conception of meaning that goes along with it, but we do not have to abandon the idea of empirical content. Empirical content is in turn explained by reference to the facts, the world, experience, sensation, the totality of sensory stimuli, or something similar.... Thus in place of the analytic-synthetic we get the dualism of scheme and content.<sup>10</sup>

Davidson's project, as will become evident in later chapters, is to get rid of the idea that reference to an extra-linguistic reality plays a primary or constitutive role in an account of what our words mean. He rejects the notion of a conventional and community-based language with a fixed structure that shapes or organizes, through the constitutive referential relation, empirical content. If, as Davidson argues, reference does not play a primary role in how it is that our words mean what they do, then there is no referent (content), and no organizer (scheme). This is not to say that there is no world or no language. Rather, what Davidson is denying is that there are intermediary entities, like representations, meanings, experiences, the totality of sensory stimuli, etc., which can be shaped or organized by the conceptual schemes of different languages, with the net result being "worlds" that are radically different in different languages. As Davidson says:

---

<sup>10</sup>Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," p. 189.



In giving up the dualism of scheme and content, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false.<sup>11</sup>

I take Davidson's point in this last quote to be that it is "truth" that is the concept that has to play the primary role the relation between language and world, and not "reference." If we take reference as primary we open ourselves up to the possibility of conceptual relativism.

In the next three sections, I look at three thinkers, Quine, Feyerabend and Kuhn, who take "reference" to be the main concept in the description between world and language. In the articulation of their respective positions, it becomes obvious that they hold that there is an epistemic intermediary, taking the form of sensory stimulus, experience, etc., that can be organized or cut-up depending upon the language (or theory) which one has. It is *that* position which Davidson argues against in his essay, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," and of which this thesis is a defence.

### 1.3 Quine's Theoretical Dualism

Part of Davidson's project to get rid of the dualism of scheme and content is already carried out in the work of Quine. For Quine, as we have already seen, there is no sense to be made of the notion of reference to extra-linguistic entities (whatever form they may take) in an account of meaning. Quine's contention is that reference is

---

<sup>11</sup>Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," p. 198.

inscrutable.<sup>12</sup> For the most part, we come to this conclusion of the inscrutability of reference through the fact that translation is indeterminate. This indeterminacy is demonstrated in radical translation. By “radical translation,” Quine means the task of trying to understand a native speaker from scratch strictly by her behaviour and dispositions. Quine argues that there is no other way. When we try to translate the native’s words, or develop a translation manual<sup>13</sup>, we will soon discover that a native’s sentence can be translated consistently in more than one way.

Quine uses the famous example of a native uttering the word “gavagai” in the presence of a rabbit. When the radical translator tries to develop an analytical hypothesis for this utterance in her translation manual, she will notice that several translations will work equally well. “Gavagai” could equally be translated as, for example, “rabbit,” “rabbit-part,” “rabbit-hood,” etc., without any determination as to which is correct. In

---

<sup>12</sup>However, Quine and Davidson come to two radically different conclusions from this realization. Quine holds that the inscrutability of reference leads to the possibility of several equally consistent translation manuals for the same language, and that each translation manual posits a different ontology into that theory or language. Quine’s conclusion, then, is ontological relativity. Davidson argues that the inscrutability of reference leads one to abandon the idea that reference plays any role in a theory of meaning. Instead of ontological relativity, Davidson argues that “reference” must be abandoned. See chapters 4 and 5 for my account of the importance of Davidson’s rejection of “reference” and the consequences it has for the dissolution of the “third dogma.”

<sup>13</sup>Davidson’s equivalent of Quine’s translation manual is what he calls a theory of truth. Quine’s translation manual is a list of analytical hypotheses, whereas Davidson’s theory of truth is a list of T-sentences. The importance of the distinction between Quinean translation manuals and Davidsonian truth theories is spelled out in section 3.2.

fact, the notion of “correct” here has to drop out. Correctness of translation is a cornerstone of the museum myth of meaning. What we have, rather, are translations that are relative. And if the native’s utterances could be translated in more than one way, then the reference of those utterances is also relative. That is, there is no way to know what a native is referring to by her statements. There can be several translation manuals for the same language, as well as several determinations as to what the reference of those translations are. The conclusion is that if there are several ways to develop a translation manual for a language, then it has to be granted that the ontology of different languages is also relative. In fact, states Quine, ontology is doubly relative:

Specifying the universe of a theory makes sense only relative to some background theory, and only relative to some choice of a manual of translation of the one theory into the other.<sup>14</sup>

The “background theory” which Quine is referring to here is, of course, one’s own language. Reference, however, is just as inscrutable here as it is in the translation of the native’s language:

On deeper reflection, radical translation begins at home. Must we equate our neighbour’s English words with the same strings of phonemes in our own mouths? Certainly not; for sometimes we do not thus equate them.<sup>15</sup>

Ontology cannot be specified for one’s own language, nor can it be specified for the native’s language that the translator is trying to translate.

---

<sup>14</sup>Quine, “Ontological Relativity,” pp. 54-5.

<sup>15</sup>Quine, “Ontological Relativity,” p. 46.

Quine says that this postulating of alternative theories can happen in science as well. That is, Quine asserts that a scientist can develop two alternative theoretical systems of the world that are both empirically equivalent (that is, both theories analyse the same domain of experience, and both imply the same observation conditionals but do not reduce to each other). If the theories did reduce to each other by a reconstrual of predicates, then they would be logically equivalent to each other. By “reconstrual of predicates,” Quine means that the two theories say exactly the same thing, just using different signs (e.g., the second theory may be identical to the first except for the fact that two predicates have switched places). Quine says that there can be an articulation of two theories that are empirically equivalent, but not logically equivalent, and, hence, not reducible to each other. But instead of opting for a relativism (as it appears Feyerabend and Kuhn argue for; see below), Quine states that we assign different signs to the two theories and accept a dualism. In fact, this happens in practice all the time. “Oscillation between rival theories is standard scientific procedure anyway, for it is thus that one explores and assesses alternative hypotheses.”<sup>16</sup>

Feyerabend and Kuhn, as I will show here, do not opt for a dualism between rival theories using distinctive signs. They argue that scientists, in practice, do not use different signs each time a theory changes (and, hence, the meanings of the terms), but rather say that two rival theories are incommensurable. That is, the meanings of the

---

<sup>16</sup>Quine, “On Empirically Equivalent Systems of the World,” *Erkenntnis*, 9 (1975), p. 328.

words are not consistent between the two theories and hence they are extensionally incompatible.

#### 1.4 Feyerabend's Theoretical Pluralism

Like Quine, Feyerabend holds that we cannot make a clear distinction between analytic and synthetic statements. Because of the abolition of this distinction in a coherent notion of empiricism, Feyerabend holds that the distinction between observation statements and theoretical statements is also an out-moded or dogmatic notion. Like Quine, he holds that it is whole theories that confront experience, not individual observation statements. Feyerabend asserts that there is no asymmetry between observation statements and theories. Even the simplest statements of perception entail some theory -- regardless of how general:

According to the point of view I am advocating, the meaning of observation sentences is determined by the theories with which they are connected. Theories are meaningful independent of observations; observational statements are not meaningful unless they have been connected with theories.<sup>17</sup>

The dogma of reductionism is also dropped by Feyerabend. In fact, not only does Feyerabend drop the idea of possibly reducing highly abstract theories to a purified set of observation statements, he also denies the possibility of reducing one theory to any other.

---

<sup>17</sup>Paul K. Feyerabend, "Problems of Empiricism," in Beyond the Edge of Certainty, ed. Robert G. Colodny (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1965), p. 213.

That is, he argues that there can be two theories that are empirically adequate for the same set or domain of evidence, yet these two theories are not reducible to each other.

Feyerabend argues that the traditional conception of scientific methodology as theoretically monistic is flawed. Feyerabend defines what he calls “theoretical monism,” or “radical empiricism,” as the position that holds these two dogmatic principles: i) the principle of consistency, and ii) the principle of meaning invariance. These dogmas are congruent with the two exposed by Quine.

The principle of consistency states that if there are two theories,  $T$  and  $T'$ , that cover the same domain of experience  $D$ , and are empirically adequate, then  $T$  is either reducible to, or subsumed under,  $T'$ . A condition of this principle is the notion of meaning invariance. This latter principle states that terms have a constant meaning, independent of their context of use. If there are two theories,  $T$  and  $T'$ , that use the same term  $x$ , then the meaning (in whatever way “meaning” is understood) of  $x$  stays constant. According to radical empiricism, if  $T'$  is inconsistent with  $T$ , then it is to be rejected. There is an inconsistency because there is an improper use of the terms – that is, the new theory uses the terminology in an incorrect way. It does not adhere to the principle of meaning invariance. A statement in  $T'$  cannot be reduced to a statement in  $T$  if a term  $x$  changes meaning in the two theories.

As stated above, Feyerabend holds that the meaning of a term is dependent upon the theory that it is a part of. A direct consequence of this, and, hence, a refutation of the

notion of meaning invariance, is that meaning varies when the theory varies. Feyerabend gives numerous examples in the history of science that demonstrate this fact. For instance, “mass” has a different meaning in classical (Newtonian) physics than it has in relativity theory. In classical physics, it is held that the mass of an object is equal to the sum of the mass of its parts, whereas in relativity, the concepts of “velocity,” “energy,” and the chosen coordinate system play an integral role in the determination of mass. Because of the fact that “mass” has such divergent meanings in these two theories, it is evident that it would be impossible to connect these two theories (classical and relative) by some sort of bridge law or reduction. If terms have different meanings in different theories, then this demonstrates the impossibility of a reduction of one theory to another. Feyerabend calls this impossibility of reductionism “incommensurability.” “Two theories will be called incommensurable when the main descriptive terms depend on mutually inconsistent principles.”<sup>18</sup>

Feyerabend asserts that the correct empirical method of science is what he terms “theoretical pluralism.” This method, which he argues would lead to a strict empiricism, allows for incommensurable theories within the same domain of experience. Actually, Feyerabend encourages the development of incommensurable theories. In this way, we are able to challenge and test the theories that came before. For the most part, theories are internally consistent. The only way of refuting them is to take a position outside of

---

<sup>18</sup>Feyerabend, “Problems of Empiricism,” p. 227, n19.

that theory. According to theoretical monism, incommensurable alternatives to consistent theories are to be rejected in favour of the true and tried. Feyerabend, however, holds that if we had accepted this methodology we would not have made any scientific progress. His theoretical pluralism allows for the development of crucial tests that determine which theory is to be preferred. The preferred theory is usually the one that leads to new facts and new predictions that were not derivable from the old theory. So, on Feyerabend's account, incommensurable alternatives are the key to scientific progress. Feyerabend argues that it:

... has been shown that in most cases it is impossible to relate successive scientific theories in such a manner that the key terms they provide for the description of a domain  $D$ , where they overlap and are empirically adequate, either possess the same meanings or can at least be connected by empirical generalizations.<sup>19</sup>

### 1.5 Kuhnian Incommensurability

Kuhn is another empiricist who has accepted Quine's embargo on the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements and the possibility of reductionism. Thus, he, like his contemporary Feyerabend, accepts the notion of theoretical holism – the doctrine that it is whole theories, and not individual statements, that are meaningful. Kuhn also denies that there is a neutral observation language to which we can appeal to allow us to contemplate alternative theories. For Kuhn, the way that we see the world is through our

---

<sup>19</sup>Feyerabend, "Explanation, Reduction, and Empiricism," in Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol. 3, ed. Herbert Feigl, *et al.* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1962), p. 81.



sensations of stimuli. Our sensations are essentially our world. Of course the stimuli does not change, says Kuhn, but our sensations do. Sensations are the product of filtering stimuli through educational programming. If someone has a different programming or educational background, then, asserts Kuhn, our sensations, and, hence, our world, differ. The possibility of any meaningful statement in science requires that there be a background in which it is framed:

What is built into the neural process that transforms stimuli to sensations has the following characteristics: it has been transmitted through education; it has, by trial, been found more effective than its historical competitors in a group's current environment; and, finally, it is subject to change both through further education and through the discovery of misfits with the environment.<sup>20</sup>

These frameworks are what Kuhn refers to as “paradigms.” People in different paradigms live in different worlds.

Kuhn's works, especially The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, are illustrated with numerous supporting examples from which he is able to abstract what he holds to be the structure of change from one paradigm to the next. Kuhn argues that there is a period of normal science where the theories and the laws are firmly embedded in the psyche of the scientists and the public. When a problem arises which the scientist believes he can solve, he applies these theories and laws to the problem in order to solve it. The problems are also identified using these frameworks of theories and laws. If one wanted to find out the particular laws and theories that are characteristic of a paradigm, all one

---

<sup>20</sup>Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 196.

would have to do would be to consult the textbooks and journals that are used in the education of scientists at that time.

Kuhn holds that within a paradigm, or period of normal science, there can occur anomalies that cannot be solved using traditional methods. These anomalies lead to crises that in turn lead to paradigmatic revolutions. A revolution occurs when a new framework is able to solve the crises. This new framework, however, is not something that is merely added on to the existing one. It totally replaces it. That is, by merely being able to solve the problem, the new framework reworks the accepted laws and theories that came before it. Not only do the laws and theories change, but even the meanings of words, since meaning depends upon a framework. Between the transition from one paradigm to the succeeding one, Kuhn asserts that there is a period of upheaval where there is a debate between the supporters of the different paradigms. However, different paradigms are incommensurable with each other, and, therefore, the supporters of the different paradigms experience a communication breakdown – that is, they are talking at cross-purposes to each other:

The sorts of communication breakdowns now being considered are likely evidence that the men involved are processing stimuli differently, receiving different data from them, seeing different things or the same things differently.<sup>21</sup>

Kuhn's reflections on the structure of scientific revolutions have brought the criticism that his analysis leads to a picture of science as irrational, relativistic, and

---

<sup>21</sup>Kuhn, "Reflections on my Critics," in Criticism in the Growth of Knowledge, ed. Imre Lakatos, *et al.* (Cambridge: The University of Cambridge Press, 1970), p. 276.

arbitrary: “irrational” because the transition from one paradigm to the next is not based upon reason but persuasion; “relativistic” because truth is relativized to a paradigm; and “arbitrary” because if there is no absolute truth external to the paradigms, then there is no criteria upon which we can say that science moves progressively. Karl Popper has criticized Kuhn on these grounds.

According to Popper, there is a truth that we strive for when we move from one paradigm to the next; that is how science progresses. He agrees with Kuhn that there is no purely neutral language that we can take up to analyse different theories. However, people from different paradigms can translate their respective languages and then decide which theory to accept. The one they accept will be closer to the truth:

The central point is that a critical discussion and a comparison of the various frameworks is always possible. It is just a dogma -- a dangerous dogma -- that the different frameworks are like mutually untranslatable languages. The fact is that even totally different languages (like English and Hopi, or Chinese) are not untranslatable, and that there are many Hopis or Chinese who have learnt to master English very well.

The Myth of the Framework is, in our time, the central bulwark of irrationalism. My counter-thesis is that it simply exaggerates a difficulty into an impossibility. The difficulty of discussion between people brought up in different frameworks is to be admitted. But nothing is more fruitful than such a discussion; than the culture clash which has stimulated some of the greatest intellectual revolutions.<sup>22</sup>

On the point of translation raised by Popper, Kuhn agrees. Those with different languages can translate and understand one another. He denies that his notion of

---

<sup>22</sup>Karl Popper, “Normal Science and its Dangers,” in Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge, pp. 56-7.

incommensurability brought out in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions ever implied untranslatability. Rather, what Kuhn wants to say is that such translation is difficult and sometimes only partial. This partiality comes about because of the fact that the language of a theory can determine (or is determined by) the ontology of a theory. Members of different frameworks not only speak different languages, but they also live in different worlds – they are ontologically different. If a historian were teaching a class on the history of science, he would have to point out not only the different laws and theories (languages) indicative of each paradigm, but also the different ontologies that they imply. Kuhn holds that a translation manual is not good enough to communicate between two cultures or paradigms; we also need an indication of what kind of ontology the alien holds to. And Kuhn, like Quine, holds that this is impossible to determine exactly. We could have two translations for the same language or theory, and yet these translations could imply two completely different ontologies. Indeterminacy of translation leads to ontological relativity:

Why is translation, whether between theories or languages, so difficult? Because, as has often been remarked, languages cut up the world in different ways, and we have no access to a neutral sub-linguistic means of reporting. Quine points out that, though the linguist engaged in radical translation can readily discover that his native informant utters 'Gavagai' because he has seen a rabbit, it is more difficult to discover how 'Gavagai' should be translated. Should the linguist render it as 'rabbit,' 'rabbit-kind,' 'rabbit-part,' 'rabbit-occurrence,' or by some other phrase he may not even have thought to formulate?<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup>Kuhn, "Reflections on my Critics," p. 268.

Kuhn's corrected account of "incommensurability" between theories or languages does not imply untranslatability, but, rather, difficulty in translation because of alternative ontologies. If all languages cut up the world in the same way, then there would be no incommensurability, and translation would be a smooth and easy process:

One need not go that far to recognize that reference to translation only isolates but does not resolve the problems which have led Feyerabend and me to talk of incommensurability. To me at least, what the existence of translation suggests is that recourse is available to scientists who hold incommensurable theories. That recourse need not, however, be to full restatement in a neutral language of even the theories' consequences. The problem of theory comparison remains.<sup>24</sup>

The problem that remains is that different theories demarcate ontologically different worlds. If the meaning of a word or sentence is based upon the relation of reference between word and world, where the "world" is seen as a by-product of a scheme or language and some sort of empirical content (representation, sensory stimulation, surface irritation, etc.), then two sentences that are phonetically the same but belong to two different frameworks could possibly have two different truth values. It is in this sense that comparison between two incommensurable theories is difficult. If truth is relative to the theory, that is, relative to the way a theory or language cuts up the world, then the decision as to which of two theories is the better cannot be based on truth, but on some other, maybe irrational, principle.

---

<sup>24</sup>Kuhn, "Reflections on my Critics," p. 268.

## 1.6 Conclusion

The intent of this chapter was to give a brief exposition of what Davidson is arguing against. In his essay, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," it is Quine, Kuhn, and Feyerabend whom Davidson names as his chief opponents. Although they have shaken off the dogmas outlined by Quine, he claims that they are still left with one dogma which leads them to postulate such notions as theoretical pluralism (Feyerabend), theoretical dualism (Quine), and incommensurability (Kuhn and Feyerabend).

Theoretical pluralism states that we can have two empirically equivalent theories that are irreducible to one another based on the fact that they do not obey the principle of meaning invariance. Feyerabend sees pluralism as a point in favour of empiricism because it leads to new fields of discovery for science. Pluralism demands that we test alternative incommensurable theories to see which leads to the best results. I think that Quine's theoretical dualism is similar to Feyerabend's pluralism except in one respect: Quine would not refer to two theories as empirically equivalent if it could be determined that one was better after a crucial test. The Duhem-Quine thesis denies crucial tests because of the fact that any statement can be altered to account for anomalous observations. Therefore, if there are two irreducible (untranslatable) theories, then we have no choice but to accept both of them.

Ian Hacking frames the problem this way: for Quine, there are a large number of ways in which to translate a theory because of his thesis of indeterminacy of translation.

Since they are empirically equivalent, one has to accept them all. He sees Feyerabend as taking an opposite view — that is, two theories could be so disparate that there is no possibility of translation; they are incommensurable.<sup>25</sup>

Davidson makes the claim several times that translation between schemes is always possible and that we would not know what it would be like to come across an untranslatable language. On these grounds, incommensurability is unintelligible. But, as I indicated above, this is not the only meaning that Kuhn gives to his notion of incommensurability. And it is Kuhn's "new" formulation of incommensurability which is Davidson's real target. Reformulated, the incommensurability of irreducible theories results in ontological relativity, which refers to the fact that two or more schemes can cut-up or organize empirical content differently.

Davidson does not want to discover what the real relation between scheme and content is, but rather destroy the notion that there is a relation at all. Davidson's project is to get rid of incommensurability by analyzing such notions as truth, meaning, interpretation (or translation), and belief. Through the analysis of these concepts, and a study of the process of "radical interpretation" (a variation of Quine's "radical translation"), he shows that the concepts of "scheme," "content" and "reference" play no role in an account of linguistic communication.

---

<sup>25</sup>Hacking, p. 152.

As I said, Kuhn's reformulation of incommensurability states that it is not merely translation between languages that causes the problems, but also the difference in ontology. This is a point that Quine sympathizes with:

If empiricism is construed as a theory of truth, then what Davidson imputes to it as a third dogma is rightly imputed and rightly renounced. Empiricism as a theory of truth thereupon goes by the board, and good riddance. As a theory of evidence, however, empiricism remains with us, minus indeed the two old dogmas. The third purported dogma, understood now in relation not to truth but to warranted belief, remains intact. It has both a descriptive and a normative aspect, and in neither aspect do I think of it as a dogma. It is what makes scientific method partly empirical rather than solely a quest for internal coherence.<sup>26</sup>

It appears from this quote that Quine sees Davidson's refutation of conceptual relativism as a merely linguistic endeavour. At *that* level, Quine holds that Davidson's analysis of untranslatable languages is acute and that his arguments are valid -- for languages. But it appears that he still wants primacy to be given to epistemological concerns. As will become evident in later chapters, Davidson's holism prevents one from making too sharp a distinction between epistemology and semantics. Both require the other. How we come to know what a word means is at the same time how we come to know what the world is like. Davidson argues that "the methodology of interpretation is ... nothing but epistemology seen in the mirror of meaning."<sup>27</sup> Echoing this claim, he elsewhere says

---

<sup>26</sup>Quine, "On the Very Idea of a Third Dogma," in Theories and Things (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 39.

<sup>27</sup>Davidson, "Thought and Talk," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, p. 169.



about his methodology of interpretation that we “have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around the world generally.”<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup>Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” pp. 445-446.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Truth and Meaning**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

Davidson's argument for the refutation of conceptual relativism is the result of many years of work in the philosophy of language – especially in semantics. Davidson comes to the conclusions reached in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" through a prior analysis of such notions as "truth," "meaning," "belief," and "language." In order to appreciate the depth of his remarks, therefore, it is necessary to look at his early work in semantics. In this chapter, I will look at his ideas on "truth" and "meaning," by examining Alfred Tarski's work on the search for a formal definition of truth and showing how Davidson utilizes this definition as a meaning theory. I will also examine the arguments which Davidson uses in defence of the claim that Tarski's truth theory is a meaning theory and outline some of the answers Davidson offers to the criticisms that

have been brought against his project. In chapter 3 I will look at his ideas regarding “language,” and the related notions of holism, belief and the “principle of charity.”

## 2.2 Tarski's Truth Definition

Davidson holds that the notions of “truth,” “meaning,” and “belief” are inseparable in any account of our understanding or interpretation of a speaker of a language. Alfred Tarski's work on the semantic conception of truth brought Davidson to this realization. Tarski's project was to give an account or definition of the classical (Aristotelian) conception of truth that was both materially adequate and formally correct.<sup>1</sup> That is, a satisfactory definition of “true” must account for all instances of its use when used in the classical sense, as will be explained, and it must not lead to any ambiguities or anomalies.

The classical sense of “truth” which Tarski has in mind in his work is the intuition expressed by Aristotle in his Metaphysics:

A falsity is a statement of that which is that it is not, or of that which is not that it is; and a truth is a statement of that which is that it is, or of that which is not that it is not. Hence, he who states of anything that it is, or that it is not, will either speak truly or speak falsely.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Tarski, “The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages,” p. 156.

<sup>2</sup>Aristotle, Aristotle's Metaphysics, translated by Hippocrates G. Apostle (Grinnell, Iowa: The Peripatetic Press, 1979), 1011b25.

A materially adequate definition of truth will account for all instances where the term “true” is used to evaluate a statement. Tarski argues that if there are instances where the term does not fit this characterization, then it is not being used in the classical sense. For Tarski (and Davidson), “true” applies strictly to sentences. For example, the statement, “snow is white,” is true if snow is white. Tarski gives a schema of the form of a true sentence which exhausts all uses of the classical sense of “true,” and which he calls Convention T.

Convention T is the criterion which is placed on a formal system that claims to give a materially adequate (extensionally correct) definition of “truth.” Convention T states that a truth definition must give either a list of all the true sentences that use the predicate “true” in a language, or a way recursively to generate all such sentences. Each such sentence will be a partial definition of truth – their totality will give the full definition of “truth” for that language. Each partial definition takes the form of a T-sentence:

(T)  $s$  is true if, and only if,  $p$ .

In this schema, “ $p$ ” is replaced by any true sentence of the language and “ $s$ ” is replaced by the name of that sentence. Any use of the term “true” in the classical sense will adhere to this schema.

What makes Tarski's work on truth important is his stress on the formal correctness of the definition. One of his main priorities is to avoid any paradoxes or

anomalies that could result. Paradoxes are easy to generate in semantics because of the fact that we are using language to describe language. Language is self-reflexive. The liar paradox is one of the most well known examples:

(1) I am a liar,

or, to put it in semantic terms:

(2) This statement is false.

In this case we have a statement that is making an evaluative judgement about itself. It is paradoxical because if we evaluate the statement as true, then it is false, and if we evaluate it as false, then it is true. Tarski contends that this occurs because we have allowed a semantic term into our language. He argues that paradoxes are a result of one allowing terms from the metalanguage into the object language.

By “metalanguage,” Tarski means the language that is used in talking about another language, and the “object language” is the one that is being talked about. The metalanguage is a language that transcends the object language and is “essentially richer.” It is essentially richer because it contains not only all the vocabulary of the object language, but also semantic terms such as “truth,” “denotation,” “satisfaction,” etc. By making a distinction between a meta- and an object-language, we prevent the paradoxes from arising.

In Tarski's T-sentences, the left-hand side of the biconditional (“s”) names a sentence of the object language, and the right-hand side, and the biconditional itself (“is

true if, and only if,  $p$ ”), is the metalanguage. It is important to notice that the semantic term “true” does not occur in the object language, and thus it is impossible to generate a semantic paradox.

Another of Tarski’s priorities in developing the definition of truth is to avoid ambiguity in the definition of the semantic terms. For Tarski, the classical notion of truth can be defined in terms of *satisfaction*. Satisfaction is the relation between objects and sentential functions. We say of an object that it does or does not *satisfy* a function. For example, in the English language, “snow” satisfies the predicative function, “ $x$  is white.” Sentences with variables, like “ $x$  is white,” are called “open sentences,” while those without variables, like “snow is white,” are called “closed sentences.” For a sentence to be true, it has to be satisfied by all objects, and for it to be false, it has to be satisfied by no objects. Open sentences that are satisfied by all objects constitute the axioms and theorems of logic. For example, “ $x=x$ ,” “ $\neg(x.\neg x)$ ,” etc., are satisfied by all objects of any language. The truth of a sentence, within a particular language, is defined in terms of satisfaction. In a given language, satisfaction is defined recursively:

We indicate which objects satisfy the simplest sentential functions; and then we state the conditions under which given objects satisfy a compound function – assuming that we know which objects satisfy the simpler functions from which the compound one has been constructed. Thus, for instance, we say that given numbers satisfy the logical disjunction “ $x$  is greater than  $y$  or  $x$  is equal to  $y$ ” if they satisfy at least one of the functions “ $x$  is greater than  $y$ ” or “ $x$  is equal to  $y$ .”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>Tarski, “The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundations of Semantics,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 4 (1944), p 353.

It is these simplest sentential functions, the objects (vocabulary) that satisfy them, the satisfaction relations, and the rules of a first-order logic (grammar), which constitute the axioms of a truth theory. The compound sentences are recursively derived from the simple axioms and complement these simple sentences to compose all the possible utterances in the entire language.

A closed sentence, although it has no variables, still has to be satisfied by all the objects of a language in order to be true. This is done by checking to see if the sentence is implied or refuted by any of the satisfaction relations. For example, assume that we have a language that has two objects,  $a$  and  $b$ , two sentential functions,  $F(x)$  and  $G(x)$ , and a logical system of first order predicate calculus. If we outlined all the satisfaction relations for that language, then we could determine, *by structure alone*, which sentences were true and which were false. Let  $a$  satisfy  $F(x)$ , and  $b$  satisfy  $G(x)$ . From this, it is easy to see that the closed sentence,  $F(a)$ , is true because it is satisfied by all the objects of that language,  $a$  and  $b$ .  $F(a)$  states that there is a satisfaction relation between  $F(x)$  and  $a$ . To confirm this, all we have to do is check our axioms that outlined the satisfaction relations of all the objects. Since there is no contradiction, i.e., since neither  $a$  nor  $b$  disconfirm this, the sentence is true. The closed sentence  $G(a)$  says that there is a satisfaction relation between  $G(x)$  and  $a$ . Since this is not confirmed by the axioms that outline the satisfaction relations, it is false.

### 2.3 Davidson's Notion of a Truth Theory as a Meaning Theory

As I indicated above, Davidson's main concern in philosophy is semantics. One of the most important tasks, argues Davidson, for a philosopher of language is to develop a semantic theory. A semantic theory is a theory that is able to give an account of how to determine the meaning of any arbitrary sentence in a natural language, and to show how the meaning of a sentence is composed and influenced by its constituent parts. If we can develop such a theory, then it could be said that we have discovered what the conditions are for the possibility of understanding or grasping the meaning of a sentence.

In the past there have been many attempts to do this, but they have all failed. One of the main reasons for this failure is that many philosophers of language do not acknowledge that a semantic theory has to be finitely recursive. That is, a semantic theory has to be able to generate the meaning of an infinity of sentences from the finite resources of vocabulary and grammatical rules (or logical system). There are two reasons for this as far as I can see: i) as language users, or as rational beings, we are finite ourselves and cannot process an infinite amount of information, and ii) for a language to work it must have elements that are repeatable and combinable -- that is, it must be holistically compositional. A word must be able to be used over again in different contexts without changing the meaning of that word:

When we can regard the meaning of each sentence as a function of a finite number of features of a sentence, we have insight into what there is to be learned; we also understand how an infinite aptitude can be encompassed by finite accomplishments. For suppose that a language lacks this feature; then no matter



how many sentences a would-be speaker learns to produce and understand, there will remain others whose meanings are not given by the rules already mastered.<sup>4</sup>

A theory that definitely does not work as a semantic theory is one that correlates meaning (as an independent entity) to every sentence. This theory violates the principle which states that recursion theories can only have a finite amount of semantic primitives. If this theory was correct, i.e., the theory that correlated an independent entity as a meaning for every meaningful sentence, then the meaning of a sentence becomes the semantic primitive and thus there would be an infinite number of semantic primitives that the theory must account for, and an infinite number of primitives that the language user must learn. This is impossible.

Quine argues that “meaning” cannot play a role in a semantic theory because it is an obscure and enigmatic notion that cannot be captured by a formal theory. Because of its obscurity, we have to try to do without it. For Davidson, a semantic theory attempts to account for how an infinity of meanings could possibly be generated by a language. Since a philosopher of language is trying to account for what or explain what “meaning” is, she cannot use meaning as the explanation:

Paradoxically, the one thing meanings do not seem to do is oil the wheels of a theory of meaning -- at least as long as we require of such a theory that it non-trivially give the meaning of every sentence in the language. My objection to meanings in the theory of meaning is not that they are abstract or that their

---

<sup>4</sup>Davidson, “Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages,” in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, p. 8.

identity conditions are obscure, but that they have no demonstrated use.<sup>5</sup>

A theory of meaning has to be constructed in terms other than itself. “Meanings” play no role in a theory of meaning (in the same way that “dormative power” plays no effective role in the explanation of why sleeping pills work).

Davidson sees a key to such a semantic theory in the truth theory that was developed by Tarski. Tarski’s theory was able to define the predicate “true” for all sentences of a language in a finite and recursive way. This was accomplished through the use of the semantic relation of satisfaction. The vocabulary of a language (the semantic primitives), the simple sentential functions, the rules of recursion (the logical system), and the satisfaction relations that map the objects of the vocabulary to the simple sentential functions constitute the axioms from which the sentences (theorems) of the language are derived. These axioms are finite in number. A truth theory, then, meets at least one criterion of a semantic theory — a finite set of axioms can entail an infinite amount of theorems to compose a language.

Now, however, since the theorems that a truth theory entails are only the true T-sentences, it could be said that a truth theory gives the truth conditions for any sentence of the object language. That is, a truth theory with a finite set of axioms will entail sentences of the form,

(T)    *s* is true if, and only if, *p*,

---

<sup>5</sup>Davidson, “Truth and Meaning,” in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, pp. 20-21.

as Tarski has demonstrated; where “*s*” is the name of a given sentence and “*p*” is the translation of that sentence in the metalanguage. *p* is the condition under which *s* is true.

The recognition that a true T-sentence gives the truth conditions of the sentence on the left-hand side of the biconditional leads Davidson to the conclusion that a Tarskian theory of truth is a semantic theory. Each T-sentence gives the conditions of what it is for a sentence in the object language to be true. This is just as good as giving the meaning of every sentence of the object language. This is much more obvious in the less trivial case where the object-language is not the same as the metalanguage. Here, the right-hand side of the biconditional is an *interpretation* of the utterance on the left-hand side. For Davidson, to give an interpretation of a sentence is to show an understanding of the meaning of that sentence. We could conclude then that each T-sentence could be replaced by an M-sentence:

(M) *s* means *p*.

Davidson does not suggest such a replacement because “meaning” is an unanalysed (and unanalysable) semantic term that cannot, as was already demonstrated, lead to a better understanding of what it is for a sentence to mean something. But as a rough approximation, “truth condition” seems to be as close to “meaning” as we will ever come:

The definition [of truth] works by giving the necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of every sentence, and to give the truth conditions is a way of giving the meaning of a sentence. To know the semantic concept of truth for a language is to know what it is for a sentence — any sentence — to be true, and this amounts,

in one good sense that we can give to the phrase, to understanding the language.<sup>6</sup>

Davidson develops Tarski's analysis in two respects: firstly, he argues that a truth theory is a meaning theory, and secondly, that Tarski's characterization of a truth predicate can be applied to a natural language. On the first point, Tarski says nothing. His project stops at a definition of "truth." He is not interested in the notion of meaning. In fact, he takes meaning for granted in this quest for a definition of truth.

In regards to the second point, however, and more importantly, Tarski warns us that the task of defining truth for a natural language is impossible and, presumably, so is the task of giving a semantic theory for a natural language.

#### 2.4 Meaning Theory for a Natural Language

There are several reasons why Tarski argues that a truth theory is not applicable to a natural language.

Firstly, and this the main substance of Tarski's polemic against a naturalized truth theory, i) the universality of natural languages prevents the possibility of formalization. That is, a natural language is too "rich" to be able to have a theory about it. If a metalanguage is developed, it immediately becomes part of the natural language. At each attempt to transcend the natural language, the natural language becomes richer. As was

---

<sup>6</sup>Davidson, "Truth and Meaning," p. 24.

indicated above, any theory that tries to define semantic notions requires a distinction between object and metalanguage for fear of semantic paradoxes, like "The Liar."

Further, a natural language has ii) many sentences that have ambiguous meanings and iii) many sentences that a truth theory cannot accommodate, e.g., demonstratives, indexicals, injunctions, adverbial modifications, etc., because of the fact that they are not truth-functional. In a natural language, we also have the phenomena that iv) sentences uttered at different times or by different people have different truth values. Tarski argues that this goes beyond the resources of any finite theory.

Davidson disagrees with Tarski on: i) the universality of a natural languages. He recognizes the fact that semantic paradoxes can occur, but argues that they are harmless, and brushes this problem away in a very Wittgensteinian gesture:<sup>7</sup>

In any case, most of the problems of general philosophical interest arise within a fragment of the relevant natural language that may be conceived as containing very little set theory.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Wittgenstein shrugs off the problem of paradoxes – even the paradoxes of mathematics (e.g., Russell's paradox) which seem to undermine a search for the foundations of that discipline. He does not see them as causing any difficulties. We don't need to solve them, argues Wittgenstein, all we need is a rule stating that we do not derive anything from them:

Think of the case of the Liar. It is very queer that this should have puzzled anyone – much more extraordinary than you might think: that this should be the thing to worry human beings. Because the thing works like this: if a man says 'I am lying' we say that it follows that he is not lying, from which it follows that he is lying and so on. Well, so what? You can go on like that until you are black in the face. Why not? It doesn't matter.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, Wittgenstein's Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics, Cambridge, 1939, ed. Cora Diamond (Hassocks, Sussex: The Harvester Press, Ltd., 1976), p. 207.

<sup>8</sup>Davidson, "Truth and Meaning," p. 29.

Davidson's point is that what should concern us as philosophers of language is not the semantic paradoxes. These paradoxes are quirks of a language that will not do harm to any serious philosophy.

Neither does Davidson think that ii) the ambiguity of terms is a problem for a meaning theory. You don't need to know the specific or exact meaning of a term to develop a meaning theory for a language. You need to know whether one can discover the truth conditions for the specific T-sentence. If the sentences of the object language get translated into the metalanguage, that is, if we know what the truth-conditions of the sentences are, we won't run into problems. The reason is that the metalanguage is my language. I know what all the terms in my language mean -- or I at least know how to use them. By my own admission, many of them are vague and unclear. But this vagueness will not affect the truth-conditions of the sentence that they are used in. "As long as ambiguity does not affect grammatical form, and can be translated, ambiguity for ambiguity, into the metalanguage, a truth definition will not tell any lies."<sup>9</sup> Just because, for example, I have not taken on the project of a philosophical analysis of the term "good," it doesn't mean I do not know the conditions for the sentence "spaghetti is good" to be true. "Spaghetti is good" is true if, and only if, spaghetti is good. Davidson advises us:

---

<sup>9</sup>Davidson, "Truth and Meaning," p. 30.

It is hard to exaggerate the advantages to philosophy of language of bearing in mind this distinction between questions of logical form and grammar, and the analysis of individual concepts.<sup>10</sup>

On point iii), Davidson has written extensively. A good portion of daily discourse is given to utterances that are not assertive, i.e., not truth-functional. An account of the rest of the discourse that we participate in must be solved if any theory of truth is to be given for a natural language. His solutions to the adverbial modification problem (positing an ontology of events) in order to reveal the finite structure of a natural language is indicative of the hope he fosters that a truth theory can be given for such a language.<sup>11</sup> The main point to keep in mind when examining Davidson's work on the solutions to the problem of sentences that do not have a truth-functional surface structure is that Davidson sees a truth theory, along the lines of the one given by Tarski, as a *condition* for the articulation of a meaning theory. That is, a sentence must have a truth-functional deep structure if it is to be counted as meaningful within a particular language. You cannot find the meaning of a sentence of another language if a predicate that demarcates all the true T-sentences cannot be given for that language. If all the T-

---

<sup>10</sup>Davidson, "Truth and Meaning," p. 31.

<sup>11</sup>Since it is not my intention to explicate or defend Davidson's work on the finiteness and truth-functionality of a natural language, I will merely give a list of some of the work done by him in this area: "Quotation," "On Saying That," and "Moods and Performances;" these three works are to be found in: Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation. As well, "The Logical Form of Action Sentences," "Causal Relations," "The Individuation of Events," "Events as Particulars," and "Eternal vs. Ephemeral Events;" these five essays are found in: Davidson, Essays on Actions and Events (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1980).

sentences are to be given, or if a list of axioms is to be given from which the T-sentences can be derived, the axioms have to be finite in number (i.e., there can only be a finite amount of semantic primitives), and all sentences that are not assertive have to be transformable into truth-functional structures. Davidson has to reject any previous theories that have not met these guidelines because it seems unlikely that any theory at all could be given for how they work.

The last transformation that Davidson has to make of Tarski's truth theory in order to enable it to handle a natural language is to account for: iv) the fluctuation of truth values of sentences spoken at different times or by different people.

Davidson's solution is to make truth a three-place predicate. That is, truth is not only relativized to a sentence, but, in his view, also to speakers and times. By relativising truth in this way, Davidson has found a way to deal with demonstratives of a natural language and has also indicated at which point a truth theory goes empirical:

Sentences with demonstratives obviously yield a very sensitive test of the correctness of a theory of meaning and constitute the most direct link between language and the recurrent macroscopic objects of human interest and attention.<sup>12</sup>

T-sentences now alter in form from:

(T)  $s$  is true if, and only if,  $p$ ,

to

(D)  $s$  is true for speaker  $u$  at time  $t$  if, and only if,  $p$ ,

---

<sup>12</sup>Davidson, "Truth and Meaning," p. 35.



where “*s*” is replaced by a name of the sentence, “*u*” by the person uttering the sentence named, “*t*” by the time that the sentence is uttered, and “*p*” by the statement with the open variables, *u* and *t*, if the sentence contains indexicals. For example, the following indexical sentence could be a typical theorem in a semantic theory of my language:

- (3) “This gavagai tastes good,” is true, as spoken by me, at 3:00 pm on Saturday, 02 Nov 96, if, and only if, the gavagai that I am tasting on the aforementioned date tastes good.

Davidson makes three major contributions to the philosophy of language by making truth a three-place predicate.

Firstly, a truth theory with a truth predicate ranging over these three variables is able to accommodate a natural language and its empirical nature. This is achieved by having an ontology, not of statements or timeless propositions, but rather of utterances. A truth theory is of the actual and possible utterances of a particular individual on a particular occasion. This was not recognized before because there was always taken to be a distinction between the saying of something (the speaker and time), and what is said (the statement). Truth, it was thought, could only be determined for the statement; the speaker and time of speaking were thought to be irrelevant to assignment of truth values and meaning. Seeing truth in this light was also one of the obstacles to making a truth theory for a natural language. In a formal language, like arithmetic, it doesn't matter who utters a theorem or when it is uttered. All that was seen to be important was the statement uttered. “ $2+2=4$ ” is true whether it is uttered by me or by a parrot, or whether it is uttered

today or a hundred years from now. Because such sentences are true in all circumstances, it was seen to be characteristic of truth that it transcend time, people and places. Since natural languages deal *directly* with times, people and places, it was seen to be impossible to develop a truth theory for this language. Davidson has shown us a way out.

The second contribution that a relativized notion of truth has for a philosophy of language is that it gives us more resources, and better hopes, for solving semantic problems. Truth, taken as a three place predicate, directly overcomes the problems of demonstratives and indexicals; the problem being that indexical statements are true under some circumstances and false under others. Since Davidson has given a solution to demonstratives -- by making "truth" a three-place predicate -- if there are other sentences that pose semantic problems because they have hidden demonstratives, or a deep structure composed of demonstrative elements, then, presumably, we have a solution for them as well. His essays on quotation, indirect discourse, and adverbial modification are attempts to develop such solutions.<sup>13</sup>

The third contribution that Davidson makes here is probably his most controversial one, and I intend to deal with it in more depth in chapters 3 and 4. If truth is relativized to speaker, time, and utterance, then a truth theory is relativized to these variables as well. Now, however, since a truth theory is constructed for a specific language, it appears as if there are a lot more "languages" than there were originally

---

<sup>13</sup>See note 11 for references to these essays.

thought to be. That is, we don't have the language "English," for example, that we each speak, but rather we all have our own languages. "I shall therefore [states Davidson,] treat theories of truth as applicable in the first place to individual speakers at various periods or even moments of their lives."<sup>14</sup> If language is regarded as a conventional set of rules of syntax and vocabulary that is a necessary condition for communication in which communities participate, then "there is no such thing as a language."<sup>15</sup> Davidson argues that communication takes place, not because of some conventional understanding of a language prior to interaction with another individual, but because of the ability of the speaker and interpreter to develop truth theories of the other's linguistic behaviour. "Language" is reinterpreted in Davidson's philosophy as the convergence of truth theories developed by the speaker/interpreter at the moment of communicative interaction. Every person that I encounter has their own language, and I have to develop a truth theory in order to understand their utterances (i.e., imply their T-sentences). That is, I have to translate their statements into my language in order to communicate with them. Even my own language that I have now is contingent because it is relativized to time. It is liable to change tomorrow, and most likely will. This is clearly a dangerous philosophical position and could lead to claims of relativism. Davidson's arguments in

---

<sup>14</sup>Davidson, "The Structure and Content of Truth," *The Journal of Philosophy*, (Volume LXXXVII, No. 6, June 1990), p. 311.

<sup>15</sup>Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," p. 446.

“On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” and the arguments that I intend to elaborate and defend in this thesis, are attempts to show that this is not the case.

## 2.5 Tarski's Trivial Truth Theory

Many argue that Tarski's theory of truth and the T-sentences that are derived for a language are trivial. Critics argue that T-sentences like, “‘snow is white’ is true if snow is white,” give us no insight into the nature of truth. Of course, this is as much a criticism of Davidson as it is of Tarski because Davidson's program is built upon Tarski's account of truth. The triviality is argued for in several ways.

One way is to refer to Tarski's Convention T as disquotational. By “disquotation,” the critics mean that the theory does nothing more than show us how to rid our language of the predicate “is true,” by dropping the quotations from the name of the sentence on the left-hand side of the biconditional. That is, since T-sentences show us that “‘snow is white’ is true,” is equivalent to “snow is white,” we can replace all sentences in our language of the form, “s is true” by “p.” Truth is a redundant concept and can be easily removed from our language. What the critic fails to realize here is that the transition from the object language to the metalanguage is one that is accomplished by *interpretation*, and not mere absence of quotation marks. The metalanguage is the language of the interpreter and the object language is the language of the speaker. If the speaker is German and the interpreter is English, then it is clear that Convention T is not

merely disquotational. Davidson urges: "One cannot find an English equivalent of the English sentence "'Schnee ist weiss' is true (in German)" simply by removing the quotation marks from 'Schnee ist weiss'."<sup>16</sup>

This emphasis on the importance of interpretation also saves Convention T from claims that it is merely a logical function that generates logical tautologies. This is a claim raised against Tarski by Hilary Putnam.<sup>17</sup> If we have a truth theory that specifies a satisfaction relation between object  $a$  and the predicate  $F(x)$ , resulting in the T-sentence,

(4) " $F(a)$ " is true if, and only if,  $F(a)$

is it fair to say that we have said anything substantial about truth? If the extension of the predicate  $F(x)$  is defined by listing the things to which it applies, isn't (4) nothing more than a stipulative definition? And do stipulative definitions really say anything at all?

Davidson argues that the assumption made by Putnam that T-sentences are stipulative is a wrong one. What Putnam is missing in Tarski's formulation is that the right-hand side of the biconditional is an interpretation of what is said on the left-hand side. Putnam sees Tarski's work as purely formal. Semantics, however, is more than formalism. Davidson writes:

---

<sup>16</sup>Davidson, "The Structure and Content of Truth," p. 285.

<sup>17</sup>Hilary Putnam, "On Truth," in How Many Questions?, eds. Leigh Cauman, *et al.* (Indianapolis: The Hackett Publishing Company, 1983) pp. 35-56.

The question whether [the T-sentence] is purely stipulative is not one that can be answered by studying the formal system; it concerns the intentions of the person making the definition.<sup>18</sup>

The person making the definition is the interpreter, the one interested in formulating a meaning theory. The interpreter does not *note* or *remark* upon the axioms that the speaker has stipulated for her language. The interpreter does not have access to these axioms in radical interpretation; they don't exist. These axioms are *constructed* by the interpreter.<sup>19</sup> The interpreter constructs a theory for an already living language in terms of her own language. The axioms are not stipulations, but rather generalizations or abstractions from empirical observations and inherent beliefs about the way things are.

## 2.6 Michael Dummett

Dummett is also interested in the project of developing a meaning theory for a natural language. He agrees with Davidson on what a meaning theory should accomplish, but disagrees with him on what form it should take. With Davidson, Dummett agrees that a meaning theory should be able to give the meaning of any arbitrary sentence of a language and it should remain faithful to the insight that the

---

<sup>18</sup>Davidson, "The Structure and Content of Truth," p. 293.

<sup>19</sup>Radical interpretation is the process of constructing a truth theory for an individual's language -- it is an account of how it is that we understand what someone says. In chapter 3 I outline and examine Davidson's claim that understanding the presuppositions that allow radical interpretation to take place gives the philosopher access to the necessary and sufficient conditions of understanding.

meaning of a sentence depends upon the role of its constituent words. So much for the points of agreement. In terms of disagreements, there are plenty. In Dummett's work on meaning theories<sup>20</sup> there are three major areas under which all his contentions against Davidson's project can be classified: i) the rejection of Davidson's holistic account of language; ii) the claim that Davidson is a realist, and, iii); Dummett's anti-realist, or verificationist, stance. These three areas of contention derive from the disagreement between the two thinkers as to the nature of language.

Dummett sees a theory for a language, following Frege, as composed of three parts.

Firstly, we have the primary level, accounted for by a theory of truth or reference. The theory of reference gives all the satisfaction relations of all the words and sentences of a particular language. At this level, meaning is completely extensional and, argues Dummett, truth functional. The problem is that we can never have a full grasp of a language at this level. The grasp (or sense) that an individual does actually have of a language at any point is accounted for in a theory of sense:

The shell -- the theory of sense -- relates this theory of truth (or of reference) to the speaker's mastery of his language; it correlates his knowledge of the

---

<sup>20</sup>Michael Dummett, "What is a Theory of Meaning?(I)," in Mind and Language, ed. Samuel Guttenplan (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 97-138, and "What is a Theory of Meaning?(II)," in Truth and Meaning: Essays in Semantics, eds. Gareth Evans, et al. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 67-137.

propositions of the theory of truth with practical linguistic abilities that he displays.<sup>21</sup>

This secondary level, the theory of sense, cannot be truth functional because it is incomplete; the individual does not have access to all the satisfaction relations of a language to be fully able to state the truth conditions of all sentences of a language.

Thirdly, a meaning theory for a language must account for the force of sentences of a language; this is accomplished in a theory of force.

The theory of force will give an account of the various types of conventional significance which the utterance of a sentence may have, that is, the various kinds of linguistic act which may be effected by such an utterance, such as making an assertion, giving a command, making a request, etc..<sup>22</sup>

This is not Davidson's conception of a meaning theory for a language. For Davidson, the split between sense and reference is nonexistent because of the fact that there is no such thing as a community-based language.<sup>23</sup> Language *is* the idiolect. In Davidson's conception, meaning theorists should regard an individual's "grasp" of the sense of a language as identical to the satisfaction relations that determine the truth of that particular language. This allows one to develop a meaning theory for an individual that is completely holistic, extensional and truth-functional. In regards to the third level of a language (the theory of force) that Dummett outlines, Davidson argues that this level is

---

<sup>21</sup>Dummett, "What is a Theory of Meaning?(II)," p. 82.

<sup>22</sup>Dummett, "What is a Theory of Meaning?(II)," p. 74.

<sup>23</sup>cf. Davidson, "Communication and Convention," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, and Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs."



beyond the capacity of a theory of meaning. Force is certainly part of communication, but it does not necessarily need to be accounted for in a meaning theory. Force is parasitic on truth and meaning. Davidson urges that we have to make a clear distinction between what words, on a particular occasion, mean, and what those words are used for. A theory of meaning or truth is not concerned with how words are used.

In Dummett's picture of language we have a transcendent entity (language) that is a list of axioms and satisfaction relations. People come to this language and use bits of it for different purposes and they always somehow distort it.<sup>24</sup> The reason for this distortion is that, as was already indicated, one cannot get a full grasp of the language, and hence one's understanding will always be incomplete. Many times, as well, a person has intentions and motives that she may try to incorporate into the words that are not given in the "language."

Dummett's failure to recognize Davidson's claim that the theory of sense is fused with the theory of truth (or reference) leads him to the following three criticisms (which I already mentioned above).

---

<sup>24</sup>Dummett's insistence that a meaning theory is a theory of sense that is distinct from a theory of truth is a reason to classify Dummett with Kuhn and company as a philosopher who holds to the dualism of scheme and content. Dummett uses the abilities of the speaker (the theory of sense) as an intermediary entity that stands between the world and language, in the same way that Quine and Kuhn use sensory stimulations as a content waiting to be organized. See chapter 5 for a fuller account of Davidson's rejection of this dogma.

Firstly, and Davidson's defence will be more fully demonstrated in the next two chapters, Dummett does not hold to a holistic philosophy of language in the same way that Davidson does. Actually, Dummett recognizes that language is holistic, but he disagrees with the claim that a theory of meaning can or should be concerned with holism. A theory of meaning, argues Dummett, is concerned with how it is that the individual has been able to master a language. It is the language that is holistic, not the individual's grasp of it. He says: "I conclude, therefore, that a theory of meaning, if one is to be possible at all, must accord with an atomistic, or at least molecular, conception of language, not a holistic one."<sup>25</sup>

Part of the reason for the rejection of the holistic account is that, for Dummett, the language (theory of truth) that an individual speaks (or has a particular mastery of) is primary, while the grasp that this individual has of this language (her idiolect – theory of sense) is secondary. People partake in speaking a language; it is something that they learn and master as they get older and more experienced. With this split between how things actually are (in a theory of reference), and what the individual knows (her theory of sense), it is possible to make a further distinction between knowing the meaning of a sentence (sense) and knowing its truth condition (reference).

Davidson takes the opposite view. For him, it is the idiolect that is primary. It is the idiolect that we develop meaning theories for. Davidson holds that there is "no such

---

<sup>25</sup>Dummett, "What is a Theory of Meaning?(I)," p. 123.

thing to be learned, mastered or born with.”<sup>26</sup> We do not learn chunks of language and get closer to how the “real” language (say, the one we find in a dictionary) is supposed to be. At each point in our life we have a complete and holistic language that is constantly replacing and recreating itself:

... [I]n so far as we take the “organic” character of language seriously, we cannot accurately describe the first steps towards its conquest as learning part of the language; rather it is a matter of partly learning.<sup>27</sup>

With that view in mind, Davidson makes no distinction between meaning and truth condition -- they are one and the same.

The second criticism that Dummett levels against Davidson is the accusation that Davidson is a realist.<sup>28</sup> In chapter 5 I intend to demonstrate how it is that Davidson avoids this labelling (as well as the label “anti-realist”) by *transcending* such debates. For Dummett, a realist is one who holds that all sentences are determinately either true or false. In his account of “meaning” as “truth condition,” Dummett mistakenly sees Davidson as holding that to know the meaning of a sentence is to know whether it is true or false. Dummett rejects this view and adopts an anti-realist (intuitionist) approach to semantics because there are a wide range of sentences that are in fact impossible to say

---

<sup>26</sup>Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” p. 446.

<sup>27</sup>Davidson, “Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages,” p. 7.

<sup>28</sup>Actually, Dummett’s claim here, and his next “criticism,” is more of a misunderstanding of Davidson’s position than a criticism. The two are much closer in their views than Dummett leads us to believe.

whether they are true or not. These types of sentences fall into three main categories: i) subjunctive conditionals; ii) past tense sentences, and; iii) sentences that quantify over an infinite or unsurveyable totality. Since a theory of meaning for Dummett is a theory of sense, there are many such types of sentences that an individual does not have access to in her language. Dummett argues that if a meaning theory is modelled after a truth theory, that is if we need to know the truth of a sentence to know the meaning of it, then we will never be able to know the meaning of sentences of the kinds i), ii), and iii).

The problem with Dummett's second criticism is obviously that he takes "truth" to be something quite different from Davidson's and Tarski's conception. For Dummett, "truth" is attributed to a sentence when we know what it is true in virtue of:

If a statement is true, there must be something in virtue of which it is true. This principle underlies the philosophical attempts to explain truth as a correspondence between a statement and some component of reality.<sup>29</sup>

Davidson agrees that a statement is true in virtue of something else, but this "something else" is not a component of an extra-linguistic reality, but rather a component of the parts of that particular sentence, and of other sentences that a person takes to be true:

Nothing, however, no *thing*, makes sentences and theories true: not experience, not surface irritations, not the world, can make sentences true. *That* experience takes a certain course, that our skin is warmed or punctured, that the universe is finite, these facts, if we like to talk that way, make sentences and theories true. But this point is put better without mention of facts. The sentence "My skin is

---

<sup>29</sup>Dummett, "What is a Theory of Meaning?(II)," p. 89.

warm" is true if and only if my skin is warm. Here there is no reference to a fact, a world, an experience, or a piece of evidence.<sup>30</sup>

When truth is defined in terms of satisfaction there is nothing that is unsurveyable. Truth is a product of the satisfaction relations of an individual's language (idiolect). What Dummett seems to be contesting is how it is that a certain individual comes across the axioms of a truth theory, not whether the T-sentences derived from them are in fact true. As I will try to show in chapters 3 and 5, it is the conditions of truth themselves and the linguistic behaviour of the speaker that cause an individual to hold that certain words have certain meanings.

The third major area of contention that I will look at is based upon Dummett's rejection of a realist theory of meaning. As I already argued, however, I hold that this rejection is unfounded because Davidson does not hold to a realist theory of meaning (nor to an anti-realist theory). Dummett's rejection of realism, though, does prompt him to offer an alternative which will be worthwhile analysing.

Dummett wants a theory that is based upon the intuitionist model of mathematics. In the intuitionist model the notion of bivalence is dropped. If we equate "meaning" with "proof" in mathematics, as Dummett suggests we do, then an intuitionist would say that we know the meaning of a statement, not by knowing how to prove it as true or false, but by a capacity to recognize such a proof if we came across one:

On this account, an understanding of a statement consists in a capacity to

---

<sup>30</sup>Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," p. 194.

recognize whatever is counted as verifying it, i.e., as conclusively establishing it as true. It is not necessary that we should have any means of deciding the truth or falsity of the statement, only that we be capable of recognizing when its truth has been established.<sup>31</sup>

Dummett adopts a verificationist or falsificationist theory of meaning. This meaning theory is the theory of sense that can be attributed to a speaker of a language that is essentially truth functional. Dummett collapses a theory of reference into a theory of sense and defines it in terms of verification and falsification. Davidson, on the other hand, collapses a theory of sense into a theory of reference, and defines his theory in terms of truth and falsity. In practice, both theories should accomplish the same tasks and both can equally account for how it is that a speaker understands a sentence (meaning theories are just constructions, remember). The difference is the presuppositions that they both make.

Dummett's theory rests on the capabilities of a speaker as distinct from a transcendent language where the truth of all sentences is already defined. The more knowledge that a speaker has of a language, then the closer that the capabilities of the speaker come to the truth. Davidson argues that it is exactly this notion of a transcendent or reified entity called "language" that leads philosophers down the slippery slope of relativism. If there are different transcendent languages that have different relations to the world, then the speakers of these different languages will have different notions of truth. In Davidson's account, there is no language or truth "out there" that we try to come

---

<sup>31</sup>Dummett, "What is a Theory of Meaning?(II)," pp. 110-11.

closer to. This bypasses the question of relativism, as we shall see, because of the fact that the truth of my language is the same as everyone else's. In other words, interpretation into my own language of other languages (or understanding other individuals) presupposes that we agree on the truth of many things.

## 2.7 Conclusion

Davidson's work on the semantic problems of truth and meaning is based on Tarski's attempt to find a definition of truth. Tarski's work shows us how to recursively retrieve all the true T-sentences of a language. The assumption that Tarski makes is that we already understand the metalanguage that we are translating our sentences into; we already know the meanings of the words. If we know the meanings of all the words of a language then we know how to extensionally define truth for that language. Davidson reverses this insight of Tarski by equating "meaning" with "truth condition." In this way, a truth theory essentially becomes a meaning theory because the class of all the true T-sentences of a language is identical to the class of all the sentences of a language that are paired with their truth conditions (meanings). This is pivotal because it shows a way to develop a meaning theory that is finitely recursive. A theory has to be finitely recursive because it is beyond our finite capabilities to comprehend an infinity of meanings.

Application of this type of a meaning theory to a natural language meets with much resistance. Many, including Tarski, argue that it is impossible. A truth theory as

outlined by Tarski cannot accommodate ambiguous meanings, sentences with indexical elements, nor the fact that natural languages are set in an empirical environment where the truth of a sentence can change under different circumstances. Davidson has shown us a way out of all these difficulties with some ingenious solutions. These solutions are the first step in the argument against conceptual relativism.

Firstly, Davidson denies that there is a "language" that we can have a meaning theory for. Language is reduced to idiolect. Secondly, a meaning theory is applied to the actual and potential utterances of a speaker at a certain time. Because of this, "truth" has to be reformulated as a three-place predicate with variables of utterance, speaker, and time. This is his third innovation.

Chapter 3 will deal with the "principle of charity." I see this as the second major contribution to the argument against conceptual relativism because it gives us a way into a meaning theory. That is, if "meaning" is "truth condition," then to understand the meaning of a sentence we have to know not only that the speaker holds it true, but also that it is, in fact, true. How can we know this? The answer is to be found in the analysis of "radical interpretation" and "the principle of charity."



## Chapter 3

### Charity and Holism

#### 3.1 Introduction

Donald Davidson's philosophical project is to give an account of meaning. We know the meaning of a sentence when we understand what someone says by the words they utter. If we can give the necessary and sufficient conditions that are required for an individual to understand these utterances, then, argues Davidson, we have come as close as we can to knowing what "meaning" is. The question of "meaning" is reformulated into the question of what someone needs to know in order to understand another's utterances. Davidson's ingenious solution is to argue that an interpreter, in order to understand (interpret) another speaker, must have implicit knowledge of a meaning theory for the speaker's language. Davidson's early work in the philosophy of language was an attempt to give an adequate outline of what form such a meaning theory should take. As I showed in the previous chapter, his conclusion was that a meaning theory for a

language should essentially be in the form of a truth theory – similar to the one proposed by Alfred Tarski – with certain modifications to allow for the “naturalness” of a natural language. The benefits of using a truth theory similar to Tarski’s was that it was finitely recursive, extensional, truth-functional, and it demonstrated how the meaning of a sentence depended on the meaning of its words. These are all benefits to any account of what form a meaning theory should take because they are all indicative of the fact that it is *possible*, i.e., it is within our finite capabilities, to construct a meaning theory.

As chapter 2 showed, there is some opposition to this account of meaning. The critics, however, do not seem to be opposed to the idea of a meaning theory as a truth theory in principle, but rather show concern as to whether we can construct such theories. Consideration of these critics was deferred to this chapter because it is in this chapter that I intend to explain the process of “radical interpretation” as the construction of such a meaning theory.

### 3.2 Radical Interpretation

Davidson calls the construction of a truth theory for a language “radical interpretation.” Construction of a truth theory is the process of trying to understand the utterances of an individual. Davidson borrows the term “radical” from Quine’s concern with “radical translation” in order to show that the most extreme case of interpretation, the interpretation of a language that is completely foreign to you, is the most

philosophically interesting case because it exposes all the presuppositions that one makes when interpreting into one's own language. Davidson, like Quine, argues that all interpretation (translation) is radical. When we give an account of how it is one interprets a speaker of a foreign language, the steps that we have to take stand out much more clearly than when we try to account for understanding in our own language. But, nonetheless, the steps are the same. Everyone speaks a different language because we develop different truth theories for their languages. Languages are individuated by their truth theories. Only if two truth theories are identical can we say that the two languages are identical. Davidson argues that this identification does not even happen in the case of particular individuals.

I have already indicated that Davidson and Quine hold similar doctrines in terms of translation and interpretation.<sup>1</sup> That is, it is clear that Davidson's account of meaning found in interpretation is heavily influenced by Quine's account of meaning found in translation.

Quine held that the development of a translation manual (through a process of radical translation) would yield an adequate account of "meaning." A translation manual is a list of analytic hypotheses of the form,

(A) *s* in the native language translates into *p* in my language.

---

<sup>1</sup>See above, chapter 1, n13.

Here, “*s*” is the name of the native’s utterance and “*p*” is the name of the matching utterance in my language. A translation manual maps every utterance of the native language into a syntactically correct translation in my language.

Davidson, on the other hand, argues that the development of a truth theory for a language (through the process of radical interpretation) yields the account of meaning that we are looking for. A truth theory, as I indicated in the last chapter, is a finitely recursive theory that entails all the true T-sentences of a language. The T-sentences that are entailed by the axioms of this theory are of the form:

(T)    *s* is true as spoken by *u* at time *t* if, and only if, *p*.

Here, “*s*” is the name of the utterance, “*u*” is the native speaker, “*t*” is the time the sentence is spoken, and “*p*” is the condition under which the sentence is true, or, for all intents and purposes, the meaning of *s*.

Davidson’s truth theory, although inspired and developed by Quine’s quest for an articulation for “meaning,” exceeds Quine’s translation manual in three respects. Firstly, a translation manual requires at least two, and maybe three, languages to work. In a translation manual we have the object language (the native’s language), the metalanguage (the language that the theory is couched in), and the subject language (the language which the manual translates the native’s language into). But it is possible that we could not understand any of these languages:

And in this general case, we can know which sentences of the subject language translate which sentence of the object language without knowing what any of the

sentences of either language mean (in any sense, anyway, that would let someone who understood the theory interpret sentences of the object language).<sup>2</sup>

For example, I could be in a Spanish library and pick up a translation manual that shows how (with instructions in Spanish) to translate from German to Greek. If I speak none of these languages, then the manual is no good to me. It gives no indication of meaning, nor of translation. Of course, I could find a manual that gives English translations of Spanish and German to find the corresponding sentences in Greek. But the only reason that this works is because I already understand English. A translation manual does not give an account of this understanding, but presupposes it at some level. Translation manuals show how to syntactically manipulate sentences of two different languages; truth theories give the meaning or interpretation of the utterances of *one* language (the native's or the speaker's). "The only expressions a theory of interpretation has to mention are those belonging to the language to be interpreted."<sup>3</sup>

This brings us to the second point. Davidson argues that in order to grasp the meaning of a sentence, we need to understand the sentence. The quest for "meaning" is identical to the quest for an account of how it is that we understand. Davidson argues that a truth theory is able to accomplish this task. A translation manual, on the other hand, merely gives a syntactical mapping of sentences. Translation is a purely mechanical

---

<sup>2</sup>Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, p. 129.

<sup>3</sup>Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," p. 130.

process. There are computers around today that can translate from one language to another, but it is clear that this does not mean that they have a grasp of the meaning of either language. If we knew how a computer worked, and if we knew how the translation software worked in the computer, we would still have no better grasp of how it is that a word means something.

Thirdly, a translation manual gives no account of how the meaning of a sentence depends upon the meaning of its parts. A theory that cannot show how the meaning of a sentence is structurally dependent upon its constituent parts would have to account for the meaning of an infinity of sentences. This is beyond the range of the capacities of a finite being. A truth theory, on the other hand, determines the satisfaction relations of a language and its vocabulary. Using standard logic, a set of simple true sentences can be generated with their corresponding truth conditions (the simple T-sentences). From these sentences, using conjunction, disjunction, adverbial modification, etc., the remaining infinity of sentences of the language can be had with their corresponding truth conditions generated solely out of a finite class of simple T-sentences. Those who construct translation manuals, however, are stuck with the task of listing an infinity of analytical hypotheses.

When constructing a truth theory for a language -- when doing radical interpretation -- there are, argues Davidson, three general steps that must be followed. The first step is to find "... the best way to fit our logic, to the extent required by

Convention T, on to the new language.”<sup>4</sup> When interpreting a language it is easiest if we treat the utterances of the speaker as composed of predicates, names, logical operators, etc., and structured by an underlying quantificational system of the first order. Davidson argues that we do this by looking at the utterances that the speakers of the native language always take to be true. Once we have identified this class of sentences, we overlay the logical system of our language as if it were “a grid” onto the object language. This implementation of a logical grid onto a foreigner’s language is motivated partly by the fact that we are simply accustomed to working with language in this form, and partly by the fact that a linguistic system composed of the devices of quantification, names, and predicates, etc., would be a language that had the benefit of entailing an infinity of rich sentences from a finite axiomatic base. Davidson was aware of this early in his career:

When we can regard the meaning of each sentence as a function of a finite number of features of the sentence, we have insight not only into what there is to be learned; we also understand how an infinite aptitude can be encompassed by finite accomplishments. For suppose a language lacks this feature; then no matter how many sentences a would-be speaker learns to produce and understand, there will remain others whose meaning are not given by the rules already mastered.<sup>5</sup>

The second step in radical interpretation is to identify and give the meaning (truth condition) of sentences with indexical elements. These sentences reveal the limit of meaning that can be attributed to each of the predicates of that class. It is this second step

---

<sup>4</sup>Davidson, “Radical Interpretation,” p. 136.

<sup>5</sup>Davidson, “Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages,” p. 8.

that incorporates an empirical element into interpretation and leads one to limiting the extension of certain terms.

The third step is to identify and try to determine the truth conditions of sentences where there is not uniform agreement among language users. This last step tries to get the meaning of sentences that are of a more theoretical nature. This last step presupposes the first step because one cannot disagree about theoretical statements unless they have the same logical grid, unless they can individuate the terms and operators of the language they are using, and unless they know the conditions of truth under the most favourable circumstances. If these first conditions are not met, it would be questionable as to whether they were talking about the same things, talking the same language, or even talking at all.

These three steps of radical interpretation differ in order from those of Quine's radical translation. For Quine, the sentences that we are first able to translate are those that have indexical elements: observation sentences. These are sentences that "refer" to the medium size things that are in close proximity to us. Secondly we interpret standing sentences -- those that are taken to be universally true. Thirdly, we try to determine logical form. The further one moves away from observation sentences, the more chance there is for indeterminacy of translation.

On Quine's account, it is logical form that has the greatest chance of being indeterminate. Davidson, however, holds that this is almost an impossibility. The reason



for this, and hopefully it will become clearer below, is that for Davidson, the notion of truth plays the primary role in interpretation, whereas for Quine it is reference to the observable world through stimulation of the senses. Since Davidson has shown that truth plays an integral part in meaning, the more sure we are of the truth of a statement, then the better chance we have of determining its meaning. Quine, however, places more emphasis on “reference” to *something*, either the world, or sense perceptions of the world, to account for meaning and the truth of our sentences. But Quine has also shown that reference is inscrutable, and that this inscrutability leads to ontological relativity. Ontological relativity is not an option for Davidson. Relativity is a consequence of the dualism of scheme and content that he is fighting against, and also precludes the possibility of interpretation. An account of understanding has to take a route that does not lead to such consequences. It must give prime importance to “truth,” and not “reference.”<sup>6</sup>

I hold that there are three main requirements for radical interpretation to take place: i) language must be understood holistically; ii) interpreters must apply the principle of charity when interpreting, and; iii) the idiolect must be identified with “language.” Each of these requirements of interpretation are interdependent; one cannot fully be understood without the other. For clarity, however, I will attempt to deal with

---

<sup>6</sup>I will deal with this more in chapters 4 and 5.

each of these separately below. I will conclude by showing how they each depend on the other.

### 3.3 Holism

There are many attempts to try to relate truth to meaning – to try to make the meaning of a sentence truth-functional. It is evident in the work of Frege, Russell, and the early Wittgenstein. A major problem with this attempt, however, is the replacement of co-extensive terms in true statements that alters the truth value. This is a problem for Davidson, because, according to his philosophy, “meaning” is not much more than extension, understood as a list of satisfaction relations that a specific term is included in. A term with the same satisfaction relations can be substituted for another with those same relations. But, of course, if one is not aware of those satisfaction relations, or is not aware that the terms are coextensive, then one could attribute different truth values to different sentences.

This is essentially the point that Dummett makes in “What is a Theory of Meaning?(I).” Dummett argues, using Frege’s distinction between sense and reference, that the sense of a term can be different from its reference. The reference of a term is its extension; the sense of a term is the inadequate grasp that a person has of this extension. Since they are different, terms that are replaceable because of their coextensiveness at the level of reference may not be replaceable at the level of sense. This is evident in any true

statement that attributes a false belief to a person, e.g., “George believes London is the capital of Canada.” This statement is true because this is actually what George believes. But if we replace “capital of Canada” with “Ottawa” to result in the statement, “George believes London is Ottawa,” we have produced a false statement, because this is *not* what George believes. If we regard meaning as divided between sense and reference, then we say that the reference of “Ottawa” and “capital of Canada” are the same, whereas the sense that George gives to these terms is quite different.

For Davidson, the distinction between sense and reference is a statement of the problem of coextensive terms, not a solution to it. Davidson argues that the problems have arisen in this area because philosophers are perplexed that two statements having the same meaning could have different truth values. This has led some to abandon the notion that meaning is truth-functional. Davidson suggests that instead of finding problems with equivalent statements with different truth values, we should first question whether the statements mean the same thing.

At this point we can see how Davidson’s ideas on charity and “language” play a role. As I will show in more detail below, Davidson argues that when there is disagreement between two speakers, it is usually because of meaning, and not truth. According to the principle of charity, we have to assume that if a person speaks a language, then that person makes true statements by the sentences they use. If George says that “London is the Capital of Canada,” then I have to assume that he is telling the

truth. But if what he says is true, he surely can't mean by "London," "capital," and "Canada" what I mean. That is, the beliefs he has about these things must be quite different from the beliefs I have if his statement is to be taken as true. And in that respect, his beliefs aren't different than mine about the same things, but rather, he has the same beliefs as me about different things. Davidson presents us with a thought experiment which makes the point more clear:

Take as an example, how clear are we that the ancients -- some ancients -- believed that the earth was flat? *This* earth? Well, this earth of ours is part of the solar system, a system partly identified by the fact that it is a gaggle of large, cool, solid bodies circling around a very large, hot star. If someone believes *none* of this about the earth, is it certain that it is the earth that he is thinking about? An answer is not called for. The point is made if this kind of consideration of related beliefs can shake one's confidence that the ancients believed the earth was flat.<sup>7</sup>

And if we accept this argument, which I will try to justify below, we have to accept the claim that there is not a "language," say English, that we all try to speak, but, rather a collection of idiolects. Everyone speaks their own language, they speak true statements when they use it, and it is our task to radically interpret or understand them. This eliminates the problem of substitution of coextensive terms because if we substitute terms that result in a change in truth-value, we can say that the terms were not coextensive, even if in my language (idiolect) they were. So much for the problem of intensionality.

---

<sup>7</sup>Davidson, "Thought and Talk," p. 168.

There is a problem, however, with Davidson's formulation of a truth-theory, with its entailed T-sentences, that Fodor and Lepore call the "extensionality problem."<sup>8</sup> A typical T-sentence, as has been repeatedly said, has the form,

(T)  $s$  is true if, and only if,  $p$ .

The form is biconditional; it is true on condition that both the left and right hand sides are true. The problem hits one immediately: if  $a=b$  is true because  $a$  is true and  $b$  is true, then any true variable  $x$  could be put in place of either  $a$  or  $b$ , and the statement would retain its truth. Since Davidson is using a truth theory as a meaning theory, he is concerned with finding a unique meaning for each statement. How is this possible if, for example, both,

(1) "snow is white" is true if, and only if, snow is white,

and

(2) "snow is white" is true if, and only if, grass is green,

are formally true? How is it that we can say that (1) gives the correct interpretation and (2) does not if both T-sentences are true?

Fodor and Lepore say that Davidson offers us three solutions. The first they call the "compositionality solution." Compositionality is the claim that any true T-sentence of a language is *composed* of elements derived from the axioms. The reason why T-sentences are true is because the predicates are satisfied by the objects as outlined in the

---

<sup>8</sup>Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore, Holism: A Shopper's Guide (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), p. 62.

satisfaction relations as articulated in the axioms of a truth theory. (2) is not a T-sentence in my language because it cannot be derived from the axioms of a truth theory constructed for my language. Although by itself (2) is true, it is not in accordance with the way the terms are used in the language. Even though both sides of the biconditional are true, if it was the case that this T-sentence gave the truth conditions for that utterance, it would have to reverberate all through the theory. "Snow" satisfies "x is white," but it also satisfies "x is cold," "x is made of water," etc. The truth conditions of these sentences, the right-hand side of the biconditional, would also have to demonstrate these changes. That is, if "snow is white" is true if grass is green, then, in the truth theory that this theorem is derived from, sentences like "snow is cold" would have to have truth conditions that show how "snow" is related to grass as a name in that language. There would have to be T-sentences that, for example, looked like this:

(3) "snow is cold" if, and only if, grass is dry.

If we were deriving sentences like (2) and (3) from the axioms, we would realize that either: i) the truth theory is completely wrong, or; ii) we are dealing with a language that is foreign and not couched in the theory.

T-sentences are composed from the axioms of a truth theory. The theorems of a truth theory are true solely because they have been derived from the axioms. To see if the truth theory actually gives correct interpretations, one tests the axioms, not the theorems that are derived from them. The compositionality solution that Davidson gives for the

extensionality problem is what I prefer to call semantic holism. The words of a language are all interconnected in such a way that they depend upon the rest of the language to work, and influence the meaning of all the other terms. "White," "cold," etc., are all predicates that are related to "snow" in such a way that they have an effect on the meaning of the term. It is the inter-relation between all the names, predicates, satisfaction relations, quantificational logic, etc., that gives a language its interconnected or holistic character. The term "snow" is defined precisely by its relation to the whole language. It cannot be understood or used truthfully outside of that context.

But the reason why these terms are interconnected this way in a language is because the things that they name, e.g., snow, have the same relations that are found in a language. The truth theory for English entails that "snow is white" because it is the case that snow is white. I call this epistemic holism. What I believe about snow, cold, and whiteness has an impact on what I think about, for example, snowmen and winter days. Each belief depends upon a large number of other beliefs and entails many others. This holistic belief system is mirrored by a holistic language.<sup>9</sup>

If someone is glad that, or notices that, or remembers that, or knows that, the gun is loaded, the he must believe that the gun is loaded. Even to wonder whether the

---

<sup>9</sup>Or is it the other way around? Is language mirrored in the belief system? Davidson's claim is that there is not a dualism here. One side does not shape or determine the other. They mirror each other and develop together in a circular or even *hermeneutic* fashion. Davidson says that once we adopt his method of interpretation, we erase "the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around the world generally." cf. "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," pp. 445-446. I examine Davidson's hermeneutic tendencies in chapter 4.

gun is loaded, requires the belief, for example, that a gun is a weapon, that it is a more or less enduring physical object, and so on. There are good reasons for not insisting on any particular list of beliefs that are needed if a creature is to wonder whether the gun is loaded. Nevertheless, it is necessary that there be endless interlocked beliefs. The system of such beliefs identifies a thought by locating it in a logical and epistemic space.<sup>10</sup>

Particular beliefs belong to a much larger web of beliefs. You can't have one belief without depending on many others, in the same way that you can't declare a T-sentence true unless it is derived from a truth theory. What prevents sentences like (2) and (3) from intruding into a belief system is that belief systems are, by their nature, true. The jump from epistemic holism to objective truth is ensured by the principle of charity. Fodor and Lepore see the principle of charity as the second solution to the extensionality problem.<sup>11</sup> I will further deal with charity below.

The third solution to the extensionality problem is called the "nomologicity solution."<sup>12</sup> This is the claim that each T-sentence which is derived from a truth theory should be regarded as a law. This follows directly from Davidson's claim that the first step in radical interpretation is determination of the logical grid of the object language. That is, the first step in radical interpretation is to try to determine, as best we can, what the words, predicates, operators, etc., are for the native's language. This process results with the determination of meaning for general terms, i.e., the interpreter will be able to

---

<sup>10</sup>Davidson, "Thought and Talk," pp. 156-157.

<sup>11</sup>Fodor and Lepore, p. 93.

<sup>12</sup>Fodor and Lepore, p. 84.



determine which sentences the native always takes to be true. *After* we have discovered the general use of the terms in the language, and positing these as nomological laws, we move to indexical situations where truth and meaning depend upon context, and then to the cases where there is disagreement as to the truth of particular utterances. This is different than Quine's theory of radical translation.

Quine encourages the interpreter to first start with the observation sentences (sentences with an indexical element) and then work towards determination of the value of the standing sentences and finally to reconstructing logical form. If we were to take Quine's advice and interpret observation sentences first and use these to constitute the axioms of a truth theory, we could run into cases, derived from anomalous empirical situations, where an axiom gives us a satisfaction relation that violates the general use of a term. Such axioms could lead us to derive sentences from a truth theory like (2) and (3). Taking Davidson's advice and determining the logical grid of a language first, anomalous empirical situations don't affect the axioms of a truth theory and hence do not yield sentences like (2) and (3).

It must be noted too that Fodor and Lepore do not hold that the three solutions which Davidson gives to the extensionality problem are adequate. They argue that language is neither holistic, nor is it radically interpretable. I hold that their arguments against Davidson, however, disregard some of his fundamental principles for the possibility of radical interpretation.

Fodor and Lepore argue that we can imagine a language that is composed of sentences with nothing like the structure that our language has. They encourage us to imagine a language that is not composed of single terms and predicates following a quantificational logical system, but rather one where there is a single sound or mark for each simple sentence. Fodor and Lepore develop a thought experiment where we compare two children: one is a child from earth who speaks English, and one is a child from some other planet who speaks at the same proficiency of the child from earth but with this alternate language. They write:

But now consider a child who is *just like* this one in his speech (and inferential and, generally, cognitive) dispositions except that, whenever child 1 would use "Snow is white" to say that snow is white, child 2 uses the unstructured expression "Alfred;" and similarly, whenever child 1 would use "That's snow" to say that that's snow, child 2 uses the unstructured expression "Sam;" and whenever child 1 would use "That's cold" to say that that's cold, child 2 uses the unstructured expression "Mary;" and so forth.<sup>13</sup>

There are clearly two related problems with the possibility of a language along the lines of the one utilized by child 2.

Firstly, it would appear that the child would have an infinity of sentences to learn if the language was the same for even the complex sentences, like "Snow is cold and wet." But this seems to be beyond the capacities of a finite creature. And if it was the case that a language user could accommodate such a capacity, it seems unlikely that anyone would be able to interpret or learn that particular language, even an interpreter

---

<sup>13</sup>Fodor and Lepore, pp. 65-66.

with a matching infinite capacity. That interpreter would have no recourse as how to be able to compare the utterances of the speaker with the conditions under which they are true. But a language that is not learnable is not a language at all. This is, of course, the conclusion that Wittgenstein comes to in his “private language argument.” A private language, he argues, is one that could not be understood or learned by anyone else. It is the absence of these attributes that make it private; but it is also these attributes that make it a language. “Private language” is an oxymoron.

The second problem with Fodor’s thought experiment is that if child 2’s language is “non-compositional” at the level of simple sentences (sentences in our language composed of one single place predicate) then it seems that, if the language is learnable -- which it must be if it is to be a language at all -- it must have complex sentences that are composed (through rules of conjunction, disjunction, etc.) of these simple sentences. This proves the claim that language is holistic. For example, if child 2 wanted to say “snow is white and cold,” she would have to conjoin “Alfred” and “Mary” into a sentence like “Alfred and Mary.” But, clearly, sentences like “Alfred and Mary” (in the language of child 2) are compositional, learnable, entailed by a finite number of parts and, hence, semantically holistic. The only difference seems to be that child 2 would have a much larger axiomatic base in the truth theory for the language she uses.

### 3.4 The Principle of Charity

The radical interpreter does not have access to the belief system (which I have argued is epistemically holistic; each belief depends on other beliefs in the system) of the speaker that she is trying to interpret. The interpreter only has access to the external world and the public speech dispositions of the speaker. Many thinkers have held that the belief system is internal and private to the individual and not accessible by interpreters. It is this point of view that has led philosophers to posit claims of epistemic relativism. If the private belief system of the speaker is different than ours, then the language that she speaks will have meanings that are also quite different than ours. Such theories have led Kuhn and Feyerabend to talk of incommensurability between languages.

Incommensurability is the result of positing an intermediary entity (manifesting itself here as a private belief system or conceptual scheme) between the beliefs a person has about the world, and the world itself. That is, there are different things that make the sentences of the different languages true. It is that philosophy which Davidson characterizes as defined by the third dogma of scheme and content.

Davidson, however, sees a different kind of link between epistemology and semantics – he holds that they mirror each other. One does not shape or determine the other. What one's words mean, and how one understands the utterances of another, is based upon the events and objects in the world that partly caused that understanding and aided in the development of the truth theory. The condition under which a statement is

true (the meaning of the statement) is the same thing which causes one to hold a certain belief and develop a truth theory for another language. This conviction, he argues, is demonstrated by the fact that you cannot interpret the utterances of another individual unless you also interpret the beliefs of the individual. One way to formalize this is to say that in a T-sentence, the left-hand side of the biconditional is the utterance to be interpreted, and the right-hand side, the truth condition, is the belief that is uttered. Both the interpreter and the speaker have to know that those words on the left are true if, and only if, they mean (or state the condition of truth for) the belief on the right. For example, in the T-sentence:

(4) "Snow is white" is true if, and only if, snow is white,

both the interpreter and the speaker must know that those words express a true belief, and that that belief is that snow is white. But it is clear that any words could be used to express any belief. It is this fact that separates different languages -- they use different sounds or signs to express the same beliefs. The words that express the belief, for example, that snow is white, is different in English than in German or in Japanese. It could be said then that interpretation is the pairing of beliefs (or the conditions that make an utterance true) with specific words.

The problem, an unresolvable one according to the relativists, is that we don't have access to the beliefs of the speaker. If a speaker privately believed that snow was blue, it appears that the only way I could discover this is if she told me. But if we spoke

different languages, this information could never be conveyed. That is, I wouldn't be able to interpret because I don't have access to her beliefs. The dilemma is that we can't interpret belief without knowing the language, and we can't interpret the language without knowing the beliefs of the speaker. Davidson's solution is to suggest that we be charitable in interpreting the utterances of others. By "charity," Davidson suggests that we make the assumption that what the speaker says is true.

The need for charity at the semantic level is obvious. Since Davidson argues that "meaning" is best understood as "truth condition," it is clear that to interpret the utterances of a speaker we have to assume that she believes that what she says is true.

But this doesn't really solve any problems:

[I]f we merely know that someone holds a certain sentence true, we know neither what he means by the sentence nor what belief his holding it true represents. His holding a sentence true is the vector of two forces: the problem of interpretation is to abstract from the evidence a workable theory of meaning and an acceptable theory of belief.<sup>14</sup>

We can imagine two people, who speak different languages, stuck on an island together. One, for example, could believe that snow is blue, say so in their language, without the other able to interpret it. The reason for the failure of interpretation is not that the interpreter doesn't recognize that the speaker holds that her sentence is true, but rather that the interpreter cannot match up the speaker's true sentence with any sentence that the interpreter holds true.

---

<sup>14</sup>Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," p. 196.

Interpretation is only possible if the interpreter is charitable at the epistemic level. That is, when interpreting, one has to assume not only that the speaker believes that what she says is true, but also that it is, in fact, true. But what the speaker holds to be true cannot, then, be any different than what the interpreter holds to be true. Regardless of what language you speak, for example, you will believe that snow is white, ice is cold, the ball is round, etc.<sup>15</sup> If you do not believe these things, we cannot say that you have a different language or belief structure, but rather that you don't have a language or belief structure at all. Davidson says:

If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything.<sup>16</sup>

By assuming that all speakers have the same set of beliefs, we can hold belief steady while we solve for meaning. The interpreter no longer has the double task of interpreting beliefs and utterances. The speaker's beliefs are the same as mine.

The principle of charity reveals, however, that we have a conception of truth that precedes any definition relativized to particular languages. This revelation shows that although truth can only be *defined* for particular languages, truth is not relative, but

---

<sup>15</sup>This is not to suggest that there are a specific set of beliefs that must be shared between speaker and interpreter, but rather that, in general, a large majority of the beliefs that we do share are usually uncontroversial in nature and, for the most part, about the macroscopic objects of the world that we both share.

<sup>16</sup>Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," p. 137.

objective. Chapter 2 indicated that, in Davidson's modified meaning theory, "truth" is relativized to a speaker, time and utterance. Since a language is the idiolect of a particular speaker, as I will argue in the next section, truth is relative to a language. But once it is shown that a language cannot be a language unless it is interpretable, and since interpretation requires charity, the relativized notion of truth is, in most respects, identical to objective or absolute truth. Radical interpretation requires that we have a conception of truth that surpasses that of particular languages. Otherwise, we would only be able to interpret those who speak our own language. As Bjørn Ramberg says:

The concept of truth that underlies a theory of interpretation is a concept of absolute truth.... It is by virtue of this trans-linguistic notion that [the interpreter] is able to formulate an empirical theory that in specifying how the truth-conditions of sentences of L are determined by their parts -- that is, in characterizing the truth predicate of the language -- actually interprets the language.<sup>17</sup>

Prior to determining what truth is for a particular language, that is, prior to interpreting a language (it's the same process), we already must have a conception of truth.

Of course, by assuming that the speaker is speaking the truth, Davidson does not mean to eliminate the notions of error and mistake in our judgements and utterances. His point is rather that we cannot make mistakes or errors unless we already have a belief system that largely converges with the way things are. Coupled with this, we cannot interpret someone as having a belief system that mostly gets things wrong. To get a belief wrong, you have to have a system of beliefs that is mostly correct.

---

<sup>17</sup>Ramberg, pp. 76-77.



For example, if you thought (incorrectly) that Jupiter was the furthest planet from the sun, you still had to (correctly) know that Jupiter was a planet, that the sun was a star, that the planets orbited the sun, etc. A false belief has no meaning unless it is supported by a large number of true beliefs. It is impossible to interpret someone as having mostly false beliefs, or beliefs that are largely different than our own. The reason for this is that:

False beliefs tend to undermine the identification of the subject matter; to undermine, therefore, the validity of a description of the belief as being about that subject. And so, in turn, false beliefs undermine the claim that a connected belief is false.... To put it another way: the more things a believer is right about, the sharper his errors are. Too much mistake simply blurs the focus.<sup>18</sup>

Davidson's conclusion is that "we can dismiss a priori the chance of massive error."<sup>19</sup>

The principle of charity is a transcendental principle<sup>20</sup> which is, so to speak, forced on us.

In that sense, as Davidson says, the principle is not charitable at all, but rather a condition for the possibility of interpretation, understanding and communication. Ramberg agrees with this transcendentalist reading of the principle of charity:

The principle of charity, on the other hand, offers no advice to us as interpreters, it yields no interpretational strategy. It is not a heuristic device, nor is it, accordingly, some thing we could get by without: it is a condition of the possibility of interpretation.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup>Davidson, "Thought and Talk," p. 168.

<sup>19</sup>Davidson, "Thought and Talk," pp. 168-169.

<sup>20</sup>I understand "transcendental" here as "condition for the possibility of such-and-such."

<sup>21</sup>Ramberg, p. 74.

The conclusion from this *a priori* principle of charity is that radical interpretation should result in a truth theory that is mostly true. If there are sets of T-sentences that are true if certain false conditions are met, then we can authoritatively say that the theory is incorrect and we need to go back to the drawing board. Let's say, for example, that we developed a truth theory for a language that entailed the truth condition, for a specific held-true utterance, that snow, in general, is blue. We recognize that this is a false belief, and we have three options to account for it. Firstly, we could say that the epistemic judgement of the speaker is incorrect. That is, there is something wrong with the faculties of the speaker and she has all sorts of wrong beliefs; she lives in a different world. Secondly, we could say that *my* epistemic judgements are incorrect. *I'm* the one who has things wrong. Thirdly, and this is what the principle of charity counsels, we could say that we have developed a truth theory that is faulty. A truth theory which entails that utterances are true if a false belief is held true, e.g., snow is blue, are to be reformulated. The problem does not lie in the judgements of the speaker or interpreter, but rather in the formulation of the truth theory. If one wants a correct interpretation, one has to develop a theory that maximizes the amount of true statements uttered by the speaker and optimizes the amount of agreement between the speaker and the interpreter.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup>Of course, it could be the case that circumstances will arise where snow *is* blue, or any other colour, e.g., blue paint spilled on snow. But that is not what the T-sentence:

(5) *s* is true if, and only if, snow is blue, states. *s* is not a demonstrative assertion, it is a claim about snow in general. And in general, snow is not blue, but white. This is where the nomologicity solution, as referred to earlier by Fodor and Lepore, comes in. T-sentences that do not have the open variables

Some critics, however, hold that the principle of charity gives too much credit to the speakers of a foreign language by assuming that they are, for the most part, speakers of the truth. These critics<sup>23</sup> cite, and invent, many examples where an interpreter gives a correct interpretation of a native's utterances of incorrect beliefs. Such examples, they argue, prove that the principle of charity is not the principle that is necessary for interpretation. Grandy, for one, argues that when we interpret the utterances of another we use what he calls the principle of humanity. This principle counsels that we count the speaker as being rational in most matters, and not necessarily correct. That is, the speaker has a system of reasoning, not a system of beliefs as Davidson urges, that is the same as ours. The relationship between beliefs is the same as mine, even if the beliefs are not. If the speaker has beliefs that she holds to be true, but are in fact incorrect, then given that she is reasonable, I should be able to predict what actions she would take given them. I

---

for time and circumstance on the right-hand side of the biconditional, for example, like:

(4) "snow is white" is true if, and only if, snow is white, are laws about the meaning of "snow" and "white." T-sentences are empirical generalizations of what a speaker holds to be true generally. It is the general case that gives the best chance of determining the meaning of the words that a speaker uses. The case where snow is blue because of spilled paint cannot be grounds for the formulation of a truth theory. This is why Davidson requires, as I said above, that we determine logical constants *prior* to the meaning of observation sentences.

<sup>23</sup>The critics that I am specifically referring to are: Colin McGinn, "Charity, Interpretation, and Belief," *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXXIV (1977), pp. 521-535; Richard Grandy, "Reference, Meaning, and Belief," *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXX (1973), pp. 439-452, and; Steven Lukes, "Relativism and its Place," in Rationality and Relativism, eds. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1982), pp. 261-305.

essentially put myself in her shoes; if I held those beliefs, then I would also hold these beliefs by rules of induction, let's say, that are necessarily common to both of us.<sup>24</sup> Davidson, using the principle of charity, says we must abandon truth theories that attribute too much error to the individual we are interpreting. He argues that we want theories that optimize the amount of agreement between us and the speaker. Grandy argues that we must abandon theories that attribute a reasoning systems that is too different from our own:

If a translation tells us that the other person's beliefs and desires are connected in a way that is too bizarre for us to make sense of, then the translation is useless for our purposes.<sup>25</sup>

There is no need, argues Grandy, to alter the meanings I attribute to a speaker's words in order to make her a speaker of truth, i.e., there is no need to invoke the principle of charity in interpretation. To err is human; it is no strike against an interpretation that

---

<sup>24</sup>The fact that we share common rules, e.g., induction, makes interpretation possible (the principle of humanity). Davidson holds that interpretation is possible because we share common beliefs (the principle of charity). These two different conceptions of the conditions of interpretation entail two different conceptions of what an agent is. Compare Lukes (p. 265):

The necessary model of the agent appears to require at least that those whose beliefs are to be identified are in general behaviourally rational in their actions and that they are, in general, sensitive to deductive argument and inductive evidence (though the degree to which these propensities are developed will depend on situation and opportunities).

with Davidson ("Radical Interpretation," p. 137):

If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything.

<sup>25</sup>Grandy, p. 443.

we attribute a false belief to a speaker. McGinn even goes as far as to say that we can develop a meaning theory by attributing false beliefs to a speaker:

For we may equally provide a basis for deriving the meanings of sentences held true by *uncharitably* imputing *false* beliefs to our speaker. We simply suppose, with or without good reason, that he has made a mistake and is expressing a false belief with a correspondingly false sentence. Falsity holds belief just as constant as truth, and affords an equally systematic rule for correlating sentences of our language with sentences of theirs in such a way (it is hoped) that the former will serve to give meanings of the latter.<sup>26</sup>

I disagree, as I'm sure Davidson would, with these critics on all points. Of course, the desire on the part of the critics to find some principle that preserves interpretation, but nonetheless makes room for error, is a sound one. But it is based upon a misunderstanding of what Davidson means when he says we must "count them right in most matters."<sup>27</sup> The principle of charity is used to *develop* a truth theory, in the course of radical interpretation, not in everyday empirical situations.

Davidson uses the example of you and a friend looking out to sea while a ketch is sailing by.<sup>28</sup> If your friend utters "What a beautiful yawl," we have two possibilities in attributing this "error" to her. Firstly, it could be that she has made an empirical mistake; that is, the ketch is probably too far away for proper identification, or there is too much fog in the harbour, etc. But this type of mistake is not one that interests Davidson, nor

---

<sup>26</sup>McGinn, p. 523.

<sup>27</sup>Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," p. 197.

<sup>28</sup>Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," p. 196.

has it any bearing on his philosophy of language. When interpreting, one has to be aware of the fact that the speaker may make an empirical mistake. But these types of mistakes should not factor into the attribution of extensions to certain words. It would be foolish to interpret a speaker as holding that ketches are “sailing vessels with the mizen-mast stepped forward of the rudder, except in situations where the vessel is too far away to tell if the mizen is stepped forward or aft of the rudder, in which case it doesn’t matter what kind of a vessel it is, it is still referred to as a ketch.” In general, empirical mistakes cannot factor into the meaning of a term. This is why, as I have said earlier,<sup>29</sup> it is Davidson’s contention that the first step in radical interpretation is determination of the logical grid of the language rather than the determination of the meaning of observation sentences. The interpreter first determines what the sentences of a language, *in general*, mean (i.e., determines the conditions under which they are generally true) and then determines what a particular sentence on a particular occasion means.

The second possibility is that the speaker always refers to ketches as “yawls.” In this case, there is not an empirical mistake, but a difference in language.<sup>30</sup> It is the second case that requires charity. You cannot accuse your friend of being incorrect, in the same

---

<sup>29</sup>See above, pp. 66ff.

<sup>30</sup>At least this is what Davidson argues. Dummett, and I think Grandy and company agree, that the speaker is not using a different language, but that she is mistaken about the language that she is using. She is a speaker of the English language; and if she is going to use English correctly, then she has to use the word “ketch” *this* way. I deal with this debate in section 3.5.

way that you cannot accuse a Francophone of being incorrect when she utters “chien” when referring to a dog. Both speakers use different sounds or marks to mean the same thing. If a truth theory was developed for my friend’s language, “yawl” would have the same extension as “ketch” does in mine. It is impossible *a priori* to be mistaken at this level.

The only other criticism against charity which needs to be considered is McGinn’s<sup>31</sup> claim that we could just as easily develop a meaning theory for an individual by counting her incorrect in most matters and attributing false beliefs to her. McGinn holds that holding beliefs false is just as good a constant indicator in determining meaning as holding them true. Of course, he doesn’t recommend that this is an efficient way to interpret, but his point is that it will work, and this fact alone is enough to show that the principle of charity is not a condition for the possibility of interpretation.

McGinn’s claim is completely absurd. Let’s say that I want to interpret a native’s utterance, *s*. According to charity, I assume that the speaker holds that the sentence *s* is true, and I assume also that the belief expressed by *s* is in fact true. Since I assume we have the same beliefs, a process of trial and error, most likely starting with immediate empirical surroundings, will lead to a theory where we can pair together sentences that we both hold true. According to McGinn, in interpreting one doesn’t have to assume that *s* is true. And if *s* is not true, then the speaker has a belief (a held-true sentence) that is in fact

---

<sup>31</sup>Above, p. 88.

false. Here is the difficulty: using charity, there is only one solution<sup>32</sup> when trying to pair true sentences of different languages. But, if we follow McGinn, there would be an infinity of solutions. All we have to do is substitute false sentences on the right hand side of the T-sentence like follows:

(F)  $s$  is true if, and only if,  $q$ ,

where  $q$  is a false sentence. If  $s$  is true when  $q$  is false, there would be an endless number of possible interpretations – as many interpretations as there are false sentences.

McGinn's interpreter cannot revert to the holistic and compositional nature of language, as Davidson does in response to the extensionality problem, because he doesn't have a starting point from which to interpret. To hold that a person has beliefs that are false by your standards is to hold that that person has an alternative or incommensurable conceptual scheme. Kuhn and Feyerabend argue that translation is not possible between such schemes, while Davidson denies that there is such a thing as an alternative conceptual scheme (if there is, we certainly wouldn't recognize it). It seems that McGinn holds the absurd position, one that not even Kuhn and Feyerabend would hold, that interpretation *is* possible between incommensurable schemes.

---

<sup>32</sup>According to Quine there could be many solutions because translation is indeterminate. Davidson agrees with Quine that translation (or interpretation) is indeterminate, but he doesn't think that it has too much of an effect on the development of a truth theory as a whole. Quine holds that indeterminacy is a crucial concern because it leads to ontological relativity. For Davidson, as I am trying to show in this thesis, ontological relativity is, in principle, impossible.



Of course, Davidson is not denying that it is impossible to make mistakes, to have mistaken beliefs, or to interpret a person that has a wrong belief. It is the *cause* of mistakes that Davidson argues needs to be clarified. Davidson gives a very naturalist explanation of the mistakes people make. I gave the example earlier about an obstructed view leading an individual to mistakenly think a ketch was a yawl. Other mistakes could result from mistaken calculations, incorrect training or education, or hasty generalizations. Mistakes, however, do *not* occur because of different conceptual schemes or different empirical content.

It is the possibility of mistake that separates beliefs from truths. Davidson's point is that you cannot base radical interpretation solely on mistakes and false beliefs. A mistake makes sense, or can be interpreted as a mistake, only after there has been much agreement on more fundamental or basic truths. As I already pointed out, too many mistakes tend to blur the focus of the content of the belief that you have. The reason that most philosophers tend to miss this point is that the things upon which there is a lot of agreement are things that we normally don't discuss. They are the ordinary and everyday beliefs that we don't even bother to question:

Making sense of the utterances and behaviour of others, even their most aberrant behaviour, requires us to find a great deal of reason and truth in them. To see too much unreason on the part of others is simply to undermine our ability to understand what it is they are so unreasonable about. If the vast amount of agreement on plain matters that is assumed in communication escapes notice, it's

because the shared truths are too many and too dull to bear mentioning. What we want to talk about is what's new, surprising, or disputed.<sup>33</sup>

### 3.5 The Primacy of the Idiolect

A direct consequence of radical interpretation, based on the principle of charity, is that meaning is not to be found in a community based, conventional and rule-governed language, but rather in the idiolect of the individual. It is the individual who assigns meaning to the terms that she uses. This point is clearly seen in the example of the ketch and yawl that I used above. Since the two speakers use different words to express the same meaning, then it has to be said that the two speakers speak two different languages. But these languages they speak are not languages studied by any linguist. A linguist would probably say that both speakers speak English, but one is using a word of it incorrectly. Davidson's point is that you are not using language incorrectly if meaning is being conveyed to the listener, regardless of how you distort what is typically thought to be standard use.

Davidson says that we must make a distinction between the standard meaning (say, the dictionary meaning) of a word, and what a speaker on a particular occasion means by that word. In many respects this is the same distinction that Humpty Dumpty was trying to make in this famous dialogue with Alice:

---

<sup>33</sup>Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, p. 153.

“And only *one* for birthday presents, you know. There’s glory for you!”  
 “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 knockdown argument for you!’”  
 “But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knockdown 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 what the question is.”<sup>34</sup>

Davidson basically agrees with the position Humpty Dumpty takes in this exchange. Words can mean whatever a person wants them to mean as long as the speaker knows she will be interpreted by her listener as meaning such-and-such by those words. When different words have the same meaning we can say that there are two different languages. What a person means by the words that they use is called the *first* or *literal* meaning of the word (or sentence). This *first* meaning is distinguished from a *standard* meaning. A *standard* meaning is the conventional use of a word in a community based language. Most times the standard meaning and the first meaning are identical. When the two types of meaning are identical then communication proceeds without radical interpretation; that is, the interpreter can use the truth theory of her own language to interpret the speaker. She does not have to develop a truth theory from scratch.

The reason that Alice didn’t get the *first* meaning of “glory” was that there was no way for her to know that “a nice knockdown argument” was the meaning that Humpty

---

<sup>34</sup>Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and In Through the Looking-Glass (Racine: The Western Publishing Company, Inc., 1970), pp. 164-165.

Dumpty intended. And, presumably, since Humpty Dumpty knew that Alice would not grasp this meaning, he could not have meant by “glory” a nice knockdown argument. What it appears he meant to do was to instigate an argument or at least a misunderstanding. But once she is aware of this fact, whether through direct indications by Humpty Dumpty or through her own ingenuity (radical interpretation), the communication of *first* meaning is possible. For communication to take place between two people, both participants must know what the other means (must know the truth conditions) by the statements that she uses. The speaker must also know that she will be interpreted a certain way. If she knows she won’t be interpreted as meaning something by using particular words or signs, then it cannot be said that that was what she meant by those words -- or at least it wasn’t her intention to convey that meaning.

Davidson frames this distinction in terms of truth theories. Before entering a conversation with someone, an individual has a prior idea (a prior truth theory) of how she will be interpreted and how to interpret. Whenever I enter a store and order a coffee, for example, I assume that the cashier will understand the meaning of my words, and that I will understand her words along the lines of the prior theory that I have. I have a prior idea of how the conversation will develop -- most likely along the lines of standard usage. If, however, the prior theory does not work, then I have to develop a passing theory. (We always have a passing theory when speaking or interpreting, but when communication succeeds without problems -- i.e., by convention -- the passing theory acts as prior

theory.) A passing truth theory is developed in much the same way that one radically interprets:

For the hearer, the prior theory expresses how he is prepared 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 his passing theory is the theory he *intends* the interpreter to use.<sup>35</sup>

In order for one to understand what Humpty Dumpty means, for example, one has to develop a passing theory that entails, for example, this T-sentence:

- (7) "That's glory for you" is true if, and only if, that's a nice knockdown argument.

It is the convergence of passing theories that ensures that communication, the sharing of a common meaning, is achieved.

It is also the convergence of passing theories that demarcates a particular language. The truth theory that entails (7), and is used and understood, respectively, by a speaker and interpreter, is what Davidson wants to call a language. When two people have the same passing theory, it could be said that they have the same language.

Davidson says:

Perhaps we can give content to the idea of two people "having the same language" by saying that they tend to converge on passing theories, degree of relative frequency of convergence would then be a measure of similarity of language. What use can we find, however, for the concept of a language? We could hold that any theory on which a speaker and interpreter converge is a language; but then there would be a new language for every unexpected turn in

---

<sup>35</sup>Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," p. 442.

the conversation, and languages could not be learned and no one would want to master most of them.<sup>36</sup>

What most linguists and philosophers prefer to call a language (a set of rules and vocabulary that a community uses, often most clearly outlined in a dictionary), is a secondary notion; it is secondary to the idiolect. This idea of a common and conventional language is constructed in order to allow for ease of communication without the hassle of radical interpretation -- that is, without the hassle of determining the meaning of utterances of a speaker from scratch. But if one is interested in the philosophically interesting question of the necessary and sufficient conditions of communication (as Davidson is), then the conclusion has to be 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 born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases.<sup>37</sup>

Michael Dummett finds Davidson's arguments and conclusions absurd.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup>Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," p. 445.

<sup>37</sup>Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," p. 446.

<sup>38</sup>Dummett, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking," in Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson, pp. 459-476. There is in this essay an amusing paragraph (p. 465) where Dummett attacks Davidson's conclusion that there is no such thing as a language (in a style reminiscent of Dr. Johnson's refutation of Berkeley's subjective idealism) by citing that there are languages in the world. I quote:

The occurrence of the phenomena that interest Davidson is incontrovertible; but how can an investigation of them lead to the conclusion that there is no such thing as a language? Oppressive governments, such as those of Franco and Mussolini, attempt to suppress minority languages; under such regimes teachers punish children for speaking those languages in the playground. In India, crowds demonstrate against the proposal to make Hindi the sole official language. Bretons,

Dummett thinks of himself as taking the standpoint which Alice does in her debate with Humpty Dumpty:

The view I am urging against Davidson is an adaption of Alice's picture, according to which words have meanings in themselves, independently of speakers.... They have them in virtue of belonging to the language, and hence in virtue of the existence of a social practice.<sup>39</sup>

Words and meaning belong to the social practice of a language. Dummett then goes on to argue that it is conventions that constitute a social practice. "...[T]o repudiate the role of convention is to deny that language is in this sense a practice."<sup>40</sup>

This debate is directly related to the one I outlined between Dummett and Davidson regarding the purported distinction made by Frege between sense and reference.<sup>41</sup> Dummett argues that there is a theory of truth for a language of which we all have an idiosyncratic or imperfect grasp -- the theory of sense. For Davidson, the theory of truth and reference are collapsed into one theory; or to put it better, the theory of sense is the theory of truth. In this conception there cannot exist an imperfect grasp of the meaning of a word. *I know what I mean by everything that I say. If you want to*

---

Catalans, Basques and Kurds each declare that their language is the soul of their culture. The option does not seem to be open to us to declare that such governments and such peoples are under an illusion that there is anything they are suppressing.

As will emerge, this claim is irrelevant to the issue.

<sup>39</sup>Dummett, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking," p. 473.

<sup>40</sup>Dummett, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking," p. 474.

<sup>41</sup>Above, pp. 51-54.

understand the meaning of *my* utterance, then you have to grasp *my* meaning, and not the standard or conventional meaning of the words I use. You have to develop a truth theory for these particular utterances. The crux of Dummett's position is that to grasp the meaning of another's utterances, we have to be involved in the social practice of language, and social practices are necessarily conventional.

Davidson argues, however, that while communication is a social practice, it is not the case that social practices are necessarily conventional. Davidson admits that most social practices are conventional, but this is out of a desire for efficiency, ease, and other social pressures, not out of necessity. Davidson admits that there are pressures on an individual to use a word as everyone else does:

These pressures are social and very real. They do not, however, as far as I can divine, have anything to do with meaning or communication. Using a word in a non-standard way out of ignorance may be a *faux pas* in the same way that using the wrong fork at a dinner party is, and it has as little to do with communication as using the wrong fork has to do with nourishing oneself, given that the word is understood and the fork works.<sup>42</sup>

If convention is not necessary, he concludes, it should play no role in the philosophical account of communication.

To substantiate the negative claim that convention does not play a necessary role in communication, I would suggest all that is required is a counter-example to the claim that conventions are necessary. This is easy enough. Think of the case of radical

---

<sup>42</sup>Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," in The Philosophy of Michael Dummett, eds. Brian McGuinness *et al.* (Dordrecht: The Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), p. 9.



interpretation. All that is required for radical interpretation to take place are two individuals and a common world. If both parties want to communicate (even though they come from different languages) they have to devise a theory where the utterances of one person will be able to be interpreted by the other. The fact that they come from different backgrounds precludes the possibility of interpretation by convention. So if interpretation is possible between speakers of different languages, then Davidson's negative claim is proven. It is clear that this type of interpretation is possible, and happens all the time when people with different languages come together. Davidson wants to make the stronger claim that it is not only speakers from different "languages" that radically interpret and disregard the need for conventions, but also speakers of the same language. Even people from the same "language" have different linguistic backgrounds:

It could even happen that every speaker from the start had his own quite unique way of speaking. Something approaching this is in fact the case, of course. Different speakers have different stocks of proper names, different vocabularies, and attach somewhat different meanings to words.<sup>43</sup>

Recognizing this fact and using Davidson's contention that meaning is primarily found in the idiolect of the individual gives the philosopher of language a means of accounting for jokes, puns, irony, malapropisms, "slips of the tongue," etc.

---

<sup>43</sup>Davidson, "Communication and Convention," pp. 276-277.

### 3.6 Conclusion

Chapter 2 gave us an indication of what conditions a meaning theory, formulated along the lines of a Tarskian truth theory with Davidson's relevant modifications, would have to meet. The primary conditions are that the theory have a finite number of axioms, that those axioms be recursive, truth-functional, entail true T-sentences, and be materially adequate (i.e., extensional). In this chapter I tried to outline how it is that we can construct such a truth theory in the process of communication, what conditions have to be attained for the possibility of this construction, and what philosophical implications this has for our understanding of "meaning," "truth" and "language."

In order for us to understand the utterances of another individual, we have to assume that the individual holds that the utterance is true, as well as assume that the belief that she holds true is in fact true. These assumptions constitute the main points of the principle of charity. A direct consequence of this transcendental principle is that when we construct a truth theory we cannot, in general, impute too many false beliefs to an individual. Instead of saying that an individual uttered a statement which was false, charity urges us to alter what we understand to be the meaning of the statement in order to make it true by our own standards. A direct result of this is that we have to hold that "meaning" is primarily located in the idiolect, and not in a community-based and conventional language. In fact, if we understand communication to be governed by a language that is conventionally agreed upon, then we deny that there is any such thing as

a language. Such a conception would hinder communication as opposed to allowing it to flourish.

I hold that charity is the key argument in Davidson's attack on conceptual relativism. It is this principle which lies behind and is the basis of the claim made by Davidson that there is no dualism of scheme and content. An individual can only be said to have a language if she can communicate with others. The possibility of interpreting her utterances to facilitate communication demands that what she says is to be true by the standards of both speaker and interpreter.

Recognition of the impossibility of the third dogma, the dualism of scheme and content, leads to the conclusion that conceptual relativism is also impossible. In chapter 5 I will deal with the outcome of these considerations and how it affects the claims made by Quine, Kuhn and Feyerabend which I outlined in chapter 1. Before moving on, however, I want devote a chapter examining some startling convergences between the philosophy of language espoused by Donald Davidson and the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, especially in what both take to be the conditions for the possibility of communication, interpretation and understanding.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Hermeneutics and Analysis: A Comparison of Davidson with Hans-Georg Gadamer**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

If one was to look for a label for Donald Davidson, and for the type of philosophy he espouses, or the type of philosophical school to which he belongs, the term most likely come to mind would be “analytic.” Davidson clearly works in the analytic tradition, explicating and criticizing its main thinkers and ideas. A survey of the philosophers he challenges in his works would be a lengthy but clear justification of the “analytic” label (the list would include Dummett, Quine, Tarski, Putnam, Burge, Strawson, Wittgenstein, Frege, Austin, Black, Carnap, Sellars, Kripke, etc.). And the ideas and problems that he tackles certainly derive from the analytic tradition. I intend to argue, however, that the solutions he gives to those problems are far from the kinds usually found in that tradition. Or, maybe it would be better to say, the solutions he proposes are framed in analytic terminology, with the corresponding rigour and logical framing required for conceptual

analysis, but are strongly aligned in content with the “hermeneutic” tradition of Continental thinking.

This should not be a surprising claim. Besides the obvious fact that both hermeneutics and analytic philosophy deal with the same phenomenon -- language -- both also claim their origins in the same thinkers: Brentano, Frege, and Bolzano.<sup>1</sup> It could be said that after those three thinkers, philosophy split in two different directions: the hermeneutic school of Heidegger, Gadamer, etc., and the analytic school of Russell, Wittgenstein, Quine, etc. These two schools are not, however, as fundamentally opposed as is often thought. Commenting on the Hegel prize he was awarded in the city of Stuttgart, Davidson says:

Since I was the first non-European philosopher to receive this award, I interpreted the occasion as marking another step in the remarkable rapprochement that is now taking place between what for a time seemed two distinct, even hostile, philosophical methods, attitudes and traditions. What we are witnessing is, of course, really no more than a re-engagement of traditions that share a common heritage. But this makes it no less surprising, since as we know, it is those who are closest in their presuppositions who are most apt to exaggerate and dwell on their differences.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter I will examine and defend the view that there is a rapprochement between these two schools through an analysis of the presuppositions of two specific

---

<sup>1</sup>For an account of the history, development, differences and possibilities of a reunion of these two traditions, see Dummett, Origins of Analytical Philosophy (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup>Davidson, “Dialectic and Dialogue,” in Language, Mind and Epistemology, G. Preyer, *et al*, eds. (Netherlands: The Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), p. 429.

representatives: Davidson and Hans-Georg Gadamer. I have chosen Gadamer as the representative of the hermeneutic school primarily because Gadamer and Davidson both deal with the same problems, *viz.*, interpretation, dialogue and communication. Davidson admits this himself: "...there is a long history to our [Davidson's and Gadamer's] shared interest in Plato, the dialectical method, and problems of interpretation."<sup>3</sup>

As I have already outlined in the introduction, the intention of this thesis is to show how and why Davidson has abandoned the view that there is a dualism between scheme and content. In chapter 5 I will summarize the results of the first 4 chapters to systematically show how this is done, and show what results it has for philosophy. What I partly want to realize in this chapter is a further understanding of the claim that there is no dualism, and an understanding of exactly what happens when we don't regard semantics or epistemology as defined by this dualism. I think Davidson's warnings that "reference" can play no role in an account of how interpretation and understanding takes place is one important hint toward the insight that we are after. The analysis of Davidson's views on reference, its results, and its relation to Gadamer's hermeneutics are found in sections 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5.

I also intend to show that both Davidson and Gadamer hold that interpretation and understanding are both part and parcel of the same hermeneutic process, that they both see "truth" as playing the primary role in any interpretation, and that a language is the

---

<sup>3</sup>Davidson, "Dialectic and Dialogue," p. 430.

horizon or world view that an individual has at a particular time. Since truth, and not reference, plays the primary role in interpretation from one language (or horizon) to another, no world-views can be incommensurable with each other since the same structure of openness to interpretation is present when they are about the same domains of experience.

#### 4.2 Semantics and Hermeneutics

In spite of Davidson's (and other's) enthusiasm for a reunion in philosophy between the apparently divergent schools of hermeneutics and analysis, Gadamer argues that there is a difference to be noted between semantics and hermeneutics that will forever keep them apart. That is, he holds that semantics (the philosophy of language, or analytic philosophy) does not, and cannot, achieve the universality of hermeneutics.

Gadamer argues that semantics is the practice that describes linguistic phenomena externally; it emphasizes the signs that are used and the rules and categories under which they fall. In contrast:

Hermeneutics ... focuses upon the internal side of our use of the world of signs, or better said, on the internal process of speaking, which if viewed from the outside, appears as our use of the world of signs.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Semantics and Hermeneutics," in Philosophical Hermeneutics, translated by David E. Linge (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1976), p. 82.

Although Gadamer grants that semantics does have some valid aims, e.g., the benefit of the logical formalization of language, as an internal analysis he argues that it is essentially impotent. In his essay, "Semantics and Hermeneutics," Gadamer points out several of the problems of semantics, and uses these problems as a catapult to argue for the superiority and universality of hermeneutics. As I will indicate below, most of the problems that Gadamer points out have been, or could be, dealt with by a Davidsonian semantic analysis. If this is correct, one can conclude either that Davidson is not doing semantics, but rather hermeneutics; or that Davidson is a philosopher who has been able to fuse the two disciplines. I will take the latter view.

So what problems does Gadamer have with semantics? First we have the claim that semantics is external while hermeneutics is internal. I simply take this to mean that semantics deals with words, signs and rules while hermeneutics deals with the meanings, in the widest sense of the word, to which these words, signs and rules relate. If that is all "semantics" is, then Davidson cannot be said to be a semantician. From the beginning of Davidson's career he outlined the main problem for semantics as the need to account for how it is that we know the *meaning* of an utterance. Of course he was well aware that many thinkers, including his teacher, Quine, had taken the line that Gadamer criticizes. But it is not Davidson's line.



The problem of the tension between the external and the internal is illustrated in what Gadamer calls “substitutionality.”<sup>5</sup> The semantic theory of substitutionality states that “... it is difficult to find a better definition for the sense or meaning of an expression than its interchangeability with another expression.”<sup>6</sup> Gadamer rightly criticizes this thesis, as does Davidson (as I argue below). Elsewhere, Gadamer says:

The task of the translator, therefore, must never be to copy what is said, but to place himself in the direction of what is said (i.e., in its meaning) in order to carry over what is said into the direction of his own saying.... What he has to reproduce is not what is said in exact terms, but rather what the other person wanted to say and said in that he left much unsaid.<sup>7</sup>

In chapter 3 I showed that there was a fundamental distinction to be made between the “translation manual” account of meaning adopted by Quine, and the “truth theory” method adopted by Davidson. Quine held that in order to grasp the meaning of another’s utterance, we have to develop a set of analytic hypotheses in which a native speaker’s utterance is mapped with an utterance in the translator’s language. Davidson argues that this does not lead to an understanding of meaning, because it could happen that a person who wants to use the translation manual does not understand either the native’s or the translator’s language. The key to meaning is understanding, not translation. Davidson’s meaning theory, on the other hand, only includes utterances of

---

<sup>5</sup>Gadamer, “Semantics and Hermeneutics,” pp. 84-87.

<sup>6</sup>Gadamer, “Semantics and Hermeneutics,” p. 84.

<sup>7</sup>Gadamer, “Man and Language,” in Philosophical Hermeneutics, p. 68.

the speaker's language. The speaker's utterance is mapped to its meaning (or truth condition), not to an utterance in my language with a similar meaning.<sup>8</sup> It is when we can map meaning to utterances that we can say we understand.

In this respect, I would argue that Davidson's semantic analysis is not strictly an external one, if by "external" we mean mere manipulation of signs. His is an internal analysis, where "internal" refers to the meanings of which words are a sign or indicator. Like the above quote from Gadamer, Davidson argues that we are to interpret another's speech into our own words even if there is no exact correlation of vocabulary. Anything said in one language can be said in another.<sup>9</sup> Both Gadamer and Davidson place an emphasis on interpretation over translation because both thinkers hold that it is understanding that is the key to meaning and communication. Understanding is facilitated in interpretation. This implies, and both Davidson and Gadamer accept, that we can understand and interpret without having the ability or resources to translate. Compare Davidson: "It is clear, then, that my view does not make the ability to interpret

---

<sup>8</sup>Of course, this meaning or truth condition must be stated in my language, but this is the best that we can do.

<sup>9</sup>As I indicated in chapter 1, pp. 11ff, Quine and Davidson are both concerned with what it means to say that two people "mean the same thing." Both are very clear that this "meaning" is not some linguistic or propositional entity entertained by the parties involved in communication (a thesis referred to by Quine as the "museum myth of meaning"). Rather, "meaning" is more closely aligned with the practices involved in the use of words. That is why, for both Quine and Davidson, indeterminacy of translation (interpretation) must be acknowledged. Translation can never be exact because there is *nothing* to be exact about.

a language depend on being able to translate that language into familiar tongue;”<sup>10</sup> with Gadamer: “Where there is understanding, there is not translation but speech. To understand a foreign word means that we do not need to translate it into our own.”<sup>11</sup>

Continuing with the theme of substitutionality in semantics, or the tension between the internal and external, Gadamer also brings up the point that it is only hermeneutics that can account for the individualization that a language can take. That is, he argues that a language is always involved in a conflict between how an individual means a word to be taken, and how that word is established by convention. The individualization of meaning that we find, for example, in some great poems, cannot be accounted for semantically. It is dangerous to try to find other words to express the same meaning that one finds in some poems, in order to express that individual meaning, without somehow distorting the poem. With the specific example of poetry in mind, Gadamer argues for the thesis that language is occasional:

What emerges here is the vast realm of the occasionality of all speaking that plays an important role in establishing the meaning of what is said. By occasionality I mean dependency on the situation in which an expression is used. Hermeneutical analysis is able to show that such dependency on the situation is not itself situational, like so-called occasional expressions (for instance, “here” or “this”) that obviously possess no fixed content in their semantical character, but rather

---

<sup>10</sup>Davidson, “Reply to Foster,” in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, p. 175.

<sup>11</sup>Gadamer, Truth and Method, 2nd revised ed. (Continuum, New York, 1989) p. 384.

are applicable like empty forms and in which, as is the case with empty forms, changing content can be inserted.<sup>12</sup>

This claim is formally vindicated in Davidson's analysis of truth and meaning. In a typical T-sentence, the left-hand side of the biconditional contains the utterance to be interpreted, while the right-hand side contains the meaning of that sentence, or the conditions under which it is true. The "empty forms" that Gadamer refers to could be supplied by the three variables which Davidson says truth and meaning are relativized to: time, speaker, and situation. As I demonstrated in chapter 2, a typical T-sentence in Davidson's meaning theory has the form:

(T) *s* is true for speaker *u* at time *t* if and only if *p*.

This relativization leads Davidson to the claim, found mostly in his later work, that to understand the meaning of an utterance it is not necessary to have access to the conventions of the language that the utterance is uttered in. Indeed, Davidson goes as far as to claim that there is no such thing as a language, at least not in the conventional sense.<sup>13</sup> Understanding is something dynamic, organic and essentially creative. It takes place each time we encounter a speaker, whether that speaker is from our language community or not.

I think the fact that Davidson's semantic theory is internal and sensitive to particular situations and individualizations shows that, for the most part, he cannot be a

---

<sup>12</sup>Gadamer, "Semantics and Hermeneutics," p. 88.

<sup>13</sup>Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," p. 446.

target of Gadamer's polemic against semantics. The superiority which Gadamer claims for hermeneutics over semantics is certainly valid, but not valid against Davidsonian semantics or hermeneutics. As I will show below, many of the arguments that are presented in Gadamer's hermeneutics are also presented in Davidson's work, if in somewhat a different form.

#### 4.3 The Problem of Reference

A key to understanding what Davidson means when he says there is no dualism between scheme and content can be found in his arguments against the claim that "reference" plays a role in an account of how our words and sentences work. That is, Davidson is arguing against the "correspondence theory of truth."<sup>14</sup> Simply put, this theory says that there is a relation between our words and the extra-linguistic objects to which those words refer that determines the truth of the sentences in which those words

---

<sup>14</sup>It must be noted that Davidson, during his career, has flip-flopped on how to characterize his (Tarski's) theory of truth. In 1969, he wrote an essay, "True to the Facts," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, pp. 37-54, where he argues that a Tarskian truth theory is, in some respects, a correspondence theory because it requires the notion of satisfaction between words and sequences of objects to define truth. Later, in 1981, in "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" in Reading Rorty, ed. Alan Malachowski (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 120-134, Davidson emphasizes the holistic nature of language and the fact that it is essentially coherent. It is coherence (and its tie to the principle of charity) that guarantees truth. In an appendix to the latter essay, "Afterthoughts, 1987," pp. 134-138, Davidson claims that he has decided to follow Rorty's advice and stop calling his theory either coherence or correspondence. Both coherence and correspondence are attempts to explain truth in terms of something more basic. This cannot be done. I will try to spell out the implications of this in chapter 5.

are found. There is a relation of reference that is essential to our understanding of truth. It is this “reference” that ensures that our words have an anchor in the extra-linguistic world. Correspondence theories say that without reference there is no truth. Reference is a necessary constituent to a theory of truth (or meaning).

Davidson’s arguments against the correspondence theory of truth and against the primacy given to the concept of reference rest on the principle that we have to make a “distinction between explanation *within* the theory and explanation *of* the theory.”<sup>15</sup> As I indicated in the last chapter<sup>16</sup>, there is a distinction to be made between the relativized notion of truth and the general or absolute notion. It is the relativized notion of truth for which a Tarskian truth theory is developed. In that theory, truth is relativized to a particular language and is defined in terms of satisfaction. It is the technical term “satisfaction” which, Davidson argues, takes up the role of “reference” which correspondence theorists are after. But for the general or absolute notion, “truth” is not defined or reduced to any more basic concept or semantic term. *Within* a particular theory (language), truth is defined by satisfaction. But outside of particular theories, we still have a notion of truth that escapes all characterizations or attempts at reductive

---

<sup>15</sup>Davidson, “Reality Without Reference,” in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, p. 221. I continue with an analysis of the importance of the distinction between explanations *of* and explanations *within* a truth theory, and its effects on an understanding of the semantic concept of “reference” below, sec. 5.2 and 5.3.

<sup>16</sup>See above, pp. 82-83.

explanations, what Ramberg calls a trans-linguistic notion.<sup>17</sup> A theory of truth does not give an explanation of what this trans-linguistic truth is, but it does show how to determine which statements of a language are true. In order to determine which statements of a language are true, a truth theory does require the semantic notion of satisfaction. But “satisfaction,” just like any other semantical concept, is a construction that we use to help explain what it is we do when we speak. It is not something that has a life of its own, and is no help in determining the relation between language and world. Davidson says:

I suggest that words, meanings of words, reference, and satisfaction are posits we need to implement a theory of truth. They serve its purpose without needing independent confirmation or empirical basis.<sup>18</sup>

When we radically interpret someone, that is, when we construct a truth theory for the language she speaks, we need to identify, firstly, the words, names and predicates that make up the vocabulary of the language. That is, we must determine the “logical grid” of the language.<sup>19</sup> When we have determined the vocabulary, we can construct the axioms of the truth theory by implementing satisfaction relations between sequences of objects and predicates. This is all done, of course, over time and in deference to how the foreign speaker uses her words. Through this interaction we can determine the conditions under which the words are true.

---

<sup>17</sup>Ramberg, p. 124.

<sup>18</sup>Davidson, “Reality Without Reference,” p. 222.

<sup>19</sup>For the three general steps required in radical interpretation see above pp. 66-68.

One of the results of Davidson's rejection of the primacy of reference is that we do not need to make mention of reference to anything extra-linguistic. The satisfaction relation which Davidson argues takes up the role of reference refers sequences of interpreted words to predicates. A T-sentence derived from the axioms of a truth theory pairs an utterance with the conditions under which it is true. Since the truth theory is one that *I* develop, the statement of the truth conditions on the right-hand side of the biconditional is articulated in my language -- I have no choice about this. The condition under which a statement is true is certainly not the intermediary referential steps between world and language, as some philosophers have argued, e.g, the relation between utterances, facts or states of affairs, and the experienced world. Rather, a statement is true because of the relationship between things in the world (articulated and mirrored in my language). "Snow is white" is true because of the relationship (or "antics," as Davidson calls it<sup>20</sup>) between snow and whiteness, not because of a relationship between the sentence "snow is white" and some representation or propositional entity. Quine recognized the same phenomenon in his theories of translation manuals. Davidson says of Quine's theory:

... a translation manual is only a method of going from sentences of one language to sentences of another, and we can infer from it nothing about the relations between words and objects. Of course we know, or we think we know, what our

---

<sup>20</sup>Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," p. 198.



words in our own language refer to, but this is information no translation manual contains.<sup>21</sup>

Quine concluded, and Davidson accepts, that reference is inscrutable; there is no way to determine it exactly. If we try to determine which objects a sentence of a particular speaker refers to, the best we can do is to name that object through a translation (interpretation). And all translation (interpretation), argues Quine, is indeterminate. In principle, we can never say for sure if we got a particular translation (interpretation) right. There is nothing to get right. This is not because of some epistemological deficiency on the part of the interpreter, but rather because of the nature of language and interpretation. All inquiry into the rightness of a translation is a linguistic inquiry and itself presupposes a level of interpretation. Quine says:

The relativistic thesis to which we have come is this, to repeat: it makes no sense to say what the objects of a theory are, beyond saying how to interpret or reinterpret that theory into another.<sup>22</sup>

Davidson accepts this claim. Or, I should say, he accepts the claim that it makes no sense to say, independent of a particular theory, what the objects of a theory are. He does not, however, accept Quine's conclusion of ontological relativity. Ontological relativity demands that we be able to specify the objects of one theory and compare them with the

---

<sup>21</sup>Davidson, "Reality Without Reference," p. 221. Nor is the information of what words refer to contained in a Tarskian truth theory. Davidson is not here railing against the inadequacies of translation manuals, but showing how, as in his theory, reference does not play a role, and is not needed.

<sup>22</sup>Quine, "Ontological Relativity," p. 50.

objects of another. But, as Quine shows, this comparison will always escape us.

To understand what a speaker says, we do not need to know what *thing* makes her statement true, but rather, we need to know how to interpret her utterance. But interpretation requires that we know that the speaker has the same beliefs that we do and it also requires us to develop a truth theory for her language. As we saw in chapters 2 and 3, the first step in the development of a truth theory is the identification of words and objects, and the determination of the simple satisfaction relations between sequences of those objects and their predicates. Knowing which statements a speaker holds true, and knowing what her beliefs are (through charity they are the same as mine), we can determine what her sentences mean; i.e., we can interpret.

One could misunderstand Davidson's arguments against reference as an endorsement of some sort of linguistic idealism. It must be stressed, however, that the rejection of reference is *not* a denial of the external world, nor is it to say that the external world does not play a role in interpretation. When formulating a truth theory for a foreign language, that is, when radically interpreting, we must be aware of the conditions under which the statements are true. The external world plays a necessary role in how it is we come to understand a language. The rejection of the primacy of reference is a rejection of the belief that reference gives an adequate account of why our sentences or beliefs about the world are *true*.

#### 4.4 Understanding and Interpretation

As I tried to indicate above, Gadamer and Davidson do share a common interest in that they are both concerned with “understanding” and how it is effected in “interpretation.” Both argue that the vehicle of meaning and understanding, and hence truth, is to be found in interpretation. Gadamer’s work is concerned mostly with the historical interpretation and understanding of eminent texts of the tradition. Davidson, on the other hand, is concerned with meaning and communication, as found especially in the situation of radical interpretation. Both thinkers are aware, however, that their analyses of these respective types of interpretation can be transposed into the other. In other words, Gadamer’s account of understanding can be used in the case of a conversation or dialogue, and Davidson’s account can be put to use in an account of interpretation of the literary text. In support of this claim, Gadamer says:

In bridging the gulf between languages, the translator clearly exemplifies the reciprocal relationship that exists between interpreter and text, and that corresponds to the reciprocity involved in reaching an understanding in conversation..... The translator’s task differs only in degree, not in kind, from the general hermeneutical task that any text presents.... It is like a real conversation in that the common subject matter is what binds the two partners, the text and the interpreter, to each other.<sup>23</sup>

And Davidson contends that the triangulation of speaker-hearer-world, which he argues is necessary and sufficient for any communication of meaning, can be replaced by the

---

<sup>23</sup>Gadamer, Truth and Method, pp. 387-388.

triangulation of writer-reader-tradition.<sup>24</sup> The common subject matter, of which Gadamer refers, is either the common world that we all inhabit, or else the literary tradition in which a particular text is written.

Other books help constitute the world which completes the triangle of author and reader, just as prior conversations provide much of what speaker and hearer depend on for good communication.<sup>25</sup>

It is important to note, however, that both take the case of a live conversation to be primary. It is only after we have obtained the ability to speak and participate in a dialogue that we can even approach a text and be spoken to by it. For this reason, in Part III of Truth and Method, Gadamer examines conversation as the ground of any possible interpretation. But not only does he examine conversation, he examines conversation between people of different languages. By these means, we can uncover the conditions that permit all hermeneutic conversations to occur, whether they occur with a partner or with an eminent text:

In situations where coming to an understanding is disrupted or impeded, we first become conscious of the conditions of all understanding. Thus the verbal process whereby a conversation in two different languages is made possible through translation is especially informative.... But in these cases understanding does not really take place between the partners of the conversation, but between

---

<sup>24</sup>Davidson, "Locating Literary Language," in Literary Theory After Davidson, ed. Reed Way Dasenbrook (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), p. 296.

<sup>25</sup>Davidson, "Locating Literary Language," p. 306.

interpreters, who can really have an encounter in a common world of understanding.<sup>26</sup>

This is clearly the same task that Davidson undertakes in his examination of the situation of radical interpretation. Davidson argues that an account of interpretation between two speakers of different linguistic backgrounds will expose the preconditions that allow the communication to take place, which we take for granted when we speak with people in our “own language.” Davidson also holds that this analysis dispels myths about linguistic competence propagated by philosophers like Whorf, Kuhn and Dummett.<sup>27</sup> He says:

Speakers of the same language can go on the assumption that for them the same expressions are to be interpreted in the same way, but this does not indicate what justifies the assumption. All understanding of the speech of the other involves radical interpretation. But 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 in another.<sup>28</sup>

In terms of the aims and methodologies of the two philosophers, it is clear that they share an affinity. Both hold that understanding takes place when we have correctly interpreted either the other speaker, or the text, and both hold that the best way to expose what happens in understanding is to look at the case of radical interpretation. If we can determine what the conditions of understanding are in this analysis, we can apply those conditions to the account of how it is we understand when we “normally” communicate,

---

<sup>26</sup>Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 384.

<sup>27</sup>This what I tried to show in chapter 3 above.

<sup>28</sup>Davidson, “Radical Interpretation,” pp. 125-126.

or when we try to interpret a text. My claim is that Davidson and Gadamer come pretty close to reaching the same conclusions.

#### 4.5 The Verbal World

Gadamer argues for the universality of hermeneutics by arguing that the world is essentially verbal. By this he means that we have no access to the world except through language. Hermeneutics is the process of coming to an understanding of some thing, whether it is a text, a dialogue, an artwork, etc. The world is a verbal or linguistic horizon that is interpreted (linguistically) by the hermeneutic process. In the hermeneutic conversation, a conversation between the interpreter and text, artwork, etc., understanding comes about (eventuates, *ereignen*) when we have interpreted the text or artwork into our own linguistic world horizon. Hermeneutics is clearly a universal process because nothing can be understood unless it is first interpreted; it is this process or event of interpretation (understanding) that is the scope of hermeneutics. Universality is ensured by the fact that nothing can escape this scope.

*[L]anguage is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting.... All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language that allows the objects to come into words and yet is at the same time the interpreter's own language.<sup>29</sup>*

Gadamer's main point in arguing that the world is verbal is to show that there is no dualism of subject (language) and object (world). For Gadamer, it makes no sense to

---

<sup>29</sup>Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 389.

talk of the world-in-itself, independent of how we interpret or understand the world. Our world *is* our language.

Language is not just one of man's possessions in the world; rather, on it depends that fact that man has a *world* at all.... Not only is the world world only insofar as it comes into language, but language, too, has its real being only in the fact that the world is presented in it.<sup>30</sup>

This last line indicates that language is not a thing that *determines* the world, or that the world is some thing that *fits* language. There is no relationship as such between the two. Rather, they stand in a mutual relationship where they become what they are through the other.

This view of the world then that is presented in a language is called a "horizon." Each language has its own horizon or world-view. Gadamer borrows this term from Husserl.<sup>31</sup> Gadamer holds that Husserl uses the term to indicate the finite horizon of perception that an individual has at a particular place and time, in a particular situation. Gadamer uses the term to indicate the understanding or world-view that an individual has, as manifested in the language which she uses. This horizon, however, is not fixed. Like Husserl's "horizon," it represents the understanding of the world that we have at a

---

<sup>30</sup>Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 443. Compare this with: "*The limits of my language means the limits of my world*," Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), §5.6.

<sup>31</sup>Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 302.

particular time. Our horizon, out of which we can never escape, is always with us, but nonetheless is always changing.

The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us.<sup>32</sup>

With every new experience and conversation that we have, we get more insight into our understanding of the way things are.

Language is the record of finitude not because the structure of human language is multifarious but because every language is constantly being formed and developed the more it expresses its experience of the world.<sup>33</sup>

Davidson, on my interpretation, says essentially the same thing. He holds that the world is a linguistic phenomenon in the sense that it is a particular “world-view” at a particular time. By this, I simply mean that, for Davidson, we cannot make a distinction between what a person believes about the world, and their language. That is, in determining the beliefs of a particular individual at a particular time, we are at the same time learning how to understand or interpret the speaker’s language. Davidson says:

In sharing a language, in whatever sense this is required for communication, we share a picture of the world that must, in its large features, be true. It follows that in making manifest the large features of our language, we make manifest the large features of reality.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup>Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 304.

<sup>33</sup>Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 457.

<sup>34</sup>Davidson, “The Method of Truth in Metaphysics,” in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, p. 199.



Our exegesis of Davidson's views about "reference"<sup>35</sup> ended in the claim that it is not *things* that cause statements to be true, or to have meaning, but rather that those statements can be translated into other statements -- i.e., interpreted. It is interpretation that is the key to understanding. Truth does not depend on reference to anything extra-linguistic, but only on reference to other statements, and the components of that sentence. In that respect, then, what has truth, or meaning, or is a possible object of my understanding, is something that can be interpreted into my language. The sentence "Schnee ist weiss," can be interpreted into my language. Since I know that

- (1) "Schnee ist weiss" is true if, and only if, snow is white,

I can say that I understand the sentence. There was no need for me to appeal to an extra-linguistic entity to understand the sentence. But I did need to appeal to a linguistic "object" to understand. That is, I had to appeal to *my* language, which includes: "snow," as an interpretation (or a facilitator of understanding) of "Schnee."

Once we have abandoned the need for "reference" in accounting for truth and meaning, and the relationship between world and language, it is obvious that "world" also has to be reinterpreted. The interpretation, I would suggest, has to take the form of something like Gadamer's "horizon." Davidson does not spell this out in his work, but I think one can argue that he does leave the door open to such an interpretation.

One indication that I see is to be found in the form of a typical T-sentence:

---

<sup>35</sup>Above, section 4.3.

(T)  $s$  is true if, and only if,  $p$ ,

where “ $s$ ” is the sentence uttered and “ $p$ ” is the condition under which it is true. We usually understand this to mean that the sentence  $s$  is true when the condition  $p$  is met. T-sentences, however, take the form of a biconditional, and biconditionals can be defined as the conjunction of two implications. In other words, the form of the T-sentence can equivalently be written:

(T1)  $s$  is true if  $p$ , and  $p$  if  $s$  is true.

By simplification,

(T2)  $p$  if  $s$  is true.

In this case, although (T2) is a derivation from (T), we get a different impression of the relation between  $s$  and  $p$ . We now understand this to say that  $p$  is the case when the sentence  $s$  is true. The condition of truth, or the belief about the world, is dependent upon the statement about that condition, in the same way that the truth of the statement is dependent upon the condition. The condition and the sentence are *interdependent*. That is, when I interpret a native speaker, the condition under which her utterance is true and the utterance itself are both discovered in the same way. Learning the language of a native speaker is both an epistemic and semantic endeavour.

Now, this holistic interdependence is not denied nor hidden, but neither is it made fully explicit by Davidson. Part of the reason for this is that Davidson's philosophic project is not to give an account of how we come to acquire a language, or of how *our*

words relate to the world, but of how we understand another speaker — how we interpret an already living language into our own language. A person's beliefs about the world cannot exceed the language that those beliefs are couched in. If we accept Davidson's (and Gadamer's) claims here:

... then we should realize that we have abandoned not only the ordinary notion of language, but we have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around the world generally.<sup>36</sup>

Of course, this world of beliefs is never fixed. It is constantly changing with each new experience. With each new belief, our language changes. We either expand on our vocabulary, or we develop a new understanding of the words that we have. The extensions that we assign to words could alter, for example, with each new belief that we have.

In this respect, then, Davidson regards the language that an individual has at a particular time as holistic and organic. It is holistic in the sense that one cannot develop a truth theory for that language (interpret it, or understand it) without at the same time developing a theory about the beliefs that that person has. Nor can one understand a particular sentence or word without understanding a whole network of other words and sentences (actual and potential) that are connected with it. And when one word in the language alters, other parts of the network may change as well. Language is organic in the sense that it grows with each linguistic encounter and with each experience. There is

---

<sup>36</sup>Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," pp. 445-446.

not some “Language” that we are all striving to master, but rather at each stage in our organic or evolutionary<sup>37</sup> linguistic development we possess a complete language – a complete world-view.

[I]n so far as we take the “organic” character of language seriously, we cannot accurately describe the first steps toward its conquest as learning part of the language; rather it is a matter of partly learning.<sup>38</sup>

This is exactly what Gadamer says about language learning as well:

Learning to speak does not mean learning to use a preexistent tool for designating a world already somehow familiar to us; it means acquiring a familiarity and acquaintance with the world itself and how it confronts us.<sup>39</sup>

Language is not a tool or instrument, present-to-hand, that allows us to do things; it is the dynamic and ever-changing world that we occupy. Our linguistic horizon is never fixed.

For Gadamer, the idea of a fixed horizon is an abstraction from the myriad of blending horizons constituted by the interaction of multiple individuals. He says:

Just as the individual is never simply an individual because he is always in understanding with others, so too the closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction. The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon.<sup>40</sup>

These reflections on the nature of language have led Davidson to:

---

<sup>37</sup>“Evolutionary” understood as getting better, but without a fixed or set goal.

<sup>38</sup>Davidson, “Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages,” p. 7.

<sup>39</sup>Gadamer, “Man and Language,” p. 63.

<sup>40</sup>Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 304.

... conclude that there is no such thing as a language, not if language is anything like many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases.<sup>41</sup>

From very similar considerations, Gadamer makes the same point:

It is obvious that an instrumentalist theory of signs which sees words and concepts as handy tools has missed the point of the hermeneutical phenomenon. If we stick to what takes place in speech, and above all, in every dialogue with tradition carried on by the human sciences, we cannot fail to see here that concepts are constantly in the process of being formed....

Indeed, the situation is even more difficult. It is doubtful that the *concept of language* that modern linguistics and philosophy of language take as their starting point is adequate to the situation.<sup>42</sup>

#### 4.6 The Fusion of Horizons

Of course, as I indicated in chapter 1, the idea that we all live in different worlds is exactly the claim that Whorf, Kuhn and Feyerabend argue for, and which Davidson says leads to relativism. These thinkers argue that different worlds presuppose different concepts, and hence a different language. And since the words or concepts found in a world that we do not occupy cannot be words and concepts for things in our world, translation is impossible. This impossibility of translation is referred to by Kuhn and Feyerabend as “incommensurability.”

---

<sup>41</sup>Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” p. 446.

<sup>42</sup>Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 403.

Davidson argues against this type of relativism by using the thesis that “reference” plays no constitutive role in the translinguistic account of truth that is required for interpretation (understanding) between speakers of two different languages. It is only when I try to account for *my* horizon, or worldview, that the notion of reference plays any role. When trying to understand *another* individual, or language, we use truth, in the form of charity, as the primary principle.

Taking the idea that our world is verbal, and coupling it with the principle of charity, viz., that most of our beliefs about the world are true, Davidson shows that the notion of incommensurability becomes “largely true but not translatable.”<sup>43</sup> And this is impossible because “truth” is a semantic notion that is predicated of utterances that are able to be interpreted into our language. In other words, we know the meaning of a sentence only when we know the conditions under which it is true. The condition under which any sentence is true has to be articulated in my language, or on this analysis, in terms of my world-view. Truth, interpretation, and understanding are interdependent concepts. In a different context, Davidson says:

So what sounded like a thrilling discovery -- that truth is relative to a conceptual scheme -- has not so far been shown to be anything more than the pedestrian and familiar fact that the truth of a sentence is relative to (among other things) the language to which it belongs. Instead of living in different worlds, Kuhn's scientists may, like those who need Webster's dictionary, be only words apart.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup>Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” p. 194.

<sup>44</sup>Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” p. 189. The “other things” to which the truth of a sentence is relative to are time and speaker.

And to be words apart (to have a different language) means that any distance can be bridged, in principle, by a correct interpretation.

In chapter 3, I tried to outline Davidson's account of how radical interpretation takes place. It boiled down to "convergence of passing theories," where a passing theory is how a speaker understands the hearer to be interpreting her, and how a hearer is interpreting (understanding) the speaker. When the two passing theories are the same, it could be said that the speaker and hearer have reached an understanding. It could also be said that they are speaking the same language. It is only when they "speak the same language" that understanding takes place. Passing theories are to be distinguished from prior theories.

Prior theories are how a speaker expects to be interpreted by a hearer prior to speaking, and how a hearer is prepared to interpret the speaker prior to listening. In some cases, argues Davidson, passing and prior theories are the same. What one expects in a conversation is sometimes what one gets. But in a lot of instances, the passing theory is quite different from the prior theory. This is taken to its extreme in the case of radical interpretation. In this situation, there is no prior theory. To understand each other, the two participants must develop a passing theory (a common language) as they learn more about each other. Of course, this passing theory is not a language distinct from the language (world or horizon) that the interpreter and speaker already speak. My understanding (interpretation) of a foreign utterance is given in terms of my language.

A passing theory is not a theory of what anyone (except maybe a philosopher) would call an actual natural language. "Mastery" of such a language would be useless, since knowing a passing theory is only knowing how to interpret a particular utterance on a particular occasion. Nor could such a language, if we want to call it that, be said to have been learned, or to be governed by conventions. Of course things previously learned were essential to arriving at the passing theory, but what was learned could not have been the passing theory.<sup>45</sup>

In this last quote, Davidson can be regarded as one philosopher who does hold that an actual natural language is something that is relativized to a particular situation. This is a thesis he has continually stressed since his earliest work in semantics.<sup>46</sup> In the essay that the above quote comes from, Davidson makes an attempt to define a language in terms of his model of passing and prior theories. And as I noted several times in this thesis, Davidson's conclusion is that there is no language; at least not one like has been conceptualized by philosophers and linguists in the past. What this claim amounts to is that there is no *fixed* language or *closed* horizon. Language has to be reconceptualized as something that is shifting, organic and dynamic. Or, in Gadamerian terms, language is an open horizon. As an open horizon, it is susceptible to influences from other horizons.

In fact, it is this susceptibility that allows us to partake in, or "fuse with," other horizons. Davidson argues that it is only when passing theories converge that we can say that we have understood. We have understood because we have taken the speaker's

---

<sup>45</sup>Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," p. 443.

<sup>46</sup>Even in "Truth and Meaning," written in 1967, Davidson argues that a truth predicate for a truth theory must be relativized to language, time and speaker.



language and interpreted it into our own. It is this convergence of passing theories, or the event of understanding, that Davidson refers to as a language. For Gadamer, it is what he calls “the fusion of horizons” that allows understanding to happen. *“The fusion of horizons that takes place in understanding is actually the achievement of language.”*<sup>47</sup> The structure of this fusion has the same basic structure as the convergence of passing theories. That is, it is linguistic, it presupposes a common language, and it deals with the truth of the matter, whatever that may be, i.e., it brings the content of the language into the light:

Every conversation presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language. Some thing is placed in the center, as the Greeks say, which the partners in dialogue both share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another. Hence reaching an understanding on the subject matter of a conversation necessarily means that a common language must first be worked out in the conversation.<sup>48</sup>

Gadamer argues, like Davidson, that it is the fact that a horizon is necessarily open that allows it to be fused with other horizons. A horizon that cannot be fused, or a language that cannot be understood, is not a horizon (language) at all. He says:

[E]ach worldview can be extended into every other. It can understand and comprehend, from within itself, the “view” of the world presented in another language.... Our verbal experience of the world has the capacity to embrace the most varied relationships of life.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup>Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 378.

<sup>48</sup>Gadamer, Truth and Method, pp. 378-379.

<sup>49</sup>Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 448.

Horizontal openness is constituted not by the language itself, or the person speaking the language, but by the truth that is presented in the language. In other words, because a foreign language says mostly true things about the world, as our language says mostly true things about the world, we can pair up the true sentences from both languages; this is called “interpretation.” The guarantee that a language is *essentially* truthful is Davidson’s *transcendental* argument for the principle of charity. As I already showed in chapter 3, charity ensures that a language cannot say mostly false things about the world. If it were otherwise, then it would preclude interpretation, understanding and, hence, the claim to be a language:

The methodological advice to interpret in a way that optimizes agreement should not be conceived as resting on a charitable assumption about human intelligence that might turn out to be false. If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything.<sup>50</sup>

Gadamer adopts this methodological advice as well. He asks:

Is it not, in fact, the case that every misunderstanding presupposes a “deep common accord?”... When we try to reach agreement on a matter on which we have different opinions, this deeper factor always comes into play, even if we are seldom aware of it.<sup>51</sup>

Being “seldom aware” of the “deep common accord” is a fact that Davidson recognizes as well. Whenever two people have a disagreement, it presupposes that they have a large

---

<sup>50</sup>Davidson, “Radical Interpretation,” p. 137.

<sup>51</sup>Gadamer, “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,” in Philosophical Hermeneutics, pp. 7-8.

store of common agreement. Otherwise, those two people would, in all likelihood, be unable to even identify what they are disagreeing about. Of course, what they agree about goes unsaid because of its triviality. If I disagree with a friend, for example, about whether the yacht that we both see in the harbour was classified as a “ketch” or a “yawl,” then it would presuppose that we both correctly believe that yachts are sailing vessels, that sailing vessels float, that boats float in water, that fish live in water, that boats berth in harbours, that we are both standing on a wharf, etc. These are all trivial beliefs, they go unsaid, and there are a huge amount of them. But without these common true beliefs, without a deep common accord, it would be uncertain as to what we were disagreeing about.

It isn't that any one false belief necessarily destroys our ability to identify further beliefs, but that the identification must depend on a large background of largely unmentioned and unquestioned true beliefs. To put it another way: the more things a believer is right about, the sharper his errors are. Too much mistake simply blurs the focus.<sup>52</sup>

In this respect, the principle of charity is to be distinguished from the principle of humanity. As I indicated in chapter 3, the principle of humanity counsels that we assign a rational structure to the actions of the individual that we interpret. It recommends that understanding comes about when we can “put ourselves into the other person's shoes.” All that is required for interpretation on this view is that we empathize with the individual. We are to say to ourselves: “If I were her, and I held that belief, then, using

---

<sup>52</sup>Davidson, “Thought and Talk,” p. 168.

the rational structure that is common to all humans, I would hold these other beliefs.” It doesn't matter whether the beliefs are true or false, I can still interpret.

I have already shown the absurdity of this position.<sup>53</sup> It is absurd because it tries to separate interpretation, or meaning, from truth. According to Davidson, however, to know the meaning of a sentence, to interpret or understand, is to know the conditions under which that sentence is true. Davidson accepts an aspect of the principle of humanity that states that the set of beliefs a person holds form a consistent system, but he goes a step further and argues that that consistent system is composed of beliefs that are, for the most part, true. Without “truth,” a language could not be understood.

Gadamer agrees. He shows, in Truth and Method, that the methodology for interpretation given to us, for example, by Schleiermacher and Collingwood, viz., where we assume the standpoint of the historical figure that we wish to understand, is inauthentic. What we need in order to understand or interpret, argues Gadamer, is the “rightness of opinion,” the truth, the common subject matter. He says:

Since we are now concerned not with individuality and what it thinks but with the truth of what is said, a text is not understood as a mere expression of life but is taken seriously in its claim to truth.<sup>54</sup>

The interpreter cannot adopt the principle of humanity, or what Gadamer calls “thinking historically,” as the primary principle of interpretation. To do so would be to neglect the

---

<sup>53</sup>Above, pp. 86-92.

<sup>54</sup>Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 297.

truth of what one is trying to interpret. It would be to neglect the subject matter. "The text that is understood historically is forced to abandon its claim to truth."<sup>55</sup>

Gadamer does not deny that the text, tradition, artwork, interlocutor, etc., that we are discoursing with is consistent and complete. Completeness is a condition of the possibility of interpretation. Gadamer calls this the "fore-conception of completeness."<sup>56</sup> An interpretation that is not rational, complete and consistent, is not an interpretation.

So when we read a text we always assume its completeness, and only when this assumption proves to be mistaken -- ie., the text is not intelligible -- do we begin to suspect the text and try to discover how it can be remedied.<sup>57</sup>

But the completeness ensured by the principle of humanity, although necessary, is not all that we are looking for. A complete set of beliefs, as manifested in a language (or world-view), is at the same time a set of beliefs that is largely true. Interpretation is based on an understanding of a common subject matter, or a common world. This is ensured by the fact that: i) the world that we live in is verbal, and; ii) all interpretation is interpretation into *my* language. Interpretation into my language is equivalent to a fusion with my world-view or horizon:

---

<sup>55</sup>Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 303.

<sup>56</sup>cf. Truth and Method, pp. 293ff.

<sup>57</sup>Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 294. In chapter 3 I showed that, for Davidson, an interpretation that results in attributing mostly inconsistent or false beliefs to a speaker is an interpretation that must be modified. Charity states that most errors lie in interpretation, not in the epistemological attitudes of the speaker or hearer.

This contention is confirmed by the fact that the concrete dealing with a text yields understanding only when what is said in the text begins to find expression in the interpreter's own language. Interpretation belongs to the essential unity of understanding. One must take up into himself what is said to him in such a fashion that it speaks and finds an answer in words of his own language.<sup>58</sup>

Davidson proves that we can only understand the language of another individual when that individual expresses mostly true beliefs with that language. If those beliefs are true, then the sentences used to articulate those beliefs can be correlated with sentences that I hold true in my language. Only a true horizon can be fused with mine. As Gadamer says:

The prejudice of completeness, then, implies not only this formal element -- that a text should express its meaning -- but also that what it says should be the complete truth.... Hence the most basic of all hermeneutic preconditions remains one's own fore-understanding, which comes from being concerned with the same subject.<sup>59</sup>

#### 4.7 Conclusion

It is clear, I think, that the "gulf" that separates the analytic tradition from the hermeneutic tradition is one that can easily be bridged if Davidson and Gadamer are an indication of the similarities in opinion that can be found in the two schools. This chapter has been an attempt to clarify some of Davidson's concerns by showing some of the

---

<sup>58</sup>Gadamer, "On the Problem of Self-Understanding," in Philosophical Hermeneutics, p. 57.

<sup>59</sup>Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 294. As I argue in chapter 3, the most basic of all interpretive conditions for Davidson is the principle of charity.

convergences between the two thinkers that are indicative of the rapprochement which, Davidson argues, we are witnessing now.

One of the convergences that I demonstrated between these two thinkers is that any account of understanding is essentially an account of interpretation. If an interpreter can devise a way to determine the true sentences of a speaker and match them to sentences she holds true, then, both Davidson and Gadamer argue, she has understood. Now, the *method* of this procedure of interpretation is not specifically dealt with by either thinker. Neither thinker holds that the task of outlining such a method is a philosophically interesting one. That task should be left to the linguist, anthropologist or psychologist. In fact, both Davidson and Gadamer hint that such a methodology may be impossible to formalize. Davidson, for instance, says:

For there are no rules for arriving at passing theories, no rules in any strict sense, as opposed to rough maxims and methodological generalities. A passing theory really is like a theory in this, that it is derived by wit, luck, and wisdom from a private vocabulary of grammar, knowledge of the ways people get their point across, and rules of thumb for figuring out what deviations from the dictionary are most likely.<sup>60</sup>

And Gadamer argues that:

Given the intermediate position in which hermeneutics operates, it follows that its work is not to develop a procedure of understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which this understanding takes place.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup>Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," p. 446.

<sup>61</sup>Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 295.

It has partly been my aim in this chapter to show that Davidson and Gadamer have reached the same conclusions as to what some of these conditions are by way of the comparison of the two thinkers and by trying to illuminate Davidson's critique of conceptual relativism. Davidson's critique, then, has been illuminated in several ways.

First, I have argued that both Davidson and Gadamer hold that truth, as opposed to reference, plays the major role in determination of meaning. Access to meaning is the role of the interpretive process. Davidson argues that interpretation is not possible without the principle of charity. Charity states that we are to count the speaker as holding mostly true beliefs. Gadamer argues for this as well from the standpoint of an individual's fore-understanding. Since all interpretations are interpretations into my language, an authentic interpretation is one that coincides with the prejudices that I have about the world. The idea that we can shed our worldview, horizon or language and inhabit another's horizon is a misconception. Everything has to be translated into our language or world-view if it is to be understood. It is from this position that we can define what the true is.

Secondly, I have argued that we cannot make a distinction, or at least cannot posit a dualism, between world and language. This is a fallout from the claim that truth plays the essential role in interpretation. An interpretation is an interpretation into our language, and, hence, an interpretation into our world-view or horizon. As charity demands, an authentic interpretation is one that brings to light the truth of the subject.



And since truth is defined from our horizon -- from our language -- interpretation is a fusion of corresponding world-views. But I must stress once again, this is not the thesis of conceptual relativism that is found in Kuhn, Whorf and Feyerabend. The conception of the relationship between world and language argued for by those philosophers is one that ignores the conception of absolute truth that transcends all languages or world-views and allows communication to take place. Those philosophers hold that different languages could demarcate radically different world-views in which there does not exist a common subject matter or truth expressible in both languages. I have shown that this is not the position of Davidson and Gadamer.

Finally, Davidson and Gadamer see language as a shifting and dynamic communion of two speakers. It is not a fixed or closed horizon that we acquire as a tool to achieve certain tasks in the world. Once we renounce the dualism of scheme and content, it makes no sense to say we approach the world with a language. They both evolve in the same way. And each time we communicate with another, we have to create a common language. This leads Davidson to conclude that "[t]he methodology of interpretation is, in this respect, nothing but epistemology seen in the mirror of meaning."<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup>Davidson, "Thought and Talk," p. 169.

## Chapter 5

### The Relation Between World and Language

#### 5.1 Introduction

The aim of this thesis has been to trace out Donald Davidson's philosophy of language in order to show how he destroys the notion of conceptual relativism, and to show how the idea of a dualism between scheme and content must necessarily go by the board. Davidson's claim is that:

In giving up the dualism of scheme and content, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false.<sup>1</sup>

It is the articulation of this unmediated touch with the world that is the focus of this chapter.

---

<sup>1</sup>Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," p. 198.

My contention, up to this point, has been that an understanding of several important features in Davidson's work naturally lead one to these very conclusions about the relationship between world and language. In chapters 2, 3 and 4 I have shown: i) how Davidson transforms a Tarskian truth theory into a meaning theory for a natural language; ii) how the principle of charity acts as a transcendental principle which prohibits the possibility of attributing too much error to a speaker we are trying to radically interpret (understand) and; iii) how, like Gadamer, Davidson's rejection of the primacy of "reference" in an account of meaning and communication leads to the conclusion that we must understand a language as a world-view or horizon that is essentially correct and necessarily open to our understanding. Simply put: to know the meaning of an utterance is to know the conditions under which it would be true, and we know we have the right understanding because we can only understand (interpret) utterances which, for the most part, are true.

From these important features in Davidson's work, it is easy to see that "truth" plays a major role. One would expect, then, that Davidson would take up the task of explaining what "truth" is; not the task that Tarski took up -- the definition of truth relativized to a particular language -- but the task of outlining what "absolute truth" is: the translinguistic notion. For prior to any radical interpretation, we already have an idea of what it is for a statement to be true. We don't learn a language and *then* determine which sentences are true. Rather, truth plays a major role in the whole learning process.

The concept must be there from the beginning in order for an individual to even understand, or have the possibility of understanding.

But, surprisingly, Davidson has little to say about truth itself. Actually, it is not that he doesn't say much about truth; but more that there isn't much to say about it. The concept of truth always plays a major role in any analysis he undertakes, but he insists that it is the most basic concept we have. It cannot be defined in terms of anything else; any attempt to do so would be circular. That is, we must first have a prior notion of truth in order to even be able to define any concept (even "truth") whatsoever:

It is a mistake to look for a behavioristic, or indeed any other sort of explicit definition or outright reduction of the concept of truth. Truth is one of the clearest and most basic concepts we have, so it is fruitless to dream of eliminating it in favor of something simpler or more fundamental.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I will look at why Davidson holds this minimalist attitude towards truth, how that attitude affects the debate between coherence and correspondence theories of truth, and how it can show us a way out of, or transcend, the realism/anti-realism debate. If we understand these arguments, then we are in a better position to see what Davidson means when says that the relation between world and language is "unmediated."

---

<sup>2</sup>Davidson, "The Structure and Content of Truth," p. 314.

## 5.2 Truth, Explanations and Causes

In the previous chapter I outlined why Davidson argues that “reference” plays no role in an account of how it is that our words and sentences mean what they do.<sup>3</sup> The conclusion was that “reference” is a concept that is used *within* a truth theory – it is a construct. A truth theory that uses the concept of reference does not presuppose that there is such a relation called “reference.” It uses that constructed relation to show how truth theoretically works. It must be recognized, argues Davidson, that we could easily have constructed a theory that had a very different microstructure in order to explain the phenomenon of truth. He says:

For if there is one way of assigning entities to expressions (a way of characterizing “satisfaction”) that yields acceptable results with respect to the truth conditions of sentences, there will be endless other ways that do as well. There is no reason to call any one of these semantical relations “reference” or “satisfaction.”<sup>4</sup>

The argument of the essay from which the above passage is quoted is that we need to make a distinction between “explanation *within* the theory and explanation *of* the theory.”<sup>5</sup> Truth theorists of the past, argues Davidson, have tended to blur this distinction. Davidson’s claim is that although “reference” (or “satisfaction”) is employed to show how “truth” works in a particular theory (e.g., Tarski’s), it is not a relation that

---

<sup>3</sup>See section 4.3 above.

<sup>4</sup>Davidson, “Reality Without Reference,” p. 224.

<sup>5</sup>Davidson, “Reality Without Reference,” p. 221.

needs independent justification; it is not a relation that exists outside of the theory.

Outside of particular truth theories, “[n]othing, however, no *thing* makes our sentences or theories true.”<sup>6</sup> There is no extra-theoretical explanation of truth.

Once we drop the idea that reference is an independent relation in the sense that it justifies our use of the word “true” outside of particular theories, we also have to drop the idea that there are extra-theoretical (extra-linguistic) things which make our sentences true. These *things* have taken many forms in the past: sense impressions, ideas, states of affairs, representations, experience, etc. Davidson’s point is not that these things don’t exist, but rather that they play only a causal, not an explanatory, role in why particular sentences are true. Once reference falls out, so does “making true.” So, just as with “reference,” where we needed to make a distinction between explanation *within* and explanation *of* a theory, with these intermediary entities we need to make a distinction between causal and justificatory (or explanatory) relations. We need an explanation of “truth” that is at the same time not a part of the causal chain of how we came to hold a certain belief to be true. “The answer to our problem must then be to find a *reason* for supposing most of our beliefs to be true that is not a form of *evidence*.”<sup>7</sup>

This argument is a spin-off of a long debate between Quine and Davidson. As is well known, Davidson is a student of Quine. Much of Davidson’s work is an extension

---

<sup>6</sup>Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” p. 194.

<sup>7</sup>Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” p. 127.

and reworking of Quine's ideas with some different emphases, but little disagreement. The work Davidson has done on radical interpretation, borrowing from Quine's radical translation, is a good example. One point, however, on which Davidson strongly disagrees with Quine, is the emphasis Quine places on the role of surface irritations of the senses. As I said in the preceding paragraph, Davidson does not deny that these irritations exist, nor that they play a *causal* role in how we come to know the world, but rather, he denies that they should play a role in *explaining* why we are justified in holding certain beliefs true.

Davidson argues that Quine gives sensations an explanatory role in determining the truth of our sentences. We come to hold certain beliefs true because we have certain sensations. Davidson refers to such theories as *proximal* theories. A proximal theory of truth holds that "sentences have the same meaning if they have the same stimulus meaning – if the same patterns of stimulation prompt assent and dissent."<sup>8</sup> Davidson, on the other hand, holds to the *distal* theory of truth and meaning. The distal theory:

... depends primarily on shared causes which are salient for speaker and interpreter, learner and teacher. Meanings are shared when identical events, objects or situations cause or would cause assent or dissent.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>Davidson, "Meaning, Truth and Evidence," in Perspectives on Quine, eds. Robert B. Barrett, *et al.* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 73. "Proximal" derives from the Latin, *proximitas* or *proximus* meaning "nearness, vicinity or proximity."

<sup>9</sup>Davidson, "Meaning, Truth and Evidence," p. 73. "Distal" derives from the Latin, *distantia* or *disto* meaning "distance, remoteness, a separation or opening."

For both the proximal and the distal theory, sensations play a causal role in our knowledge of the world. It is through the senses that we come to know the world. In addition, however, Quine's proximal theory of truth appropriates sensations for explanatory and justificatory purposes. That is, Quine argues that sensations are sufficient to account for *why* we have certain beliefs about the world.

The distal theory denies this. To give sensations, or any epistemic intermediary, such a role leads one down the path, argues Davidson, to scepticism. Once we place an entity between our beliefs of the world and the world itself, we are always able to doubt whether that entity is giving us the message correctly, or corresponding correctly, or representing correctly. A person's sensory impressions could be very different from the way things are in the world outside:

Introducing intermediary steps or entities into the causal chain, like sensations or observations, serves only to make the epistemological problem more obvious. For if the intermediaries are merely causes, they don't justify the beliefs they cause, while if they deliver information, they may be lying. The moral is obvious. Since we can't swear intermediaries to truthfulness, we should allow no intermediaries between our beliefs and their objects in the world. Of course there are causal intermediaries. What we must guard against are epistemic intermediaries.<sup>10</sup>

The distal theory of meaning encourages an account of empirical content that is externalist. By "externalist," Davidson means that, "... the contents of our earliest learned and most basic sentences ("Mama," "Doggie," "Red," "Fire," "Gavagai") must be

---

<sup>10</sup>Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of truth and Knowledge," p. 125.



determined by what it is in the world that causes them to be true.”<sup>11</sup> In a Tarskian style truth (meaning) theory, a typical T-sentence has a form similar to this common example:

- (1) “Snow is white” is true, if and only if, snow is white.

With such a theory we are committed to an ontology of utterances (the left-hand side of the biconditional), truth, and conditions under which the sentences are true, or the causes of the sentences (the right-hand side of the biconditional). Quine’s proximal theory, it seems, would also have to posit an ontology of surface irritations as truth conditions. But this violates what the field linguist is capable of determining in radical interpretation. That is, in the situation of radical interpretation, an interpreter only has access to the world which she and the native share, and the linguistic behavior of the native. It is only from these two phenomena, plus the ingenuity of the interpreter, that a truth theory can be constructed. It is impossible to tell what sensations another person is having; the best we can do is observe the causes of those sensations. The triangulation of speaker, interpreter and the world of common causes is sufficient for radical interpretation. Intermediary entities, of the type endorsed by Quine’s proximal theory, are not necessary in an account and explanation of how it is that we understand. As Davidson says:

... sensory stimulations are indeed part of the causal chain that leads to belief, but cannot, without confusion, be considered to be evidence, or a source of justification, for the stimulated belief.

What stands in the way of global scepticism of the senses is in my view the fact that we must, in the plainest and methodologically most basic cases, take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief. And what we, as

---

<sup>11</sup>Davidson, “Epistemology Externalized,” *Dialectica*, vol. 45, no 2-3, 1991, p. 198.

interpreters, must take them to be is what they in fact are. Communication begins where causes converge: your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same events and objects.<sup>12</sup>

### 5.3 Coherence and Correspondence Theories of Truth

In the previous chapter, I indicated that during his career, Davidson has shown some uncertainty as to how to characterize the theory of truth he endorses.<sup>13</sup> In one of his early essays, "True to the Facts," he characterizes his theory as a correspondence theory.<sup>14</sup> The main idea he was striving to explain was that the truth of a sentence could be explained by an analysis of the relation between language and the world. His point was that this relationship is achieved with the semantical relation of satisfaction.

Of course, as is stressed in that essay, satisfaction is quite different from correspondence as normally conceived. Satisfaction is the pairing of n-tuples of entities with predicates of a particular language. For Davidson (and Tarski), a sentence is true if the predicate is satisfied by the entity that is assigned to it. The sentence, "snow is white," is true if the predicate "x is white" is satisfied by the entity "snow." We can see if this is the case by checking the satisfaction relations that are found in the axioms of a truth theory. In a theory of truth that uses satisfaction to help explain truth, each true

---

<sup>12</sup>Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," p. 132.

<sup>13</sup>See chapter 4, n13.

<sup>14</sup>Davidson, "True to the Facts," pp. 37-54.

sentence is true for a different reason, viz., the predicate is satisfied by the entities which are assigned to it. One predicate is distinguished from another by the fact that it is satisfied by different sequences of objects. "Snow is white" is true for a different reason than "grass is green."

Since different assignments of entities to variables satisfy different open sentences and since closed sentences are constituted from open, truth is reached, in the semantic approach, by different routes for different sentences. All true sentences end up in the same place, but there are different stories about how they got there; a semantic theory of truth tells the story for a particular sentence by running through the steps of the recursive account of satisfaction appropriate to the sentence.<sup>15</sup>

Correspondence, on the other hand, is normally conceived as a pairing of sentences with a non-linguistic entity. The problem with these theories, at least a problem that Davidson tried to expose in "True to the Facts," was that each sentence was true, not because of the structure of the sentence, but because the correspondence relation of one sentence can not be distinguished from the correspondence relation of other sentences. That is, to say that "snow is white" corresponds to the fact that snow is white, is really no different than saying that "snow is white" is true. Likewise, since "grass is green" corresponds to the fact that grass is green, and since this is the same as "'grass is green' is true," we can replace "is true" (using the principle of substitution of co-extensive singular terms, so long as both refer to the same truth value) by the correspondence relation of the other sentence. In other words, we could say that "snow is

---

<sup>15</sup>Davidson, "True to the Facts," pp. 48-49.

white" corresponds to the fact that grass is green. And clearly, when a large number of sentences are involved, as in any natural language, it would be impossible to determine what any sentence corresponded to so long as it was true. All sentences would correspond to the same thing -- The Great Fact. Davidson says:

No point remains in distinguishing among various names of the Great Fact when written after "corresponds to;" we may as well settle for the single phrase "corresponds to the Great Fact." This unalterable predicate carries with it a redundant whiff of ontology, but beyond this there is apparently no telling it apart from "is true."<sup>16</sup>

That "redundant whiff" is the attempt to posit intermediary epistemic entities called facts. It should be clear from the previous section that Davidson does not endorse such a procedure. A sentence is not true because of a relation between it and things that are not

---

<sup>16</sup>Davidson, "True to the Facts," p. 42. The argument in the paragraph preceding this quote comes from the same essay, p. 42. In an earlier essay, "Truth and Meaning," p. 19, Davidson gives a formal proof for a similar argument. In that essay he is concerned to show that there is no uniquely referring relation between singular terms and their referent; in "True to the Facts," he is concerned to show that there is no correspondence relation between the meaning of a sentence and some fact. He cites Frege as the author of the argument. I quote:

... a difficulty looms if we want to continue in our present (implicit) course of identifying the meaning of a singular term with its reference. The difficulty follows upon making two reasonable assumptions: that logically equivalent singular terms have the same reference, and that a singular term does not change its reference if a contained singular term is replaced with another by the same reference. But now suppose that "*R*" and "*S*" abbreviate any two sentences alike in truth value. Then the following four sentences have the same reference:

- (1) *R*
- (2)  $\wedge x(x=x.R) = \wedge x(x=x)$
- (3)  $\wedge x(x=x.S) = \wedge x(x=x)$
- (4) *S*

For (1) and (2) are logically equivalent, as are (3) and (4), while (3) differs from (2) only in containing the singular term " $\wedge x(x=x.S)$ " where (2) contains " $\wedge x(x=x.R)$ " and these refer to the same thing if *S* and *R* are alike in truth value. Hence any two sentences having the same reference have the same truth value. And if the meaning of a sentence is what it refers to, all sentences alike in truth value must be synonymous -- an intolerable result.

sentences, but because of a relation between the parts (entities) that constitute the sentence.

So, for Davidson, "correspondence" cannot give an explanation of a truth theory. *Within* a Tarskian truth theory, however, "correspondence" does play a role when conceived as "satisfaction." But this is clearly something quite different than the correspondence theorist wanted. Satisfaction shows how truth works for a particular language; it does not tell us what truth is. That is, it does not justify truth *qua* truth.

The only other option, it seems, once we get rid of correspondence theories as explanations of truth, is to take up the coherence theory of truth. This is the position adopted by Davidson in "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge." Coherence is the best option (and, it seems, the only other option) once we drop the notion of "reference." But, as Davidson himself later realized, this claim is also misguided. Traditionally, coherence theories were seen as theories that argued that consistent sets of beliefs were true. That is not the position Davidson wants to defend in his paper. Clearly, we could imagine a consistent set of beliefs that were false.

Properly understood, Davidson's point in this paper is that if one speaks a language and is in communication with another person, then the language that one speaks, the beliefs one has, are by their nature and for the most part consistent and true. Communication is impossible if the language one speaks and the beliefs one has are

largely false. The principle of charity, as I explained in chapter 3, ensures this.<sup>17</sup> An interpreter is not be able to understand or interpret a speaker who does not usually speak truthfully and consistently.

So again, the search for a justification of truth fails. True sets of beliefs, expressed in a language, are consistent, and “correspond” to the way things are, but this is because the system of beliefs is mostly true, not vice-versa. Davidson’s point in calling his theory a coherence theory is that “nothing can count as a reason [or explanation or justification] for holding a belief except another belief.”<sup>18</sup> But this still begs the question as to why *that* belief is true.

For a correspondence theory, a true belief is justified by the belief that it corresponds to the way things are. In a coherence theory, a true belief is justified by another belief. What is common about both cases is the quest for a justification that is at the same time a piece of evidence -- viz., another belief. We need a justification of why our beliefs are true, not a justification of truth:

[T]ruth is as clear and basic a concept that we have. Tarski has given us an idea of how to *apply* the general concept (or try to apply it) to particular languages on the assumption that we already understand it; but of course he didn’t show how to define it in general (he proved, rather, that this couldn’t be done). Any further attempt to explain, define, analyse, or explicate the concept will be empty or wrong: correspondence theories, coherence theories, pragmatist theories, theories that identify truth with warranted assertability (perhaps under “ideal” or “optimum” conditions), theories that ask truth to explain the success of science or

---

<sup>17</sup>See section 3.4 above.

<sup>18</sup>Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” p. 123.

serve as the ultimate outcome of science or the conversations of some elite, all such theories either add nothing to our understanding of truth or have obvious counter-examples. Why on earth should we expect to be able to reduce truth to something clearer or more fundamental?<sup>19</sup>

As I said above, Davidson's point is that we need a reason, that is not evidence, why our beliefs are true. And this reason cannot be an explanation of truth. The reason he gives is that beliefs are, by their nature, generally veridical. Instead of analyzing "truth," we need to analyze "belief."

Instead of asking, "what makes this particular belief true?," Davidson prefers that we analyze the situation of radical interpretation, keeping in mind the distal theory of meaning I outlined above. The situation is this: a radical interpreter comes to a native speaker armed only with her beliefs about the way things are, and the experience of a common world that is shared with the speaker. Beliefs about what is and what is not the case are expressed in the interpreters own language. The interpreter, the native speaker, and the shared world form the triangulated matrix necessary for communication to take place. The task of the interpreter, then, is to pair up native utterances with her own based on behaviours (linguistic and otherwise) of the native, and the interpreter's beliefs about the world. Quine's account of how a field linguist comes to understand the native's utterance of "gavagai" as "Lo, a rabbit" is an instance of the steps that are to be undertaken.<sup>20</sup> We assign beliefs (held-true sentences) to a native by what we perceive to

---

<sup>19</sup>Davidson, "Afterthoughts, 1987," pp. 135-136.

<sup>20</sup>Quine, Word and Object, pp. 26ff.

be the causes (which are the distal, not the proximal, stimulus) of those beliefs. A true belief is caused by an object or event in the world; "... we can't in general first identify beliefs and meanings and then asked what caused them."<sup>21</sup> Since it is the case that beliefs are in part identified by what caused them, it seems unlikely that a person could have beliefs radically different from my own because they are caused by the same things in the world. And since most beliefs are caused by the world, at least the beliefs one holds to be most central, most beliefs have to be true. Davidson says:

The agent has only to reflect on what a belief is to appreciate that most of his basic beliefs are true, and among his beliefs, those most securely held and that cohere with his main body of beliefs are the most apt to be true. The question, how do I know my beliefs are generally true? thus answers itself, simply because beliefs are by nature generally true. Rephrased or expanded, the question becomes, how can I tell whether my beliefs, which are by their nature generally true, are generally true?<sup>22</sup>

From this we can see why Davidson is tempted to call his theory a coherence theory. Since beliefs are, by their nature, generally true, the only justification we need for a particular belief is another belief. Although Davidson repeals the "coherence" title for his theory of truth, he still holds to the basic conclusion of "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," viz., "all that counts as evidence or justification for a belief must come from the same totality of beliefs to which it belongs."<sup>23</sup> A sentence in a language is true,

---

<sup>21</sup>Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," p. 131.

<sup>22</sup>Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," p. 133.

<sup>23</sup>Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," p. 134.



not *because* it corresponds to the way things are (although it does correspond to the way things are), but *because* it is implied by, and implies, many other true sentences.

Davidson's stance towards truth is maybe best described in Arthur Fine's,

"Natural Ontological Attitude."<sup>24</sup> Fine says:

If pressed to answer the question of what, then, does it *mean* to say that something is true (or what does the truth of so-and-so commit one), NOA [the Natural Ontological Attitude] will reply by pointing out the logical relations engendered by the specific claim and by focussing, then, on the concrete historical circumstances that ground that particular judgement of truth. For after all, there is nothing more to say.<sup>25</sup>

If asked, for example, "Why is the sentence 'Corks float in water' true?," Davidson (and Fine) would respond, not with an analysis or explanation of truth, but with other true sentences, most likely regarding buoyancy, cork trees, the density of water, etc.

#### 5.4 Realism. Anti-Realism and the Natural Ontological Attitude

There has been a controversy as to how to characterize Davidson's philosophy of language in terms of the realist/anti-realist debate. Because the realism debate has close ties to the debate between correspondence and coherence theories of truth, a sense of confusion issues from Davidson's attempts at self characterization. Davidson has often labeled himself a realist, especially early in his career. Michael Dummett, for one,

---

<sup>24</sup>Fine, "The Natural Ontological Attitude," pp. 112-135. I explain how that "attitude" is relevant to Davidson in the next section.

<sup>25</sup>Fine, p. 134.

picking up on these early pronouncements of Davidson, uses him as his arch-rival.<sup>26</sup> It is widely recognized now, even by Dummett himself, that he essentially misinterprets the type of realism that Davidson was espousing.

Dummett interprets Davidson's claim that meaning is truth-functional as equivalent to the fact that the meaning of every sentence is determinately either true or false. That is, he regards Davidsonian realism as the position that to know the meaning of a sentence is to know whether it is true or not. Dummett adopts an anti-realist (intuitionist) approach to semantics because there are a wide range of sentences about which it is in fact impossible to say whether they are true or not.<sup>27</sup> The anti-realism he endorses is called "verificationism."<sup>28</sup> Verificationism discards the principle of bivalence (which Dummett wrongly attributes to Davidson) and identifies the ability to determine meaning with the *ability* to verify a statement. Dummett holds that verification and falsification are much more in line with the intuitionist philosophy of mathematics which he endorses. But Dummett is clearly confused here. Davidson holds that to know the meaning of a sentence is to know the condition *under which* it is true; this is different than knowing *that* it is true:

It would not be possible to grasp or entertain a proposition without knowing what it would be for it to be true; without this knowledge there would be no answer to

---

<sup>26</sup>Dummett, "What is a Theory of Meaning?(II)," pp. 89ff.

<sup>27</sup>See above, section 2.6.

<sup>28</sup>Dummett, "What is a Theory of Meaning?(II)," pp. 109ff.

the question what proposition was being grasped or entertained. I do not mean that all propositions necessarily *have* a truth value.... To know what it would be for a proposition to be true (or false) it is not necessary to be able to *tell* when it is true or false (much less to *know* whether it is true or false).... In order to understand a proposition one must know what its truth conditions are, but one may or may not be concerned with the question of whether it is true.<sup>29</sup>

This last quote states what has been Davidson's position from the start, which is not very different from Dummett's.

It does not necessarily follow, however, that because he is not a realist in Dummett's sense that Davidson is therefore an anti-realist. In his essay, "Realism and Anti-Realism in Davidson's Philosophy of Language," Frederick Stoutland rightly argues against the realist interpretation put on Davidson by such thinkers as Dummett and Mark Platts<sup>30</sup>, but he replaces it with an anti-realist interpretation which in my view is incorrect.<sup>31</sup> Stoutland's attack on the realist interpretation is quite acute. He argues that a realist philosophy of language has to hold to the thesis that i) a sentence is true in virtue of some extra-linguistic entity, and ii) that there are intermediate entities (like representations, meanings, etc.) between a sentence and its truth condition. To adopt i) is to see a need for an explanation of truth, and to adopt ii) is to see some intermediate

---

<sup>29</sup>Davidson, "The Problem of Objectivity," *Tijdschrift Voor Filosofie*, 57, 2, Je 95, pp. 210-211.

<sup>30</sup>Mark de Bretton Platts, Ways of Meaning (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).

<sup>31</sup>Frederick Stoutland, "Realism and Anti-Realism in Davidson's Philosophy of Language," *Critica*, vol 14, 1982: no. 41, pp. 13-51; no. 42, pp. 19-39.

entity as that needed explanation. I have tried to show above, in sections 5.2 and 5.3, that this is not Davidson's position.

Stoutland, citing passages from Davidson, and doing some commendable interpretation, rightly shows us that these two theses are not consistent with Davidson's philosophy of language. One of his main arguments against the realist interpretation is the prohibition Davidson places on the possibility of explaining truth in general outside of a particular language. A sentence, Stoutland argues, is not true in virtue of anything that is not already contained within that sentence. "Davidson's theory of meaning is a theory about the structure of language; the relation of language to extra-linguistic reality is not explained *within* that theory."<sup>32</sup> Elsewhere, he says:

Although (most) true sentences are "about" extra-linguistic objects, they are not true in virtue of such objects, but in virtue of their fitting in (cohering) with other sentences held true by competent speakers of the language.<sup>33</sup>

But Stoutland does seem to go wrong in the second half of his essay when he attributes an anti-realist interpretation to Davidson.<sup>34</sup> Davidson's point in showing that

---

<sup>32</sup>Stoutland, *no. 41*, p. 49.

<sup>33</sup>Stoutland, *no. 42*, p. 19.

<sup>34</sup>Stoutland, *no. 42*, pp. 19-39. Dummett wrongly attributes the realist interpretation to Davidson because of a sentence Davidson included in one of his essays to the effect that "we can still remain realists ...". Stoutland makes the same mistake in attributing an anti-realist interpretation to Davidson. He finds an obscure sentence that says sentences are true because they "help people achieve goals and realize intentions." Both sentences, in my view, are taken out of context and do not cohere with the overall sense of Davidson's work. Neither Dummett nor Stoutland are justified in attributing their respective positions to him.

truth is not “correspondence to the facts” was that truth does not need an extra-linguistic explanation. No sentence is true in virtue of anything. Stoutland violates Davidson’s prohibition against explanatory endeavors, presumably thinking it was applicable only to *realist* attempts at explanations of truth. That is, when Stoutland interprets Davidson’s claim that “... no *thing* makes sentences and theories true,”<sup>35</sup> as meaning that sentences are not true in virtue of extra-linguistic objects, he still holds it to be the case that sentences could be true in virtue of things that were not objects, e.g., desires and intentions. In spite of his earlier arguments, he says:

What we need is some account of the conception of truth assumed in Davidson’s theory of meaning – an account which does something other than analyze the truth-structure of a language.<sup>36</sup>

The account Stoutland gives is an anti-realist one.

Arthur Fine’s “Natural Ontological Attitude” (from now on, NOA) is, I think, the position which should be taken after one realizes truth cannot be explained by something more basic.<sup>37</sup> Fine’s results do not come from an analysis of Davidson’s philosophy of language, but rather from an analysis of the different accounts of truth found in the

---

<sup>35</sup>Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” p. 194.

<sup>36</sup>Stoutland, *no.* 42, p. 36

<sup>37</sup>It is Rorty who suggests this connection between Fine and Davidson; cf. “Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth,” fn. 61, p. 150. In this same essay, Rorty also acknowledges his indebtedness to the work done by Frederick Stoutland to show that Davidson is not a realist, but thinks (as I do) that there is an inconsistency in trying to peg him as an anti-realist.

philosophy of science. In this particular paper he argues against the attempt made by realists to try to explain truth as “correspondence.”<sup>38</sup> He sees that attempt, as Davidson does, as fruitless. To say that a sentence or a theory corresponds to things “out there” is to say no more than that that sentence or theory is true. The realist attempt to explain truth as correspondence, argues Fine, amounts to nothing more than “a desk-thumping, foot-stomping shout of “Really!”<sup>39</sup> True statements are about things that really, really exist. The failure of the realist’s attempt to explain truth as correspondence resides “... in his repeating the question-begging move from explanatory efficacy to the truth of the explanatory hypothesis.”<sup>40</sup> That is, in order to explain truth as correspondence, the realist must presuppose truth in the explanation, i.e., as *truly* corresponding. As well, the realist has to admit he has access to a relation that violates realistic principles; “... realism commits one to an unverifiable correspondence to the world.”<sup>41</sup> This rejection is formally articulated in Davidson’s rejection of the argument that there is a relation of correspondence to an extra-linguistic reality. For Davidson, “correspondence” cannot be made any more explanatory than “correspondence to the Great Fact.”

---

<sup>38</sup>Following this essay in *The Shaky Game*, Fine also has an essay entitled, “And Not Antirealism Either,” (pp. 136-150) where he is concerned to show that a rejection of realist view of truth, and the adoption of NOA, does not lead one to anti-realism.

<sup>39</sup>Fine, “The Natural Ontological Attitude,” p. 129.

<sup>40</sup>Fine, “The Natural Ontological Attitude,” p. 120.

<sup>41</sup>Fine, “The Natural Ontological Attitude,” p. 116.

Anti-realism, Fine argues, also takes up an analysis of truth after the abolition of realism. But now, instead of describing truth in terms of correspondence to reality, anti-realists put a limit on what is real. Fine says:

To be sure, the antirealist is quite correct in his diagnosis of the disease of realism, and in his therapeutic recommendation to pay attention to how human beings actually operate with the family of truth concepts. Where he goes wrong is in trying to fashion out of these practices a completed concept of truth as a substantial something, one that will then act as a limit for legitimate human aspirations.<sup>42</sup>

The real, they argue, has to be confined to either the observable, or verifiable. Everything else is a tool or instrument that allows us to perform our tasks and predict the future. So where the realist may insist that monopoles or charmed quarks or neutral bosons are really real, the anti-realist may say, since these things are not observable, that they constitute part of a system, play indispensable role in that system, but do not make up a part of the set of true sentences. But it seems that any limit, like observability, can easily be broken or stretched. A prime example is the anti-realist credo that states that true statements come from observables. Since this is a true statement that is not observable, it seems that the leeway granted to it could also be granted to statements about monopoles and charmed quarks.

The predicament that the debate between realism and anti-realism puts us in is that realism “reaches for more than can be had” by postulating a relation of correspondence independent of the concept of truth, while anti-realism retreats to secure

---

<sup>42</sup>Fine, “And Not Antirealism Either,” p. 142.

ground, setting limits to what can be known and what is true, all the while breaking those very limits. Fine suggests we adopt NOA. NOA, he says, is essentially the “core position” of both the realists and the anti-realists, while refusing to make the move to an analysis or explanation of truth. The “core position” that Fine refers to here is the fact that both realists and anti-realists *accept as true* the beliefs of everyday discourse and the beliefs of science. What distinguishes realists from anti-realists, then, is what they add to this core position:

[R]ealism adds an outer direction to NOA, that is, the external world and the correspondence relation of approximate truth; antirealism (typically) add an inner direction, that is, human-oriented reductions of truth, or concepts, or explanations.... NOA suggests that the legitimate features of these additions are already contained in the presumed equal status of everyday truths with scientific ones, and in our accepting them both as *truths*. No other additions are legitimate, and none other are required.<sup>43</sup>

So, both the realist and the anti-realist will agree, for instance, that “... electrons really carry a unit negative charge and really do have a small mass (of about  $9.1 \times 10^{-28}$  grams),”<sup>44</sup> but they will disagree on how to explain “really” and “true.” Fine suggests we take up NOA, which is the “core position” minus any attempt at explanation, because truth explanations always lead to failure. With Davidson he agrees that:

... the concept of truth is the fundamental semantic concept. Its uses, history, logic, and grammar are sufficiently definite to be partially catalogued, at least for

---

<sup>43</sup>Fine, “The Natural Ontological Attitude,” p. 133.

<sup>44</sup>Fine, “The Natural Ontological Attitude,” p. 129.



a time. But it cannot be “explained” or given an “account of” without circularity. Not does it require anything of the sort.<sup>45</sup>

The “partial cataloguing” that Fine refers to here is the characterization of truth offered by a Tarskian truth theory based upon a language that is attuned to the truths of science. The truths of science constitute our present horizon or world-view. We can show how truth *works* for such a particular language at a particular time, but we cannot *explain* it. And as I tried to demonstrate in the last three chapters, truth theories vary over time for particular individuals or language communities, world views or horizons.

## 5.5 Conclusion

In chapter 1, I schematically outlined the philosophies of Quine, Feyerabend and Kuhn in order to show what kind of position Davidson is arguing against in his essay, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” and negatively to indicate what the relation is between language and world. The common position that these thinkers hold is that there is something called “content” (sensations, surface irritations, experience, etc.) and something called a “conceptual scheme” (theoretical framework, paradigm, Language, ideology, educational programming, etc.) that shapes, fits, or organizes that content. I indicated that this view of the relation between the language and the world is a relic of the Cartesian search for first philosophy.

---

<sup>45</sup>Fine, “And Not Antirealism Either,” p. 149.

In this thesis I have tried to show that there is no such thing as a conceptual scheme (language) nor that there is any such thing as empirical content, at least not in any explanatory sense of the term. With the abandonment of these two notions, understood in the terms that the above thinkers set forth, the relation between world and language becomes unmediated. By “unmediated” I mean that the relation of organizing or fitting falls away. Let me recap.

A language is a set of words and sentences that can be grouped into manageable chunks in order to convey a meaning. “Meaning,” as Davidson has taught us, is the condition under which a particular sentence is true. In order to understand the language of another individual, we must develop (at least implicitly) a truth theory for that language. The process of such a development is called “radical interpretation.” In radical interpretation, all that we have access to, in order to develop our truth theory, are the verbal dispositions of the native speaker, and our experience of our shared world. But what we *want* to have access to are the meanings of the words that the native is speaking, and the beliefs that the native has about the world.

At this point, we apply the principle of charity. Since the meaning of the natives utterances are the conditions under which they are true, and since the conditions under which any statement is true (regardless of language) are shared by speaker and interpreter, it could be said that the native and the interpreter have the same beliefs, regardless of which language they are couched in. Charity is an a priori principle. If we did not

assume that the speaker was a speaker of the truth, it would be impossible to interpret her. If, when a rabbit ran by, the native speaker uttered "Gavagai!" and we did not assume that the speaker was telling the truth, then there would be an infinity of possible interpretations for that particular utterance. A condition, then, for the possibility of interpretation is charity. And like interpretation, it is also a condition of learnability (which is essentially the same thing -- understanding, interpretation, and learnability are synonymous for Davidson). That is, unless the native speaker held that what she said was the truth, not only would foreigners not understand her, but neither would people in her own language community be able to understand her. In other words, a language that, for the most part, contains false sentences and is essentially unlearnable is a private language. But, as Wittgenstein has shown, there are no such things as private languages.

Notions such as incommensurability cannot be accommodated into Davidson's conception of languages and how they function. The incommensurability thesis says that there are languages (or conceptual schemes) that are so different from each other that there is no way to translate between them. But, as was said above, a language is a set of words that is used by a person to express mostly true sentences. Not only that, it is only a language if other people can understand, learn and interpret it. As Davidson says, incommensurability becomes:

...largely true but not translatable [interpretable]. The question of whether this is a useful criterion is just the question how well we understand the notion of truth,

as applied to a language, independent of the notion of translation [interpretation]. The answer is, I think, that we do not understand it independently at all.<sup>46</sup>

But Davidson does not only argue against the notion of incommensurable conceptual schemes seen as untranslatable languages. Like Gadamer's insistence that language should be understood as an open horizon, Davidson argues against the idea that language is something that has any fixed (closed) structure at all. To see languages that way is to reify them, when in fact languages are dynamic and organic, changing to the situation, time and place. In effect, "... there is no such thing as a language, not if language is anything like what many linguists and philosophers have supposed."<sup>47</sup>

The abolition of "language," in the sense of a structured entity or conceptual scheme that organizes empirical contents, is one step in abjuring the third dogma. The next step is "content" itself. I showed how Davidson dealt with this concept above.<sup>48</sup> The idea of a content that could be shaped, fitted or organized by language has to take the form of experience, sensations, impressions, surface irritations, etc.

The primacy that has been placed on these entities in the West could be seen as a direct result of the emphasis placed on the Cartesian *cogito*. As I stated in chapter 1, taking the *cogito* as the starting point for a system of knowledge results in a philosophy where special emphasis is placed on both the cognitive abilities of the individual, and the

---

<sup>46</sup>Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," p. 194.

<sup>47</sup>Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," p. 446.

<sup>48</sup>Above, section 5.2.

perceptions (sensations or representations) that the *cogito* cannot doubt. Davidson, however, argues that we should be anti-Cartesian; that is, anti-subjective, anti-foundationalist, and anti-representationalist. His justification for this claim again comes from the examination of radical interpretation.

Like Descartes, Davidson agrees that we cannot doubt our own perceptions. They are the first step in a long causal chain that leads to our knowledge of the external world. But the language that we use to communicate to others is not about those perceptions, or any other component in the causal chain (e.g., surface irritations, firing synapses, etc.). Language, for the most part, is about objects and events in the world – the distal stimulus. As I have stressed several times, it is these things that cause us to have certain beliefs, which in turn affect the meanings of our sentences. And since it is the distal stimulus which causes us to have certain beliefs, that is, causes us to hold as true a set of certain sentences, we can only interpret those who have the same beliefs. Because the interpreter's beliefs are caused by the same things in the world as the speaker, there is no place for scepticism here.

The confusion, Davidson seems to think, regarding the dualism of scheme and content has come from a misunderstanding as to what truth is, and what causes us to hold sentences as true. The picture presented by the Cartesians (and that includes Quine, Kuhn and Feyerabend) is that reference is the main constituent in our knowledge of the world. Each language has a set of words that refer to things in the world. A sentence is true or

false if it means a proposition that represents the way things actually are. But, the Cartesians argue, languages could be so disparate, in the sense that their words cut up the world in such a different way, that translation would be impossible between the two languages. There could be true sentences in one language that represent the ways things are in that particular world-view that cannot be expressed in the alternative language.

For Davidson, such a situation cannot arise. Understanding and interpreting a language is a matter of observing the linguistic behaviour of the speaker, and how she interacts with the world around her while using her language. Interpretation is not a matter of determining how words cut up the world or represent a particular world-view. The world is not a intermediary entity that a language can cut up. It is necessarily independent of language, otherwise language could not work. It is something that is available to both the speaker and the interpreter, regardless of which language they speak. The field linguist has no access to such determining referential relations, nor does she need any. Sentences are true or false because of what the words mean and because of the way the world is. *Those* are the objects that the linguist is after, not referential relations, or the contents of experience.

To repeat, a sentence is true because of what the words mean and because of the way the world is. This is all we know about truth, and all we need to know. Nothing more can be said. As Davidson says, no *thing* makes a sentence true. Nothing stands in the way of language and the world; no empirical content, no intermediary entities, no

*tertium quid*.<sup>49</sup> As Fine says, reading too much into the notion of truth will only get us into philosophical trouble. Taking this advice, and recognizing that we cannot explain truth in general, but only show how it works in particular, we can see what Davidson meant when he said that we are in “unmediated touch with the world,” and that it is the “antics” of familiar objects that make our sentences true or false.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup>I am borrowing “*tertium quid*” from Rorty; cf. “Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth.”

<sup>50</sup>Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” p. 198.

## Bibliography of Works Cited

- Aristotle, Aristotle's Metaphysics, translated by Hippocrates G. Apostle, Grinnell, Iowa, The Peripatetic Press, 1979.
- Bergmann, Gustav, "Logical Positivism, Language and the Reconstruction of Metaphysics," in The Metaphysics of Logical Positivism, Westport, The Greenwood Press, 1954, pp. 30-77.
- Carroll, Lewis, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and In Through the Looking-Glass, Racine, The Western Publishing Company, Inc., 1970.
- Davidson, Donald, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," in Reading Rorty, ed. Alan R. Malachowski, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, pp. 120-134.
- "Afterthoughts, 1987," in Reading Rorty, pp. 134-138.
  - "Epistemology Externalized," *Dialectica*, vol. 45, no. 2-3, 1991, pp. 191-202.
  - "Meaning, Truth and Evidence," in Perspectives on Quine, ed. Robert B. Barrett, et al., Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, pp. 68-79.
  - "Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1984, pp. 3-16.
  - "Truth and Meaning," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, pp. 17-36; originally published in *Synthese*, 17 (1967), pp. 304-323.
  - "True to the Facts," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, pp. 37-54; originally published in *The Journal of Philosophy*, 66 (1969), pp. 748-764.
  - "Quotation," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, pp. 79-92; originally published in *Theory and Decision*, 11 (1979), pp. 27-40.
  - "On Saying That," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, pp. 93-108; originally published in *Synthese*, 19 (1968-69), pp. 130-146.



- "Moods and Performances," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, pp. 109-121.
- "Radical Interpretation," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, pp. 125-140; originally published in *Dialectica*, 27 (1973), pp. 313-328.
- "Belief and the Basis of Meaning," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, pp. 141-154; originally published in *Synthèse*, 27 (1974), pp. 309-323.
- "Thought and Talk," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, pp. 155-170.
- "Reply to Foster," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, pp. 171-179.
- "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, pp. 183-198..
- "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, pp. 199-214.
- "Reality Without Reference," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, pp. 215-226; originally published in *Dialectica*, 31 (1977), pp. 247-253.
- "Communication and Convention," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, pp. 265-280.
- Essays on Actions and Events, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1980.
- "The Social Aspect of Language," in The Philosophy of Michael Dummett, ed. Brian McGuinness, *et al.*, Dordrecht, The Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994, pp. 1-16.
- "The Structure and Content of Truth," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. LXXXVII, no. 6, June 1990, pp. 279-328.
- "The Problem of Objectivity," *Tijdschrift Voor Filosofie*, 57, 2, Je 95, pp. 203-220.

- “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” in Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson, ed. Ernest Lepore, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, pp. 433-446.
  - “Dialectic and Dialogue,” in Language, Mind and Epistemology, eds. G. Preyer, *et al.*, Netherlands, The Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994, pp. 429-437.
  - “Locating Literary Language,” in Literary Theory After Davidson, ed. Reed Way Dasenbrook, University Park, Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993, pp. 295-308.
- Dummett, Michael, “What is a Theory of Meaning?(I),” in Mind and Language, ed. Samuel Guttenplan, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1975, pp. 97-138.
- “What is a Theory of Meaning?(II),” in Truth and Meaning: Essays in Semantics, ed. Gareth Evans, *et al.*, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1976, pp. 67-137.
  - “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking,” in Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson, ed. Ernest Lepore, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986, pp. 459-476.
  - Origins of Analytical Philosophy, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Feyerabend, P. K., “Explanation, Reduction, and Empiricism,” in Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol. 3, ed. Herbert Feigl, *et al.*, Minneapolis, The University of Minnesota Press, 1962, pp. 28-97.
- “Problems of Empiricism,” in Beyond the Edge of Certainty, ed. Robert G. Colodny, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall Inc., 1965, pp. 145-260.
- Fine, Arthur, “The Natural Ontological Attitude,” in The Shaky Game, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 112-135.
- “And Not Antirealism Either,” in The Shaky Game, pp. 136-150.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg, Truth and Method, 2nd revised ed., New York, Crossroad, 1975.

- “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,” in Philosophical Hermeneutics, Berkeley, The University of California Press, 1976, pp. 3-17.
  - “On the Problem of Self-Understanding,” in Philosophical Hermeneutics, pp. 44-58.
  - “Man and Language,” in Philosophical Hermeneutics, pp. 59-58.
  - “Semantics and Hermeneutics,” in Philosophical Hermeneutics, pp. 82-94.
- Grandy, Richard, “Reference, Meaning, and Belief,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXX, 1973, pp. 439-452.
- Hacking, Ian, Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?, Cambridge, The Cambridge University Press, 1975.
- Kuhn, Thomas, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd ed., Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1970.
- “Reflections on my Critics,” in Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge, ed. Imre Lakatos, *et al.*, Cambridge, The University of Cambridge Press, 1970, pp. 231-278.
- Lepore, Ernest, ed., Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy on Donald Davidson, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986.
- and Fodor, Jerry, Holism: A Shopper’s Guide, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1992.
- Lukes, Steven, “Relativism and its Place,” in Rationality and Relativism, eds. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 1982, pp. 261-305.
- McGinn, Colin, “Charity, Interpretation, and Belief,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXXIV, 1977, pp. 521-535.
- Platts, Mark de Bretton, Ways of Meaning, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979.

- Popper, Karl, "Normal Science and its Dangers," in Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge, ed. Imre Lakatos, *et al.*, Cambridge, The University of Cambridge Press, 1970, pp. 51-58.
- Putnam, Hilary, "On Truth," in How Many Questions?, ed. Leigh Cauman, *et al.*, Indianapolis, The Hackett Publishing Company, 1983, pp. 35-56.
- Quine, Willard Van Orman, "Ontological Relativity," in Ontological Relativity and Other Essays, New York, The Columbia University Press, 1969, pp. 26-68.
- Word and Object, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 1960.
  - "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in From a Logical Point of View, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Harvard University Press, 1953, pp. 20-46.
  - "On the Very Idea of a Third Dogma," in Theories and Things, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981, pp. 38-42.
  - "On Empirically Equivalent Systems of the World," *Erkenntnis*, 9 (1975), pp. 315-328.
- Ramberg, Bjørn T., Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language: An Introduction, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1989.
- Rorty, Richard, "Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth," in Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Volume I, Cambridge, The Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 126-150.
- "Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the Reification of Language," in The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger, ed. Charles B. Guignon, Cambridge, The Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 337-357.
  - ed., The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1967.
- Stoutland, Frederick, "Realism and Anti-Realism in Davidson's Philosophy of Language," *Critica*, vol 14, 1982: no. 41, pp. 13-51; no. 42, pp. 19-39.

Tarski, Alfred, "The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages," in Logic, Semantics, and Metamathematics, translated by J. H. Woodger, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1956, pp. 152-278.

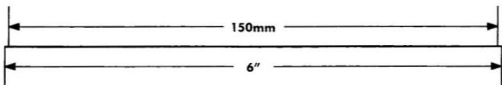
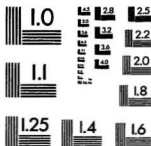
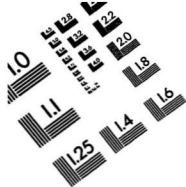
— "The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundations of Semantics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 4 (1944), pp. 341-375.

Whorf, Benjamin Lee, "Language, Mind and Reality," in Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf, ed. John B. Carroll, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 1956, pp. 246-270.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, Wittgenstein's Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics, Cambridge, 1939, ed. Cora Diamond, Hassocks, Sussex, The Harvester Press, Ltd., 1976.

— Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961.

# TEST TARGET (QA-3)



APPLIED IMAGE, Inc  
1653 East Main Street  
Rochester, NY 14609 USA  
Phone: 716/482-0300  
Fax: 716/288-5989

© 1993, Applied Image, Inc., All Rights Reserved

