

# The Reality of Language

## On the Davidson/Dummett Exchange

I conclude that there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered or born with. (Davidson, 1986, p. 446)

The occurrence of the phenomena that interests Davidson is incontrovertible: but how can an investigation of them lead to the conclusion that there is no such thing as a language? (Dummett 1986, p. 465)

Michael Dummett and Donald Davidson, two of the most important and influential philosophers of the latter half of the twentieth century, have been engaged in an ongoing debate, in and out of print, for two decades. They disagree about the role of convention in communication and about whether knowledge of linguistic conventions is essential to interpretive success. Prior knowledge of conventions about linguistic usage is typically thought to play a significant role in communication. We know something about the conventions with which our words are used, and this prior knowledge evidently plays a significant practical role in interpreting them. In the face of this commonplace wisdom, Davidson insists that such knowledge is neither necessary nor sufficient for communication (Davidson 1994, p.3). Dummett has protested against this, and, further, has responded to Davidson's claim that there is no such thing as a language (in the epigraph above) by arguing that Davidson's own program in the philosophy of language would be undercut if his argument were to succeed (Dummett 1986).<sup>1</sup>

For many readers the debate remains elusive; Dummett and Davidson often seem at cross-purposes, and it is unclear whether in the end serious disagreement separates them. In this paper we will discuss and evaluate two rounds of their exchange, the first constituted by "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (Davidson 1986)<sup>2</sup> and "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some

---

<sup>1</sup> Dummett is not alone. Ian Hacking observed, "'True-in-*L*' is at the heart of Davidson's philosophy. What is left, if there is no such thing as an *L*?" (Hacking 1986, p. 447). Dorit Bar-On and Mark Risjord wrote: "Unless Davidson's radical claim is a departure from his developed views, the Davidsonian program appears to have undermined itself" (Bar-On and Risjord 1992, p.163). They go on to say that the thesis "in an important sense...robs the [Davidsonian] program of subject-matter and empirical content" (p. 164), and they point out that Davidson does not in fact abandon the use of the notion of a language after "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (p. 187).

<sup>2</sup> Davidson's paper "Convention and Communication" (Davidson 1984), though its primary focus is not the same as "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," already, if more briefly and with

Comments on Davidson and Hacking” (Dummett 1986), and the second by “The Social Aspect of Language” (Davidson 1994) and Dummett’s reply<sup>3</sup> (Dummett 1994). We will argue that, once it is understood exactly which thesis Davidson is attacking, it is hard to see how it undermines anything he had previously maintained, and that it is, in a certain sense, just a further articulation of the consequences of his basic methodological stance. We will also argue that there is no reason for him to suspend his use of the notion of a language in a perfectly respectable sense (distinct from the one he attacks) that comports with his theoretical aims. Indeed, it may be doubtful whether the argument undermines any beliefs any reasonably sophisticated philosopher or linguistic has ever held, including Davidson. After clearing away some of the misunderstandings which separate them, we will argue that it is unclear that there is in the end much substantive disagreement between Dummett and Davidson on the role of convention in communication. However, we will also isolate one issue on which there may remain, if not an outright disagreement, a difference of emphasis of some importance.

We will begin by clarifying Davidson’s argument against the “reality of language.” §§1-2 identify Davidson’s target. §3 considers his argument against it. We will not follow precisely the development in his hands, partly to try to elicit more clearly what’s going on in his argument, partly to make the discussion more tractable, and partly to position ourselves to register, we hope, illuminating comments about it. This discussion will serve as a foil for raising general questions about our understanding of conventions in communication. In §4, we will consider Dummett’s responses to Davidson’s argument, in the light of our exposition, and try to determine where there is agreement despite initial appearances, and where disagreement over fundamental matters may remain. We hope this will set the stage for further clarification of the role of conventions in communication, both in principle, and in the case of linguistic beings who share our epistemic limitations. §5 provides a brief conclusion.

---

milder rhetoric, announces its main theme, and advances essentially the same reasons for it. We will focus however on the latter, since it will position us to state more precisely what Davidson’s target is, and also to see what motivated the picture he aimed to oppose when he wrote that there is “no such thing as a language” (p. 446), in a sense which undermines what many philosophers and linguists have wanted to maintain.

3 Dummett’s papers “Language and Communication” (Dummett 1989) and “Meaning, Knowledge and Understanding” (Dummett 1991) are also of some relevance for this debate, but we’ll focus on his two papers mentioned in the main text above.

§1: *First (Literal) Meaning, Speaker Meaning, and Conventional (Dictionary) Meaning*

Davidson's denial of "the reality of language" is motivated by examples of language use which are incompatible or at odds with dictionary (or customary) meaning, but which do not impede communication. The title of his paper "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" is an example of this, is taken from a line spoken by Mrs. Malaprop in Sheridan's play, *The Rivals*. A malapropism, of which this is an instance, is a ludicrous misuse of a word by a speaker mistaking one word for another similar in sound which *does* express the meaning he intends. For this reason, it is usually easy to determine what a speaker intends to convey when guilty of a malapropism, as in Mrs. Malaprop's attempt to convey that something was a nice arrangement of epithets.

But mistakes of this kind aren't the only occasions on which we take another to have intended, in some sense, something other than what the words he used literally meant in his community's language. Words may be used with a nonstandard meaning when a speaker knows it will be clear to an interpreter exactly how he intends them to be understood. Hearing Mrs. Malaprop, we may reuse her misused words in fun, saying, "And that's a nice derangement of words," intending them to be understood as meaning what they were *misunderstood* to mean—and then meaning them ironically—without falling into misunderstanding ourselves.

This phenomenon prompted Davidson to distinguish between literal meaning (or what he called "first meaning") and conventional (or dictionary) meaning. Our imagined utterance is understood to mean "And that's a nice arrangement of words," but only ironically, that is, we are taken to mean, by so meaning with our words, that it was *not* a nice arrangement of words. Here we find the familiar separation of literal and speaker meaning, even though the words were not used with conventional meanings. This distinction between first and conventional meaning is one key to Davidson's rejection of one conception of the role of convention in communication, and one conception of a language, according to which language consists of conventional meaning bearers—and how that is understood is important—knowledge of which is necessary and sufficient for communication.

First meaning is what a speaker intends his words to be understood to have so as to form the basis for subsequent effects achieved by his using those words he does. As Davidson puts it, it is the meaning he intends to be "first in order of interpretation" (Davidson 1986, p. 435). Various forms of nonliteral meaning always play off of the literal (or first) meaning of an

utterance. Grasping a metaphor or literary figure involves first understanding what the words literally mean. The image in these lines from Shakespeare's Sonnet 73.

That time of year thou mayst in me behold  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
Upon these boughs which shake against the cold,  
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

would be lost if we did not understand what these words literally meant (their first meaning as intended by Shakespeare). It would be lost if we did not understand *inter alia* that 'choir' designates that part of the church, the chancel eastward of the nave, screened off from the rest of the church and the audience, which is appropriated to the singers, and where the services are performed. Understanding the intent involves understanding first what these words literally mean, which together with their use in application to a person, prompts us to see certain analogies, and to make certain associations, as we are intended to.

Usually, we take for granted that what words literally mean is determined by public norms governing them in a speaker's linguistic community. But the distinction between literal and speaker meaning survives nonstandard uses of words, and so this important distinction must be relativized to a speaker. When a speaker uses his words in accordance with public norms, his literal, that is to say, his first meanings, will correspond to their dictionary meanings. Yet the two can and do come apart. They coincide when the competent speaker intends any further meaning attached to his words to be arrived at by first interpreting the words in accordance with public norms. They diverge when he intends the words he utters to be interpreted in the first instance in a way that does not correspond to their dictionary meanings, whether intentionally or inadvertently. (One could insist that 'literal meaning' be reserved for dictionary meaning or conventional meaning, but this would be a verbal quibble, for we would still need the distinction between first meaning and speaker meaning, where first and dictionary meaning need not coincide.)

The reason it is important to distinguish first meaning from conventional meaning is that the former is essential to all communication, and, indeed, to all linguistic uses of language. If we misidentify the two, we will be led to suppose conventional meaning is also essential to all linguistic communication. Davidson does not explicitly draw this connection, but seeing that it is there helps to throw into better definition the thought underlying his argument.

§2: *Davidson's Target*

Dummett remarks (in the epigraph of this paper), “The occurrence of the phenomena that interests Davidson is incontrovertible: but how can an investigation of them lead to the conclusion that there is no such thing as a language?” (Dummett 1986, p. 465). We believe the answer to his question can be uncovered through careful attention to Davidson’s remarks about the following three “plausible principles concerning first meaning in language” (Davidson 1986, p. 436).

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

Davidson’s target is principle (3), in particular, when interpreted as saying that first meanings are governed essentially by learned conventions or regularities. (3) is equivalent to identifying first meaning, conceived of in its role as what words are intended in the first instance to be interpreted as meaning, with conventional meaning of the sort expressed by dictionary definitions.

What is the connection between (3) and Davidson’s claim that there is no such thing as a language? It is made as follows. First, we plausibly hold that to interpret another, we must know which language he is speaking on that occasion of interpretation. Second, we identify his language as determined by what he intends the first meanings of his words to be at that moment. Third, we identify first meanings, as in (3), with conventional meanings of the words in his linguistic community. Thus, we arrive at a conception of language as something essential to interpretation, because knowledge of a speaker’s first meanings is essential to interpretation, and such knowledge consists (by the identification of first with conventional meaning) in mastery of conventions determined by community practices, mastery which must be acquired prior to interpretation. On this conception, a language is (a) a vocabulary and set of rules determined by conventions in a linguistic community which (b) is mastered by members of the community and mastery of which is both (c) necessary and (d) sufficient for interpreting its speakers.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> “I take for granted, however, that nothing should be allowed to obliterate or even blur the

It is evident that the denial of a 'language' in this sense doesn't commit one to there not being languages in *any* respectable sense. For convenience, when we speak of a language as characterized by (a)-(d), we will write 'language'. Henceforth, we will restrict 'language' for use to characterize a meaningful vocabulary and set of rules which determine the meanings of sentences formed using it. Every language is a language the meanings of whose words are determined by linguistic conventions in a community mastered by its members, and mastery of which is both necessary and sufficient for interpreting its speakers. Though Davidson doesn't draw this distinction, it is nonetheless implicit in his discussion, and it will aid us in discussing the implications of his argument, and determining the extent to which there is a genuine conflict between Dummett's position on the role of language in communication and Davidson's .

### §3: *Davidson's Argument*

We have already anticipated an important part of Davidson's argument against the reality of languages, but we shall fill in the details in this section. Here's what needs to be established:

- (1) That knowledge of the conventional meanings of the words that a speaker uses (henceforth, 'knowledge of conventional meanings') is insufficient for interpreting him.

(1) can be understood in both a stronger and a weaker sense. (a) In a weak sense, (1) is the claim that knowledge of conventional meanings does not guarantee correct interpretation, so that on occasion, perhaps quite often, additional facts must be adduced to arrive at a correct interpretation of a speaker. (b) In a stronger sense, (1) is the claim that we must always bring to bear other knowledge in addition to knowledge of conventional meaning to interpret a speaker correctly. We shall consider how the evidence bears on both (a) and (b).

- (2) That knowledge of the conventional meanings of words that a speaker uses is unnecessary for interpreting another.

(2) also can be taken in a stronger and a weaker sense. (c) The weaker interpretation is that in principle, if not in fact, given our limited epistemic capacities, knowledge of conventional meanings can be discarded. (d) The stronger claim is that as a matter of fact, speakers being as distinction between speaker's meaning and literal meaning. In order to preserve the distinction we must, I shall argue, modify certain commonly accepted views about what it is to 'know a language', or about what a natural language is. In particular, we must pry apart what is literal in language from what is conventional or established" (Davidson 1986, p. 434)

they are, no knowledge of conventional meanings is required for them to succeed in interpretation.

(1) The argument against sufficiency appeals to facts we previously surveyed to motivate distinguishing conventional from literal (or first) meanings, where the latter are necessary for all communication. The data establish that people do speak misusing words relative to public norms without preventing their audience from figuring out, as we might put it, what they would have said had they used their words in conformance with the public norms. What this comes to is that their audience correctly interprets their words to mean what the speaker intended them to think he meant. We will come to some worries about this below, but for now we are interested in the consequences of accepting it.

If this is the right way to interpret the data, it follows that knowledge of conventional meaning is insufficient in sense (a) for interpretation. In these cases our knowledge of conventional meanings plays a role in our coming to correctly interpret the speaker's words, since it is in part by recognizing their inappropriateness interpreted in accordance with their conventional meaning in the context that we come to assign a different literal or first meaning to them. However, we also rely on knowledge that it is unlikely the speaker in those circumstances would have wanted to say what his words literally say, and knowledge of certain kinds of errors we know people are liable to make in speaking and in learning public norms for the use of words. This seems obvious and incontrovertible. It is very likely that every speaker has at least once misused a word relative to his community's norms, and yet still has been understood. This happens whenever we are corrected, the right word being supplied, since such correction requires knowing what we intended to say. Misuse of words relative to public norms is an occupational hazard of speaking, as understanding people despite their linguistic foibles is a routine exercise of charity.

It is not as obvious that claim (b) is correct, nor is it clear Davidson ever meant to argue for (b) rather than just (a). (At least one sympathetic commentator has suggested Davidson's target is (in effect) (b), which of course entails (a), though not *vice versa* (Pietroski 1994, p.105).) The case *against* (b) can be run as follows: While people do make mistakes from time to time, or use words deliberately with a nonstandard meaning, often they do not. And even if no one is an ideal speaker, say, of English, in the sense of grasping completely the entire vocabulary of English with all its variants and specialized suburbs, surely there are competent and

responsible (though humorless) English speakers who are paragons of erudition and who do not misuse what words they deploy in speech either intentionally or unintentionally. And it is at least plausible that on many occasions there is no call for reinterpreting what another says by assigning nonstandard meanings to his words. In these cases, it is just plain false that any knowledge must be brought to bear in addition to knowledge of the conventional meanings of the words uttered. Thus, while knowledge of conventional meanings does not guarantee interpretive success, sometimes it is all that is needed.

A counter-argument rests on the observation that the possibility a speaker has not used his words in conformity with public norms is ever-present. Thus, in interpreting a speaker as meaning with his words exactly what we understand those words to mean according to public norms, we must believe that he is using those words in accordance with public norms, that is, that he is not mistaken and does not intend us to recognize that he intends us to interpret his words in a nonstandard way. In order for our interpreting him thus to be justified, our belief must also be justified. But since this justification will invoke more than knowledge of the conventions for the use of words, and even that the speaker is a member of the appropriate linguistic community, it follows that knowledge of conventional meaning is never sufficient for interpretive success.

There is truth in both the objection and its response. It does seem obvious, once we turn our attention to the matter, that deploying our knowledge of conventional meaning to interpret a speaker *does* require our supposing, and believing justifiably, if our interpretation is to be justified, that he is speaking in conformity with public norms.<sup>5</sup> And this requires knowledge of more than just conventional meanings. At the same time, it also seems clear that we routinely and successfully interpret others successfully on the basis of taking them to mean what their words mean according to public norms. We do so because we often have good reason to think that others, particularly our intimates, in most circumstances, are using words in conformance with public norms, and we are adept at noticing when they are not. Acknowledging these facts,

---

<sup>5</sup>This might be challenged on the grounds of a general rejection in epistemology of the need to justify what might be called default assumptions. That is, it might be maintained that when it comes to our beliefs about what others in our community mean by their words and actions, they are justified by default: unless circumstances depart in some way that we should notice from the norm, the beliefs we have automatically are justified without appeal to anything. They must be actively justified only when circumstances depart in certain specific ways from the norm. Perhaps this would motivate a rejection of (b). But to pursue this issue in epistemology would take us too far afield, and is not likely to shed much additional light on the issues of direct concern to us here.

the question whether (b) is justified boils down to *what we intended by saying that knowledge of conventional meanings is sufficient for interpretive success*. If we meant simply that sometimes, even often, we are not called upon to revise our view that the speaker speaks with the majority, then (b) should be rejected. If we meant simply that knowledge of conventional meanings all by itself sometimes suffices for interpreting another as speaking in accord with public norms, then, since this is not so, we should accept neither (a) nor (b). Indeed, in this case, (b) follows simply from the observation that human beings are in general fallible.

Our discussion can be recast in terms of Davidson's distinction between a speaker's and an interpreter's *prior* and *passing* theories, and it will be useful to do so in anticipation of later argumentation (Davidson 1986, pp. 441-2). We begin with the more central distinction between an *interpreter's* prior and passing theories. The theories in question are *not* ones the interpreter is actually supposed to hold, but rather ones a theorist uses in characterizing the interpreter's dispositions to understand a particular speaker. In a communicative exchange, an interpreter always stands ready to modify how he is disposed to understand a speaker in light of information provided by the context and what the speaker has already said.

*The prior theory for the interpreter* is one that characterizes his dispositions to interpret the speaker prior to the onset of a communicative exchange.

*The passing theory for the interpreter* is one that characterizes his dispositions to interpret the speaker's utterances in the midst of the communicative exchange.

(In the limit, the passing theory is the theory applied to each distinct utterance in the conversation by the speaker.) Prior and passing theories for interpreters are always relativized to particular speakers and times (or time intervals).

As with the interpreter, the prior and passing theories for the speaker are to be thought of as relativized to interpreters and times.

*The prior theory of the speaker* is "what [the speaker] *believes* the interpreter's prior theory to be..." (Davidson 1986, p. 442).

*The passing theory of the speaker* "is the theory he *intends* the interpreter to use" (*ibid.*), the one, then, which expresses what the words in his mouth mean while he is talking to the interpreter.

Davidson says the passing theory for the speaker is the theory he *intends* the interpreter to use, but in light of his own admonishments that we are not to take seriously the idea that

communicators hold full-blown meaning theories (pp. 438, 441), it seems appropriate to interpret him to mean that the passing theory for the speaker is what characterizes his dispositions to speak during a communicative exchange, and expresses how he intends to be interpreted.

Dummett points out that there is an asymmetry in the distinction between prior and passing theories for interpreter and speaker (Dummett 1986, p. 460). For the interpreter, the prior and passing theories are representations by the theorist of how the interpreter is disposed to interpret the speaker prior to, and during, a communicative exchange. For the speaker, the prior theory is *what* the speaker *believes* the interpreter's prior theory is. This is not exactly the same as how the speaker is disposed to interpret the interpreter prior to the interpretive exchange, which would be parallel to the interpreter's prior theory.

Dummett is right about the asymmetry. However, we believe that he makes a mistake about the content of the speaker's prior theory. He says it is a *second order theory*, a theory about a theory, presumably because Davidson describes the speaker's prior theory in terms of the speaker's beliefs about what the interpreter's prior theory is. However, it is a mistake to suppose Davidson assumes the speaker has formulated a meaning theory that he explicitly believes to be held by the interpreter. This would, if Davidson is right, make both the theorist and the speaker wrong. So, his remark about what the speaker believes must be a shorthand and misleading way of saying something which could be captured from the theorist's perspective without attributing detailed beliefs about semantic theories to the speaker. What is it, though?

The prior theory for the speaker is a *first order theory* that characterizes the speaker's dispositions to use words *conditional on* his wanting to use those words in accordance with how he would suppose the interpreter to interpret them by default. So, it is not, as Dummett says, a second order theory. In part, the mistake arises from an ambiguity in the passage: in the locution 'what the speaker believes the interpreter's prior theory to be', the theory being denoted is the theory  $x$  such that  $x$  is believed by the speaker to be the interpreter's prior theory. This theory is first order. Its content is not given by the content of the speaker's beliefs about the interpreter.

What then are these theories theories of? They are theories of languages; they aim to model dispositions of interpreter and speaker. For the interpreter, the prior and passing theories model his dispositions to interpret the speaker prior to, and during, the communicative exchange. For the speaker, the prior and passing theories model, respectively, his dispositions to speak as his interpreter would by default understand him, conditional on his wanting to be so understood

*prior to* the communicative exchange, and his dispositions to speak *during* the communicative exchange. At any given time, determinate facts about the speaker's dispositions to use words fix what they mean. Thus, the speaker's dispositions determine, at a time in question, a meaning for each of the infinity of sentences which can be grammatically formed from words to which he then has dispositions attached. In the sense of 'language' at the end of §2, then, they are theories of languages the speaker can speak at a time. Prior and passing theories for both interpreter and speaker are theories about the speaker's language (specifically about the language he intends to use in speaking to the interpreter). The difference is that for the interpreter they characterize his dispositions to interpret the speaker (these theories may not work for his own dispositions to speak to the speaker), while for the speaker they characterize his dispositions to speak, conditionally for the prior, and actually for the passing, theory. (Davidson suggests we think of these theories as cast in the form of truth theories for the speaker. However, nothing hinges on his way of thinking of the form of such theories.)

Let us recast the issue about whether there is any such thing as a language in terms of the distinction between prior and passing theories. The thesis that Davidson argues against is that successful communication requires both an interpreter's and a speaker's prior theories (at least the portions relevant to the communicative exchange) to capture correctly the conventional meanings of the speaker's words, and to coincide with their passing theories. This identifies first meaning with conventional meaning. His objection, then, is that successful interpretation depends solely upon an interpreter's and speaker's passing theories coinciding. The prior and passing theories of the interpreter can differ with respect to one another, as can those of the speaker; and the prior theories of interpreter and speaker need not be identical, even when they succeed in communication, because they can converge on a passing theory. Prior and passing theory may both diverge from a correct theory of the meanings of words according to public norms. Passing theories are often modifications of prior theories in light of inferences about what the speaker really means in the context (or for the speaker about how the interpreter is understanding and will understand him), and prior theories for particular speakers may themselves diverge from public norms, that is, they may not treat the speaker as speaking in perfect conformity with those norms.

How is knowledge of conventional meaning in fact related to prior and passing theories? We typically suppose members of our linguistic community will speak for the most part in

accordance with public norms, as we do, though we recognize there will be deviations from public norms (of course, we may also deviate unknowingly from public norms, as most of us recognize, but are not in a position to do anything about it). We might be said to have dispositions characterizable using a generalized prior theory, one which can be thought of as generalizing over members of the linguistic community. The dispositions this theory characterizes or models are conditioned by what we believe words in our linguistic community to mean according to public norms. This theory would aim to capture what would usually be thought of as our competence in the public language, the language of our community.

This answers a question Davidson asks in “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs” (p. 444) when he despairs of identifying prior and passing theories for particular speakers with linguistic competence: “Is there any theory that would do better?” Yes, the theory that characterizes our dispositions to interpret someone as, so far as we can tell, an ideal speaker of the public language. This theory characterizes our competence in the public language. To the extent that it corresponds to the public norms, we can be said to be competent in the public language. This is obviously not what Davidson calls a framework theory, “a basic framework of categories and rules, a sense of the way English (or any) grammar may be constructed, plus a skeleton list of interpreted words for fitting into the basic framework” (Davidson 1986, p. 444).

When we encounter a speaker (or interpreter) for whom we have no clues to idiosyncratic usage, we are apt to treat him by default as in perfect accord with public norms. The prior theory for us will then be the instantiation of the generalized theory to the individual. As we learn more about the speaker’s or interpreter’s idiosyncrasies (or flights of fancy), our dispositions to interpret or speak will be modified. This shows up in the prior and passing theories as their characterizing the speaker’s language as distinct from the language determined by public norms.

How are these facts, then, related to repudiating languages? Clearly, nothing in any of these considerations would lead us to deny a speaker is speaking a language when interpreted. In fact, the account *presupposes* it, for otherwise prior and passing theories would lack a subject matter. One can speak a language, though, without speaking a language. A language is a language that meets certain additional conditions, chief among which being that it play a certain role in communication, namely, (i) that it be learned prior to communicative exchanges, (ii) that it be all one need know for successful interpretation, (iii) that knowing it be necessary for successful communication, and (iv) that it be identical with what one learns in learning which

public norms attach to words (in the relevant linguistic community), i.e., that it be the public language. Given (i)-(iv), to deny that knowledge of public norms for the use of words is sufficient for successful communication is to deny there are languages.

It is a bit odd, however, to cast the thesis in this form, and that may be why commentators have been misled about its import. It is doubtful anyone ever thought all of (i)-(iv) were necessary for something's being a language. The position that the public language *plays* the relevant roles is one we can *imagine* someone holding. But then the more natural way to put the contrary thesis would be to say that knowledge of the public language is not sufficient or necessary for successful communication. This way of framing the thesis renders it more plausible if less exciting.

We have characterized the thesis under attack as that speakers communicate successfully by bringing to bear identical (or overlapping) competencies in speaking and in interpreting public languages. Davidson often puts the thesis in a more general form, as the claim that speakers and interpreters bring to a communicative exchange an identical competence which is necessary and sufficient for communicative success.

The problem we have been grappling with depends on the assumption that communication by speech requires that speaker and interpreter have learned or somehow acquired a common method or theory of interpretation—as being able to operate on the basis of shared conventions, rules or regularities (Davidson 1986, p. 446).

This would be so only if shared prior theories, however derived, were both necessary and sufficient for communication. If the argument we have surveyed here is correct, then this view is mistaken, and the denial of the more general thesis, which would have been seen as founded, in any case, on the more specific, is established as well.

Does any of this undermine the idea that many actual speakers share a language in a fairly robust sense that accounts for the ease with which they communicate with one another? Presumably not. The thesis being attacking requires prior and passing theories be both shared and exactly alike. It is doubtful anyone ever wanted to claim anything so strong. So, the denial of this claim leaves plenty of room for thinking that the prior and passing theories for many interpreters and speakers in a linguistic community share a lot in common, certainly enough to make sense of the idea that they share a language. We can think of this simply as the shared subset of the axioms that characterize their prior or passing theories: given any overlap, they share a language. Of course, this will never be the whole of what is thought to be the public

language: but none of us are masters of that, and no one could ever seriously have thought otherwise.<sup>6</sup>

(2) We now turn to the second thesis Davidson defends, namely, that prior knowledge of conventional meanings is unnecessary for successful communication. Since the thesis Davidson attacks claims that prior knowledge of conventional meaning is both necessary and sufficient, his attack on its sufficiency alone is enough to refute it. However, it is clear that he thinks knowledge of conventional meanings is unnecessary as well, and this look in any case to be the more substantive thesis. We distinguished a strong and weak version of the claim. The strong version is that, given our cognitive abilities, we can interpret someone without prior knowledge of any conventional meanings attached to his words. The weak version is that it is in principle possible to interpret another without prior knowledge of conventional meanings.

The thesis that knowledge of conventional meanings is unnecessary for communication is clear in “Communication and Convention,”

Knowledge of the conventions of language is...a practical crutch to interpretation, a crutch we cannot in practice afford to do without—but a crutch which, under optimum conditions for communication, we can in the end throw away, and could in theory have done without from the start. (1984, p. 279)

It is not entirely clear whether Davidson thinks that without expanding our cognitive powers we could in fact interpret others without relying upon shared knowledge of prior conventions or established regularities, interpreting deviancies in light of the standard practice. What we could do in theory may require suspending certain of our current limitations. We take first, then, the question whether shared knowledge of prior conventions is in principle necessary for interpretive success. In asking this question, it is important *not* to require speaker and interpreter to use the same conventional meaning bearers in speaking. All that is required is that they share prior knowledge of the conventional meanings of the words each uses, whether the same or not, with the same conventional meanings or not. One party to a conversation might speak Mandarin and the other French and yet understand each other perfectly well.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> It is doubtful Davidson would want to quarrel with any of this. In (Davidson 1994, p. 3), he says, “I am happy to say speakers share a language if and only if they tend to use the same words to mean the same thing, and once this idea is properly tidied up it is only a short uninteresting step to defining the predicate ‘is a language’ in a way that corresponds, as nearly as may be, with ordinary usage.”

<sup>7</sup> Within some linguistic communities, there are systematic differences in the vocabulary used by

The question whether it is in principle possible to interpret another without an appeal to prior knowledge of conventions can be put usefully this way: Is there knowledge an interpreter can in principle access, leaving aside natural limitations of knowledge and perspicacity, which would enable him to interpret correctly a speaker at a time of whom he had no prior knowledge? Setting aside natural limitations of knowledge and cognitive abilities, this is equivalent to asking whether there are facts independent of linguistic conventions that determine (or could determine) what a speaker means by his words. If Davidson's basic methodological stance on matters of meaning is correct, the answer is clearly affirmative.

A speaker's dispositions to use words, as he is disposed to in his environment, fix their meanings. More cautiously, if the speaker does not intend his words' meanings to be determined by conventions in his linguistic community, then what his words mean is determined by his dispositions to use them. If we grant an interpreter knowledge of a speaker's dispositions to use words in his environment, then the interpreter knows everything he must in order to interpret correctly the speaker's words. Indeed, if knowledge of a speaker's dispositions plus knowledge that he is of the same psychological type as oneself is sufficient for correctly determining what his words mean, it is in principle possible to interpret another speaker without relying on prior knowledge of any conventions or regularities for the use of words. Two gods could speak to each other each relying on knowledge that the other knew all of his dispositions without any need to appeal to knowledge of how either had used or understood his words in the past.

It is much more difficult to decide whether *we* could succeed without the crutch of conventions and established regularities. *We* clearly cannot know what someone's dispositions to use words are without either having observed him over a period of time, or locating him within a linguistic community whose regularities in word use we have antecedently learned. Even with his complete physical description and a correct theory of physics, the computational problem would be intractable. There is no prospect for us of knowing what someone means by his words at a time with no grounds whatsoever to think that prior to the communicative interchange he uses them one way rather than another. The role that participation in a speech community plays in actual communicative practice is to provide us with grounds for thinking a

---

subgroups. In Japanese, men and women are supposed to use systematically different forms for certain grammatical particles and pronouns. It is easy to imagine extending this social arrangement so that two groups in the same linguistic community used entirely non-overlapping vocabularies.

speaker is disposed to use words in a certain way. It is, perhaps, imaginable that two speakers could interact, and by mutual consent converge, on a changing passing theory which deviates further and further from public norms, and perhaps in some systematic way that does not leave any words with stable meanings. But even this, clearly something not within our powers, would rest on prior knowledge of public conventions.

It might be objected that in fact field linguists do break into alien languages all the time. Of course, this is correct. But they do so by figuring out which regularities there are in the use of words by their subjects, which is a matter of coming to see by which conventions their words are governed in their linguistic community. Knowledge of conventions for word use seems, for us at least, to be essential for communicative success, even if it is unnecessary that we always interpret words in accordance with public conventions.<sup>8</sup> We suspect, and will suggest below, that one locus of the disagreement between Davidson and Dummett comes down to the question of the importance of our epistemic limitations and consequent reliance on prior learned conventions to our understanding of the nature of *our* communicative abilities.

So far, we have been concerned with whether knowledge of public conventions for word use, or prior knowledge of conventions, even if adhered to only by individuals involved in a particular communicative exchange, is either necessary or sufficient for communicative success. In practice, it is insufficient; in principle, it is unnecessary. But it might be maintained that nonetheless in a sense conventions are necessary for communication. This depends on how we understand what it is to participate in a convention, or understand words in accordance with one. In “Communication and Convention,” Davidson argues conventions are unnecessary for communication. His conclusion rests on both of the kinds of considerations we have so far reviewed and also on a certain

---

<sup>8</sup> Suppose you encounter someone in a context where there is no reason to think he is a member of your speech community and he utters words that sound like English. Suppose you interpret them as English with success. Is this an instance of interpreting someone correctly without prior knowledge of shared conventions? The question is whether you know that you have interpreted him correctly without acquiring knowledge of which conventions he intends his words to be governed by. Guessing correctly isn't knowledge, though you may quickly become assured you have guessed correctly by his reaction to what you say and do in response to his utterances. In this case, it looks as if speaker and hearer do adhere to like conventions, and a trial at communicating on this assumption quickly confirms it. But knowledge of correct interpretation succeeds the trial rather than precedes it. But see the discussion below in the text on convention.

conception of what a convention is that derives from work by David Lewis.<sup>9</sup>

For Lewis, the most important component in a characterization of *convention* is the notion of a regularity. In particular, he says:

a regularity *R* in the behavior of members of a population *P* when they are agents in a recurrent situation *S* is a *convention* if and only if it is true that, and it is common knowledge in *P* that, in almost any instance of *S* among members of *P*,

- (1) almost everyone conforms to *R*;
- (2) almost everyone expects almost everyone else to conform to *R*;
- (3) almost everyone has approximately the same preferences regarding all possible combinations of actions;
- (4) almost everyone prefers that any one more conform to *R*, on condition that almost everyone conform to *R*;
- (5) almost everyone would prefer that any one more conform to *R'*, on condition that almost everyone conform to *R'*,

where *R'* is some possible regularity in the behavior of members of *P* in *S*, such that almost no one in almost any instance of *S* among members of *P* conforms both to *R'* and to *R* (Lewis 1969, p. 78).

If we take Lewis to mean here, as is natural, an *actual* regularity in behavior, then his account requires there to be instances, presumably many, of the behavior constitutive of the convention in order for there to be a convention of the kind in question. If this is a necessary feature of convention, then conventions are neither sufficient nor in principle necessary for communicative success however important a role they play in actual communicative success.

An actual regularity, however, is not a necessary feature of a convention. We can establish conventions that have not yet been followed, e.g., when explicitly establishing conventions for governing forms of behavior we already engage in. When a group of nations agree upon conventions to govern the treatment of prisoners of war, or noncombatants in war zones, these conventions are in effect from the time of the agreement whether there is any immediate scope for their application. If we agree to the conventions, and dispose ourselves to follow them, then they, in effect, exist, even before anyone's behavior is governed by them. Indeed, we could have conventions for governing behavior in situations which *never* arise, e.g., governing contact with an extraterrestrial intelligence.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>Davidson doesn't quote Lewis's final version of his analysis of convention, but a preliminary one of his analysis of convention, although in a relevant respect they are identical, i.e., in treating a convention as a regularity.

<sup>10</sup>Although Lewis's characterization is strictly about the conditions under which *a regularity* in

What, then, is necessary for conventions? For present purposes, we would like to slightly modify Lewis's characterization to apply to conventions that hold in a community, though no particular behavior has yet been governed by them. This characterization does not require explicit agreement: During a time interval  $t$ , a *convention* obtains in a population  $P$  to behave in accordance with a rule  $R$  in a situation type  $S$  if and only if it is true that, and it is common knowledge in  $P$  that, in almost any instance of  $S$  among members of  $P$ ,

- (1) almost everyone conforms to  $R$ ;<sup>11</sup>
- (2) almost everyone expects almost everyone else to conform to  $R$ ;
- (3) almost everyone has approximately the same preferences regarding all possible combinations of actions;
- (4) almost everyone prefers that any one more conform to  $R$ , on condition that almost everyone conform to  $R$ ;
- (5) almost everyone would prefer that any one more conform to  $R'$ , on condition that almost everyone conform to  $R'$

where  $R'$  is some possible rule governing the behavior of members of  $P$  in  $S$ , such that almost no one in almost any instance of  $S$  among members of  $P$  would conform both to  $R'$  and to  $R$ .

This modified characterization differs from Lewis's by being about the conditions under which a convention obtains to behave in accordance with a rule, rather than being a condition on when a regularity is a convention. We might say the relation between them is that a regularity in behavior in a community is a convention when it arises because of a convention to behave in accordance with a rule. This provides a plausible characterization of when a convention obtains in a community which does not require past regularity of behavior.<sup>12</sup> It does not require future regularity of behavior either, since the situation the rule governs may never occur, and also because it does not require members of the community to adhere to the convention in the future for it to qualify as a convention now.

---

behavior in a community is a convention, and not of what a *convention* is, it is clear that he thinks only regularities are conventions. He says as much flatly at one point, e.g., "A convention is a regularity in behavior" (Lewis 1969, p. 51), and it is presupposed in much of his discussion.

<sup>11</sup> This does not require everyone actually engage in behavior in accordance with  $R$  in situations of type  $S$ , but only that they are disposed to do so, since  $S$  may not occur. For our purposes, all that is important in calling  $R$  a rule is that it is a statement of a pattern of behavior in situation type  $S$ ; one conforms to the rule if one's behavior in the situation type exemplifies the pattern.

<sup>12</sup> We are not concerned with whether this is exactly right. What is important for our point is just that it is close enough that any refinement will yield the same results for our interests, namely, that convergence on a passing theory amounts to mutual agreement on conventions.

If convention is understood in this sense, it is crucial to couch Davidson's point in terms of prior knowledge of established conventions. For the speaker and the hearer in a communicative exchange understand the speaker to be intending to use words in accordance with certain rules: these rules will meet the conditions for there being conventions to behave in accordance with them. Only the speaker and interpreter are required. The conventions which govern their communication need not be stable. But since the speaker and interpreter need to converge on a passing theory for successful communication, they must converge on a common set of rules governing the speaker's use of words, i.e., on shared conventions. In this sense, conventions are necessary for communicative success, at least insofar as it is linguistic communication.<sup>13</sup>

Does this undermine any of Davidson's conclusions? So far as we can see, no serious damage is done. Some re-expression of his conclusion is required if what we have said about convention is correct. But when we say conventions are required for communication, given what we mean by that, we do not say anything which conflicts with anything Davidson maintains. And in fact in our discussion, looking ahead, we worded things in a way that avoids the difficulty.

This characterization of convention, which countenances them in the absence of antecedent regularities in a community, or on a speaker's and interpreter's part, helps render more palatable a claim Davidson makes at the end of "Communication and Convention," namely, "...philosophers who make convention a necessary element in language have the matter backwards. The truth is rather that language is a condition for having conventions" (1984, p. 280). If we are right, there is a sense in which we can have our cake and eat it too. Convention is essential to language. But *prior* shared conventions are not. We cannot, however, quite stretch this to sanction the claim that language is a condition for having conventions, though it is clear why Davidson should think this so, since he is committed to language being necessary for thought, and clearly thought is necessary for conventions (Davidson 1984).

Suppose we are mistaken about what is expressed by 'convention' in English, and that, as Lewis thinks, nothing is a convention unless a regularity. Would this be significant? We don't

---

13 It might be thought that the requirement that everyone conforms to the rules will require speaker and hearer to speak in the same way. But the formulation is not so restrictive, since the rule can be that everyone interpret the speaker in accordance with a certain set of rules, including the speaker.

think so. This would mean that there is a historical component to the common notion of convention. It would not show that a central part of this historical notion is neither necessary nor sufficient for linguistic communication. Though people who think language is necessarily conventional have probably not carefully distinguished between the historical and ahistorical conceptions of convention, it seems most likely they have thought that language must be conventional roughly because (in the relevant community) its vocabulary is governed by (in a certain sense) arbitrary rules which everyone expects, and wants, everyone else to obey.<sup>14</sup> Clearly, we miss something important if we flatly deny communication must rely on conventions, because we believe convention has an historical component that requires that the rules have been followed in the past. Here what is needed is a further distinction marking the difference between the historical and ahistorical conceptions. The observation that language is not necessarily conventional because the historical requirement may not be met in possible communicative situations appears, then, to be less damaging to traditional views about the relation of convention to linguistic communication.

With this discussion in the background, we turn now to a closer look at Dummett's response to Davidson's argument(s) and position.

#### §4: *Dummett's Reaction*

Dummett has criticized Davidson's thesis that "there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed." If our take on Davidson's argument and its import is right, then Dummett's critical reaction has in part been based on a mistake about what Davidson was arguing for. Before discussing the two rounds of exchange between them (to repeat, the first constituted by (Davidson 1986) and (Dummett 1986), and the second by (Davidson 1994) and (Dummett 1994)), we want to consider and then distinguish the view we just sketched from a view Davidson attributes to Dummett according to which conventions govern speech acts.

The doctrine Davidson attacks is expressed by Dummett as follows:

---

14 Consider a remark by Alston, which probably represents the attitude of many philosophers: ...what really demarcates symbols is the fact that they have what meaning they have by virtue of the fact that for each there are rules in force, in some community, that govern their use...Henceforth, we shall feel free to use the term "conventional" purged of misleading associations, as shorthand for "on the basis of rules" (Alston 1964, pp. 57-8).

...there is a general convention whereby the utterance of a sentence, except in special contexts, is understood as being carried out with the intention of uttering a true sentence (Dummett 1981, p. 298).

Davidson objects that no such convention can attach to the utterance of declarative sentences, because no convention can guarantee someone has intentions requisite for assertion. This issue is not the same as whether shared (prior) knowledge of conventions is required for communication, for that could be true even if his attack against Dummett's doctrine here is completely successful.

On the doctrine itself we make a brief digression. We agree with Davidson that there is no convention attaching to declarative sentences that makes it the case that someone who utters one, except in certain circumstances, has thereby made an assertion. It is not so clear to us that some utterance acts do not count as performances of certain sorts of speech acts in certain circumstances even if the speaker does not intend them to. For example, saying 'I do' absent mindedly at an appropriate point in a wedding ceremony would not be grounds for denying after the ceremony that one had contracted in marriage to someone else. But in any case, in most circumstances we could beg off having asserted something by saying that we were just rehearsing, or pretending, or practicing elocution, or the like. It may be that in some cases, when we are well aware that by uttering a certain sentence we give our audience license to think we intend to assert something, we will be treated as if we had asserted it. For in such cases, if we utter it anyway, and give no warning that we do not intend to assert something, it is quite likely we will be held responsible for any untoward consequences just as if we had asserted it. However, in this case, we might wish to distinguish between having asserted it and having undertaken an obligation to have asserted it, so that for purposes of praise or blame we are treated as if we had asserted it, though we did not. Let us say an official at the United Nations charged with emergency response for flood victims is asked by a subordinate where the rain has been falling. Well aware of the question and effect of what he is about to utter, he continues disdainfully practicing his elocution: 'The rain in Spain falls mainly in the plain'. Arguably this is not an assertion, but he will be held responsible as if he had asserted it because he has in the circumstances licensed his interlocutor to take it as one.

In any case, it is not clear that Dummett ever wanted to maintain the strong thesis that Davidson is attacking. His words are certainly compatible with a significantly weaker thesis,

namely, that there is a convention that one use declarative sentences standardly to make assertions, just as there is a convention in the United States to drive on the right on a two-lane road. Such a convention does not guarantee that when one utters a declarative sentence, one makes an assertion, any more, unfortunately, than the convention to drive on the right guarantees one will. But if one does not, and it is what is recognized as a standard context, it follows that one is not following the convention. (See Lewis's remarks on conventions of truthfulness (Lewis 1969, pp. 148ff).) We need not take a stand about whether there are such conventions. But whether there are or not, it is clear there is nothing conceptually problematic about it.

These sorts of conventions govern forms of activity which can occur without conventions governing them. Constitutive conventions bring into existence kinds of behavior that would not exist otherwise. Conventions governing games are like this. There would not be any moves in chess without the conventions that define chess. It may be that Davidson is mainly concerned to deny that whatever conventions there are governing the use of declaratives to make assertions are constitutive conventions. This implies that it is possible to make assertions without following those conventions, which indeed seems possible.

Let us now return to the main debate. We will concentrate on the more recent exchange between Dummett and Davidson, since it gets past obvious misunderstandings in their first exchange (for example, whether Davidson intended to be attributing to interpreters and speakers knowledge of the content of prior and passing theories, and, to some extent, about whether he meant to deny we learn and use public languages in communication—he did not).

In "The Social Aspect of Language," Davidson characterizes the issue between himself and Dummett as about whether the idiolect or language (in the sense of public language) is conceptually primary. In more detail, he locates the disagreement between them as follows:

What bothers Michael is...my failure to appreciate that the concept of a speaker meaning something by what he says depends on the notion of a shared language and not the other way around. My mistake, in his eyes, is that I take defining a language as the philosophically unimportant task of grouping idiolects, whereas he thinks I have no non-circular way of characterising idiolects. (Davidson 1994, p.3)

To adopt the view that the idiolect is primary is not to deny language is social. But it is to raise a question about what constitutes its essential social element.

The connection between Davidson's thesis that prior shared knowledge of public

conventions for the use of words is neither necessary nor sufficient for communication and the thesis that the idiolect, not the public language, is conceptually primary, is that if prior knowledge of the (or a) public language is not necessary or sufficient for communication, then our core understanding of linguistic communication is independent of our conception of a prior shared public language. We understand what linguistic communication is even in the absence of an enduring public language; consequently, our conception of it derives from our conception of something prior to it, namely, overlap of idiolect: Stable overlap of idiolect, then, summons the idea of an enduring public language.

Davidson imagines three critical responses. The first is that taking the idiolect as basic fails to account for our holding ourselves to a public norm in speaking. The second is that in practice we can't get along without prior knowledge of a public language. The third is that without the public language we have no answer to Wittgenstein's question about what makes the way we go on the right way.

To the first, Davidson protests that there is no obligation to speak as others do, and that the reason we hold ourselves to a public norm is adequately explained by its utility. There could arise a responsibility to speak to others in conformity to public norms, where an antecedent responsibility to cooperate in certain enterprises is in place, and where speaking the same as others is important for success: but this is a derived, and not an original, obligation and it is not *to* public norms but to those to whom one is speaking. Davidson takes Dummett to be his target here. Dummett, however, declines the role, and rather adopts a view similar to the one we have been sketching (Dummett 1994, p. 266), claiming that Davidson has misinterpreted him.

To the second response, Davidson says that it is irrelevant to the theoretical issue. In a sense, this seems right, though we will ask below whether there is still not an important issue here which is being overlooked..

Davidson's response to the third is not as clear. Consider this passage:

My proposal takes off from this observation: what matters, the point of language or speech or whatever you want to call it, is communication, getting across to someone else what you have in mind by means of words that they interpret (understand) as you want them to....The intention to be taken to mean what one wants to be taken to mean is, it seems to me, so clearly the only aim that is common to all verbal behavior that it is hard for me to see how anyone can deny it....if it is true, it is important, for it provides a purpose which any speaker must have in speaking, and thus constitutes a norm against which speakers and others

can measure success of verbal behavior. (Davidson 1994, p. 11)

His suggestion appears to be that the norm that determines correct or incorrect interpretation is provided by a speaker's intentions in using words, though he adds that this does not imply a speaker's words mean whatever he wants or intends them to mean. It does not, because for his words to mean what he intends, it must be possible to succeed in communicating with a reasonable interpreter when he uses them in accordance with his intentions. In this sense, communication is the source of meaning, though intending is essential to meaning, and provides its normative element. There is one more point Davidson advances, which may be connected with the last, though it is unclear to us whether this is so, namely, an answer to Wittgenstein's question about what makes it the case that we go on in the same way as we have before. Wittgenstein intended this question to be equivalent to the question what makes it the case that we follow one rule rather than another. This looks as if it should be essentially the same question as the one we've just addressed, since to mean something by one's words is to have used them in accordance with a rule. The question of whether we are going on in the same way is just the question whether we are following the same rule. Intending to mean the same thing by the same word, then, should supply the answer. But Davidson goes on to give a different answer.

So far as we can tell, his answer is that one goes on in the same way provided one is a member of a social group minimally consisting of two people who have correlated each other's reactions to some common stimuli with the stimuli. One goes on in the same way if one does not frustrate the other's natural inductions about one's behavior. This is supposed to be the minimal social element in answering the question what it is to go on as before.

It is unclear to us how this answer is connected with identifying intentions as providing the guide to whether one has interpreted another correctly. The proposal does not in fact seem sufficient to account for someone's going on the same as before, at least if this means responding in the same way to the same stimuli. If two people make the same mistake about a stimuli, e.g., and have the same reaction, which they've come to expect in the light of what they mistook the stimuli for, on Davidson's proposal they would have gone on in the same way. But in a clear sense they did not: they reacted differently from usual, assuming they usually get it right. But neither detected the error. In any case, this would not be sufficient for following a rule. Suppose something consistently amuses both A and B, and they notice this about each other, and

enter into the relevant natural deductions. This has so far nothing to do with following a rule or speaking a language. So, whatever question Davidson's answer addresses does not seem to be the question Wittgenstein was posing.

We suspect there is no informative answer to the question what is it to go on as before in the sense of following the same rule. To suppose that there is is to suppose rule following can be reduced to something else. But there is no reason to think that this is so. Thus, Davidson's first answer, that it is in virtue of our intending to go on as before, is likely to be as informative an answer as is possible.

Dummett, in his reply to Davidson, concedes, straight off, "Davidson is quite right that sharing [a language in the sense he has characterized] is neither necessary nor sufficient for communication, and he is right for the right reasons" (Dummett 1994, p. 257). Dummett disclaims ever having held the view criticized. However, he denies this is central in the debate about whether the common public language or idiolect is conceptually primary. That knowing a common language, in the usual sense, is neither necessary nor sufficient for communication, Dummett says, does not show it is unimportant for our philosophical understanding of linguistic communication.

However, Dummett does not make clear what he takes the question about the primacy of the common language over the idiolect to be. He clearly does not think the primacy of the common language requires that knowledge of it be both necessary and sufficient for communication. It is not sufficient, because we can succeed in communication even though we don't know the same things about the public or common language. It is not necessary for the same reason: mistaken about the common language, a speaker may still be successfully understood. In what sense, then, could one maintain that a common language is central to an investigation of linguistic communication?

One suggestion might be that although shared knowledge of a common language is neither necessary nor sufficient, without *some* prior shared knowledge of conventions for the use of words, linguistic communication would be impossible. If our discussion in §3 is correct, however, not even this constraint is required in principle.

Dummett, however, takes the issue to hinge apparently on whether two speakers could communicate using different vocabularies (Dummett 1994, p. 263). He says, granting its possibility, it would still be the case that the two speakers shared a language, for though each

speaks using different words, each presumably could speak using the other's words given that he can interpret the other.<sup>15</sup>

But true or not, this is not the issue. The real issue is whether speaker and interpreter must have prior knowledge of shared conventions. For this, it would suffice, as we noted, that they learn a prior language one speaks and the other interprets, though neither speaks the other's language.

Because of this misunderstanding, it is unclear whether Dummett disagrees with Davidson over the central issue. The reason is that Dummett does not raise the question whether *prior* shared knowledge of rules governing meaning bearers is essential to communication rather than simple shared knowledge at the time of communication of rules governing meaning bearers. Furthermore, the question (at least as Davidson understands it) is not whether such prior knowledge is in fact required, but whether it is in principle required.

It may well be that Dummett's insistence on the importance of a public language is really an insistence on the importance of there being shared mastery of a common set of rules governing meaning bearers for linguistic communication to take place. If this is so, then it does not conflict with any doctrine Davidson has advanced—if we are right. For, this would be merely to hold that on the ahistorical conception of convention, shared mastery of conventions is necessary for communication. Moreover, even if Dummett holds that for actual speakers, prior knowledge of a public language (not necessarily complete overlap) by participants is necessary for communicative success, this would not yet constitute a conflict, since it is doubtful Davidson would deny this.

Thus, in the end, it remains, as Dummett says, “obscure...how far apart Davidson and I really are on the strictly philosophical issues” (Dummett 1994, p. 265).

If there is a remaining disagreement, it may attach not to the question whether prior knowledge of shared conventions is necessary for any communication in principle, nor to the question whether we must use conventions as a crutch given our epistemic position, but rather to the question whether discounting it in a philosophical account of specifically human

---

15 Is this clearly true? It is easy to imagine someone who has the capacity to understand a language spoken to him, but who cannot speak it; otherwise, those who are dumb but not deaf could not master a language to the extent of understanding others when they were spoken to, a manifest falsehood. Certainly, to survive these sorts of cases, the claim would have to be carefully qualified.

communication, or, more broadly, communication among linguistic beings of our epistemic type, leads to a serious distortion of our understanding of our own nature as linguistic agents. By linguistic beings of our epistemic type we have in mind linguistic beings whose cognitive abilities do not enable them access to dispositions of others without induction on past behavior and whose computational abilities are not equal to figuring out rapid shifts in systematic and wholesale use of words. For such beings, knowledge of prior shared convention is necessary. God may dispense with prior knowledge of shared conventions. We cannot. We have no reason to think that Dummett and Davidson do not agree that some prior knowledge of linguistic conventions is essential for communication for linguistic beings of our epistemic type. However, because it is not in principle necessary, Davidson would hold that it is not essential for understanding the nature of communication among even such limited epistemic agents, and that there is no sense in which the public language is conceptually prior to the idiolect.

It may be on precisely this point that Dummett disagrees with Davidson. Communication like the gods is not an option for us. *We* must master a public language in order to communicate at all. A philosophical understanding of *our* communicative practices and communicative successes may well then have to locate a central place for mastery of a public language, on pain of distorting our understanding of what makes communication possible *for us*. If so, then we should not, in fact, “given up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions” (Davidson 1986, p. 446).

An analogy may be appropriate. Philosophical understanding of the epistemic position of an omniscient being, a being with direct knowledge of everything (assuming it is possible), has no need for an account of how such a being could come to know things about its environment on the basis of sensory experience. So, one might say, an account of how sensory experience plays a role in our knowledge of our surroundings should not be thought of as pertaining to the essence of knowledge. It is for us merely a crutch, in principle dispensable. Suppose all of this is true. Nonetheless, we would not have an adequate philosophical understanding of *our* epistemic position if we did not pay attention to the central role sensory experience plays *for us* in gaining knowledge of the world. Similarly, we would not have an adequate philosophical understanding of *our* communicative abilities if we did not pay attention to the central role that mastery of public languages plays *for us* in enabling us to successfully communicate with one another.

This lays the ground for a version of the thesis that the public language is conceptually

prior to the idiolect. It is not an option for us to think of knowledge of idiolects as coming first, and the public language as being constructed out of their overlap. For us the public language, even if it is an abstraction from the overlapping practices of different speakers, comes first, and we must think of the various idiolects of public languages as deviations from them. That is, when we approach others as interpreters of their speech, we must accept that it will depend upon establishing shared conventions for interpretation of public signs, and that interpretation will then proceed by accepting default interpretations based on the picture we have built up of our shared conventions, deviation from which must be justified. Even in the case of another speaker who does not share our public language, and whom we do not have the opportunity to see in his linguistic community, our interpretation of him will be conceived of as the project of discovering or developing a public language, in the sense of settled conventions for the use of words which are taken as giving the default interpretation in communicative exchanges. Communication for us, then, goes essentially through knowledge of a public language. Idiolects are thought of by us as deviations from shared conventions. In precisely this sense we can say that the public language is conceptually prior to the idiolect for us.

We are not sure to what extent Davidson would have disagreed with this picture if it had been presented to him, for it is not in conflict with the denial that conventions are in principle necessary—abstracting away from our epistemic type. We suspect that Dummett may well have something of the sort sketched in mind in arguing that the public language is conceptually prior to the idiolect. If there remains a dispute, though, we would urge that both sides have got hold of an important truth. Linguistic communication *in principle* does not presuppose prior shared knowledge of conventions, and in that sense the public language is not prior to the idiolect. But linguistic communication for linguistic being of our epistemic type does require prior shared knowledge of conventions, and in that sense the public language is conceptually prior to the idiolect.

##### §5: *Conclusion*

Our purpose has been to sort out the issues in the debate between Dummett and Davidson on the role of conventions in linguistic communication and the importance of public language in our understanding speech. Davidson's, on its face, astonishing claim that "there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed" looks to be plainly set against the view the conventions are central, and to flatly deny

that there are public languages. Against this Dummett has argued that the public language in fact is conceptual prior to the idiolect and pointed out that Davidson's position looks to be incompatible with much of his own program in semantics. We have argued that appearances are misleading here, and that Dummett and Davidson are closer on matters of substance than might have been thought. Davidson does not deny that there are languages in a perfectly intelligible sense. He rather denies that prior knowledge of shared conventions is necessary or sufficient for communication *in principle*. This falls out of his taking the stance of the radical interpreter as methodologically basic in understanding meaning. For the radical interpreter can focus attention on an individual in isolation from his linguistic community. It is the individual's dispositions to use words which the radical interpreter wishes to gain access to. So it is the individual's dispositions which determine, on this view, his meanings. Thus it will appear that participation in conventional practices is not essential for being a speaker or for communication, however important it is in practice. But this is not to deny that in the sense of convention as rule following we introduced that speaker and interpreter share conventions, for this is what it is to share passing theories, and this Davidson sees as essential to linguistic communication.

The dispute between Dummett and Davidson, in light of these clarifications, seems to some to degree to be a matter of mutual misunderstandings. It is unclear that they differ on whether conventions in the sense we have articulated are required for linguistic communication, or even on whether prior knowledge of shared conventions can be dispensed with in principle. On the matter of the priority of the public language to the idiolect, we suggested a way of understanding that thesis, as applied to epistemically limited agents, which looks to capture an important truth about the role of public languages for us in communication. For us, the idiolect is conceived of as a deviation from a set of shared conventions, rather than the shared conventions being conceived of as an abstraction from independent idiolects. This is still compatible, however, with the claim that in principle, for beings of a different epistemic type, the public language is not necessary for linguistic communication, and so in that more abstract sense is not conceptually prior to the idiolect. There then seems room both of the traditional importance according understanding the role of conventions in linguistic communication which Dummett defends, and for Davidson's claim that there is a sense in which the public language is not fundamental to an understanding of linguistic communication as such.



## Bibliography

- W. Alston. 1964. *Philosophy of Language*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- D. Bar-On and M M. Risjord. 1992a. "Is There Such a Thing as a Language?" *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 22: 163-190.
- Davidson, Donald. 1984. "Communication and Convention." *Synthese*, 59: 3-18; reprinted in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, D. Davidson, New York: Clarendon Press, 1984. 265-280.
- . 1986. "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs." In *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*. ed., E. Lepore. Cambridge: Blackwell. 433-446.
- . 1994. "The Social Aspect of Language." In *The Philosophy of Michael Dummett*. ed., B. McGuinness and G. Oliveri. Dordrecht: Kluwer. 1-16.
- M. Dummett 1981 *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA.
- . 1986. "'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs': Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking." In *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*. ed., E. LePore. Cambridge: Blackwell. 459-476.
- . 1989. "Language and Communication", in *Reflections on Chomsky*, eds. A. George, Oxford: Oxford University Press; reprinted in *The Seas of Language*, M. Dummett, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. 166-187
- . 1991. "Meaning, Knowledge and Understanding", in *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics*, M. Dummett, London: Duckworth. 83-106
- . 1994. "Reply to Davidson." In *The Philosophy of Michael Dummett*. B. McGuinness and G. Oliveri. Dordrecht: Kluwer. 257-67.
- I. Hacking. 1986. "The Parody of Conversation." In *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*. ed., E. LePore. Cambridge: Blackwell. 447-458.
- D. Lewis. 1969. *Convention*. Cambridge: Boston, MA.: Harvard University Press.
- P. Pietroski. 1994. "A Defense of Derangement." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 24: 95-117.