Convention and Meaning

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May 16, 2012

1 Introduction

Donald Davidson denied convention any interesting role in the philosophical theory of meaning: Conventions, he claimed, are neither necessary nor sufficient to account for communication by language. Davidson's anti-conventionalism is part of his more general individualism about meaning. According to Davidson, it is first and foremost the individual speaker's words that have meaning. More precisely, it is the individual speaker's words on their particular occasion of utterance that are meaningful. These meanings need not be those commonly assigned throughout a speech community. Notions such as that of a shared language, shared practices of use, and the attendant notions of standard meaning and linguistic mistake, are as uninteresting to the philosophical theory of meaning as that of convention, Davidson maintains: "We want a deeper notion of what words, when spoken in context, mean" (Davidson 1986, 91).

Radical and controversial as these views may seem, their most intriguing feature may be that Davidson ultimately motivates both anti-conventionalism and individualism by the social or public nature of language. It is because linguistic meaning is essentially public that neither convention nor any other form of shared regularity in the use of linguistic expressions is necessary for successful communication. And it is because linguistic meaning is essentially public that shared knowledge of conventional meanings is not sufficient to account for our actual communicative achievements, either.

I shall start by sketching the meaning theoretical background for Davidson's anti-conventionalism. In section 3, I shall take up his almost forgotten arguments against attempts to conventionally link semantics to non-semantic purposes, and then devote the remainder of this article (sections 4 - 6) to Davidson's much discussed attack on the idea that literal meaning is conventional meaning.

2 The public nature of meaning

The most basic tenet of Davidsonian meaning theory may be that *meaning is public*: "The semantic features of language are public features. What no one can, in the nature of the case, figure out from the totality of the relevant evidence cannot be part of meaning" (1979, 235). This is a metaphysical claim: Meaning facts are essentially such that they are in principle *knowable*.

In his meaning theoretical writings, Davidson explores the consequences of this basic claim in a variety of directions. In what we could call the "radical interpretation papers", he focuses on the question of meaning determination.[1] Since meanings are essentially public, and understanding a linguistic utterance is knowing what it means, the interpreter is the central figure in these papers:

> Quine revolutionized our understanding of verbal communication by taking seriously the fact, obvious enough in itself, that there can be no more to meaning than an adequately equipped person can learn and observe; the interpreter's point of view is therefore the revealing one to bring to the subject (Davidson 1990, 62).

A Davidsonian interpreter is simply someone who understands – correctly interprets – what another says. To employ the interpreter for revealing what is essential to meaning we need to look at what he knows, and how. Or rather, at how we, as philosophers or linguists, can model his knowledge, and what ultimately justifies it (cf. Davidson 1973, 125; Davidson 1986, 95f). Davidson's answer to the first question was that we can use a Tarski-style theory of truth as our formal semantic theory. The 'outputs' of such theory – the T-sentences – correspond to what an interpreter who understands an utterance of a given sentence knows, and the inner workings of the theory provide us with a model of his linguistic ability. Given this answer, the question of what justifies the interpreter's knowledge becomes the question of what the data are for such a theory. And since we are interested in the nature of meaning, the data must be characterized in non-semantic terms. According to Davidson, what follows is that meaning is determined by observable behavior:[2]

> What we should demand (...) is that the evidence for the theory be in principle publicly accessible (...). The requirement that the evidence be publicly accessible is not due to an atavistic yearning for behavioristic or verificationist foundations, but to the fact that *what is to be explained is a social phenomenon.* (...) As Ludwig

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[1] The most important of the radical interpretation papers are Davidson 1973, Davidson 1974, Davidson 1975, Davidson 1976. A useful overview can be found in Davidson 2005.

[2] For a more detailed introduction to Davidson's account of meaning determination, see Glüer 2011, chs. 2 and 3. See also Pagin ???, this volume.

Wittgenstein, not to mention Dewey, G.H Mead, Quine, and many others have insisted, language is intrinsically social. This does not entail that truth and meaning can be defined in terms of observable behavior, or that it is 'nothing but' observable behavior; *but it does imply that meaning is entirely determined by observable behavior, even readily observable behavior. That meanings are decipherable is not a matter of luck; public availability is a constitutive aspect of language* (1990, 56, emph. added).

Both constructing formal semantic theories for natural language, and foundational considerations regarding the evidence available for such theories ultimately serve meaning theoretical – or foundational – purposes, according to Davidson. Even though a formal semantic theory is an empirical theory, the explanation we are ultimately after is philosophical. We want to understand the nature of a social phenomenon: the phenomenon of communication by language.

From this perspective, familiar everyday notions such as that of a language, those of sentence, word and name, along with slightly more technical ones such as predicate or reference, and even that of meaning itself come to be seen as technical notions:

The concept of a language is of a sort with, and depends on, concepts like name, predicate, sentence, reference, meaning (...). *These are all theoretical concepts*, and the items to which they apply are abstract objects. (...) Where we want these concepts is in talking about speech behavior. Philosophers, psychologists, and linguists need these theoretical terms if they want to describe, theorize about, and explain verbal activities. (...) The main point of the concept of a language, then, and its attendant concepts like those of predicate, sentence, and reference, is to enable us to give a coherent description of the behavior of speakers, and of what speakers and their interpreters know *that allows them to communicate* (Davidson 1992, 108f emph. added).

As used by philosophers, psychologists, and linguists, the concepts of meaning and language are theoretical concepts, Davidson argues. From this perspective, we are not interested in the ordinary usage of terms like 'meaning' and 'language'. The philosophical theory of meaning, for instance, is not an account of what 'meaning' means in ordinary language. In particular, we are not interested in, or constrained by, what we might call "folk theories" about meaning. Rather, the sole purpose of these concepts is the explanation of successful communication by language. It is this context, and this context only, that provides them with content: "The notion of meaning depends entirely upon cases of successful communication" (Davidson and Glüer 1995, 81).

Any satisfactory account of successful linguistic communication must capture the phenomenon in all its actual variety. No clear cases must be left out, and we must not be misled by our

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already rather theoretical preconceptions. It seems a rather entrenched part of our folk-theory of meaning, for instance, that meaning is conventional. But, or so Davidson claims, there are lots of "unconventional" cases of where linguistic communication clearly succeeds.

In what we might call the "anti-conventional papers", Davidson therefore reminds us of the extent to which the speaker is a free and creative agent.[3] In what follows, I shall at times refer to the considerations Davidson presents in the anti-conventional papers as the "convention considerations". The convention considerations in a certain sense bring the speaker back into the picture; they focus on particular instances of linguistic communication as a creative interplay between a particular speaker and his hearer. And they provide a characterization of success meant to be sufficiently basic to capture all clear cases.

So, when does linguistic communication succeed? Take a particular utterance u. The speaker of u intends to mean something p by the words she utters: She has, as Davidson puts it, a "semantic intention". This intention is directed at her hearer; according to Davidson, it is an intention to be interpreted a certain way. More precisely, Davidson claims, the speaker S intends the hearer H to interpret u as meaning p because H recognizes that S intends him to do so, a feature familiar from Paul Grice's writings on meaning.[4] Let's call these Davidsonian semantic intentions "D-intentions". Looking at it in this way, a particular utterance is a case of successful linguistic communication iff the speaker's D-intention is fulfilled. The speaker's D-intention is fulfilled iff the hearer interprets him the intended way (and by the right Gricean mechanism). This, Davidson himself comments, provides the basis for a "characterization of linguistic ability [that] is so nearly circular that it cannot be wrong: it comes to saying that the ability to communicate by speech consists in the ability to make oneself understood, and to understand" (Davidson 1986, 106).[5]

According to Davidson, it is cases of language use that meet this characterization of success that the notion of meaning gets all its content from. And he takes this to mean that in a case of successful linguistic communication, the utterance means what the speaker intended the hearer to interpret it as meaning. Since the sole purpose of the notion of meaning is to explain or

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[3]The most important anti-conventional papers are: Davidson 1982; Davidson 1986; Davidson 1989; Davidson 1993; Davidson 1994.

[4]Cf. Davidson 1986, 91ff; Davidson 1993 170ff. For Grice's original suggestion for defining what he calls "non-natural meaning" in terms of intentions to effect certain beliefs in the hearer, and to achieve this effect via the hearer's recognition of the intention, see Grice 1957. Because of what he calls "the interdependence of belief and meaning", Davidson is skeptical towards the Gricean project insofar as it aims at analyzing meaning in terms of other propositional attitudes. Cf. Davidson 1974, 143f.

[5]This characterization is therefore *not* a contribution to the Davidsonian account of meaning determination. As noted above (fn. 4), Davidson was skeptical towards the Gricean project of *analyzing* non-natural meaning in terms of beliefs and intentions. The very reason for this skepticism was that he thought of the notions of meaning and those of the propositional attitudes including intention as interdependent. Bringing out the connection between semantic intention and meaning is part of understanding and tracing these interdependencies, not part of an foundational account of how content in general – i.e. meaning and propositional attitude content – is determined.

account for communication by language, this is the "deeper" notion of meaning Davidson seeks, the notion of meaning that is philosophically most basic and interesting. From the meaning theoretical point of view, he claims, it is the most interesting notion of what we usually call literal or semantic meaning.

The crux, however, is that there is an abundance of cases of successful communication where the intended meaning is anything but the standard or conventional meaning of the expressions uttered. Just think of any malapropism or neologism that you or others have "gotten away with". Or take the example of Davidson's title, Mrs. Malaprop who talks about "a nice derangement of epitaphs" – meaning *a nice arrangement of epithets*. In such cases, Davidson argues, the speaker D-intends to mean something non-standard, and if the hearer understands what he means and interprets the utterance accordingly, we have a case of successful communication. But the meaning both assign is non-standard.

Before we investigate this notion of meaning, and its challenge to the meaning theoretical significance of conventions in more detail in the next section, I would like to emphasize the philosophical nature of the account of linguistic communication Davidson suggests. The philosophical theory of meaning investigates the very nature of meaning and communication by language. The relevant question to ask with respect to convention then is whether linguistic communication is an essentially convention-governed activity. In the opening paragraphs of his 1982 paper *Communication and Convention*, Davidson takes some pains to clarify the modal nature of the question he is trying to answer:

> Convention figures conspicuously in many of our activities, for example in playing tarot, in speaking, and in eating. In playing tarot, convention is essential, in eating it is not. In explaining what it is to play tarot we could not leave out of account the rules that define the game; in explaining what it is to eat no mention of rules or conventions needs to be made. What is the case with speech? Are conventions mere conveniences or social flourishes, or are they necessary to the existence of communication by language?

> The question is delicate because it concerns not the truth of the claim speech is convention-bound, but the importance and role of convention in speech. The issue may be put counterfactually: could there be communication by language without convention? (Davidson 1982, 265.)

According to Davidson, meaning is not essentially conventional because convention is neither necessary nor sufficient to account for the full variety of actual cases of successful communication, and we are beginning to see why he thinks that. But that does not mean that it is not the case

that there are conventions for the use of linguistic expressions, or that success is very often achieved by means of precisely standard or conventional meanings, or that speakers tend to use expressions regularly both over time and across whole communities. Davidson does not deny any of this. What he denies is that it is essential to meaningful speech:

> It is easy to misconceive the role of society in language. Language is, to be sure, a social art. But it is an error to suppose we have seen deeply into the heart of linguistic communication when we have noticed how society bends linguistic habits to a social norm. What is conventional about language, if anything is, is that people tend to speak much as their neighbours do. But in indicating this element of the conventional, or of the conditioning process that makes speakers rough linguistic facsimiles of their friends and parents, we explain no more than the convergence; we throw no light on the essential nature of the skills that are thus made to converge (Davidson 1982, 278).

Meaning is essentially public or social, Davidson argues, but we cannot use the notions of convention, shared regularity or shared practice of use to capture this. There is too much meaning outside the conventional, so to speak, too much perfectly understandable, but unconventional language use, for these notions to reach the required "depth". Ultimately, it is thus his very insistence on the fundamentally public nature of meaning that motivates Davidson's anti-conventionalism.

3   Semantics and ulterior purposes

In *Communication and Convention* Davidson actually examines three ways in which convention might be thought essential to linguistic communication. Roughly, these concern the relation between the mood of a sentence and the force of the speech act performed by means of an utterance of that sentence, the relation between the literal meaning of a sentence and the non-linguistic purpose an utterance of it serves, and, finally, the relation between linguistic expressions and their literal meaning. None of these relations, he argues, is essentially conventional. In the first two cases, this is because it is impossible for there to be a convention of the relevant kind, i.e. a convention explaining the existence of the relation in question, and in the third convention is neither necessary nor sufficient for its explanatory task.

Even though discussion of Davidsonian anti-conventionalism has mostly focused on the third kind of conventionalism, I would like to quickly draw attention to two aspects of Davidson's discussion of what I shall call "purpose conventionalism": Roughly, the claim that there are, or have to be, conventional links between semantics and non-semantic intentions or purposes of speakers. For the upshot of Davidson's discussion is a conclusion of much more general

significance: Not only is it impossible for there to be conventions linking the literal meaning of a sentence (or its mood indicator) to non-semantic purposes, it is impossible for there to be systematic links of a certain kind between semantics and non-semantic purposes or intentions whatsoever. This is the Davidsonian doctrine of the *autonomy of meaning*:

> I conclude that it is not an accidental feature of language that the ulterior purpose of an utterance and its literal meaning are independent, in the sense that the latter cannot be derived from the former: it is of the essence of language. I call this feature of language the principle of *the autonomy of meaning* (Davidson 1982, 274).

If Davidson is right about this, it would have significant implications for recent fights about the semantics-pragmatics distinction, implications, however, that this is not the place to spell out.[6]

What these forms of conventionalism have in common is the idea that literal meaning can be explained or accounted for by means of the relation between expressions and non-semantic purposes: "the idea [is] that convention can link what our words mean – their literal semantic properties, including truth – and our purposes in using them" (Davidson 1982, 271). In the case of the mood-force relation, this concerns a certain part of the uttered sentence, i.e. its mood indicator, and the illocutionary force of the utterance. In the case of the sentence meaning-ulterior purpose relation, it concerns the meaning of the whole sentence and what the speaker aims at accomplishing by means of uttering it.

Purpose conventionalism is a reaction to the observation that sentences can be used for all sorts of purposes. A declarative sentence can be used to perform basically any speech act – an utterance of it does not have to be an assertion, but can be a question, an order, or what have you. Likewise, a sentence meaning that p can be used for all sorts of purposes – to get you to believe that p, to get you to believe that not-p, to order you to do something, to make you laugh, to give you an example of how strange some English sentences sound, and so on. There is literally no end to the things a speaker can do by means of uttering a declarative sentence. Davidson ties these observations together in terms of the autonomy of meaning: "We came across an application [of the principle of the autonomy of meaning] when discussing illocutionary force, where it took the form of the discovery that what is put into the literal meaning then becomes available for any ulterior (non-linguistic) purpose – and even any illocutionary force" (Davidson 1982, 274f).

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[6]For a contribution to that discussion holding on to the autonomy of meaning, cf. Cappelen and Lepore 2004. Defenders of so-called "truth-conditional pragmatics" like Recanati, on the other hand, argue that because of the pervasive context-sensitivity of natural language pragmatic processing plays a role already for determining the truth conditional content of a large part of utterances of natural language expressions. Nevertheless, they hold, there can be systematic formal theories of truth conditional content – pace Davidson. Cf. for instance Recanati 2004, Recanati 2010.

The basic idea motivating purpose conventionalism then is the following: Since an utterance of a particular sentence S can serve a large variety of different purposes we need a convention to "pick out, in a way understood by both speaker and hearer, and in an intentionally identifiable way, those cases in which the ulterior purpose directly yields the literal meaning" (Davidson 1982, 273). It is precisely this job Davidson argues convention *cannot* do.

The arguments Davidson levels at purpose conventionalism in *Communication and Convention* are too intricate to fully unravel and do justice to here. But there are two basic strands that can be isolated: First, there is the question of how a convention would establish the relevant link in the first place. And Davidson's first impossibility claim is that the relevant convention linking a sentence S to a purpose P *cannot* be a convention to the effect that utterances of S under certain 'standard' conditions have P. Take the case of sentence meaning. The convention is supposed to explain that S literally means p. But the most it could possibly explain is that S means p under standard conditions. S, however, means p under non-standard conditions as well (cf. Davidson 1982, 275).

Second, there is the question of sincerity. The conventionalism at issue tries to explain S's literally meaning that p by means of a convention linking S and P. The link effected needs to be such that under certain conditions uttering S implies having P. Davidson then points out that uttering S only ever implies P if the speaker is *sincere*. We thus need a convention to the effect that under certain circumstances speakers are sincere. But, and that is Davidson's second impossibility claim, there cannot such a convention.

Why not? What we need is a convention that is in force under certain circumstances. These need to be such that speaker and hearer know what they are and can recognize their obtaining. To illustrate the impossibility, imagine that we would decide that whenever a certain red flag is up, the convention to utter S only if you want to achieve P is in force. Assume that you do not want to achieve P but that you want to make your hearer believe that you want to achieve P. A perfect time for doing this would be precisely when the red flag is up. So, Davidson concludes, "nothing is more obvious than that there cannot be a convention that signals sincerity" (Davidson 1982, 274).[7] This does *not* mean that there cannot be a convention of sincerity that is in force when the red flag is up. What it means is simply that there being such a convention does not ensure that when the red flag is up all uses of S are made with the purpose P. Conventions can be broken. It's in their nature. But since sincerity would have to be ensured if we want to make it the case that uttering S implies having P, this cannot be done by convention.

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[7]Cf. also his discussion of Frege's assertion sign (Davidson 1982, 269f).

4 Word meaning and speaker meaning

Even if we were to agree with Davidson on the autonomy of semantics, however, we might think that the connection between linguistic expressions and their literal meaning must be established by convention. After all, the connection clearly is in a certain sense *arbitrary*; so, what could establish it if not convention? But, or so the Davidsonian argument goes, convention is not up to this job either, because convention is neither necessary nor sufficient to account for all the things utterances can, and actually do, mean. Davidson makes this argument first in the final parts of *Communication and Convention*, and repeats in – in more spectacular form – in *A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs* (1986). *Nice Derangement* starts with a number of amusing examples of non-standard language use: malapropisms, spoonerisms, and sheer neologisms. What these are supposed to illustrate is the existence and prevalence of a certain phenomenon: utterances with non-standard or non-conventional but nevertheless literal meaning. In fact, Davidson claims, "the phenomenon is ubiquitous" (Davidson 1986, 89). Here is part of the quote he opens the paper with:

> From time to time, Ace will, in a jerksome way, monotonise the conversation with witticisms too humorous to mention. It's high noon someone beat him at his own game, but I have never done it; cross my eyes and hope to die, he always wins thumbs down (Davidson 1986, 79).[8]

Not all malapropisms are funny, deep, or even intentional. Often, speakers substitute one word for another without even being aware of it. Mrs. Malaprop speaks of "a nice derangement of epitaphs" or "the allegories on the bank of the Nile". World literature contains a number of characters more than usually prone to this kind of "mistake"; besides Sheridan's Mrs. Malaprop there is Frau Stöhr in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* and the captain of the *Patna* in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* – and, of course, Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*. But it happens to every one of us, and, as Davidson stresses, it can happen to any word or construction. In many cases of malapropism, the hearer is aided by similarity of sound. But that is not necessary, either. To be cases of successful linguistic communication, all we need is that the hearer gets what the speaker D-intends him to interpret the uttered words as meaning.

This does not mean that a speaker can mean whatever he D-intends by an utterance. Humpty Dumpty cannot mean that there is a nice knockdown argument for you by saying to Alice 'There is glory for you' because she has no way of figuring this out (cf. Davidson 1986; 98; 121f). The speaker can only D-intend to mean what he can reasonably expect the hearer to get – arguably,

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[8]Davidson here quotes Mark Singer writing in *The New Yorker*, 4 April 1977, p. 56. Singer is writing about Goodman Ace who wrote radio sitcoms.

this restriction basically is part and parcel of the notion of a semantic intention (cf. Hornsby 2008, 113f). And of course, often it is reasonable to expect your hearer to get the standard meaning of words. But not always. And it is perfectly possible, Davidson argues, to have non-standard D-intentions – as long as you provide the hearer with cues enabling him to figure out what you mean.[9] Nor does it have to be similarity of sound that provides the cue. It can basically be whatever the context provides – as long as it is accessible to the hearer.

The cases of successful linguistic communication Davidson draws attention to are, he claims, such that

    i) the speaker intends his utterance u of sentence S to be interpreted as meaning p,

    ii) the hearer understands this and because of that interprets u as meaning p,

    iii) p is u's literal or "first" meaning,

    iv) and p is not identical with S's standard or conventional meaning.

Let's call cases that fulfill these conditions "malaprop cases". Davidson never spells out exactly what the standard or conventional meaning would be. He sometimes loosely characterizes it as what you would find in the dictionary, or the way the community or the experts use certain expressions.[10] Instead, he focuses on some essential aspects of conventional or standard meaning: If there is such a thing, it is such that speakers and hearers can know it *in advance* of the particular conversation we are interested in, and this knowledge will be *shared* by them. Moreover, if conventional meaning is essential to linguistic communication, what makes it so is precisely its being shared knowledge between speakers and hearers. If these indeed are necessary aspects of conventional meaning – and this assumption seems very plausible – Davidson can make his case against convention by concentrating on these aspects.

If there is a significant number of malaprop cases among them it should be clear that shared knowledge of standard meanings is not *sufficient* to "explain our actual communicative achievements" (Davidson 1994, 110). In malaprop cases, speaker and hearer might very well know what the words uttered standardly mean. For instance, when Archie Bunker says 'We need a few

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[9]Hornsby nevertheless argues that "shared knowledge of meaning is necessary for communication as we know it" (cf. Hornsby 2008, 114). If "communication as we know it" does not mean anything more than communication that does not require abilities such as magic or telepathy (cf. ibid. 117), this seems unpersuasive in the particular cases Davidson lines up. But I think Hornsby is less interested in particular cases of successful communication than Davidson is. Rather, she seems interested in the ease and frequency of success in linguistic communication considered as a "mass phenomenon", so to speak. Her point then would be that the frequency and ease of actual success throughout this phenomenon can only be explained as the result of heavy reliance on shared knowledge of standard meaning. It is important to note, however, that this is compatible with Davidson's claims about what is necessary for a particular utterance to be a case of successful linguistic communication.

[10]In Davidson 1982, 276, he quotes David Lewis's definition of convention (1975) and – despite misgivings about some of its conditions – suggests granting that "something like Lewis's six conditions does hold roughly for speakers of the same language". The relevant regularities would be regularities of assigning meanings to words and sentences.

laughs to break up the monogamy', these words do have a standard meaning. And both Archie and his hearer might know both that the words have a standard meaning and what it is. And even though this knowledge might play some role in arriving at the correct interpretation, it clearly is not sufficient for understanding what Archie actually means. Nor is it *necessary*. Both Archie and his hearer might be blissfully ignorant of the standard meaning of the words uttered. Still, communication succeeds as long as the hearer interprets Archie as Archie D-intended him to. Consequently, convention is not essential to linguistic communication both in the sense of literal meaning not necessarily being identical to conventional meaning (condition iv) above), and in the sense of knowledge of conventional meaning not being necessary for understanding literal meaning.

These basically rather simple points might be somewhat obscured by Davidson's fondness for "cute" or literary examples. It has been observed that many of his examples heavily play on standard meanings to convey all sorts of things over and above what Davidson construes as their literal or first meaning.[11] But as far as Davidson is concerned, these are accidental features of the examples. It might therefore be better to use trivial, everyday examples like the following that once happened to me. One winter I was looking out of my kitchen window. It was raining heavily. I turned to my friend who was about to leave, pointed at the window and uttered (the German equivalent of) 'Would you like to borrow a whisk broom?' Without hesitation, my friend pulled her umbrella from her backpack, waved it at me, and said 'No, thank you, I've got one'. Only after that we both realized what I had in fact said, and burst out laughing. There are no subtle "deeper" meanings in an example like that, and all the relevant clues to what I D-intended were provided, not by the standard meaning of 'whisk broom', but by the context of the utterance, in particular my friend's being about to go out in connection with my pointing gesture. The whisk example thus might be a rather clear candidate for being a malaprop case.

But is the D-intended meaning the *literal* meaning? This claim might well be the most controversial aspect of Davidson's anti-conventionalism. It has been argued, for instance, that malaprop cases do not pose any challenge to conventionalism because there is no need to construe the D-intended meaning as the literal meaning: We can construe it as a kind of speaker meaning. The idea would be that we can treat malaprop cases just like cases of irony or metaphor. In irony, a speaker utters a sentence that literally means that p in order to communicate that not-p. And in metaphorical speech, a speaker utters a sentence that literally means that p in order to communicate a "metaphorical meaning" q. The question then is what reason there is to treat "malaproppy" meanings any different from metaphorical ones (cf. Green 2001, 241ff, Reimer 2004, 321ff).

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[11]Cf. Green 2001, 243, for instance.

According to Davidson, there is a crucial difference between malaprop cases and typical cases of speaker meaning, however. To see why we need to look at his way of distinguishing literal meaning – what he prefers to call "first meaning" – from speaker meaning. Here is how he introduces the notion in *Nice Derangement*:

> Here is a preliminary stab at characterising what I have been calling literal meaning. The term is too incrusted with philosophical and other extras to do much work, so let me call what I am interested in *first meaning*. The concept applies to words and sentences as uttered by a particular speaker on a particular occasion. But if the occasion, the speaker, and the audience are 'normal' or 'standard' (in a sense not to be further explained here), then the first meaning of an utterance will be what should be found by consulting a dictionary based on actual usage (such as *Webster's Third*). Roughly speaking, first meaning comes first in the order of interpretation (Davidson 1986, 91).

The best way of identifying the relevant notion of meaning, however, is by means of the intentions of the speaker, Davidson explains. The intentions with which a speaker made a particular utterance can be ordered by means of the means-ends relation. Such an ordering can be expressed by means of 'in order to', as in the following Davidsonian example:

> Suppose Diogenes utters the words 'I would have you stand from between me and the sun' (or their Greek equivalent) with the intentions of uttering words that will be interpreted by Alexander as true if and only if Diogenes would have him stand from between Diogenes and the sun, and this with the intention of getting Alexander to move from between him and the sun, and this with the intention of leaving a good anecdote to posterity (Davidson 1986, 92).

In such an order, Davidson says, the first meaning is specified by the first intention that requires the Gricean feature. This intention is what he calls "the semantic intention".

If literal meaning is understood as Davidsonian first meaning, the distinction between it and speaker meaning can be drawn along rather traditional lines: Cases of genuine speaker meaning are such that knowledge of literal or first meaning is required for understanding or explaining speaker meaning. Davidson illustrates this need by means of some lines from Shakespeare's *Sonnet 53*:

> We have no chance of explaining the image in the following lines, for example, unless we know what 'foison' meant in Shakespeare's day:

> Speak of the spring and foison of the year,
>
> The one doth shadow of your beauty show,
>
> The other as your bounty doth appear...

> Little here is to be taken literally, but unless we know the literal, or first, meaning of
> the words we do not grasp and cannot explain the image (Davidson 1986, 91).

In the relevant order of intentions, the metaphorical or ironical intention necessarily comes after the semantic intention. Uttering words with a certain literal or first meaning is a necessary means for getting one's speaker meaning across. This necessity, Davidson argues, is simply lacking in malaprop cases. It is simply not the case that malaproppy meanings can only be understood by means of first grasping a different standard meaning. According to Davidson, it is not even necessary "that the speaker use a real word: most of 'The Jabberwock' is intelligible on first hearing" (Davidson 1986, 90). Moreover, as Lepore and Ludwig note, it is perfectly possible to use words non-standardly *and* ironically – as when they imagine answering Mrs. Malaprop by saying 'And that's a nice derangement of words' (cf. Lepore and Ludwig 2005, 266).

The crucial difference between first and speaker meaning thus could be put in terms of pragmatic processing. Understanding speaker meaning requires pragmatic processes of the classical Gricean kind – these days sometimes called "secondary pragmatic processes": "*secondary* pragmatic processes are ordinary inferential processes taking us from what is said, or rather from the speaker's saying of what is said, to something that (under standard assumptions of rationality and cooperativeness) follows from the fact that the speaker has said what she has said" (cf. Recanati 2004, 17). Such processes take first meaning as input and derive speaker meaning from it. No such processing is necessary to arrive at first meanings. That is why Davidson says: "We want a deeper notion of what words, when spoken in context, means; and like the shallow notion of correct usage, we want the deep concept to distinguish between what a speaker, on a given occasion, means, and what his words mean" (Davidson 1986, 91).[12]

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[12]Green argues that malaprop cases do *not* force any radical adjustment to our (conventional) notion of literal meaning because they either can be construed as involving secondary pragmatic processing of a rather particular kind or are such that the speaker does not have any clear semantic intention at all:

> Either the agent is so confused that no clear first intention can be attributed to them, or the agent is aware of what they are doing, in which case their first intention is to produce a meaningless or deviant sentence that is sufficiently close in sound to a meaningful one to be interpretable by an audience with sufficient linguistic competence (Green 2001, 252).

It is not easy to see how this general claim could be substantiated. A few counterexamples are all that is needed to falsify it, however. Take the whisk example. I certainly was not aware of what I was doing. Nor do I think that I was so confused that no clear first intention could be attributed to me. Of course, I managed to inadvertently produce an expression I (probably) had not intended to produce. But it was completely clear what I intended to mean by the expression I produced. I intended to mean *umbrella*. (Having such an intention does not require anything like consciously thinking something like 'I intend to mean umbrella by 'whisk broom', of course; cf. Davidson 1986, 122f.) Examples like these, it seems to me, can easily be multiplied. As Davidson says, "we all get away with it all the time" (Davidson 1986, 99).

Nevertheless, you might think that there is something counter-intuitive about construing malaproppy meanings as first or literal meanings. Intuitions about what was *said* on a given occasion might be cited to motivate the claim that malaprops first and foremost mean what the words uttered standardly or conventionally mean.[13] It is far from clear, however, that the intuitive or ordinary notion of what is said is at all precise enough to justify the claim that there is a clear intuition about what is said when speakers produce malapropisms. Nor is it clear that the intuitive or ordinary notion of what is said tracks standard semantic content.[14] And last, but not least, we saw already in the introduction that Davidson's project is not a reconstruction of the ordinary notions of meaning or language. Nor – we might add now – is he interested in a reconstruction of the ordinary notion of what is said. According to Davidson, any such project would be meaning theoretically interesting only if we otherwise would miss something essential to linguistic communication.[15]

Reimer does have a comeback to this, however. She counters the Davidsonian claim that conventional meaning is uninteresting by arguing that, on the contrary, "the conventional construal

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And of course Davidson is not saying that all malapropisms are easily understood. What Davidson claims is that actual linguistic communication is such that easily understood malaprops occur all the time. Therefore, it does not help to establish that there also are numerous cases where malaprops are not or not fully understood. Reimer, for instance, observes "*contra* Davidson" that "when confronted with a malaprop, we are often downright confused" (Reimer 2004, 323). That is no doubt true, and Reimer gives some plausible examples. But Davidson does not deny that idiosyncratic language use often fails to be understood. He claims that it often succeeds.

[13]For arguments along these lines, see Kemmerling 1993, 100, Reimer 2004, 321ff.

[14]Take the whisk example again. Of course, there is a sense in which I *said* 'Would you like to borrow a whisk broom?' In fact, there are several such senses. First, there is the sense in which 'saying that' means uttering precisely the expressions following 'that'. Then, there is the sense in which 'saying that' means uttering words having the standard meaning that the words following 'that' have. In this sense, I asked whether my friend wanted to borrow a whisk broom. But that is not all. Take irony. The speaker who ironically utters 'That's great' might be correctly reported as having said that that is great, but equally correctly as having said the opposite. What is correct here depends on the purpose of the said-that report. Thus, my friend might correctly report me as having asked whether she wanted to borrow an umbrella. The possibility of a correct said-that report (or asked-whether report) thus might not show all that much when it comes to literal meaning. For further critical discussion, see Cappelen and Lepore 1997; Cappelen and Lepore 2004.

[15]Kemmerling 1993 asks us to consider a case where a speaker S who knows that her hearer H is apt to interpret 'arthritis' as meaning *diabetes* utters 'I have arthritis'. She does so because she is legally required to inform H of her illness, but wants H to believe that she has diabetes. Kemmerling claims that this is a clear case where S has misled, but not lied. Moreover, he thinks that Davidson misses something essential about linguistic communication if he cannot draw the distinction illustrated by this case, "the distinction between lying and willfully-misleading-by-using-a-true-sentence" (Kemmerling 1993, 103).

But how clear is it that S has not lied? The principle behind the verdict, I take it, is supposed to be that lying implies saying something that is not true, but then, we are just back to intuitions about what is said (see fn. 14). In any case, I would be surprised if intuitions regarding this example were at all clear.

Moreover, it is very hard to see why it should be difficult for Davidson to draw the distinction Kemmerling finds so important. All he needs to do is define a notion of shared or standard meaning along the lines he proposes for defining a notion of a shared language: "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", Davidson writes (Davidson 1994, 111). On the basis of such a notion, the speaker in Kemmerling's example can be described as not uttering something the standard meaning of which is false. She can also be described as willfully misleading by using a sentence the standard meaning of which is true. The real question is not whether this distinction can be drawn, but whether it is meaning theoretically (as opposed to, for instance, legally) interesting to do so.

of malaprop meaning is a theoretically fruitful one" (Reimer 2004, 322). Since speakers above all want to be understood, they usually intend to conform to conventions, according to Reimer, more precisely, they do so in all cases where they do not intentionally use words idiosyncratically. Therefore, the notion of conventional meaning is "a theoretically fruitful notion in that it can be appealed to in order to explain why speakers utter the particular words that they do" (Reimer 2004, 324). As we saw, Davidson does not deny that speakers often intend to speak as their neighbours do, nor does he deny that doing so facilitates understanding. Consequently, he does not deny either that very often, we can explain a speaker's choice of words in precisely this way. Again, his claim is only that there being such an explanation is not necessary for successful linguistic communication. Take the whisk example once more. My choice of the word 'whisk broom' can certainly not be explained by my wanting to utter an expression the conventional meaning of which is *umbrella*: If I had any such intention, it failed.

Once we accept malaprop cases as cases of successful linguistic communication, it seems to me, the Davidsonian case for the claim that conventional meaning is not essential to such communication is pretty strong. One might wonder, however, whether what is going on in these cases is properly *linguistic* in nature. *Which* language, you might ask, is Mrs. Malaprop speaking? Is she really speaking (any language) at all when producing her malaprops? That will be the topic of the next section.

5 Is there such a thing as a language?

In *Nice Derangement* Davidson's anti-conventional line of thought culminates in what has been perceived by many as an outright, possibly suicidal attack on language itself. He argues that the frequency, pervasiveness, and easy interpretability of idiosyncratic language use in a certain sense threatens the very idea that speaking a language is necessary for linguistic communication. Here is the original formulation of what I shall call the "no-language claim":

(NL)   "There is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed" (Davidson 1986, 107).

Maybe unsurprisingly, this is a claim for which Davidson got a lot of fire, most notably from Michael Dummett.[16] And there certainly is something funny about a philosopher of language

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[16]Cf. Dummett 1986. Among other things, Dummett interprets Davidson as claiming that each and every case of successful linguistic understanding requires interpretation of the uttered expressions, and argues that such an account of understanding would lead into an infinite regress of interpretations, a regress familiar from Wittgenstein's so-called rule-following considerations and clearly vicious in nature. Davidson counters that the supposed regress ensues only if the notions of interpretation is read in the particular way in which Wittgenstein explicitly employs it in those passages (where 'interpretation' means replacing one linguistic expression by another linguistic expression), a notion completely at odds with Davidson's notion of interpretation (cf. Davidson 1994, 112). For other discussions of the no-language claim cf. Hacking 186; Ramberg 1989, 98ff.; George 1990; Bar-On

claiming that there is no such thing as a language. But to evaluate its philosophical merits, we have to see the no-language claim in its wider context, and we have to take seriously the proviso it contains – "if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed".

The notion of a language is significant in the context of Davidson's convention considerations because it might furnish an answer to the question of when communication not only is successful, but also linguistic. After all, there is a difference between communicating by means of language and communicating by means of extra-linguistic gestures or signs, for instance. Communication by language involves the use of linguistic expressions, signs that have *linguistic* meaning. So, what is required for communicating linguistic meanings? According to Davidson, "[t]he usual answer would (...) be that in the case of language the hearer shares a complex system or theory with the speaker, a system which makes possible the articulation of logical relations between utterances, and explains the ability to interpret novel utterances in an organized way" (Davidson 1986, 93). But, Davidson argues, this answer is mistaken: Language *in this sense* is inessential for linguistic communication.

So, what exactly is language *in this sense*? What is the notion of language that Davidson is attacking, a notion he claims had been employed by many philosophers and linguists – including himself? In retrospect, he characterized this notion as follows:

> It was this: in learning a language, a person acquires the ability to operate in accord
> with a precise and specifiable set of syntactic and semantic rules; verbal communica-
> tion depends on speaker and hearer sharing such such an ability, and it requires no
> more than this (Davidson 1994, 110).

What is under attack here is not so much a certain notion of a language than a certain notion of a language *together* with a set of ideas about its relation to linguistic competence and the use of linguistic expressions.[17] It is therefore quite consistent with the no language claim that Davidson himself even after *Nice Derangement* gives the following explanation of what a language is: "A language may be viewed as a complex abstract object, defined by giving a finite list of expressions (words), rules for constructing meaningful concatenations of expressions (sentences), and a semantic interpretation of the meaningful expressions based on the semantic features of individual words" (Davidson 1992, 107). The no-language claim does not dispute that there are languages in this sense. What it disputes is that an utterance u is a case of successful linguistic communication if, and only if, there is a language in this technical, abstract sense that both

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and Risjord 1992; Pietroski 1994, Lepore and Ludwig 2005, ch. 17.

[17]One might have reasonable doubts about how common the notion of a language under attack actually is; cf. Lepore and Ludwig 2005, 275.

models the speaker's and the hearer's linguistic competence in advance of u and assigns the correct interpretation to u.[18]

Just like the rest of Davidson's anti-conventionalism, the no-language claim is a *modal* claim about what is essential to successful linguistic communication. And indeed, the no-language claim, drastic as it may sound, does not add anything very radical to Davidson's anti-conventionalism. In particular, Davidson does *not* give up on the idea that what distinguishes linguistic communication is a certain kind of *systematicity*. What he challenges is once more the idea that communication succeeds if, and only if, speaker and hearer share knowledge of conventional meanings in advance of their conversation. That claim, the point now is, does not get any more plausible by requiring them to share *whole systems* of conventional or standard meanings in advance of their conversation. When Davidson argues that there is no such thing as a language, what he means is that it is not essential to particular cases of successful linguistic communication that there is *a pre-established, shared language.*

In *A Nice Derangement*, Davidson further spells out this idea. Focusing on the semantic rules of a language, as specified by a T-theory, he now suggests distinguishing between what he calls "prior theory" and "passing theory":

> For the hearer, the prior theory expresses how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker, while the passing theory is how he does interpret the utterance. For the speaker, the prior theory is what he believes the interpreter's prior theory to be, while his passing theory is the theory he intends the interpreter to use (Davidson 1986, 101).[19]

All of these theories are T-theories. So, the question is how these four T-theories relate to one another in cases of successful communication.

As we saw above, Davidson conceives of an utterance u as a case of successful linguistic communication iff the hearer H of u interprets it as the speaker S D-intended it to be interpreted. This translates into the terms of the prior and passing T-theories as follows: Communication succeeds iff both S's and H's passing theories assign the same interpretation to u. What needs to

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[18]It is, however, not very clear in what sense a speaker is 'operating in accord' with the semantic rules of a language in the technical sense. According to Davidson, these are specified by a T-theory. But how can the speaker's production of an utterance be modeled as the product of following the rules of a T-theory? The speaker wants to express a certain meaning, and the theory modeling his ability to do so would presumably tell him how to find the expressions to use. One might think that the speaker could use the T-theory 'the other way around' – as going from T-sentences to expressions, that is. But the number of T-sentences is infinite, and we can hardly model a speaker's ability to find expressions for his thoughts as a capacity to go through an infinite list of T-sentences until an expression with the required meaning is found. For more on this and on the idea of 'inverse compositionality' that might provide an answer to this problem, see Pagin 2003.

[19]This is not supposed to be taken as implying claims "about the propositional knowledge of an interpreter, nor are they claims about the details of the inner workings of some part of the brain" (Davidson 1986, 96). And the same holds for the speaker.

be shared, that is, is nothing but the interpretation of u – after it has been made. Prior theories, whether shared or not, are irrelevant to the question of success. In a way, we can therefore reformulate the no-language claim like this:

(NL′) For an utterance u by a speaker S to a hearer H to be a case of successful communication, it is neither necessary nor sufficient

    i)   that S's prior theory is the same as S's passing theory for u,

    ii)   that H's prior theory is the same as H's passing theory for u, or

    iii) that S's prior theory is the same as H's prior theory.[20]

Quite plainly, the basic point of these considerations remains the same – whether it is put in terms of conventional or standard meanings, or in the more fancy terminology of prior and passing theories. What this terminology does add is the insistence on *systematicity*: To specify the meaning of an utterance, be it ever so fleeting, a whole, systematic semantic theory is required.

But why? Asking why a whole systematic semantic theory is required for the interpretation of every meaningful utterance, be it ever so idiosyncratic, amounts to asking: Why should the "meanings" that idiosyncratically used expressions have when understood count as *linguistic* meanings at all? Aren't these uses of words more like spontaneous gestures or the use of non-linguistic objects to signal something than like typical uses of linguistic expressions?

"The answer is," Davidson writes, "that when a word or phrase temporally or locally takes over the role of some other word or phrase (as treated in a prior theory, perhaps), the entire burden of that role, with all its implications for logical relations to other words, phrases, and sentences, must be carries along by the passing theory" (Davidson 1986, 103). For an expression to have a meaning is to (potentially) contribute to the meanings of *all* the possible complex expressions it could be part of. There is broad consensus among philosophers and linguists that a formal semantic theory modeling actual speakers' linguistic abilities needs to have a finite base and be at least recursive (cf. Davidson 1986, 95). Any such theory is a (theory for a) whole language in the technical sense spelled out above. Any such language *could* be spoken over any stretch of utterances. Potentially, that is, the speaker producing a malaprop *could* go on speaking the language specified by the passing T-theory correctly interpreting it – for any length of time. But he does not have to.[21] And according to Davidson, there is no particular set of elements of

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[20]Of course, i)-iii) are *jointly* sufficient for u's being a case of successful communication. Joint satisfaction of i)-iii), however, is not necessary for u's being a case of successful communication.

[21]Green claims that Davidson's passing theories are not systematic (cf. Green 2001, 248f, see also Hacking 186, 455). She writes: "Systematicity was supposed to guarantee constancy of meaning across contexts of utterance and times, so there is no substance to the idea that the passing theory is systematic" (Green 2001, 248). The systematicity of a Davidsonian passing theory consists in its being a finitely axiomatised, recursive (and moreover compositional) T-theory. Systematicity is what allows such a theory to assign meanings to a potentially limitless

our prior theories that could not be changed in the passing theory required for understanding some utterance. These changes can be more or less short-lived, but they can occur basically anywhere:

> there is no word or construction that cannot be converted to a new use by an ingenious or ignorant speaker. And such conversion, while easier to explain because it involves mere substitution, is not the only kind. Sheer invention is equally possible, and we can be as good at interpreting it (say in Joyce or Lewis Carroll) as we are at interpreting the errors or twists of substitution (Davidson 1986, 100).

Moreover, basically any feature of the situation in which the word is uttered can be utilized for providing the relevant clue. Therefore, Davidson maintains, we have to modify how we think of our linguistic ability. To the extent that this capacity is truly creative both on the speaker's and on the hearer's part, we must not think of it on the model of an interpretation machine that we carry around with us and that for any arbitrary utterance (plus certain contextual parameters) that we feed it cranks out an interpretation (cf. Davidson 1986, 95). Essential parts of our linguistic competence cannot be captured in this way:

> We may say that linguistic ability is the ability to converge on a passing theory from time to time – this is what I have suggested, and I have no better proposal. But if we do say this, then we should realize that we have abandoned not only the ordinary notion of a language, but we have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally. 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 at least in this, that it is derived by wit, luck, and wisdom from a private vocabulary and 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 (Davidson 1986, 107).

But even if we agree with Davidson that linguistic ability is like any other knowledge in that there are no rules for arriving at correct theories, we might insist that the theories themselves remain sufficiently different. Even if the "evolution" of our beliefs and theories in general is a dynamic, uncodifiable process, not all of them can be correctly described by means of "evolving"

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number of sentences (and their utterances in varying contexts). It is hard to see, however, what systematicity is supposed to have to do with constancy of meaning across time. No theory, systematic or not, guarantees anything in cases where it does not apply (any longer). The question is not whether the passing theory is systematic. The question is whether constancy of meaning over time is essential to linguistic communication.

formal semantic theories. These are and remain very different from, say, physical theories.[22]

Moreover, the following question remains a good one: Is it really inessential to *linguistic* communication that success usually is very swift and frequent? Davidson emphasizes the ease and swiftness with which idiosyncrasies often are interpreted. According to him, this is sufficient motivation for construing the underlying ability as linguistic. But *standard* language use is understood easily and swiftly, too, and presumably with an even higher success rate than idiosyncratic use. If regular use of linguistic expressions is necessary for this feature of successful communication, it is hard to see why this should be meaning theoretically uninteresting. It would, after all, throw light on the nature of linguistic capacities that we actually use everyday. This is not to say that Davidson is wrong when he claims that regular use is not necessary for success, or that the linguistic capacities that we actually use everyday are not exhausted by such a description. It is only to say that our linguistic capacities are essentially such that they allow for effortless, reliable, and predictable success.[23]

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[22]Some commentators worry that Davidson ultimately is committed to a picture on which passing theories necessarily change with each utterance. These changes are seen as undermining the very idea of an expression's having any meaning – i.e. any conditions of correct application. The worry is supposed to arise because of the holisms Davidson subscribes to. Thus Meredith Williams writes: "Given the argument of 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', the theory of meaning that describes the speaker's linguistic competence is not stable over time, but constantly changes with each new utterance. Any difference in belief or use of an expression marks a different language, given the holistic interdependence of meaning and belief" (Williams 2000, 305ff).

Davidson does hold that meaning determination is holistic in the sense that the meanings of all the (atomic) expressions of a language are determined together. He also holds that meaning and belief are interdependent in the sense that meanings and belief contents are determined by the same determination base. It does not follow from this, however, that any change in belief is a change in meaning: According to Davidson, meaning and belief content are determined by the principle of charity, and the principle of charity is a many-one determination principle (for more on this, see Pagin 1997). Moreover, as Paul Pietroski points out, even if Davidsonian holism had such radical consequences, the appeal to passing theories would do nothing to aggravate them (cf. Pietroski 1994).

Nor does the appeal to passing theories aggravate what Williams – in explicit reference to Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations – calls "the paradox of interpretation". The problem, according to Williams is that any given number of applications of an expression is "compatible with any of an array of distinct theories of meaning" (Williams 2000, 303)). If there is such a problem for Davidson, it is a problem for his account of meaning determination. This is not the place to discuss Davidson's account of meaning determination, but it should be noted that if the problem is that no (finite) number of applications of an expression can, just by itself, determine the meaning of that expression, it really would not matter at all just how many actual applications we consider. Even if Davidson were concerned with meaning determination in the convention considerations, the problem would just be the same whether the meaning theories to be determined vary over time, or not. But as pointed out above (section 2), Davidson's convention considerations are not concerned with questions of meaning determination – in contrast to Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations. The convention considerations operate on a level where it is taken for granted that the foundational problems of meaning determination have been taken care of and intensional notions such as that of intention can be made non-question begging use of (pace Williams 2000, 305).

[23]It should be noted, however, that even if regularity of use is essential to the kind of success our linguistic endeavors very often meet, this does not imply that conventionality is in any way essential to meaning. Conventionality requires more than regularity; it is for instance intuitively very plausible to think that conventional action needs to be, in some way, *motivated* by the convention. The same would seem to hold for rule-following or norm-guidedness, at least on any intuitive notion of rule following and norm-guidedness. (See Glüer 2001 for a discussion of Davidson's anti-conventionalism in relation to the currently popular idea that meaning is normative, Wittgenstein's game analogy and his rule-following considerations. See Bilgrami 1993 for discussion relating Davidson's anti-conventionalism to normativism and (social) externalism.) According to Davidson, this element is redundant when it comes to meaning. In discussion with Dummett, who argues that speakers need to have a "prescriptive attitude" towards the common language (cf. Dummett 1991, 85), he puts the point as follows:

6 Radically interpreting Mrs. Malaprop

Last, but not least, we can ask how the dynamic, fleeting picture of meaning that the no-language claim seems to induce fares with respect to the possibility of radical interpretation. After all, a speaker who does not use his words with a certain regularity would not seem to be radically interpretable. Even though this is certainly true, it would be wrong to think that there consequently is some deep tension between Davidson's earlier and later work. This would be wrong because it, again, misconstrues the character of Davidson's individualism.[24] For even though Davidson holds that the notion of an idiolect has priority over that of a sociolect when it comes to accounting for meaning (cf. Davidson 1994, 111), this does not mean that there are no social constraints on what an individual speaker can mean by his words. Linguistic meaning, according to Davidson, is essentially public – he never departs from this basic doctrine.

To see why he therefore does not expect the no-language picture to cause any tension with radical interpretation, we need to look at that scenario from the speaker's perspective, too. The most pertinent question then is: What, if anything, can the radical speaker D-intend the radical interpreter to interpret him as meaning? An important, and intuitively plausible principle Davidson uses here is the following: You cannot intend what you know to be impossible (cf. Davidson 1989, 147). Thus, Humpty Dumpty cannot (intend to) mean *a nice knockdown argument* by 'glory', because he knows that Alice will not be able to understand him.[25] Prima

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> Suppose that someone learns to talk as others do, but feels no obligation whatever to do so. For this speaker obligation doesn't enter into it. We ask why she talks as others do. 'I don't do it because I think I should', she replies, 'I just do talk that way. I don't think I have an obligation to walk upright, it just comes naturally.' If what she says is true, would she not be speaking a language, or would she cease to be intelligible? In other words, what magic ingredient does holding oneself responsible to the usual way of speaking add to the usual way of speaking? (Davidson 1994, 117).

Lepore and Ludwig (2007) argue that there is no deep controversy between Davidson and Dummett when it comes to the role of convention in communication, but this would seem to be one clear bone of contention between them. Lepore and Ludwig also argue that "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, that is, on shared conventions. In this sense, conventions are necessary for communicative success, at least in so far as it is *linguistic* communication" (Lepore and Ludwig 2005, 282). Given that they take being governed by rules to involve "intending to use words in accordance with certain rules" (ibid.), I think this is exegetically doubtful. No intention to follow any rule, be it ever so short lived or individualistic, is necessary for meaningful speech according to Davidson. His point about obligation clearly generalizes to individual regularities. (Already in *Communication and Convention*, he asks in passing "what 'conforming' to a regularity adds to the regularity itself" (276).) Moreover, it is neither obvious nor uncontroversial that "the speaker and the hearer in a communicative exchange do understand the speaker to be intending to use words in accordance with certain rules" (Lepore and Ludwig 2005, 282) – as witnessed by the recent debate regarding the normativity of meaning (for an overview, see Glüer and Wikforss 2009).

[24] For a rather different way of reconciling the no-language picture, interpreted as an essentially dynamic view of meaning and language, with radical interpretation, cf. Ramberg 1989, 98ff. For discussion, see Bar-On and Risjord 1992; Pietroski 1994.

[25] Catherine Talmage argues that the account of (literal) meaning Davidson gives in the radical interpretation papers actually commits him to the claim that Humpty Dumpty is (radically) interpretable as long as he at the time of his utterance is *disposed* to consistently use 'glory' "in the way in which competent English speakers are disposed to use the phrase 'a nice knockdown argument'" (Talmage 1996, 542). But that does not seem right; the radical interpreter will not be able to determine that Humpty Dumpty is so disposed if Humpty Dumpty does not actually use 'glory' in that way across quite a number of utterances. The appeal to the so-called "omniscient

facie, it might seem to follow that the radical speaker cannot (D-intend to) mean anything by any of his utterances, for he knows that, initially at least, the radical interpreter will not be able to understand him. But there is a crucial difference: The radical speaker can use his words in such a way that they are interpretable, in such a way, that is, that the radical interpreter will eventually be able to figure out what the speaker means: "The best the speaker can do is to be *interpretable*, that is, to use a finite supply of distinguishable sounds applied consistently to objects and situations he believes are apparent to his hearer" (cf. Davidson 1984, 13). Radical interpretation thus appears as a limiting case on the no-language picture: The case where all other ways of being interpretable are blocked, and the only chance at communicating lies in the regular application of one's words.

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