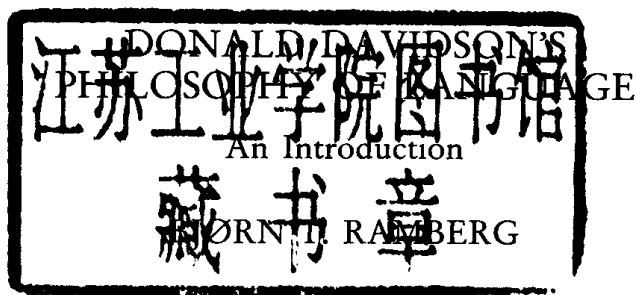


Donald
Davidson's
Philosophy of
Language
An Introduction

Bjørn T. Ramberg



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BTR

Oslo, August 1988

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1

Introduction

There is no such thing as a language. This is the remarkable conclusion of Donald Davidson's recent paper, 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' (Davidson, 1986a). What are we to make of this claim? Davidson made his formidable reputation as a philosopher in large measure through a series of ground-breaking studies in semantics published over the last three decades.¹ Is he now calling into question the very existence of what these papers purport to be about?

Such a sweeping recantation is not what Davidson intends. He is not looking to deprive the study of language of its subject matter. He is, rather, urging that we revise some commonly held ideas about how linguistic communication works. What his arguments lead him to conclude, is that

there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases. (Davidson, 1986a, p. 446).

Davidson is not giving up his search for a description of the nature of linguistic competence, the elusive goal of his philosophical efforts over the last 25 years. He is suggesting that the concept of a language is an obfuscatory hindrance to that task. This claim amounts to more than a slightly hyperbolic dismissal from service of a conceptual tool. Davidson is making a philosophically substantive point, and his target is a powerful and highly plausible

idea. For what could linguistic competence be, if not the mastery of a clearly defined shared structure, the mastery of an integrated, unitary system that speaker and interpreter have in common?

The considerations that have led Davidson to reject this seemingly persuasive explanatory strategy surface explicitly in 'Communication and Convention' (*Inquiries*, pp. 265–80). This paper, first published in 1983, is by three years the most recent of the ones collected in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Its ammunition is directed at various attempts to explain linguistic communication in terms of conformity to a body of conventions. It is easy to see how closely related this topic is to Davidson's later attack on the concept of a language. In so far as we think of a language as a clearly defined shared structure, we must conceive of any particular language as constituted by a particular social practice. And a social practice is specifiable in terms of the conventions that govern it. But what Davidson attempted to show in 1983, was that 'convention does not help explain what is basic to linguistic communication' (*Inquiries*, p. 280). If linguistic communication does not essentially involve conventions, in what sense is it a specifiable practice? And if it is not a specifiable social practice, what content can we give to the notion of a language? None, is Davidson's recent conclusion.

Not surprisingly, this dramatic pronouncement has met with resistance, notably from Ian Hacking (1986) and Michael Dummett (1986). They argue that Davidson's conclusion is unwarranted. Hacking, in particular, thinks that in drawing it Davidson is *ipso facto* retracting some of the central premises of his earlier papers. On the reading of Davidson that I develop below, Hacking and Dummett are wrong on both counts.

The guiding intuition behind my interpretation of Davidson is that all his writings on language can be read as attempts to exorcise the ghosts of reification from out thinking about communication. On this view, Davidson's challenge to the very idea of a language emerges as a natural development of his theory of meaning.

In papers published in the 1960s and 1970s, Davidson carefully develops a philosophy of language purified of the reification of meaning and reference. More recently, he has focused on the reification involved in the notion of a language itself. It turns out

that the concept of a language, like the notion of meanings of words and the idea of a relation of reference, can do no work in an account of linguistic competence. All three are conceptual parasites, gaining any content they might have only as the theoretical constructs of a model of linguistic communication that derives its explanatory power from another source: the concept of truth.

It is true that in developing his comprehensive philosophy of language Davidson does write as if we can make good sense of the concept of a language. But this does not imply that the validity of his theory hinges on this assumption, unless we imagine the progression of philosophical thought to be a matter of deductive construction. Like the boards in Otto Neurath's ship, the concepts of a language, of meaning and of reference cannot be replaced all at once. By taking for granted that there are languages, Davidson was able to articulate a theory of meaning which in turn enabled him to subject this very natural supposition itself to critical scrutiny. The result, I hope to show, is not a theory which undercuts itself, but a comprehensive, coherent account of the phenomenon of linguistic communication.

My reconstruction of Davidson's empirical, holistic and dynamic picture of language is intended ultimately as a semantic underpinning for a holistic understanding of critical rationality. While I believe the account is Davidsonian in spirit and in all its fundamental features, I cannot claim that it is in every detail a faithful representation or development of Davidson's own current theory. Of the arguments developed in the chapters ahead, those that are not explicitly made by Davidson are certainly inspired by his thinking. But this is not to say that he would give them all his stamp of approval. Nor is that stamp required. My project is not primarily one of exegesis; it does not matter all that much how Davidson's thought actually developed over the course of writing the papers I draw on. The dialectic I am after is conceptual, not chronological. Nor is it important that he be pinned down in cases where textual evidence reveals some vacillation. I am not concerned to make a contribution to the history of ideas. In the present context, getting Davidson right is not an end in itself, but a means, an extremely valuable means, to getting language right.

In chapter two, I draw the contrast between semantics and

epistemology, sorting out some ambiguities that threaten our understanding of the idea of a theory of truth. First I give a general explication of the questions Davidson takes himself to be answering. This is followed by a brief account of a few key features of Davidson's primary source of inspiration, the philosophical views of Willard Van Orman Quine.

In chapter 3, I move on to meatier topics. The empirical nature of Davidson's approach is placed in relief through an analysis of various theories of reference. I argue that from Davidson's perspective, causal and intensionalist theories of reference suffer from the same kind of defect. This defect is fatal; I conclude that no theory of reference can ever serve as the foundation of a theory of meaning.

The import of Davidson's holistic view of the source of the empirical content of a semantic theory is brought out in chapter 4, where the traditional notion of truth as correspondence is contrasted with Alfred Tarski's concept of *satisfaction*. Still, both concepts appear to involve some relationship between language and the world. Does this make Davidson's semantics an underpinning for realism? It does not, I argue, at least on any traditional understanding of realism.

The idea of satisfaction is essential to Davidson's theoretical machinery because it is the key to Tarski's definition of truth. And this definition provides, according to Davidson, the structure of a theory of interpretation. But Tarski's definition works only for formalized languages. How can Tarski's theory be applied to natural languages? This question is addressed in the first part of chapter 5. The remainder of the chapter is an attempt to justify the claim that a theory of truth for a natural language is an interpretation of that language. I discuss the relation between the truth conditions of sentences and the meanings of sentences, as well as the significance of the theoretical constraints imposed by Tarski's convention T, that is, his test of the adequacy of a theory of truth for a given language. The discussion is intended to challenge the commonly held view that constraints other than truth are needed to eliminate apparently absurd theories.

Chapters 6 and 7 are concerned with the nature of the empirical content of theories formulated in accordance with convention T: What are the assumptions we must make if observations are to

provide an evidential base from which we can inductively axiomatize a theory and against which the theory can be tested? How constraining is the empirical evidence? Through the answers to these questions, the full significance of the concept of truth for Davidson's view of language will begin to emerge. Against current orthodoxy, I claim that in interpreting speakers we maximize the empirical content of our theories solely by construing speakers as speakers of truth. There is no need to bring in psychological or other principles as constraints on our theories of interpretation.

In chapter 8, I show how Davidson's articulation of his understanding of the explanatory function of the concept of truth finally leads him to reject the very idea of a language as a semantically uninformative concept. However, I argue, this move is precipitous. For while Davidson is right to conclude that linguistic understanding is not to be explicated in terms of knowing a language, the concept of a language can still be useful to our understanding of linguistic communication. But its usefulness depends on our assigning to the notion of a language a new function in our explanatory strategies.

The ambitious intent of these closely related discussions is to provide both an idea of what language is and an account of how we use it to communicate. Thus armed, I will, in chapter 9, be in a position to give an analysis of incommensurability in which this concept, like that of truth, will turn out to be an essential element in a dialectic of critical, reflexive interpretation.

NOTES

- 1 Most of these papers are collected in Davidson, D. (1984), *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Clarendon Press, hereafter cited as *Inquiries*.

What is a Theory of Truth?

At first careless glance, it might appear misleading to construe Davidson as attempting to provide a theory of meaning. His work in semantics is informed by Quine's scepticism towards 'meanings', and is directed towards the possibility of constructing a theory of truth for natural languages. Davidson finds the basic model for such theories in the work of Tarski, who showed us how to construct a theory of truth for formalized languages.¹ But unlike Tarski, who sought and found a way to define the concept of truth, Davidson's goal is not simply a characterization of this notion. He is not primarily interested in Tarski's semantic concern, which was to find a way of expressing what we mean by calling a sentence true. And he is certainly not attempting to construct an epistemological or metaphysical theory of truth in the sense of a theory about the *nature* of truth.² Davidson's question is, 'what is it for words to mean what they do?' (*Inquiries*, p. xiiv). The answer amounts to a 'theory of meaning', which for Davidson is 'not a technical term but a gesture in the direction of a family of problems (a problem family)' (*Inquiries*, p. 215).

If it is to avoid circularity, a theory of meaning must explain communication without relying on undefined semantic concepts.³ To do that, it must fulfil two basic requirements: it must be powerful enough to provide an interpretation of any utterance a speaker of a natural language might make, and it must be testable against evidence available independently of any knowledge of the linguistic concepts of the language (see for instance *Inquiries*,

p. xiiv or p. 215). The thrust of Davidson's reflections on language is that these demands are satisfied by a Tarski-style theory of truth. Theories of truth are the focus of Davidson's investigations in so far as they give the structure of a theory of meaning.

Accordingly, there are two clusters of problems around which the bulk of his work in semantics is spun: the first centres around the question, how can a theory of truth provide us with a theory of meaning? The best-known and most accessible of Davidson's papers on language revolve around this problem. The first cluster has two main aspects, corresponding to the two demands he places on a philosophically interesting explanation of communication: one has to do with how a theory of truth yields interpretations of statements, and another with what is required of such a theory for it to be empirically testable.

The second cluster of problems surrounds the question, how can a theory of truth for a natural language be constructed? Here we are in the domain of the more technical questions, questions that concern, in effect, the actual subjugation of language to the technology of quantification. Davidson's contributions to this process are significant, but since I am concerned more with the philosophical underpinnings and consequences of his strategy than with the mechanics of the strategy itself, I shall pass by in relative silence those papers that deal with the specific logical structure of things like adverbial attribution, quotation and indirect speech.

How does the kind of theory that Tarski constructed tell us what we mean by calling a sentence true? Essentially by recursively characterizing a set of sentences that give the truth-conditions for all the indicative sentences of a language. We may, in other words, regard the structural model provided by Tarski for Davidson's theories of meaning as theories that give the extension of the truth-predicate for a given language. In putting it this way, two important points emerge: the first is simply that there is no *one theory of truth*. Not only is there no one theory of truth for all languages, but, it will turn out, in the case of natural languages there is no way even to uniquely determine the extension of the truth-predicate for any particular language. Or, more felicitously, we might say that we can never uniquely determine the language to which an utterance belongs, a predicament from which we should take conceptual warning. The difference between these

formulations is significant, and bears directly on the nature of the indeterminacy of translation. It also contains the seeds of suspicion towards the concept of a language.

The second fundamental point is this: the task of constructing a theory which gives the extension of the truth-predicate of a language is the task of showing how, from a finite number of axioms and procedural rules, we can deduce the infinite number of theorems that give the truth-conditions for the sentences of the language. This is no mean feat; it presupposes, for instance, at least on Davidson's view, that we can extend first-order logic horizontally in such a way that we can capture the logical structure of any possible kind of assertion in a language in quantificational terms.⁴ But it is a very different feat from the one of providing a theory of that elusive something by virtue of which true sentences are true. The distinction is essential, and should be obvious. The problem is that both kinds of theories might sloppily be glossed as theories about what makes sentences true (cf. *Inquiries*, p. 70). So, at the risk of belabouring the point, let me put it this way: Davidson's kind of theory is one which would enable us to specify the conditions under which a sentence in a language is true, without telling us anything about when those conditions prevail or how to determine whether they do prevail. It is a semantic theory, and as such is about how we use language. As a theory of truth, specifically, it gives a systematic account of the restrictions that must be brought to bear upon our use of any given sentence of a language if we are to call that sentence true. For Davidson, the only property true sentences have in common is the property of being used in accordance with these restrictions. Conversely, the attempt to construct an account of truth on the basis of a purported relation between sentences and something else is, in a sense that will become clearer in chapter four, like pressing the accelerator when the car is in neutral. As explanatory vehicles, such theories are not going anywhere.

This is not to say that we should not have theories about how we come to believe that the truth-conditions for a given sentence or set of sentences do in fact prevail, or about how we can justify such beliefs. These are theories of perception, observation, learning and communication; they treat of psychology, neurology and biology, of sociology and history. The one thing they are not

about is *truth*. The elucidation of the concept of truth is a matter of semantics. Judging the truth-value of sentences is a matter of human inquiry running the gamut from idle speculation and loose observation to rigorous, explicitly systematic cognitive procedures. Epistemology, in so far as it is simply such inquiry directed towards itself, is just part of our normative theorizing about how to justify our beliefs; how to make our inquiries as efficient as possible in establishing the truth-value of sentences. Here is where, for instance, theories about the possibility of verification and falsification, about surface irritations and *qualia* find their place, but such theories are not the only, perhaps not even the primary, kind of theory that is epistemological in this broad and innocuous sense. Trouble arises only when epistemology conflates the question of what it is for a sentence to be true (which asks what we mean by calling a sentence true), with the question of how we know whether a sentence is true. This is where epistemology becomes the search for certainty, founded on the misconception that there is just one answer to the second question and that an answer to the first will provide it. This is the mistake of thinking that if we only stare at the concept of truth sufficiently hard for a sufficiently long time, we will crack its riddle and thus recognize its mark on all true sentences. Armed with this mark, with cartesian insight into the nature of truth itself independent of our investigations into particular matters of fact, we would be able to specify justificatory criteria for our beliefs about the world in terms that are primary with respect to our inquiry into how things are. But if we keep the two questions about truth properly distinct, we must abandon this idea of a riddle of truth. And with it, we must abandon the distinction between legitimizing accounts of knowledge and genealogical accounts of knowledge. What we are left with is, on the one hand, epistemology naturalized, and on the other, semantics.

Avoiding the confusion implicit in the notion of something *making* sentences true, something in virtue of the possession of which sentences fall into natural classes like 'true' and 'false', hinges on our keeping semantics distinct from epistemology. Only then will we be able to appreciate the nature of the key issue of verifiability. A semantic theory of truth is verifiable, it will turn out, precisely because it allows us to 'characterize the property of

truth without having to find entities to which sentences that have the property differentially correspond' (*Inquiries*, p. 70). Only then will we appreciate in what sense and to what extent Davidson relies on a pre-theoretical grasp of truth in order to forge a theory of meaning out of a semantic theory of truth.

In formulating a theory of meaning on the basis of Tarski's answer to the question of what it is for a sentence to be true, Davidson assumes that we have some answers to the second question of how to determine the truth-value of sentences. In a peculiar way, he might also be said to contribute to our faith in those answers. But he is no epistemologist; he does not deal in that currency, though many cheques have been written in his name.

The search for the mark of truth in the form of entities to which sentences can correspond is a venerable tradition, the continuation of which is possible only for someone unimpressed by Quine's efforts to undermine the distinction between questions of meaning and questions of the way of the world. Ever since the early 1950s and the publication of 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' (Quine, 1961), Quine has been making the point that when we pursue our conceptual truths genealogically, following their roots towards the source of their presumed special status, we do not make the expected discovery of empirically uncontaminated meaning. Instead we find only unquestioned agreement, of just the kind that prevails about the more obvious features of the world. The difference between questions of meaning and questions of fact amounts to a difference in degree of consensus, or, in those cases where consensus is strong, to the sorts of conclusions we tend to draw about anyone who refuses to conform. We might defend our consensus against the non-conformist by recommending a sensory-apparatus examination, or by suggesting a remedial course in English. Quine argues that this difference in our response towards a deviant is not in the end supported by an underlying difference in the kinds of question at issue.

Quine's point is best appreciated in the context of his holistic critique of verificationism. He agrees that meaning does lie in the difference made by something's being the case: As the verificationists maintained, the meaning of some bit of language is to be explicated in terms of the sensory givens that would lead us to

assent to that bit of language. The problem is that the sort of thing we assent to, that is, sentences, cannot individually be brought into determinate relations with packets of sense data or patterns of stimulation or any other such attempted explication of the given. This is one of the key points in 'Epistemology Naturalized' (Quine, 1969b). Quine argues in this essay that 'the typical statement about bodies has no fund of experiential implications it can call its own . . . [only a] substantial mass of theory, taken together, will commonly have experiential implications; this is how we make verifiable predictions' (Quine, 1969b, p. 79). This holistic approach to the confrontation of language with experience eliminates the possibility of distinguishing between a contribution of meaning and a contribution of the world towards making our sentences true or false. The reason is that it leaves us no isolable thing that corresponds to the idea of 'the meaning of a sentence' in the sense required. If we equate meaning with empirical content, as Quine does, and insist that only theories as wholes have empirical content, then sentences have meaning only as parts of a body of theory. In such a body it is possible to systematically tamper with the roles assigned to its parts, words and sentences, in ways that leave the empirical content of the theory as a whole unaltered. This is Quine's doctrine of the indeterminacy of translation. As Davidson stresses, 'it should be viewed as neither mysterious nor threatening. It is no more mysterious than the fact that temperature can be measured in Centigrade or Fahrenheit' (Davidson, 1986b, p. 313). Different ways of translating a speaker into some other language can be equally satisfactory because of the asymmetrical relation between truth and empirical content entailed by Quine's holistic view of meaning: While we ascribe truth-values to individual sentences, we ascribe definite empirical content only to bodies of sentences. Indeterminacy of translation is the free play resulting from the fact that it is always possible to neutralize the effects of alterations in the truth-value of one sentence on the body as a whole by making adjustments elsewhere. This asymmetry in the ascription of meaning and truth is also what deprives the analytic – synthetic distinction of any grip. In criticizing the distinction, Quine is arguing not that we cannot make sense of the concepts of analytic and synthetic sentences, he is suggesting that these classes of

sentences are empty. As Dummett points out in 'The Significance of Quine's Indeterminacy Thesis' (Dummett, 1978):

[Quine's position is that] an analytic sentence is one such that no recalcitrant experience would lead us to withdraw our assignment to it of the value true, while a synthetic one is such that any adequate revision prompted by certain recalcitrant experiences would involve our withdrawing our assignment to it of the value true ... as thus defined, there are no analytic sentences, and there are no synthetic ones. (Dummett, 1978, pp. 375).

The reason is the implication that even while we ascribe definite empirical content to a body of sentences, we are unable to secure any individual sentence in that body against possible revision. In short, Quine argues that it is impossible to fix the meaning of any individual sentence by reference to experience.

Quine's holism undermines any attempt to give privileged status to certain kinds of truth. Giving up the two dogmas of empiricism, the dogmas of analyticity and reductionism, means, first, that we can no longer retreat to a special class of sentences the truth of which are guaranteed by virtue of their meaning. And giving up foundational epistemology in the face of 'the impossibility of strictly deriving the science of the external world from sensory evidence' (Quine, 1969b, p. 75), and even of translating all of science into sentences about sensory evidence, means that there is no hope of isolating a special class of sentences the truth of which is guaranteed by virtue of the way the world is. Meaning is no more nor less definite than empirical content, and neither can be ascribed to sentences regarded in isolation. Truth, on the other hand, as a property of individual sentences, is never fully constrained by the empirical content or meaning that we ascribe to bodies of sentences. Once the point is made that the domains of the concepts of truth and meaning are not defined at the same level of linguistic structure, it becomes clear that neither semantics nor epistemology can provide us with a firm foundationalist footing. Truths about language are no more immutable than truths about empirical inquiry, and truths about empirical inquiry are no less subject to revision than truths of such inquiry.

On Davidson's account it is impossible to overestimate the significance of Quine's prying loose the concept of meaning from individual sentences, that is, from the vehicles of truth. Davidson