

Phil/Ling 375: *Meaning and Mind*

[Handout #8]

Donald Davidson: A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs

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*** The goal:**

___ I want to know how people who already have a language manage to apply their skill or knowledge to actual cases of interpretation.

___ My problem is to describe what is involved in the idea of ‘having a language’ or of being at home with the business of linguistic communication.

§ Main Theses:

1. Malapropism is not a rare phenomenon in our language; it is ubiquitous. In all these cases of malapropism, the hearer has no trouble understanding the speaker in the way the speaker intends.
2. We want the deep concept to distinguish between what a speaker, on a given occasion, means, and what his words mean. The widespread existence of malapropisms and their kin threatens the distinction, since here the intended meaning seems to take over from the standard meaning.
3. We must pry apart what is literal in language from what is conventional or established.
4. In interpreting others’ utterances, there are no learnable common core of consistent behavior, no shared grammar or rules, no portable interpreting machines set to grind out the meaning of an arbitrary utterance.
5. Interpretation comes at the converging points of passing theories (between the speaker and the hearer); linguistic ability is the ability to converge on a passing theory from time to time.
6. The theory we actually use to interpret an utterance is geared to the occasion (thus it can change from one occasion to the next).
7. **We should give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions.**

§ [malapropism]:

___ mal·a·prop·ism

___ the misuse of a word through confusion with another word that sounds similar, especially when the effect is ridiculous

Examples:

___ Lead the way and we’ll precede.

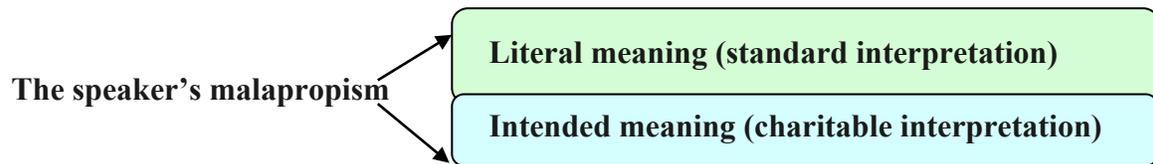
___ We need a few laughs to break up the monogamy.

___ Familiarity breeds attempt.

___ We are all cremated equal.

What is interesting is the fact that in all these cases the hearer has no trouble understanding the speaker in the way the speaker intends.

Q: Why? How does the hearer realize that the standard interpretation cannot be the intended interpretation?



§ Literal Meaning

[first meaning] = literal 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’, then the first meaning of an utterance will be what should be found by consulting dictionary based on actual usage.

§ Three principles concerning first meaning:

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

* The problem posed by malapropism

___ Malapropisms fall into a different category, one that may include such things as our ability to perceive a well-formed sentence when the actual utterance was incomplete or grammatically garbled, our ability to interpret words we have never heard before, to correct slips of the tongue, or to cope with new idiolects. These phenomena threaten standard descriptions of linguistic competence.

Davidson: The interpreter has a theory of interpretation.

___ To say that an explicit theory for interpreting a speaker is a model of the interpreter's linguistic competence is not to suggest that the interpreter knows any such theory.

___ Claims about what would constitute a satisfactory theory ... are rather claims about *what must be said to give a satisfactory description of the competence of the interpreter.*

In other words, we are trying to define conditions under which we can assign *linguistic competence* to the interpreter.

Q: Do we all speak *the same language*?

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

§ The Prior Theory vs. the Passing Theory

1. An interpreter has, at any moment of a speech transaction, what I persist in calling a theory.
2. The interpreter's theory has been adjusted to the evidence so far available to him: knowledge of the character, dress, role, sex of the speaker, and whatever else has been gained by observing the speaker's behavior, linguistic or otherwise.
3. The speaker says something with the intention that it will be interpreted in a certain way, and the expectation that it will be so interpreted.
4. In fact this way is not provided for by the interpreter's theory. But the speaker is nevertheless understood; the interpreter adjusts his theory so that it yields the speaker's intended interpretation.

The prior theory for the hearer	how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker.
The passing theory for the hearer	how he <i>does</i> interpret the utterance.
The prior theory for the speaker	what he <i>believes</i> the interpreter's prior theory to be.
The passing theory for the speaker	the theory he <i>intends</i> the interpreter to use.

§ The Opponent's View: Theory of Convention

___ According to that account, each interpreter (**and this includes speakers, since speakers must be interpreters**) comes to a successful linguistic competence, and which he shares with those with whom he communicates. Because each party has such a shared theory and knows that others share his theory, and knows that others know he knows, some would say that the knowledge or abilities that constitute the theory may be called conventions.

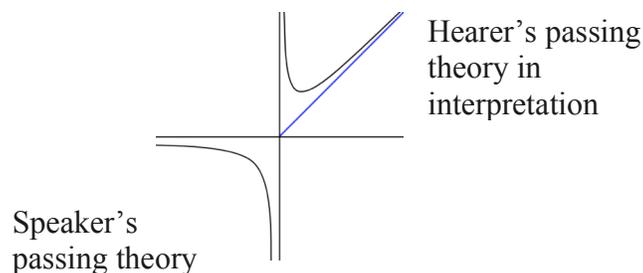
* Davidson's Rebuttal

1. What must be shared for communication to succeed is the one the interpreter actually uses to interpret an utterance (the hearer's passing theory), and it is the theory the speaker intends the interpreter to use (the speaker's passing theory).

2. Only if these passing theories coincide is understanding complete.
3. But the passing theory cannot in general correspond to an interpreter's linguistic competence.
4. It is quite clear that in general the prior theory is neither shared by speaker and interpreter nor is it what we would normally call a language.
5. Therefore, the passing theory is not governed by conventions.
6. Therefore, the theory of convention does not explain communication.

§ Davidson's Theory of Interpretation

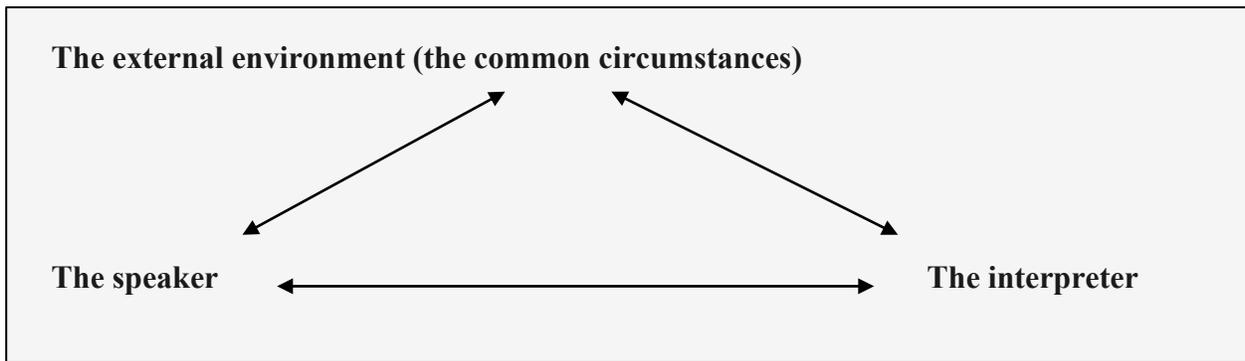
1. Interpretation is complete only when the speaker's passing theory and the hearer's passing theory coincide.
2. As the speaker speaks his piece the interpreter alters his theory, entering hypotheses about new names, altering the interpretation of familiar predicates, and revising past interpretations of particular utterances in light of new evidence.
3. As speaker and interpreter talk, their prior theories become more alike; so do their passing theories. The *asymptote* of agreement and understanding is when passing theories coincide.



4. But the passing theory cannot in general correspond to an interpreter's linguistic competence. Not only does it have its changing list of proper names and gerrymandered vocabulary, but it includes every successful – i.e., correctly interpreted – use of any other word or phrase, no matter how far out of the ordinary.
5. Every derivation from ordinary usage, as long as it is agreed on for the moment (knowingly deviant, or not, on one, or both, sides), is in the passing theory as a feature of *what the words mean on that occasion*.
6. A passing theory is not a theory of what anyone would call an actual natural language. 'Mastery' of such a language would be useless, since knowing a passing theory is only knowing how to interpret a particular utterance **on a particular occasion** (the theory we actually use to interpret an utterance is geared to the occasion).
7. Of course things previously learned were essential to arriving at the passing theory, but what was learned could not have been the passing theory.
8. An interpreter must be expected to have quite *different prior theories for different speakers* – not as different, usually, as his passing theories; but these are matters that depend on how well the interpreter knows his speaker.

9. The general framework or theory, whatever it is, may be a key ingredient in what is needed for interpretation, but it can't be all that is needed since it fails to provide the interpretation of particular words and sentences as uttered by a particular speaker.
10. 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 derivations from the dictionary are most likely.

§ Davidson's Tripartite Theory — Interpretation is a three-way street among the speaker, the hearer and the shared context of the external environment.



§ Conclusion

1. Most of the time prior theories will not be shared, and there is no reason why they should be. What must be shared for communication to succeed is the one the interpreter *actually* uses to interpret an utterance, and it is the theory the speaker *intends* the interpreter to use. Only if these coincide is understanding complete.
2. The prior theory has in it all the features special to the idiolect of the speaker and the interpreter is in a position to take into account before the utterance begins.
3. One way to appreciate the difference between the prior theory and our ordinary idea of a person's language is to reflect on the fact that an interpreter must be expected to have quite different prior theories for different speakers – not as different, usually, as his passing theories; but these are matters that depend on how well the interpreter knows his speaker.