

**Phil/Ling 375: Meaning and Mind
[Handout #9]**

Donald Davidson: Belief and the Basis of Meaning

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§ From Quine → Davidson

Quine: Radical Translation/Indeterminacy of Translation

Davidson: Radical Interpretation/Indeterminacy of Interpretation

Quine: Let's get rid of the notion of *meaning*

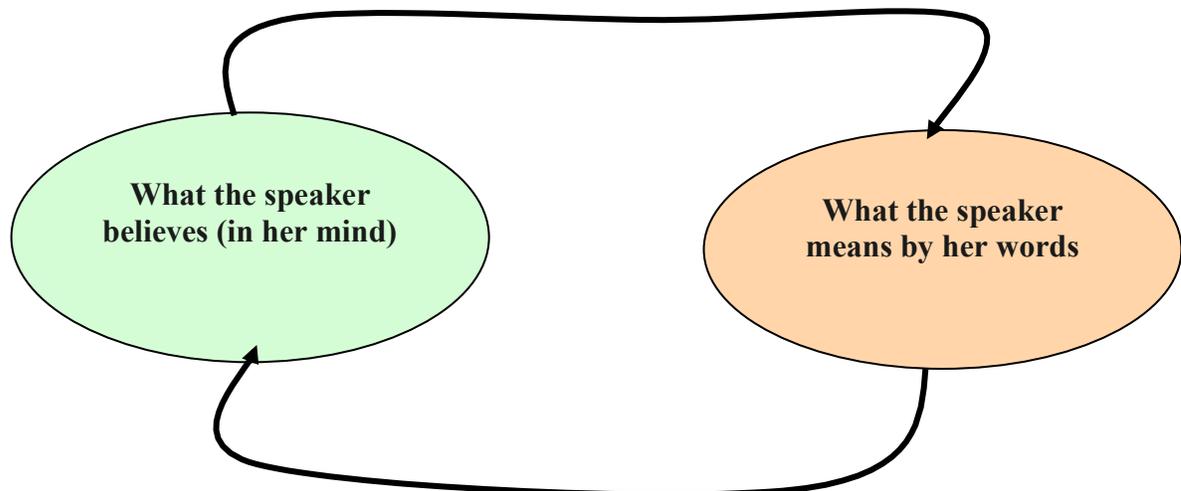
Davidson: We can use the notion of *truth* in place of *meaning*.

§ What Is A Theory of Interpretation?

1. Meaning and belief play interlocking and complementary roles in the interpretation of speech. We interpret a bit of linguistic behavior when we say what a speaker's words mean on an occasion of use.
2. Since a competent interpreter can interpret any of a potential infinity of utterances, ... what we must do is state a finite theory from which particular interpretations follow.
3. Theory of interpretation is the business jointly of the linguist, psychologist and philosopher. Its subject matter is the behavior of a speaker or speakers, and it tells what certain of their utterances mean.

§ [The difficulty in interpretation]: → The problem of circularity

___ A central source of trouble is the way beliefs and meanings conspire to account for utterances. A speaker who holds a sentence to be true on an occasion does so in part because of what he means, or would mean, by an utterance of that sentence, and in part because of what he believes. If all we have to go on is the fact of honest utterance, we cannot infer the belief without knowing the meaning, and have no chance of inferring the meaning without the belief.



§ The Problem of Circularity:

Q: Do we start by interpreting the speaker's utterances or by interpreting the speaker's beliefs?

Davidson: beliefs, intentions → utterances

___ We should derive a theory of interpretation from detailed information about the intentions, desires, and beliefs of speakers (or interpreters, or both).

___ Making detailed sense of a person's intentions and beliefs cannot be independent of making sense of his utterances.

§ Radical Interpretation:

___ In interpreting utterances from scratch – in *radical* interpretation – **we must somehow deliver simultaneously a theory of belief and a theory of meaning.**

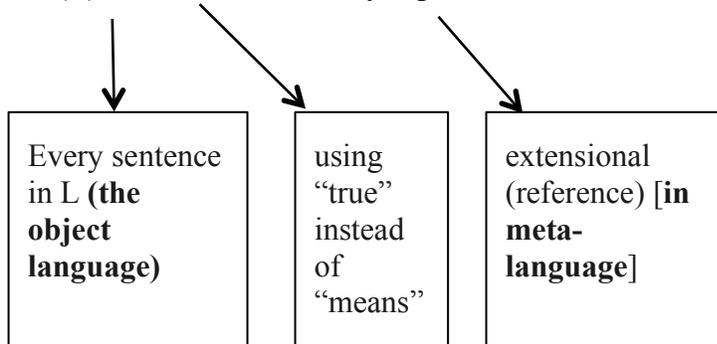
§ Basic Methodological Assumptions for Radical Interpretation:

1. We suppose that we have available the speaker's attitude of holding certain beliefs true, relative to time (past or present).
2. We can describe the common external circumstances under which the attitudes hold or fail to hold.
3. *We can tell when a speaker holds a sentence to be true without knowing what he means by the sentence, or what beliefs he holds about its unknown subject matter, or what detailed intentions do or might prompt him to utter it.*
4. Beliefs are best understood in their role of rationalizing choices or preferences.
5. The theory for which we should ultimately strive is one that takes as evidential base preferences between sentences – preferences that one sentence rather than another be true.
6. The theory would then explain individual preferences of this sort by attributing beliefs and values to the agent, and meanings to his words.

§ The Method: Tarski's Convention T

* [Convention T]

(T) *S* is True if and only if *p*.



Example of T-sentences:

___ “la nieve es blanca” is true if and only if snow is white.

___ “雪是白色的” is true if and only if snow is white. (The T-sentences make a lot more sense when the object language is one with which we are unfamiliar.)

Q: How does Convention T help solve the problem of radical interpretation?

Note: Davidson argues that we cannot start from beliefs/intentions to interpret the speaker's utterances, since to know what the speaker means we must know her beliefs and intentions first. With the method introduced here, we can simply derive the speaker's beliefs/intentions from her attitude (*of holding sentences true*) under our common (between the speaker and the interpreter) external circumstances (i.e. same contexts).

§ In Cases of Disagreements

- ❖ There will be differences from speaker to speaker, and from time to time for the same speaker, with respect to the circumstances under which a sentence is held true.
- ❖ The general policy, however, is to choose truth conditions that do as well as possible in making speakers hold sentences true when (according to the theory and the theory builder's view of the facts) those sentences are true.
- ❖ The aim is not the absurd one of making disagreement and error disappear. The point is that **widespread agreement is the only possible background against which disputes and mistakes can be interpreted.**
- ❖ Making sense of the utterances and behavior of others, even their most aberrant behavior, **requires us to find a great deal of reason and truth in them.**
- ❖ To see too much unreason on the part of others is simply to undermine our ability to understand what it is they are so unreasonable about.
- ❖ If the vast amount of agreement on plain matters that is assumed in communication escapes notice, it's because **the shared truths are too many and too dull to bear mentioning.** What we want to talk about is what's new, surprising, or disputed.

§ Davidson's Belief Holism

___ **One can't interpret an utterance independent of one's knowledge of the speaker's whole set of beliefs and utterances.**

To interpret a particular utterance it is necessary to construct a comprehensive theory for the interpretation of a potential infinity of utterances. The evidence for the interpretation of a particular utterance will therefore have to be evidence for the interpretation of all utterances of a speaker or community.

§ A further complication: Indeterminacy of Interpretation

___ A theory for interpreting the utterances of a single speaker, based on nothing but his attitudes towards sentences, would, we may be sure, have **many equally eligible rivals,**

for differences in interpretation could be offset by appropriate differences in the beliefs attributed.

___ The resulting indeterminacy of interpretation is the semantic counterpart of Quine's indeterminacy of translation, but the degree of indeterminacy will probably be less if my suggestions are followed than if Quine's are.

*** Note: For Davidson, the indeterminacy of interpretation does not lead to the possibility of incommensurable (not capable of being compared because of the lack of a common quality for comparisons to be made) conceptual systems.**

Davidson's optimism:

1. Given a community of speakers with apparently the same linguistic repertoire, the theorist will strive for a single theory of interpretation: this will greatly narrow his practical choice of preliminary theories for each individual speaker.
2. We employ "the principle of charity."

[The Principle of Charity]:

___ In cases of translation of someone's malapropism, for example, we should decide in favor of *reinterpretation* of words in order to preserve a reasonable theory of belief (rather than using a literal translation which makes him a fool).

§ Common Language and Private Belief Structures (among speakers)

___ What makes a social theory of interpretation possible is what we can construct a plurality of private belief structures: belief is built to take up the slack between sentences held true by individuals and sentences true (or false) by public standards.

___ What is private about belief is not that it is accessible to only one person, but that it may be idiosyncratic.

___ Attributions of belief are as publicly verifiable as interpretations, being based on the same evidence: if we can understand what a person says, we can know what he believes.

§ Conclusion:

1. Each interpretation and attribution of attitude is a move within a holistic theory, a theory necessarily governed by
 - (i) concern for consistency (**the principle of charity**)
 - (ii) general coherence with the truth (**holding a sentence true under a given circumstance**)
2. We can have a workable theory of interpretation and a workable way of attributing beliefs *without assuming that indeterminacy can be eliminated*.