BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

What is Interpretation? A Dilemma for Davidson

Nils Kürbis

Abstract. The core idea of Davidson's philosophy of language is that a theory of truth constructed as an empirical theory by a radical interpreter is a theory of meaning. I discuss an ambiguity that arises from Davidson's notion of interpretation: it can either be understood as the hypothetical process of constructing a theory of truth for a language or as a process that actually happens when speakers communicate. I argue that each disambiguation is problematic and does not result in a theory of meaning.

1 Introduction

According to Davidson, a Tarski-style theory of truth, conceived of as an empirical theory constructed by a radical interpreter, can serve as a theory of meaning. In this paper I present a dilemma for Davidson, based on an ambiguity of the notion of 'interpreter'. Two meanings should be distinguished: a) the – hypothetical – interpreter who constructs a theory of truth for a language, b) interpreters understood as actual speakers. The question Davidson needs to address is whether actual speakers interpret each other, pretty much like a field linguist interprets a yet unknown language, or whether it is just from the theoretical point of view that Davidson calls speakers 'interpreters', i.e. the interpreter provides a model of speakers, which has theoretical applications, but should not be equated with what is actually going on when real speakers communicate. The dilemma is that each choice of disambiguation of 'interpreter' fails to achieve goals that can reasonably be required of a theory of meaning and that Davidson has set himself. Thus, if the dilemma cannot be answered, Davidson has failed to provide a theory of meaning.

2 Davidson on Interpretation

2.1 Theory

At various places in his writings, Davidson says that the method of constructing a theory of truth for a language is not one actual speakers employ in communicating.[1] He describes his aim as providing a theoretical model of understanding, which is not something that should be equated with what is actually going on when speakers communicate.

What Davidson has in mind can be brought out by comparing it to the following case. Suppose we want to construct a theory of riding a bike. We observe what bikers do and try to formulate principles of riding a bike that systematise the evidence of how bikers ride a bike. Eventually, we describe how biking is done by appealing to laws of mechanics and relevant empirical information available at each moment during a bicycle ride. Riding a bike is characterised as a process in which empirical information about the biker's environment is used together with laws of mechanics to calculate the movements of the biker's muscles that enable the biker to ride the bike successfully. The biker is described as implementing this information. Such a theory would give a decent description of how biking is done. Nonetheless, it would be implausible to claim that this is actually the process that goes on in bikers when they ride a bike—in fact, ascribing to bikers implicit knowledge of this theory would jeopardise it, as it is plausible that many bikers have no idea about mechanics, and it may also be that real bikers use different empirical information than the one the theory builds on. Thus the actual knowledge of the bikers we observed is constituted differently, and need not correspond to anything the theory says (although there may be some overlap). The theory is only in so far a description of the competence of a biker as it provides a coherent systematisation of the empirical evidence, but it does not uncover the real knowledge of the bikers. This does not matter. Indeed, it may very well be the case that the way I ride a bike and the way you ride a bike have nothing substantial in common; of course we'll share some knowledge, for instance where to put our feet and hands, but it may well be that the rest of our respective skills diverge radically. For instance, the way me and a participant in the Tour de France implement our respective skills of riding a bike may not have an awful lot in common. The theory nonetheless gives

---

[1]For instance, 'The Social Aspect of Language' in *The Philosophy of Michael Dummett*, ed. Brain McGuinness & Gianluigi Olivieri, Dordrecht 1994, p.4.

insights into how biking is done. Someone knowing the laws of mechanics, the necessary empirical details at each moment and how to implement the information in muscular movements could indeed use the theory to ride a bike. A further feature of the systematisation of the evidence provided by the theory is that any other systematisation ought not to contradict it by stipulating laws which go against mechanics, for instance, or by making use of completely irrelevant empirical information. The theory provides a limit for all other acceptable theories.

It is plausible that in learning and speaking a language, we do not acquire or apply knowledge of a theory of truth. It would be rather strange to claim that speakers know the technical details of Tarski's definition of truth and that their use of language draws on this knowledge. And even though Davidson might be able to convince most speakers that they know the axioms and some of the theorems of the theory, e.g. '"x is white" is true if and only if x is white', this is may not be true for the more intricate details of Tarski's theory, for instance the part that deals with satisfaction conditions.[2] As Davidson puts it, 'to say 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. It is possible, of course, that most interpreters could be brought to acknowledge that they know some of the axioms of a theory of truth.' The point is not to find out what is actually going on in the speaker. 'Claims about what would constitute a satisfactory theory are not [...] 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. They are rather claims about what must be said to give a satisfactory description of the competence of the interpreter. *We* cannot describe what the interpreter can do except by appeal to a recursive theory of a certain sort. It does not add anything to this thesis to say that if the theory does correctly describe the competence of an interpreter, some mechanism in the interpreter must correspond to the theory.'[3] It is nonetheless

---

[2]For a more detailed account of the problems of ascribing such knowledge to speakers as a form of implicit knowledge, see Crispin Wright: 'Theories of Meaning and Speakers' Knowledge' in *Realism, Meaning & Truth*, Oxford, Cambridge 1993, p.218ff. This problem might be removed in claiming that the knowledge in question is shown in the capacity to speak the whole language, though there are no distinct capacities that correspond to technical details of Tarski's definition of truth. But this is as implausible as claiming everyone who knows how to ride a bike knows implicitly the laws of mechanics.

[3]This and the last quote are from 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', in *Truth and*

the case that if we did construct a theory of truth for a language, we would have something the knowledge of which would enable us to understand this language. Knowledge of a theory of truth is sufficient for communication, but not necessary. Davidson's claim is that if someone knows a theory of truth for a language, this enables him to interpret the speakers. But not the other way round: a speaker can understand a language without knowing a theory of truth. Furthermore, this sufficient knowledge is of a kind that no other theory should contradict it, in the sense that no other theory should entail that the T-schema fails.

Accordingly, Davidson characterises his project as hypothetical. This is all we can hope for, as there may not be anything that all cases of communication have in common. 'What could we know that would enable us to [interpret a speaker's utterances]? How could we come to know it? The first question is not the same as the question what we *do* know that enables us to interpret the words of others. For there may easily be something we could know and don't, knowledge of which would suffice for interpretation, while on the other hand it is not altogether obvious that there is anything we actually know which plays an essential role in interpretation. The second question, how we could come to have knowledge that would serve to yield interpretations, does not, of course, concern the actual history of language acquisition. It is thus a doubly hypothetical question: given a theory that would make interpretation possible, what evidence plausibly available to a potential interpreter would support the theory to a reasonable degree?'[4] Thus Davidson is interested in providing a theoretical model of understanding a language, a coherent systematisation of the empirical evidence, but not an account of what is actually going on when speakers communicate. The last two quotes illustrate an intricate question: in which sense can we say that speakers are interpreters?

2.2 Practice

Davidson, as some of the quotes in the last section illustrate, has the habit of calling speakers interpreters and acts of communication 'interpretation'. The question arises whether 'interpretation' is as much of a theoretical construct

Interpretation. Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson, ed. Ernest LePore, Oxford 1986, p.438.

[4]'Radical Interpretation', in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford 2001, p.125.

as is the theory of truth, or whether communication by real speakers involves some process of interpretation.

There are good reasons to assume that interpretation is only to be understood as a hypothetical process, something speakers could do to understand each other, but don't actually do. One reason is that Davidson's model for interpretation is the radical interpreter, and surely real speakers hardly ever interpret each other radically. In particular, Davidson's radical interpreter is someone who constructs a theory of truth for a speaker, and Davidson has made it clear that a theory of truth is not the kind of thing actual speakers employ, hence actual speakers aren't radical interpreters.

That the notion of interpretation should be understood on the model of the radical interpreter is supported by Davidson's view that there may not be any abilities shared by speakers communicating: 'mutual understanding is achieved through the exercise of imagination, appeal to general knowledge of the world, and awareness of human interests and attitudes.' Speakers do not have to share 'a precise and specifiable set of syntactic and semantic rules' they have learnt to operate with in learning to speak.[5] If there are no essential ingredients in understanding, a theory concerning our actual knowledge of the language would be a hopeless endeavour and a hypothetical account all we could possibly hope for. If this is so, then 'interpretation' is a substantial concept only if modelled on the radical interpreter: if there is nothing essential to the diverse cases of actual speakers communicating, then the concept of interpretation would be as unsuitable for systematisation. Modelling it on the radical interpreter gives the concept a very specific, precise and rich content.

Hence it would appear that calling speakers 'interpreters', rather than being a description of a process actual speakers go through in communication, should be understood as a mere *façon de parler*, justified from the point of view of Davidson's hypothetical, 'highly simplified and idealised proposal'[6].

It is, however, not certain that this correctly captures Davidson's intentions. Davidson is ambiguous on the question of how to understand 'interpretation', as is illustrated, for instance, by 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' and 'The Social Aspect of Language'. Davidson seems to think that linguistic meaning can be understood as a product of speakers interpreting each other: 'It is understanding that gives life to meaning, not the other way round.'[7]

---

[5]The last two quotes are from 'The Social Aspect of Language', p.2.

[6]'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', p.441.

[7]'The Social Aspect of Language', p.12; cf. also 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs'

Interpretation, thus, is a skill actual speakers have and Davidson aims at reconstructing the actual knowledge of speakers. 'I want to know how people who already have a language (whatever exactly that means) 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 being at home with the business of linguistic communication.'[8] Davidson writes that in understanding each other speakers employ a '"strategy", which is a nice word for the mysterious process by which a speaker or hearer uses what he knows in advance plus present data'[9]. This equates actual speakers like you and me with interpreters. This is as it should be, if the aim is to explain what meaning actually is. To tackle this question, Davidson must understand real speakers as interpreters.

It is worth remarking in this context that Davidson at one point quotes 'evidence' for the fact that different speakers have different internal grammars.[10] This is hard to reconcile with the claim, quoted in the last section, that the theory is supposed to be independent of anything that might really go on in the speaker.

2.3   Where the Problem Lies

I shall argue in the next sections that the ambiguity noted in the last section cannot be cleared up. I shall argue that neither option of interpreting Davidson's use of 'interpretation' leads to the result that he has put forward a successful theory. The ambiguity thus lends itself to the construction of a dilemma for Davidson, which he is not able to dissolve.

Here is one last quote to illustrate the problem. 'Those who use a language do not normally have a theory [of truth for the language]; all I asked of a satisfactory theory in this respect was that *if* someone had such a theory for a speaker, at a time, that theory would suffice for understanding an arbitrary utterance of that speaker [...] it is the philosopher trying to understand understanding, who needs the theory in order to say what it is that the interpreter knows if he understands a speaker. [...] the interpreter knows what is conveyed by every T-sentence entailed by a theory of truth for the

p.445f, and 'The Social Aspect of Language', p.10ff.
   [8]'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', p.441.
   [9]Ibid., p.445.
   [10]Ibid., p.444f.

speaker's language'[11]. First, we are presented with the plausible claim that most speakers do not know a theory of truth. But then we are told that the theory is needed in an account of understanding, i.e. the understanding involved in actual speakers like me and you communicating. The conclusion is that speakers know what is 'conveyed' by a theory of truth, though not a theory of truth. The question immediately arises why, if speakers know what is conveyed by a theory of truth, we don't describe that which is conveyed in terms of something the speakers actually know. The answer that suggests itself is that Davidson thinks that there is nothing to be described in such terms, as there is nothing in common to the diverse faces of communication. So all we can hope for is the hypothetical project. But then, in which sense can we say that we've understood understanding and that speakers know what is 'conveyed' by a theory of truth?

In the next sections, I shall elaborate on Davidson's ambiguity. I shall argue first that interpretation must be understood as hypothetical, and then that it cannot be so understood, thereby developing a dilemma for Davidson. For the further discussion it is useful to adopt a distinction between theories of meaning and theories of understanding.[12] Davidson tries to answer two questions. 1. 'What is it for words to mean what they do?'[13] Here we ask for a theory of meaning. 2. 'What knowledge enables someone to understand a language?' Here we ask for a theory of understanding. The theory of truth is Davidson's answer to the first question; interpretation the answer to the second.

3 A Dilemma

3.1 Interpretation must be hypothetical

It is *prima facie* implausible that something like interpretation is actually going on when speakers communicate. In most cases, we understand immediately what a speaker says. Interpretation is involved only in cases where

---

[11]'Appendix: Replies to Rorty, Stroud, McDowell and Pereda' in *Truth, Language and History*, p.324.

[12]This distinction can be found in Dummett, although for him, these are not different theories: 'a theory of meaning is a theory of understanding' ('What is a Theory of Meaning? (I)' in *The Seas of Language*, Oxford 1993, p.3).

[13]'Introduction' to *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford 2001, p.xv.

we don't immediately understand what another speaker has said.[14]

If interpretation was what is actually going on when speakers communicate, it would also be difficult to explain how two speakers who have never met before can immediately understand each other. Speakers would have to learn how to communicate, as we learn a foreign language. We would have to do some observations of each others utterances, make conjectures what is meant, test them in interaction, and so on.

To say that speakers undergo some sort of 'conditioning' when learning to speak their first language, as Davidson claims, cannot solve the problem, as then we should expect a theory of meaning for the language we are conditioned to use. This would appear to be a public language. The idiolect would cease to be prior, which contradicts some of Davidson's tenets.

It would obviously be circular to stipulate that knowledge of a language consists in the ability to interpret, as the ability to interpret presupposes knowledge of a language. 'To interpret' means, according to the dictionary, 'to explain the meaning of information, actions or words', but we can only explain the meaning of something in a language.[15] So interpretation could only be used to explain how speakers who already understand a language could come to understand each other. As in fact sometimes communication involves interpretation, nothing stands in the way of using interpretation as a

---

[14]It would be implausible to claim that the process of interpretation happens very quickly and not consciously. It would seem to entail that understanding is, in most cases, an unconscious process. This sounds absurd, as then it might happen that I understand an utterance without being aware of it. So there could be cases were I find myself acting in a particular way, without knowing why I do what I'm doing, because I haven't noticed that I've understood an utterance and responded to it. If understanding consisted in an unconscious process of interpretation, then it might happen that, e.g., we utter a sentence that is the answer to some question without knowing why we utter this sentence, because we are not aware that we understood the question that has been asked. Or we might find ourselves doing something that would count as complying with a command, without knowing why we did what we did, because we did not consciously notice that a command has been interpreted.

[15]According to the dictionary, 'to interpret' also has a second meaning: to understand an action, mood, or way of behaving as having a particular meaning or significance. Maybe someone who does not speak a language can nonetheless interpret in this sense. However, this notion of interpretation isn't one that could be meant when the construction of a theory of truth is at issue. If there is nothing essential about communication, interpretation is a substantial concept only if modelled on the radical interpreter constructing a theory of truth—in other words, it has to be understood as meaning 'to explain the meaning of information, actions or words'.

theoretical, hypothetical model. It's only when it is used as describing what actual speakers do all the time that it becomes problematic.

This kind of circularity involved in using interpretation as what is actually going on can also be brought out by the following considerations. If speakers actually interpreted each other, and this was the real basis of understanding, there would be no significant distinction between using words correctly and thinking one does so: the distinction between being correct and seeming to be correct could not be drawn. This would be devastating for the project. If correct is what seems correct to an interpreter, and there is no sense in talking about correct interpretations, then there is no sense in saying that the interpreter understands the speaker: understanding only occurs if the speaker was interpreted correctly. This points to the conclusion that the distinction can only be drawn with reference to meaning: the interpreter interpreted the speaker correctly, if he found out what the speaker meant. Hence interpretation cannot be the basis of explaining what meaning is.

One might reply that the criterion for correctness of interpretation is that speaker and interpreter successfully interact. This shifts the problem to what a successful interaction is. But this cannot be explained without referring to speaker and interpreter understanding each other. If A utters a command, and B misinterprets it, but by chance does what would count as complying with the command, had he understood it, this is not really a case of successful interaction.

Davidson attempts to solve the problem of the 'distinction between using words correctly and merely thinking one is using them correctly, without appeal to the test of common usage'[16]. Speakers find themselves reacting in similar ways to similar stimuli. Failure means someone, speaker or hearer, does not react in such a way (p.15). A speaker speaks in the way she does, because she thinks like that she will be understood. She believes that what she says is in accord with what other speakers of the community would say in the same situation (p.13).

We can ask the same question again: what is the difference between reacting in the same way as you do and thinking I react in the same way as you do, if all I have is your behaviour and my interpretation of it, i.e. if all I have given is what I think you were doing or intending with the behaviour you showed, or if all I have given is that I think you reacted to such and such stimuli? Davidson responds by asserting that the speakers recognise

---

[16]'The Social Aspect of Language', p.10ff.

the difference, because there is such a difference. 'A grasp of the concept of truth, of the distinction between thinking something is so and its being so, depends on the norm that can be provided by interpersonal communication; and of course interpersonal communication, and, indeed, the possession of any propositional attitude, depends on a grasp of the concept of objective truth.' (p.15.) Davidson uses the concept of truth as basic and aims to explain meaning in terms of it.

I doubt that this solves the problem that would arise if interpretation is understood as a process really going on when speakers communicate. As Davidson thinks that there may be nothing that real cases of communication have in common which is substantial enough to build a theory on, 'interpretation' is a substantial concept only when understood as an empirical theory, the kind of theory a field linguist could construct. Thus it is essential to the notion of interpretation, if it is not to be trivial, that it is the idealised, simplified process of constructing a theory of truth on the basis of empirical evidence. Any other notion of interpretation is insubstantial, as there is nothing essentially involved in everyday interpretation. So without the theory of truth, Davidson's answer to the second question, what knowledge enables someone to speak a language, is not worth being called a theory of understanding. To make 'interpretation' a substantial answer to the second question, it has to be backed up by the theory of truth and modelled on the field linguist interpreting radically. The theory of understanding then is the theory of truth as constructed by a radical interpreter. But, Davidson says, no speaker actually knows a theory of truth for his language: it is only something that could be known. Obviously, then, interpretation has to be as hypothetical as knowledge of the theory of truth.

3.2   Interpretation cannot be hypothetical

The theory of truth could not answer the first question, what it is for words to mean what they do, if meanings in fact were a product of speakers interpreting, i.e. understanding, each other. If the latter were the case, the theory of meaning should be a by-product of a theory of understanding. But there is nothing essentially involved in understanding each other, says Davidson. Thus in an important sense there is no such thing as a theory of real communication: what goes on in real cases of communication does not exhibit enough structure to allow theorising. Hence there also couldn't be a theory of meaning. But of course Davidson does think that there is a theory of

meaning. Hence meaning cannot really be a product of speakers interpreting each other, hence real speakers aren't interpreters.

The question arises what Davidson's theory of meaning is, if interpretation is hypothetical. His strategy appears to be to explain meaning in terms of the primitives truth and interpretation. But meaning is a real phenomenon, not a hypothetical one. So how can the real phenomenon be explained in terms of a hypothetical process?

Let's have a closer look at the theory of truth. Suppose we construct a theory of truth for English on the basis of the disquotational form of T-sentences and what we as competent speakers of English know. To fit the T-schema, sentences of ordinary English have to be formalised in the language of first-order predicate logic, which, where necessary, is supplemented with devices like quantification over events to be rich enough to be able to incorporate all phenomena of natural language. This project is far from trivial and might tell us something about language we didn't know. Such a theory would be a theory of meaning which does not aspire to say anything about understanding.

There is, however, something unsatisfactory about a theory of meaning which is not a theory of understanding. The theory doesn't tell us what is wrong with, for instance, '"Gras is green" is true if and only if snow is white'. The theory cannot explain why this 'T-sentence', although just as true as '"Snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white', does not give the correct truth-conditions for "Gras is green"—it is built on the assumption that we as competent speakers can recognise the difference between the two, but does not aim at giving an account of this difference. It is clear that Davidson didn't intend his theory of truth to be a theory of meaning without being a theory of understanding. This is so quite apart from the fact that otherwise his work would have been completed less than half-way through 'Truth and Meaning' and some of the essays on applications and actions and events. Davidson does aim to explain the difference between the right and the wrong kinds of T-sentences. For Davidson, the theory of truth is an *empirical* theory, constructed on the basis of evidence of the conditions under which speakers hold sentences true. A theory of truth understood in the way described in the last paragraph, on the contrary, is not an empirical theory: we can just lay it down without any empirical evidence concerning the conditions under which speakers assert which sentences. A theory of truth which contains the wrong T-sentences is not successful in interpreting speakers' utterances, and hence a theory of meaning which is not a theory

11

of understanding is not the kind of theory Davidson has in mind, because it must fail to explain the difference between interpretative T-sentences and non-interpretative T-sentences. 'Empirical power in such a theory depends on success in recovering the structure of a very complicated ability – the ability to speak and understand a language.'[17] Accordingly, Davidson holds that a theory of meaning must also be a theory of understanding.[18]

Davidson would not agree that a theory of truth can serve as a theory of meaning independently of a theory of understanding. Davidson's proposal of how to make the theory of truth empirical is to connect it to interpretation. Thus we are forced to conclude, in order to answer the question what it is for words to mean what they do, that Davidson needs to hold that speakers actually are interpreters.[19]

4   Conclusion

A theory of truth solves the task Davidson has set himself only together with interpretation, as a theory of truth without interpretation does not explain the difference between interpretative and non-interpretative T-sentences. Interpretation solves Davidson's problems only together with the theory of

---

[17]'Truth and Meaning', in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford 2001, p.25.

[18]I assume Rorty means something like a theory of truth that is not a theory of understanding when he praises Davidson's philosophy of language as 'purified' from epistemological considerations (Chapter IV of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Oxford 1999). If my reading of Davidson is correct, then Rorty misrepresents Davidson in a rather crude way. Such a purified philosophy of language is not the point at all. Rorty disapproves of Dummett's approach, which is concerned with epistemology in the question whether the Principle of Bivalence holds. If I am right and making the theory of truth empirical involves interpretation and this is to account for understanding, then Dummett makes a point that neither Rorty nor Davidson can simply ignore. How to interpret an utterance of an undecidable sentence? On Davidson's account, there cannot be any evidence for its meaning. The interpreter has nothing to base his interpretation on, if the sentence is subject to the Principle of Bivalence. Rorty's claim that Davidson's 'purified' philosophy of language puts him in the same boat as some of the elect few of the philosophers who have opposed the view of the mind as the mirror of nature – say, Hegel, James and Dewey – also hardly squares with Davidson's claim that the study of language reveals at least some of the most general aspects of the world, as, for instance, that we should accept an ontology of events.

[19]In Dummett's terminology, a theory of truth without interpretation would be a modest theory. Adding interpretation to the theory of truth is arguably Davidson's attempt at formulating a 'full-blooded' theory of meaning.

truth, as there is nothing essentially involved in actual communication. This is a dilemma. The first part entails that interpretation is not hypothetical, the second part that it is hypothetical.[20]

'Interpretation' is a substantial concept suitable for theorising only if modelled on the radical interpreter constructing a T-theory. To claim that interpretation is what actually happens when speakers talk to each other, plus the claim that nothing is essentially involved in the process of interpretation, amounts to a rejection of the possibility of a theory of meaning. A good way to make sense of Davidson's claims concerning interpretation, and also his holism, is that there is no reason to assume that linguistic knowledge could be systematisable in the way Dummett, for instance, thinks possible. However, Dummett is surely right to claim that if linguistic knowledge were not systematisable, then there could be no such thing as a theory of meaning properly so called. To have a theory of something presupposes that this something is sufficiently structured to allow theorising about it. A Tarski-style theory is substantial only as constructed by a radical interpreter, as an empirical theory; at the same time, interpretation is only substantial if conceived of as the construction of a Tarksi-style theory of truth for an unknown language. Both cannot stand alone; only together do they make up a theory of meaning. Then, however, Davidson cannot claim to have constructed a theory that explains real meaning. But this is what he intends to do. On the one hand, Davidson seems to be saying that there is nothing substantial to real meaning, hence nothing to theorise about, and that the closest we can get is a radical interpreter constructing a theory of truth. Then the project is hypothetical. At the same time he rejects that the project is merely hypothetical and aims at explaining what really is involved in communication.

I conclude that Davidson does not succeed in providing a theory of meaning. Tarski-style theories of truth alone are vacuous as theories of meaning; they have to be made empirical theories. This step is achieved by supplement-

---

[20]This tension in Davidson's approach also becomes overt in his remarks concerning the learnability of language. One of Davidson's motivations for describing language recursively was that otherwise we could not make sense of how language is learnable. ('Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages', in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford 2001, p.3.) At the same time, in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', p.441, we read that Davidson was never 'concerned with the infinitely difficult problem' of language acquisition, which involves a complex process of 'conditioning', which again may not exhibit enough structure for theorising.

ing them with the idea of interpretation and construing them as empirical theories constructed by a radical interpreter. If interpretation is only a hypothetical or theoretical notion, not what speakers actually do, then of course there is no sense in claiming that meaning is a product of speakers interpreting each other or that what it is for words to mean what they do is that speakers interpret each other. If speakers do not really interpret each other, and this is just a *façon de parler*, then obviously meanings must come from somewhere else. If speakers actually interpret each other, and the answer that meanings are products of these processes of interpretation makes sense, then Davidson does not succeed in providing a theory of meaning either, for interpretation without being construed as the construction of a Tarski-style theory of truth for a language is not substantial, and together with Davidson's remarks that there is nothing essentially involved in interpretation would amount to a rejection of the possibility of a theory of meaning. Either way, no theory of meaning results.

5   References

Davidson, Donald: 'Introduction' to *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford 2001

– 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', in *Truth and Interpretation. Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore, Oxford 1986

– 'Radical Interpretation', in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford 2001

– 'The Social Aspect of Meaning', in *The Philosophy of Michael Dummett*, edd. Brain McGuiness & Gianluigi Olivieri, Dordrecht 1994

– 'Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages', in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford 2001

– 'Truth and Meaning', in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford 2001

– 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford 2001

Dummett, Michael: 'The Philosophical Basis of Intuitionistic Logic', in *Truth and other Enigmas*, London 1978

– 'What is a Theory of Meaning?', in *The Seas of Language*, Oxford 1993

Rorty, Richard: *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Oxford 1999

Wright, Crispin: 'Theories of Meaning and Speakers' Knowledge', in *Realism, Meaning & Truth*, Oxford, Cambridge 1993