



DAVIDSON AND SEMANTICAL REDUCTIONISM

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Sitting at the dinner table I find myself urging a pinch of salt for my dish, and I utter the following string of sounds: “kood-yoo-pahs-mee-thuh-sawlt-pleez”. This seems to cause my friend to extend her arm, grab the salt and place it in my immediate vicinity. Someone unaccustomed to the wonders of human language might find this sequence of events quite amazing. The trick rests, among other things, on the relation between the word ‘salt’ and the container of NaCl-crystals on the table. But what is this mysterious relation? How did it come about? And, more generally, what is the relation between the phenomenon known as linguistic meaning and the rest of our world?

This essay concerns two philosophical programmes for answering this type of question. The first, that of the semantical reductionists, is an intuitively appealing programme and in many ways a standard position. Still, it will only be presented briefly as its main function is to be a contrast to the main philosophical programme of the essay; that of late American philosopher Donald Davidson. In developing his thoughts Davidson rejects one of the deepest intuitions of the semantical reductionists. Presenting and discussing this bold move is one of the main themes of the essay.

But before we begin let us put the discussion in perspective by considering the motives philosophers have for inquiries into the nature of meaning. Here I mention only two that have been, and continue to be important.

Motive from naturalism: It is a commonplace claim that most contemporary philosophers consider themselves naturalists - at least in the sense of denying the existence of supernatural entities. The main reason for this is that it is theoretically problematic to postulate non-natural entities that make any kind of causal difference in the spatiotem-

poral world. This would invalidate well-founded physical laws such as the law of conservation of energy. Still, in the example above we saw that the meaning of the word ‘salt’ (and some other words) made a causal difference in making my friend pass the salt. Such considerations motivate philosophers to try to find the place of linguistic meaning in a naturalistic world, and thereby making meaning less mysterious.

Motive from philosophical methodology: Through close attention to the structure and use of language, modern analytical philosophy has succeeded in making many traditional philosophical discussions clearer, or at least less vague. In addition, investigations into the way we use important terms (e.g. knowledge and moral value) has provided many fresh ideas and arguments on old matters. This methodology of using language as a means for making philosophical progress leads us naturally to inquire into what linguistic meaning is. There is good reason to believe that much of modern philosophical methodology would be a great deal more powerful if we knew the nature of meaning. With these points in mind we turn now to the two accounts which constitute the main part of this paper.

SEMANTICAL REDUCTIONISM

The relation between such linguistic expressions as names and predicates on the one hand, and objects and events on the other is known as *reference*; e.g. the word ‘salt’ *refers* to salt. It is intuitively plausible that it is through this relation that language makes contact with the rest of the world. Davidson, as we shall see, rejects this idea, but for semantical reductionism it is crucial, so let us go with it for now. Keeping in mind our motives from above, what

we need is to give a naturalistic account of how words can refer. That is, we state what natural properties determine the reference of a word, and thus we *reduce* the semantical properties of words to naturalistic ones. Some such idea lies at the foundation of most accounts labelled ‘semantical reductionism’.

Davidson’s framing of the problems of meaning is philosophically interesting regardless of the success of his solution.

Now, what brings the semantical reductionists together is that they share a number of intuitively appealing assumptions. Firstly, they agree that the semantical properties of bits of natural language are somehow derived from or constituted by semantical properties of mental states (Fodor, 1987, p. 97; Loewer, 1997, p. 108). This leads them to the idea that the semantical properties of mental states can be assembled in a language of thought (often given the name *Mentalese*), which is to contain mental entities with properties analogous to those of names, predicates, sentential connectives etc. (Loewer, 1997, p. 110-111). Granted this, what is needed for reduction is some theory stating the semantical properties of *Mentalese* in purely naturalistic terms. To implement this programme one must try to connect the instances of the bits of *Mentalese* with instances of certain types of objects or events in the external world. Obviously, the notions needed to pull this through are those of laws and causation. The programme of the semantical reductionists, then, is to give a naturalistic story for semantical properties by establishing causal laws connecting objects and events in the external world with tokens of names and predicates of *Mentalese*, thus providing a direct naturalisation of the relation of reference. A tentative implementation of the programme is found in what is called the ‘Crude Causal Theory’ (CCT): Let *f* be a predicate in *Mentalese* and *F* some property external to the mind; the CCT can then be stated: ‘It is metaphysically necessary that (if tokens of *f* are caused by and only by instances of the property *F* then *f* refers to *F*).’²¹ Although it captures the main intuition of the semantical reductionists, the CCT has obvious problems. An important one is its inability to account for erroneous judgements, e.g. mistaking a cow for a horse. If the sight of a cow can cause an instance of the *mentalese* predicate ‘horse’ then the CCT must allow ‘horse’ to refer to both cows and horses. Of course we know that ‘horse’ does not refer to both cows and horses, so the CCT must be astray. This is called ‘the disjunction problem’ and it has haunted

many a semantical reductionist. Despite the shortcomings of the CCT, semantical reductionists take it to be essentially on the right track and use it as a point of departure, trying to sophisticate it so as to avoid counterexamples. And the accounts have grown quite sophisticated indeed, with appeals to ‘epistemically optimal conditions’ and counterfactual causality. But still deep problems remain, as they themselves admit (Fodor, 1987, p. 98; Loewer, 1997, p. 121).

Davidson finds the CCT simply beyond repair, and we shall soon see why. But if we are to get any clear idea of Davidson’s inventive theory we must not get ahead of ourselves.

DAVIDSON’S HOLISM

In Davidson’s philosophy questions about linguistic meaning take the form of an inquiry into the knowledge that constitutes a person’s competence in a particular natural language, say German (Davidson, 1975, p. 215). Davidson’s approach, simplified, is to replace questions like ‘what is the meaning of *S*?’ with ‘what would a potential interpreter need to know in order to understand *S*?’²² Note the methodological contrast to semantical reductionism with its narrow focus on an isolated word and its object. This change of focus treats a theory of meaning as a part of a more comprehensive theory of interpretation. Framing the difficulties this way enables Davidson to clearly identify a number of requirements he finds any satisfactory theory of meaning must meet. These requirements then act as beacons on the path to his influential theory.

A considerable part of my presentation of Davidson’s thinking will aim at formulating clearly what these requirements are, and what considerations prompt them. One reason for stressing these meta-semantical points is that insight into them is essential for understanding Davidson’s project. Another reason is that Davidson’s framing of the problems of meaning is philosophically interesting regardless of the success of his solution. After having spelled out these requirements I go on to sketch the theory Davidson thinks will be adequate. As mentioned, in the making of his theory Davidson goes against an important intuition found in semantical reductionism; that it is through reference that language is connected to the rest of the world. That is, Davidson finds a direct naturalization of reference impossible and in stead offers a more holistic solution. The point will resurface towards the end.

TWO INTERPRETERS

To facilitate the presentation of his thoughts I will start

by introducing two characters that lurk in the background throughout Davidson's philosophy of language. One is the *Radical Interpreter* (RI, for short). The RI comes to find himself on an isolated island among a native people of which he has no knowledge whatsoever. He does not know what they value in their lives or what beliefs they hold about the world, and he has absolutely no knowledge about what their words mean. The problem of the RI, then, is that he cannot assign meanings to the utterances of the natives, because he has no idea of what beliefs they might be expressing, while he is unable to make out any beliefs because he does not know the meaning of utterances made. Consequently he is forced to simultaneously build a theory of meaning and a theory of belief.

...can we create a theory that displays how a language can be *learnable*?

The other character is the Competent Interpreter (CI). What characterizes the CI is that he understands the utterances made by the people of the relevant speech-community. A paradigmatic example of what his competence enables him to do is this: Upon hearing the words "Es regnet" uttered by a person speaking German, the CI can go on to interpret his words as having the meaning that it is raining.³ It is the competence of the CI that Davidson wants a theory of meaning to give a systematic account of. The theory must spell out the rules and mechanisms used by the CI as he extracts the meaningful parts of an utterance and combine them to yield an interpretation.

An important assumption for Davidson is that someone in a situation sufficiently similar to the RI can become a CI through observing the native speakers. This seems reasonable given that the natives themselves (no doubt as children) have learned the language through observing others. In what comes I will take this assumption as granted. It is time now to see how contemplating the situations of the respective interpreters naturally lead Davidson to a number of requirements for a theory of meaning.

COMPOSITIONALITY AND HOLISM

It is a striking feature of the competence of the CI that he is able to understand an unbound amount of sentences, many of which he has previously never encountered. For instance, you (the reader) were just able to understand the previous sentence even though you had never seen it before. Yet, in the process of becoming a CI, the RI improves his skill through the study of only a finite number of sentences. How can we relieve this tension between

the finite and the infinite? That is, how can we create a theory that displays how a language can be *learnable*? It can only be done, claims Davidson, by invoking some form of *compositionality* (Davidson, 1965, p. 8). Roughly put, this is the idea that "meanings of sentences depend upon the meanings of words" (Davidson, 1967, p. 17).⁴

A natural response to such considerations is to try to state a theory that assigns to every word an entity that is its meaning. Davidson finds this strategy, which he attributes to Frege, wholly unexplanatory. The shortcomings of the strategy can be displayed through an example: Take the sentence "Tarski was Polish". Following Frege we say that the meaning of the predicate "... was Polish" is so that if given the meaning of "Tarski" as argument it yields the meaning of "Tarski was Polish" as its value. But this account and its alleged appeal to the structure of the sentence is void. What the theory has done is simply tell us that the meaning of the sentence "Tarski was Polish" is the meaning of "Tarski was Polish", which is obvious to anyone, no competence in English required (Davidson, 1967, p 21).

Davidson draws two conclusions from this, one following in extension of the other. First, it seems clear from the example above that postulating meanings as entities for words will not provide a satisfactory theory of meaning. Davidson writes: "My objection to meanings in the theory of meaning is (...) that they have no demonstrated use" (Davidson, 1967, p. 21), and rather than being helpful "appeal to meanings leaves us stranded further from the non-linguistic goings-on that must supply the evidential base for interpretation" (Davidson. 1973, p. 126-127). Davidson's perhaps surprising move, then, is to give up the talk of entities such as meanings of words in theories of meaning. Following this line, what is needed is a formulation of the requirement that does not commit us to such entities. To achieve this, we use the following formula for the *requirement of compositionality*: A theory of meaning must (i) have finitely many axioms, so that (ii) theorems giving the meaning of the sentences can be derived from the axioms.⁵

The second conclusion springs from trying to fill in the void left when removing word-meanings; even if there are no such entities as meanings of words, surely, words are not meaningless? What account can Davidson give of the meanings of words? Well, there is still a plausible alternative open to him, namely to hold that words do have meanings, but only "in the ontologically neutral sense of making a systematic contribution to the meaning of sentences in which they occur" (Davidson, 167, p. 22). So,



what Davidson advises us is: To find the meaning of a sentence we must look to the parts of the sentence (i.e. the words), but to find the meanings of the parts of the sentence we must look to “the sentences in which they occur”. The corollary of this is that “we can give the meaning of any sentence (or word) only by giving the meaning of every sentence (and word) in the language.” (Davidson, 1967, p.22). This is one face of the pervasive *holism* that is characteristic of Davidson’s project. The same point surfaces a number of times in different terms, some instructive instances are “only in the context of the language does a sentence (and therefore a word) have meaning” (Davidson, 1967, p. 22) and “to interpret a particular utterance it is necessary to construct a comprehensive theory for the interpretation of a potential infinity of utterances.” (Davidson, 1974, p. 148). A theory of meaning must have a structure that respects this holistic character of meaning by not assigning determinate meanings to words or sentences. Rather, it must display the endeavour of acquiring a language as a process of trial and error aiming to fit the words and sentences into an acceptable pattern.⁶

LANGUAGE, EMPIRICISM AND THE PRINCIPLE OF CHARITY

From what we have learned we can now re-describe the RIs project as one of deriving, through a process of trial and error, a finite amount of axioms from which he can then extract the meanings of individual sentences. But given his radical epistemic situation it seems hopeless to arrive at any even remote theory that can be tested. Impossible as it may seem, we have already granted that the task is surmountable. Hence there must be some non-semantic evidence available that the RI can start his theorizing from, viz. there must be some sort of connection between the semantical (of which the RI has no knowledge) and the empirical (which the RI can access insofar as his senses are intact). On this basis, Davidson provides the following *empirical requirement*: a theory of meaning must be so that it “can be given empirical application by appeal to evidence described without using linguistic concepts.” (Davidson, 1977, p. 215). This can be seen as another way to formulate the motive from naturalism mentioned in the introduction.

We will return to the nature Davidson ascribes to this empirical evidence, but for now we may note the RI will still be uncertain as to how to know whether progress is being made. For if he does not know any implications of a satisfactory theory, how can he go about testing a tentative version? The solution lies in what is now com-

monly known as the Principle of Charity. The Principle of Charity takes on different forms, and eludes strict definition. Still the core seems to be a kind of “methodological advice to interpret in a way that optimizes agreement” (Davidson, 1973, p. 137). between informant and interpreter.⁷ The Principle much facilitates the task of the RI. He is suddenly in a situation where he can pretty much fix the beliefs of the natives (since, according to the Principle, their beliefs are basically his own) while solving utterances for meaning (Davidson, 1973, p. 137). The RI might find the considerable and sudden improvement in his situation too good to be true. What can Davidson provide as justification for this methodology?

...we may conclude that interpretation is possible only in so far as informant and interpreter have corresponding causal relations with the outside world.

Davidson’s argumentation on this point is simple and powerful. I will give it as a defence for two sub-principles of the Principle of Charity. Firstly, if the RI is to get anywhere at all he must at least in some cases be able to tell from the circumstances what the natives are talking about. Plausible cases here are ones where the informants make use of demonstratives and indexicals⁸, as in “Dass ist Schnee”. So there must be some way for the RI to tell what objects or events the natives find it natural to remark on. What the interpreter must do is “take the speaker to be responding to the same features of the world that he (the interpreter) would be responding to under similar circumstances.” (Davidson, 1991, p. 211). Davidson baptizes this the Principle of Correspondence. The importance of this principle is easily seen if we imagine a case where it does not obtain. Let’s say the RI is on Mars trying to make out the language of the Martians. Unknown to him, the Martians have an entirely different kind of sensory system (ultraviolet sight, echolocation, etc.), and therefore talk about a range of events unperceivable for the RI. It seems clear that he will not make much headway.⁹ If we follow Davidson here, we may conclude that interpretation is possible only in so far as informant and interpreter have corresponding causal relations with the outside world.

The second sub-principle, the Principle of Coherence, advises the RI to make his interpretations so as to “discover a large degree of local consistency in the thought of the speaker.” (Davidson, 1991, p. 211). But how can the RI rule out the possibility that the natives hold wildly inconsistent beliefs? We have assumed that the RI *can* come

to interpret the natives. Obviously, this is only possible if the natives are actually successfully communicating among themselves. Now, say a speaker successfully communicates using the native expression equivalent to “Bears are dangerous animals”. Since the communication is successful we can no doubt assume the listeners rightly attribute to the speaker the belief that bears are dangerous animals. The RIs worry, then, is that the speaker might also hold beliefs to the effect that bears are a type of flower, no flowers are animals, everything dangerous is also desirable to encounter and, finally, no flowers are dangerous, only desirable to encounter. Being faced with such a case of cognitive lunacy it seems we can think of nothing but to deny that the speaker holds the belief appropriately expressed by the sentence “Bears are dangerous animals”. Thus we conclude that the listeners did not attribute correctly a belief to the speaker, which blatantly contradicts our presupposition that successful communication was being made. Davidson makes the point admirably clear: “If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs or as saying anything.” (Davidson, 1973, p. 137). The upshot of all this is that the RI may safely draw on the advantages of the Principle of Charity when building his theory of interpretation. For if the Principle turns out not to apply to the case at hand, interpretation is either impossible (as in the Martians case) or there is nothing to interpret (as in the cognitive lunacy case). Note that Davidson’s argumentation did not draw on any presuppositions about the intelligence of the natives. All that was needed for the argumentation to work was the assumption that the RI can come to understand their speech (Davidson, 1973, p. 137).

T-SENTENCES AND TARSKI-STYLE THEORIES OF TRUTH

We turn now to a formal issue. Part (ii) of the requirement of compositionality mentions ‘theorems giving the meaning of the sentences’. What is the nature of these theorems? Davidson considers some alternatives. The theorems could take the form ‘s means m’ where ‘s’ is to be replaced by a name of a sentence, and ‘m’ is to be replaced by a term that refers to the meaning of the sentence. But this would clearly imply treating meanings as entities, an approach Davidson rejects for reasons given above. Instead, one could try ‘s means that p’ where ‘p’ is replaced by a sentence that gives the meaning of ‘s’. The

problem here is the ‘means that’, since it gives rise to what is known as an *intentional context*¹⁰. Intentional contexts are only treatable by an appeal to the distinction between meaning and reference, and thus we would be arguing in circles since meaning is the very notion we seek to clarify. Davidson suggests the following solution: “let us try treating the position occupied by ‘p’ extensionally: to implement this, sweep away the obscure ‘means that’, provide the sentence that replaces ‘p’ with a proper sentential connective, and supply the description that replaces ‘s’ with its own predicate. The plausible result is:

(I) s is T if and only if p.” (Davidson, 1967, p. 23).

Let us now examine the features of the theorems on the form (I) (called T-sentences) and see if it meets the current needs. The ‘s’ is still to be replaced by a name of a sentence, while the ‘p’ is to be replaced by that sentence, viz. the ‘s’ mentions the sentence, the ‘p’ uses it. The biconditional, then, is a natural choice of connective since the ‘s’ and the ‘p’ are clearly equivalent. The T-sentences are obviously extensional since all their parts are familiar from Frege’s quantificational logic. But what about the predicate “is T”?¹¹ Is it a predicate we know from ordinary speech? To see what predicate it might be, let us sample a few theorems on the form (I):

“Snow is white” is T if and only if snow is white.
 “Candy is sweet” is T if and only if candy is sweet.
 “Water quenches thirst” is T if and only if water quenches thirst.

A short contemplation of the examples should lead to the conclusion that “is T” will apply just to the true sentences; “is T” is simply “is true”. So we see that Davidson is following Frege’s old thesis that the meaning of a sentence can be expressed through its truth-conditions. But in what sense do the T-sentences give the meaning of the sentence named in it? That a T-sentence gives satisfactory truth-conditions is not enough to make sure that it gives the meaning since it does not say that the mentioned sentence is true *because* the truth conditions are fulfilled (Davidson, 1973, p. 138). This opens for absurdities like the T-sentence ““Snow is white” is true if and only if grass is green”, which makes ‘snow is white’ true, but clearly does not give its meaning. The solution, again, must be holistic. We can be sure that a T-sentence gives the meaning of the named sentence provided we know a theory satisfying the Principle of Charity that implies the T-sentence



Illustrasjon: Ragnhild Aamås

(Davidson, 1973, p. 138). Such a theory could not plausibly entail a T-sentence like the one above without also entailing something like “‘That is snow’ is true if and only if the demonstrated object is grass”, which is intolerable to the Principle of Charity (Davidson, 1967, p. 26, note 10; Miller, 1998, p. 273-276).

The road taken by Davidson in the above paragraphs was not trotted without anterior motive. In one of his most famous articles, Alfred Tarski, a polish logician whose work Davidson admires, derives the exact same form for theorems. He then goes on to write:

Now at last we are able to put into a precise form the conditions under which we will consider the usage and the definition of the term “true” as adequate from a material point of view: we wish to use the term “true” in such a way that all equivalences on the form (T) can be asserted, and *we shall call a definition of truth “adequate” if all these equivalences follow from it.* (Tarski, 1944, p. 71).

Tarski demonstrated how to construct definitions of truth for some formal languages that are materially adequate in this sense. And, importantly, Tarski’s semantical definitions of truth fulfil, in an exemplar way, Davidson’s requirement of compositionality that we know from above.¹²

The truth-definitions that Tarski provided for some formal languages seem to come close to capturing the knowledge needed to interpret these languages. A natural

idea then would be to apply the same structure to natural languages, which is exactly the route Davidson opts for. Thus we have arrived at Davidson’s main thesis, which can be rendered as follows: *If we are able to construct a Tarski-style theory of truth for a natural language we would have a satisfactory theory of meaning for that language. Furthermore, knowledge of the theory and of the fact that it is satisfactory would suffice to yield interpretation of any utterance by a member of the relevant speech-community* (Davidson, 1967, p. 35; 1973, p. 131; 1975, p. 161; 1977, p. 218 and 222). Davidson, then, holds that a semantical theory of truth can serve as a theory of meaning and as a theory of interpretation. In other words, he thinks that a satisfactory Tarski-style theory of truth for a natural language constitutes a systematic description of the competence of the CI.¹³

EVIDENCE AND THEORY BUILDING

It is time now to sum up the requirements Davidson has put on the evidence that is to provide a non-semantical basis for meaning, as it will help to see what the solution might be. Given holism, the evidence must be on the level of closed sentences. Since we are talking about a theory of truth, the evidence must be related to the truth-value of the sentences. Finally, the evidence must be available to the RI, allowing him to construct a Tarski-style theory of truth which is satisfactory to the Principle of Charity. Davidson’s solution is to take as evidence instances where the native takes the attitude of ‘holding true’ to an uttered sentence. This attitude is something the RI will plausibly be able to identify even if he does not understand exactly what is being asserted (Davidson, 1973, p. 135). Since natural language is full of indexical features, this attitude will vary according to the circumstances, even when the sentence is the same. And according to the Principle of Charity, the natives will hold sentences true only in circumstances where they are in fact true, and the RI will be able to determine what the relevant circumstances are. So by varying the circumstances while keeping the sentence fixed, and testing when the natives holds it true, the RI can infer the meaning of the sentence. What the RI must do, then, is go from a large amount of evidence on the form:

(E1) The natives holds true ‘Es regnet’ now, and it is raining now, and

(E2) The natives do not hold true ‘Es regnet’ now, and it is not raining now to

(T)-theorems like:

(I) ‘Es regnet’ is true if and only if it is raining (Davidson, 1973, p. 135).

Thus Davidson’s proposal is that “we should imagine

the theory builder assuming that some T-sentences are true on the evidence, building a likely theory, and testing further T-sentences to confirm, or supply grounds for modifying the theory.” (Davidson, 1977, p. 222). In this way the RI slowly improves his skills by fitting the words into the right pattern.

THE STATUS OF REFERENCE

The disagreement between Davidson and the semantical reductionists is brought to a head when considering the status of reference. To Davidson the relation of reference is simply not a place where there is direct contact between language and objects and events in the world, i.e. reference *cannot* be naturalised directly.¹⁴ Instead, Davidson suggests, we should think of reference (and word-meaning) as a theoretical construct needed to implement the theory, but not open to direct confrontation with evidence. Here he draws an analogy to physics. In explaining macroscopic properties like solubility and vaporising we appeal to an unobserved microscopic structure. If we assume an anti-realist position to this enterprise, the part played by the microscopic structure is exhausted by its use in predication and explanation of macroscopic events, and any evidence for the nature of the microscopic structure is to be found on the macroscopic level. Analogously, the part played by reference in theories of meaning “is exhausted in stating the truth conditions for sentences”, and any evidence for the semantical properties of words is to be found on the level of closed sentences.

But under this disagreement on reference lies a fundamental difference of methodology. Davidson tries to throw light on linguistic meaning by examining the features of communication on a holistic level. Conversely, the semantical reductionists focus on the smallest units of meaning. On the face of it these strategies seem compatible and with luck even mutually enlightening. However, the two are really contradictory. The semantical reductionists presuppose that the meaning of a word is an entity suitable for examination in isolation. Davidson, on the other hand, maintains that a word only has meaning in the context of a language.

As so often in philosophy, both these methodologies can be coherently defended. The interesting question to ask is: which strategy is able to provide us with valuable insights? Here I find semantical reductionism at a loss, and

for a definite reason. As mentioned, the theories of the semantical reductionists typically are sophisticated structures built to avoid counterexamples, without focus on how language connects to other aspects of human life. Further, even the most complex ones are only moderately successful at solving problems. But still the semantical reductionists hold on to their strategy with both hands.

To Davidson the relation of reference is simply not a place where there is direct contact between language and objects and events in the world,...

Why? Because they are so very sure that linguistic meaning *must* ultimately rely on causal relations between natural objects (Fodor, 1987, p. 98). This is an idea accepted by most, even Davidson, but it seems that the intense focus on it makes them overlook an important point spelled out in Davidson’s philosophy of mind: Assume that there is causality between natural objects behind every *single* linguistic event. This need not mean that one can specify *types* of causal relations and natural objects which constitute *types* of linguistic events.¹⁵ E.g. it might prove impossible to specify the physical conditions necessary and sufficient for a person to think ‘horse’, or any other linguistic thought. The reason is that the system where linguistic meaning arises, the mind, is so complex and has such idiosyncratic features (i. e. a large degree of coherence) that its workings resist capture in a strict lawlike language. If this is so there is little reason to expect semantical reductionism to make any fruitful advances, and the strategy of naturalizing reference should be abandoned.

In contrast to semantical reductionisms logical puzzles, I find Davidson’s holistic strategy has led to many insights into the relations between fundamental concepts. He has displayed how coherence of thought is presupposed in meaning, and how communication is made possible through our resemblance in sensation and thought. Further, he has shown us it is only by viewing each other as rational lovers of truth that we can achieve good interpretations of the speech of others. These are deep and exiting ideas, and if I have to give up my intuitions on reference to justify them, then I for one am willing.

NOTES

- 1 The formulation of the CCT is from Loewer (1997, p. 112).
- 2 This can be seen from the definition of a theory of meaning used in Davidson (1973, p. 125). In the explicit substitution of questions I draw on. Malpas (2003) and Ramberg (2002).
- 3 The emphasis on interpretation, as opposed to translation marks a contrast to Davidson's mentor Quine. In translation one passes from "Es regnet" to "It's raining". But this does not necessarily display any semantical competence since we may well imagine a Norwegian having simply memorized a German-English translation manual. He would then be able to make the above move without any knowledge of what the sentences were about.
- 4 The idea of compositionality traces back to Frege.
- 5 This formulation of the requirement of compositionality is, in essence, from Miller (1998, p. 247).
- 6 Ramberg (2002), see also Davidson "Reply to Jim Hopkins", in Lewis Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, where he attributes the idea to Wittgenstein.
- 7 This is a crude formulation indeed, and much effort has been made to sophisticate it (see Lewis (1974) and Heal (1997), but the formulation will suffice for our present purposes.
- 8 That is, "words and phrases whose interpretations are dependent on features of the context in which they are used" (Deutsch, 1998).
- 9 The example here is due to Ramberg (2002).
- 10 That is "a context in which the substitution of expressions having the same semantic value need not preserve the semantic value (truth-value) of the original sentence" (Miller, 1998, p. 250).
- 11 The predicate is needed to make the sentence grammatically correct, otherwise it would be something like "John if and only if p". The point is made by Miller (1998, p. 254), who accredits it to Mark Platts.
- 12 Tarski shows this in "The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages". Regrettably, there is no space here to give an account of Tarski's work. The reader is asked to take for granted that his definitions do satisfy the requirements of compositionality and material adequacy.
- 13 Many, including Tarski himself, have doubted that his method can be applied to natural languages. This is a very important objection that Davidson discusses this in much of his work. Here, however, I am just concerned with giving an outline of Davidson's ideas, and so I leave this issue without further comment.
- 14 Davidson's semantical anti-reductionism should be seen in connection with his anti-reductionism in philosophy of mind. The link is that in both cases it is the holistic character of the matter, and especially commitments to consistency and coherence, that makes reduction to physical language impossible. For the whole argument see Davidson (1970).
- 15 This is a simplification of Davidson's anti-reductionism in philosophy of mind. For the whole argument see Davidson (1970).

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