

# NO NEED TO SPEAK THE SAME LANGUAGE?\*

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Bjorn T. Ramberg's book focuses on Davidson's work in the philosophy of language, published between 1984 and the appearance of the book. Recent papers provide the focus for an overview of Davidson's philosophy of language and its relations to broader debates and influences. Still, the reader is warned: the author "cannot claim" that the book "is in every detail a faithful representation or development of Davidson's own current theory." Instead, what we have is a "reconstruction" of Davidson on language and meaning, an account "Davidsonian in spirit and in all its fundamental features."<sup>1</sup> The result is a projection of Davidson's views, or important aspects of them, in a particular direction: Davidson and interpretation in process. The following critical discussion of main issues in Ramberg's book should not distract potential readers from this useful and thoughtful overview of Davidson on interpretation and meaning.

The book is an "introductory" reconstruction of Davidson on interpretation—a claim to be taken with a grain of salt. Writing introductory books has become an idol of the tribe. This is a concise book and reflects much study. It has many virtues along with some flaws. Ramberg assembles themes and puzzles from Davidson into a more or less coherent viewpoint. A special virtue is the innovative treatment of incommensurability and of the relation of Davidson's work to hermeneutic themes. The weakness comes in a certain unevenness. While generally convincing and well written, the book has low points which may leave the reader confused or unconvinced. Davidson is the hero in this book, and our hero is sometimes over-idealized.

The Introduction starts with a famous yet startling quote from Davidson's "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs:" "There is no such thing as a language."<sup>2</sup> The reader is hooked—leastwise those readers who were once gripped by the project of semantics for natural language, who have spent hours looking for the "latest," or had occasion to hope for dispensation in the mail from Berkeley. Emphasis on Davidson's "Nice Derangement" gives Ramberg's book a particular slant. To be sure, the aim is still to construct theories of meaning for languages, modeled on the structure of Tarskian truth theories, but the meaning of "theory" and "language" have shifted: "linguistic understanding arises only through an on-going process of theory construction and reconstruction."<sup>3</sup>

How does Davidson's recent work relate to the project for semantics of natural language dating back (at least) to "Truth and Meaning" (1967) Ramberg argues that Davidson came to de-emphasize the notion of language, shifting attention to linguistic communication. "Though Davidson does write as if we can make good sense of the concept of language," this is to be regarded as provisional. "By taking for granted that there are languages, Davidson was able to articulate a theory of meaning." The concept of language became problematic, according to Ramberg, still the result "is not a theory which undercuts itself, but a comprehensive, coherent account of the phenomenon of linguistic communications" where "truth" and "satisfaction" are the crucial explanatory concepts.<sup>4</sup> We need to take into account how "languages" change in communications—even in the communication required to interpret them. The approach is enlightening, though the process of interpretation threatens to swallow the products.

The interpretation is interesting and plausible, all the more since it seems that Davidson has arrived, in a sense, at a conclusion pessimistically forecast by Chomsky. For Chomsky had argued, via a *reductio ad absurdum*, against the idea that belief or attitude are fully relevant to formal semantics in empirical linguistics, favoring a strict distinction between matters of meaning and matters of fact or belief. Thus, given Davidson's approach to meaning via radical interpretation, and the role of belief (or "holding true") in this, any de-emphasis or shift on the concept of language is of special interest. Chomsky argued that since speakers of the same language differ in beliefs and attitudes, if such differences are fully

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<sup>1</sup>. Ramberg 1991, *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language*, p. 3

<sup>2</sup>. Davidson 1986, "Nice Derangement," p. 446.

<sup>3</sup>. Ramberg 1991, *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language*, p. 138.

<sup>4</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

relevant to semantic theory, then from a semantic perspective, “language is a chaos which is not worth studying.”<sup>5</sup> But there may be ways around this pessimism.

### 1. Language and Communication

A chief point of interpretation is argued in Chapter 8, “What is a Language?” Ramberg seeks to “show how Davidson’s articulation...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.”<sup>6</sup> But there is some going back and forth here between “language, as that which a speaker makes use of when successfully communicating,” which “cannot be given independently of the truth-theory which determines its structure,”<sup>7</sup>—this turns out here a rejected “reification”—and a broader, non-formalizable conception of language. In the latter, linguistic competence does not amount to “knowledge of Tarskian theories of truth,” instead “the essential competence turns out to be the ability to continuously form and reform such theories by interpreting assertions as on the whole true.”<sup>8</sup> Stress on a non-formal conception of language or communicative competence arises in connection with the point that “communications does not depend, as we naturally tend to suppose, on our speaking the same language.”<sup>9</sup> It arises too in connection with Davidson’s emphasis upon innovative interpretation, “the passing theory” of an interpreter, and the fact that we derive such passing theory “by wit, luck, and wisdom.”<sup>10</sup> For Ramberg, Davidson is wrong to reject the concept of language in semantic theory. For, “the move is precipitous,” and while Davidson is right in rejecting explication of all interpretation in terms of knowing a (formalizable) language alone, “the concept of language can still be useful in our understanding of linguistic communications,” if it is assigned a new explanatory function. Thus Ramberg emphasizes an *informal* conception of language. In particular, talk of language plays a crucial role in the author’s analysis of incommensurability in Chapter 9. Both the concept of truth and that of incommensurability turn out as essential elements “in a dialectic of critical, reflexive interpretation.” In the short final chapter, emphasizing “a concept of meaning in which conventions are not intrinsic”—because based on the model of radical interpretation—,<sup>11</sup> Ramberg argues for crucial similarities between Davidson’s work and Gadamer’s. “What Gadamer says of the hermeneutically enlightened consciousness—opposing it to the unreflexive critique of prejudice—is also a description of the process of radical interpretation.”<sup>12</sup> Quoting Gadamer:<sup>13</sup> “it allows the foreign to become one’s own...by explicating it within one’s own horizons with one’s own concepts...”<sup>14</sup> In a similar way, Davidsonian radical interpretation allows us to overcome the conventions of our own language in encounter with the speech of another.

One might better say that we come to be able to express the foreign conceptual system making use of our own grammar and vocabulary except, of course, that Davidson’s famous (or infamous) rejection of the notion of conceptual system would not allow him this way of stating the matter. Instead there is talk of differing theories and the modification of interpreter’s theories through communication. All well and good. The only sense to be made of differing conceptual systems is in terms of differing theories which embody them.<sup>15</sup> In order to follow out Ramberg’s program, what is needed is a frank recognition that interpretation aims to elucidate a theory (or belief-system) expressed in the syntactically identified language. Interpretation may in fact be a matter of continuous process, with no complete and formalized product, as ordinarily practiced. However, a formalized conception of language-system would seem to be in order for a more scientific approach to semantics—even if empirical semantics usually only aims at a partial theory of speaker’s (system-immanent) competence or the (idealized) semantic common denomi-

<sup>5</sup>. Cf. Chomsky 1977, *Language and Responsibility*, p 153; Callaway, 1981, “Semantic Theory and Language,” reprinted above, p. 21ff.

<sup>6</sup>. Ramberg 1991, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>8</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>9</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>10</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 104; Cf. Davidson 1986, “Nice Derangement,” p. 446.

<sup>11</sup>. Ramberg 1991, p. 139.

<sup>12</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>13</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 140f.

<sup>14</sup>. Gadamer 1976, “Semantics and Hermeneutics,” p. 94.

<sup>15</sup>. Cf. Callaway 1988, “Semantic Competence and Truth-conditional Semantics,” p. 20.

nators of a given community. In Ramberg there is danger that such products will be lost to the process, though this is not a reason to ignore the emphasis on the linguistic intelligence responsible for creative development of language and interpretation.

Davidson seems to approximate this perspective in his article, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” and thus, Ramberg’s opening quotation from this paper might be regarded as an instance of Davidson following the “ways of paradox,” making or suggesting a point which has already been suggested by others: the naive concept of language is not suited to scientific investigation in empirical semantics. Further, according to Davidson, “language,” like “meaning” must take a back seat to “truth” and “belief.”

## 2. Truth and Reference

The third chapter “Reference,” is largely devoted to explication of Davidson on reference and satisfaction. Consistent with the thesis of Davidson’s “Reality without Reference”(1977), the notion of reference is turned over to various advocates of intensional meanings or the causal theory of reference. Some will find this disconcerting, since Quine, among others, has used the term “theory of reference” as a general designation of Tarskian semantics, including theory conducted in terms of “denotation,” “designation,” “satisfaction,” “values of the variables,” and so on. Moreover, it seems reasonable to view Davidson’s essential innovation as a matter of simulating or reconstructing traditional concepts of meaning within the Tarskian theory of referential notions. Thinking of Quine’s “Notes on the Theory of Reference,” or *The Roots of Reference*, we are reminded of extensionalist claims upon the vocabulary. Still, these claims have not gone uncontested, and the epistemic neutrality of Tarskian semantics has long been contested or misunderstood. So, there is this much excuse for Davidson’s repudiating the notion of reference. Still the point does not go down easy.

Ramberg supports Davidson on reference and satisfaction by arguing convincingly that we can have no general criterion or theory of reference with independent epistemic bite. Just as it is hopeless to look for a general criterion of truth, by means of which we could decide if an arbitrarily selected sentence is true or false, so there can be no general criterion of reference, by means of which we could decide if arbitrarily selected expressions refer to, or are true of, a given object or set of objects. Ramberg and Davidson rightly reject the conflation of epistemology and semantics involved in the search for general criteria of truth or reference. “This is the mistake of thinking that if we only stare at the concept of truth hard for a sufficiently long time, we will crack its riddle and thus recognize its mark on all true sentences.”<sup>16</sup>

The Cartesian dream of a certain mark of truth is not generally entertained in contemporary philosophy. Yet, the search for a general criterion or theory of reference has persisted, though this is equally a mythical philosopher’s stone. For suppose we knew *what reference is* in the sense of being able to decide for a given name ‘*a*’ and a given predicate ‘*F*’ what object ‘*a*’ designates and what diverse objects ‘*F*’ is true of. Given that, the sentence “‘*a*’ designates an object of which ‘*F*’ is true,” tells us, in the semantic meta-language that ‘*Fa*’ is true, a theory which completely determined reference would seem to make any other inquiry unnecessary: it would amount to a “certain mark” of truth. This may seem plausible, if not explicitly stated, in light of the fact that expressions get linked to objects and classes of objects by means of linguistic conventions, or if we hope to uncover referential relations by tracing back the causal history of the use of expressions. But all of this is mistaken in so far as it assumes that semantics can *independently* answer epistemically substantial questions. Most answers are parasitic on theoretical-empirical developments in the object language.

In standard Tarskian semantics (considering logical truth in terms of domains and interpretations, for instance), interpretations are given to expressions of a theory, regarded as true, or provisionally regarded as true. Our substantial knowledge about the reference of constituent expressions is normally derivative from, and dependent upon, the assumed truth of an object-language theory (or its axioms), and it can have no greater or independent epistemic value—since there are no analytic truths valid independent of all empirical-theoretical revisions (or variations) of belief.

The approach to referential notions which Davidson rejects involves the quest for independent epistemic import. “Davidson’s strategy is the opposite, reflecting his inversion of the building block

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<sup>16</sup>. Ramberg 1991, p. 9.

approach. In this theory, correspondence (in the form of satisfaction) derives whatever content it has from the part it plays in a theory which is testable...<sup>17</sup> To generate the theorems of a T-theory, we must invoke “a relation mapping expressions to objects. And so it does stipulate a relation between words and objects.”<sup>18</sup> This is what is retained of the notion of correspondence. But this relation does no epistemic work in a T-theory. We “assign” expressions to objects in the axioms of a T-theory, so as to make the T-sentences come out right—where these are attested by empirical investigation of the environmental conditions under which sentences are held true. There can be no question of first knowing, independently, what objects satisfy which expressions and then deriving, on this basis, truth-conditions for object language sentences.

From this perspective, there is no reason to expect that a causal theory of reference could, in general, tell us the referents of arbitrarily selected expressions. At the most, one expects a limited and fallibilistic account of reference in causal terms. We are ultimately dependent upon science or common belief to know what objects there are to stand in causal relations to expressions. Obviously, knowing all about what reference is, will not be a substitute for scientific or common-sense inquiry. Hence, we should not expect to totally substitute causal for referential notions. There will be no reduction of semantics to physical sciences. In Tarskian semantics, we have a kind of definition in use of referential notions (relative to a language-system), but this confers no independent answers upon questions about reference and referents. “Going on to explicate reference further in terms of causal connections would then add nothing to our understanding of what it is for words to mean.”<sup>19</sup> (Better, causal-historical research can at best supplement, never fully replace, other theoretical research.) For any substantial answers we come to will be parasitic upon object-level language-systems and their epistemic status. Meanings (interpretations of expressions) are so crafted, and re-crafted, as to allow us to say what our (object-level) empirical inquiries lead us to need and want to say. Thus the priority of “truth” over “reference” (or satisfaction) and of “theory” (or “belief-system”) over “conceptual scheme.”

### 3. Radical Interpretation

Chapters 6 and 7 are devoted to Davidson on radical interpretation, the first focusing on the principle of charity and the second largely concerned with “anomalies and indeterminacies” of interpretation. This substantial focus on the theme of radical interpretation, at the center of the book, is fully in order. It is such thought experiments which allow an appropriate emphasis upon the empirical evidence required by a semantic theory for a linguistic community. Errors in interpreting Davidson’s theory easily arise if this point is missed: “The process of radical interpretation is intended as a theoretical description of linguistic competence, a rationalization of the practice of interpreting speech, not as a description of an actual procedure such as the methods of translators.”<sup>20</sup> It is by reference to the process of radical interpretation that we are to see what is involved in “getting the T-sentences right.”

To get the process of radical interpretation started a number of presuppositions have to be made. The radical interpreter has to assume that she’s confronted by creatures with beliefs and intentions who assert sentences and “when they assert, they largely do so correctly.”<sup>21</sup> The latter part, the ill-named Principle of Charity, is the subject of an extensive literature and given due attention by Ramberg. But there are two, more hidden, assumptions which are at least as crucial. First, it’s assumed that the radical interpreter can identify sentences or assertions—truth-value bearing units amidst a mass of phatic communion, questions, orders, and other noise—without having already identified particular beliefs, meanings, desires, intentions, and so on.<sup>22</sup> Second, the “concept of truth that underlies a theory of interpretation is a concept of absolute truth.”<sup>23</sup> Ramberg mentions these two further assumptions but might have gone further. The first point raises a question of whether it would not be better to closely examine the interrelations of the ascription of beliefs, meanings, *and* grammar. We are tempted to think that “light dawns gradually over the whole.” Moreover, it is not merely a matter of a set of beliefs and meanings. An

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<sup>17</sup>. *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>18</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>20</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>21</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>22</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 68; p. 72.

<sup>23</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

entire form of life becomes involved, since action generally is relevant to interpretation. The second point, concerning “absolute” truth also warrants more attention, particularly where the attempt is made to relate Davidson to continental philosophers such as Gadamer. We need to ask about “absolute truth”—the notion of “truths-for-languages as somehow the same”—the notion that “drives interpretation,”<sup>24</sup> whether it amounts to or is presupposed by the claimed universality of hermeneutic rationality. What is clear on all sides is that our ability to ask about what is true always outruns our ability to answer related questions in compelling ways.

Ramberg provides useful discussions of problems and errors in the understanding Davidson’s theory of interpretation. Three points deserve particular emphasis. First, the Principle of Charity is “not a pragmatic constraint...but a *precondition for interpretation*.”<sup>25</sup> The temptation is to see Davidson as mistaken if he does not regard initial charity in the attribution of truth to particular speech acts as a defeasible way of getting started. Moreover, we might try to simply imitate what the natives say, while trying to help in what they do, focusing on imperatives and their execution rather than statements and truth. But it does seem clear that Davidson is not tempted, to this point, by a pragmatic view of the principle of charity. What is not clear is that his is the best approach. There is much resemblance to pragmatic themes, since *problems* in interpretation (where we are tempted to attribute explicable error) can only arise within the context of something understood as correctly interpreted—just as a problem in our own beliefs can only be understood against the background of our normal success in action based on unproblematic belief. If we generalize the traditional pragmatist treatment of belief and the problematic to problems in interpretation, the need to establish a relatively (and fallibilistically) unproblematic context stands out. Why claim more, and what more could we plausibly claim?

Second, Ramberg insists that the procedure of radical interpretation is not a matter of guessing what, say, ‘gavagai’ *means* by giving its translation. The radical interpreter “is trying to formulate a sentence which states as specifically as possible the combination of features characterizing occasions when speakers of L utter ‘gavagai’.”<sup>26</sup> This is an approach to the problem of synonymy in Davidson’s program—dating back to criticisms due to Putnam, and John Foster (see the discussion of “counterfeit T-theories” on p. 79). One problem with this approach is the talk of “features.” If features are enough like properties to enable this account to make reasonable interpretations plausible, then it seems that features are just meanings—projected into the environment. Nor is it clear that Davidson must avoid “translation” with its implicit synonymy claims. For example, if we interpret the native’s “*Questa è acqua*” as “this is water” rather than “this is H<sub>2</sub>O,” then we are apparently focusing on the “water feature” rather than the more esoteric chemical feature. But looking to the axioms of the truth theory,

(1) ‘acqua’ is true of x iff x is water

is no less extensional than

(2) ‘acqua’ is true of x iff x is H<sub>2</sub>O

Whether (1) or (2) gives the meaning of ‘acqua’ seems not the kind of problem we could settle by postulation of distinct “features.” The question concerns the interrelations of speech acts in which the word is used. To justify (1) as against (2) we need to consider the entire range of usage of the word, and that is basically how we would have to explicate the talk of features. Clearly we can aim to simulate talk of meanings without departing from extensionality.

Third, Ramberg insists that the radical interpretation model is not a model of a static state of semantic competence, but a model of a process. Semantic understanding is essentially dynamic.<sup>27</sup> Therefore it is a mistake to think “that individual sentences must have their own determinate meanings, that there is something that determines what language someone speaks prior to the empirical task of systematizing the semantic structure of someone’s speech behavior... What is indeterminate is not what a sentence of a language means, *but what language is being spoken*. ... Since we never apply the exact same theory to any two speakers, or even to any one speaker at different points in time, this makes the identity of lan-

<sup>24</sup>. *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>26</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>27</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

gauges a matter of degree.”<sup>28</sup> In view of this final point it might be speculated that Ramberg himself sometimes takes the radical interpretation procedure pragmatically, for example when he suggests that the radical interpreter has to assume “that she is dealing with one homogeneous language community.”<sup>29</sup>

The major consequence of the radical-interpretation model, according to Ramberg, is that it provides us with a concept of meaning in which conventions are not intrinsic:

As communicative exchange proceeds, as language is used in monologue or dialogue, what keeps an interpreter in the game is not any one theory, but the ability to come up with new ones. Even if it were granted that any given truth-theory captures a set of conventions, the continuous production of such theories cannot be described as a matter of conforming to conventions of meaning.<sup>30</sup>

However, in connecting these ideas with those of Gadamer, a tension arises. “No actual speaker is able to achieve complete freedom from linguistic convention and still understand, or convey meaning.”<sup>31</sup> This leaves one wondering whether the non-actual radical interpreter isn’t *too* bleak.<sup>32</sup> If really all conventions and psychology—any “principle of humanity”—are dropped the task seems practically hopeless: What justification do we have of the assumption that the radical interpreter is faced with a human being?

Of course Davidson doesn’t deny, as e.g. Dummett<sup>33</sup> stresses, that in practice conventions are important for communications, but they are “only” of pragmatic value; they are contingent with respect to the task of the radical interpreter. The difference between the truth-theory (or truth-theories) the radical interpreter has to construct and the formations of conventions is that the first task is synchronic and the second a diachronic phenomenon.<sup>34</sup> Critics like Dummett imply that to interpret an utterance is to “translate” it into your own idiolect; but “what already *is* expressed in your own idiolect is not interpreted, you somehow just get it.”<sup>35</sup> Instead the radical interpretation model reverses the logical priority of the concept of a language and the concept of interpretation.<sup>36</sup> The salient contrast is not that between idiolects and languages, but between *occasions of utterance*, on the one hand, and abstractions, such as languages or idiolects, on the other.<sup>37</sup>

#### 4. Incommensurability

Ramberg suggests that “the question of whether continuity of reference is what makes communication possible”<sup>38</sup> is at the core of the incommensurability debate. If this is the correct analysis of the incommensurability issue, then Davidson’s theory might have something interesting to offer, because it appeals to a conception of semantics which “makes no essential use of reference.” It follows directly from Davidson’s model of radical interpretation that the thesis of incommensurability taken as absence of translatability is incoherent because, “Davidson equates a conceptual scheme with a language or a set of inter-translatable languages, and then goes on to show that the only such set we can conceive of is the set of all possible languages.”<sup>39</sup> From the point of view of the radical interpreter and her extensional semantics, incommensurability understood as impossibility of translation is not conceivable.<sup>40</sup> If a radical interpreter cannot interpret a “language” then it is unclear how the speakers of this “language” would have

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<sup>28</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>29</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 81; cf. p. 88.

<sup>30</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>31</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>32</sup>. Cf. Blackburn 1984, *Spreading the Word*, p. 278; Blackburn 1996, “The Dispute on the Primacy of the Notion of Truth...,” p. 1017, regarding linguistic conventions. Also, see Gadamer, quoted in Ramberg, p. 139, “One of the fundamental structures of all speaking is that we are guided by preconceptions and anticipations in our talking in such a way that these continually remain hidden and that it takes a disruption in oneself of the intended meaning of what one is saying to become conscious of these prejudices as such.” Gadamer 1976, p. 92.

<sup>33</sup>. Cf. Dummett 1986, “Some comments on Davidson and Hacking.”

<sup>34</sup>. Ramberg, 1991, p. 111.

<sup>35</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>36</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>37</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>38</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>39</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>40</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

learned it.<sup>41</sup> One feels inclined to remark again that those speakers might have learned their language because they are allowed more resources than the radical interpreter, thus pointing to practical problems of access.

Ramberg suggests it is a mistake to identify incommensurability with intranslatability. It is a mistake related to the error of identifying a language with a set of conventions. Incommensurability is a “disruption in the on-going interpretation-through-application of our linguistic conventions”<sup>42</sup> But it does not follow that translation or communication is, therefore, not possible, “only that *interpretation* rather than reliance on convention, is required to a greater degree than usual.”<sup>43</sup> Kuhn is on the right track to suggest that “what is required in cases of incommensurability is precisely interpretation or translation.”<sup>44</sup> Probably both Kuhn and Feyerabend would agree with Ramberg’s broad assessment of the *communicative* aspect of scientific revolutions and incommensurability. But Ramberg is wrong to think that that is all there is to the incommensurability issue. First, contrary to the impression Ramberg gives, in recent writings Kuhn (and also Feyerabend) make a clear distinction between learning a language (a theory) and translating one theory/language into another. For example Kuhn (1991) writes: “more recently, I’ve spoken of the historian’s recovery of older meanings as a process of language learning rather like that undergone by the fictional anthropologist whom Quine misdescribes as a radical translator... . The ability to learn a language does not, I’ve emphasized, guarantee the ability to translate into or out of it.”

Second, Ramberg seems to miss the original worry about incommensurability when he says that it is “part of the semantic evolution of language.”<sup>45</sup> Although Kuhn himself appeals to evolutionary considerations, the original problem was precisely that no *reasons* or rational justification can be given why we should prefer one theory over another “incommensurable” theory. In Ramberg’s solution, either this worry is dropped in favor of the salvation of the universal conversation of mankind, or the unjustified assumption is made that “evolution” means “progress” (of universal reason, toward absolute truth). It takes away the distinction between learning and translation by assuming that no restrictions are placed “on what can be said in a given language, because we are, of course, able to construct new sentences with new extensions”<sup>46</sup>—an idea which, interestingly, can be traced back to Edward Sapir (1949). But nothing follows as to whether we have to commit ourselves to one scientific theory or another, no matter how well we’ve understood both of them by extending our language in the appropriate ways using the procedure of radical interpretation.

Still Ramberg makes an important contribution by suggesting how incommensurability can be overcome by continuing inquiry. Kuhn’s talk of Gestalt switches is inappropriate; the conversion is not one of seeing the world differently, but “is learning and using a new language.”<sup>47</sup> Differences in conventions between distinct linguistic communities may be overcome by formulating a joint or common language to meet outstanding problems between the groups.

Ramberg applies the same reasoning to the interpretation of foreign cultures. Incommensurability will occur, not “because alien traditions as such could turn out to be incommensurable, but because of the immensity of the task of penetrating the prejudices that cause us to misinterpret what is foreign, and so to mistake the language being spoken.”<sup>48</sup> “Davidsonian semantics is entirely without epistemological ramifications.”<sup>49</sup> But it is precisely because Davidson’s theory of interpretation does not cut “much anti-relativist ice”<sup>50</sup> that one wonders why Ramberg is confident that it can solve the problems of intercultural communication. Consider the following two quotations from Ramberg:

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<sup>41</sup> . *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>41</sup> . *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> . *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>43</sup> . *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>44</sup> . Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>45</sup> . *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>46</sup> . *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>47</sup> . *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>48</sup> . *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>49</sup> . *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>50</sup> . *Ibid.*

The difference between the interpreter and the L-speakers is not a difference in what they see and feel, but in what they look for, and in what they deem relevant to something's being a particular something. This will depend on what sort of features of the world they find useful to call attention to, juxtapose, or ignore.<sup>51</sup>

Just as the principle of charity has no implications about the similarities or dissimilarities of respective world views, so the ineliminable possibility of translation is no guarantee that we share criteria of truth or have a common core of empirical knowledge or that our languages enable us to refer to some fundamental common set of references.<sup>52</sup>

Surely, at the level of broad sweeping statements this is not very different from what we find in the writings of Kuhn or the odd cultural relativist. (So they might be said to have undermined the third dogma of empiricism as well, because none of them has ever denied that, *in practice*, radical interpretation works.) On the contrary, if we read the quotations more carefully it would seem that a more thorough analysis is required of what exactly is shared and not shared, different and not different, or given and not given, and how words like “world” and “similarity” are to be taken.

### 5. Conclusion

If we take seriously Davidson's suggestion that “communication does not depend, as we naturally tend to suppose, on our speaking the same language”<sup>53</sup> one would expect a more revolutionary change than Ramberg is offering, restricting his book to questions of truth, meaning, and belief. Ramberg briefly mentions<sup>54</sup> Davidson's long-term aim of providing a unified theory of meaning and action, but even “an interlocking account of the central cognitive and conative attitudes” showing that “truth rests in the end on belief, and even more ultimately on the affective attitudes”<sup>55</sup> might not be enough. In a truly unified (or holistic) theory of interpretation, ascription of desires, emotions, intentions, and so on, *as well as* the meaning of non-verbal actions, would seem to be prior to, or at least as important as, the ascription of meaning to truth-value bearing utterances.<sup>56</sup> On the one hand, because more “data” are added, this might make it more plausible that radical interpretation *is* always possible. On the other, it would make theory construction more difficult, because we would have to give up semantics as a completely autonomous discipline, embedding it into a comprehensive theory of the mutual interpretation of human (inter-)action.

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<sup>51</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>52</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>53</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>54</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 90f.

<sup>55</sup>. Davidson 1990, p. 315, p. 326.

<sup>56</sup>. J. van Brakel 1991, p. 239; Callaway 1993, Introduction and Chapter 6.