Davidson and Wittgenstein: Affinities and Contrasts

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1.   Introduction

Davidson studied the *Philosophical Investigations* (1950), the *Blue and Brown Books* (1958) and the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1919), but their influence, according to Davidson himself, was indirect and mediated.

> I was … more influenced [than Quine] by Wittgenstein, at least in the sense that I spent a lot of time reading Wittgenstein way back in the '50s, when *Investigations* were first coming out in English. And I'm sure I absorbed a great deal more than registered in a direct way. And then for, you know, decades I didn't look back very much, I was just going on in my own way, but was probably influenced all along, for as you know I was heavily influenced by people who were heavily influenced by Wittgenstein, Anscombe, Hampshire, John Wisdom. (Davidson and Hopkins 1997, 3:20)

Davidson's and Wittgenstein's attitudes toward philosophy differed. Davidson didn't share with the later Wittgenstein the view that philosophy's job was to "shew the fly the way out of the fly bottle" (Wittgenstein 1950, §309). He sought to solve even the biggest problems: the nature of meaning, the mind-world relation, and our knowledge of the external world, and our own and other minds. Yet one can see important affinities between Davidson and Wittgenstein. This chapter looks for "continuity and convergence"[1] between Davidson's and Wittgenstein's work, identifies common themes and family resemblances, as well as disagreements, especially in the theory of meaning.[2]
I take up in turn:

- their shared rejection of the utility of an ontology of meanings;
- a convergence on the idea that we must show rather than say what an expression means;
- the similarities and differences between them on meaning as use and the sense in which rule following is essential for meaning;
- the publicity of language, first in connection with radical interpretation; and

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[1] Hopkins's introductory remarks in (Davidson and Hopkins 1997).
[2] Citations to Wittgenstein are sparse in Davidson's work until the 1990s—thirteen in the first forty years of Davidson's career (1949-1989). From 1990 to 2000 there are forty-two citations to Wittgenstein, and fourteen in the 2000s, mostly in the posthumous *Truth and Predication* (2005). The two articles citing Wittgenstein most frequently are "The Second Person" (1992) with eleven (for a 1989 conference on Wittgenstein) and "The Social Aspect of Language" (1994) with eight.

- then with Davidson's later work on triangulation in securing objective thought.

Themes overlap—we "travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction" (Wittgenstein 1950, p. v)—and we seek to arrive at a more detailed understanding of similarities and differences by looking at the same terrain from different perspectives.

2.   Meanings as entities

Davidson's identifies his question as: "What is it for words to mean what they do?" ((2001d, p. xiii, [1984]). We would have an answer to this question if we could construct a theory for a language that (loc. cit.)

(1) provides "an interpretation of all utterances actual and potential of a speaker or group of speakers" that is
(2) "verifiable without knowledge of the detailed propositional attitudes of the speaker."

We satisfy (1) by providing a theory *understanding of which* puts one in a position to understand the language. We satisfy (2) confirming it on an independent basis. The theory is for a particular language, but the lessons are general because the procedure applies to any language.

Davidson took a dim view of associating entities, such as senses, intensions, functions, propositions, properties, relations, etc., with expressions to explain what they mean (2001j, pp. 17-22, [1967]).[3] The problem with associating entities with expressions to explain their meaning is that this fails to provide a theory that meets condition (1) above. The deficiency is typically masked by theorists using expressions to refer to the entities that *mean the same as* the expressions for which they are to give the meaning (Lepore and Ludwig 2005, ch. 2, esp. pp. 55-56). Thus, if we give the meaning of 'Schnee ist weiß' as in [1],

[1]   'Schnee ist weiß' in German means *the proposition that snow is white*.

we (a) understand the expression used to refer to the proposition assigned and (b) recognize the embedded sentence to be the same in meaning as 'Schnee ist weiß'. This suffices to understand the object language sentence if we know [1] is true. But the proposition referred to (if any) plays no role in conveying what 'Schnee ist weiß' means. (Like Wittgenstein's beetle in a box (*Philosophical Investigations* §293), it plays no role in how the language functions.) For if we name the proposition 'Bob' and state the same thing, as in [2], this does not put us in a position to understand 'Schnee ist weiß'.

[2]   'Schnee ist weiß' in German means Bob.

Davidson's solution was to approach the task indirectly. We construct a recursive axiomatic truth theory for a language that meets Tarski's Convention T. The theory would issue in theorems (ignoring context sensitivity) that have the form (T),

(T)   *S* is true in *L* iff *p*

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[3] The original date of publication is in square brackets if it differs from that the cited text.

where '*p*' is replaced by a sentence that translates *S*.[4] If we know (T) satisfies this condition, we can replace 'is true in *L* iff' with 'means in *L* that' *salva veritate*. Davidson then proposed that a truth theory confirmable from the standpoint of a radical interpreter would *ipso facto* meet Convention T (Davidson 2001f, sec. 3). Thus, he hoped to illuminate the meaning of sentences on the basis of their parts by proving T-sentences giving their interpretive truth conditions.

There were many influences on Davidson's rejection of an ontology of meanings. Quine's suspicions of intensional entities is one ("creatures of darkness" he called them (1956, p. 180)). But it is not hard to see some striking similarities to Wittgenstein.[5] Wittgenstein begins the *Blue Book* by rejecting attempts to answer the question 'What is the meaning of a word?' directly.

> Let us attack this question [instead] by asking, first, what is the explanation of the meaning of a word; what does the explanation of a word look like?
> ...
> The questions "What is length?", "What is meaning?", "What is the number one?" etc., produce in us a mental cramp. We feel that we can't point to anything in reply to them and yet ought to point to something. (We are up against one of the great sources of philosophical bewilderment: a substantive makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it.)
> Asking first "What's an explanation of meaning?" has two advantages. You in a sense bring the question "what is meaning?" down to earth. For, surely, to understand the meaning of "meaning" you ought also to understand the meaning of "explanation of meaning". Roughly, "let's ask what the explanation of meaning is, for whatever that explains will be the meaning." Studying the grammar of the expression "explanation of meaning" will teach you something about the grammar of the word "meaning" and will cure you of the temptation to look about you for some object which you might call "the meaning". (1958, p. 1)

This begins an investigation that concludes that understanding a word's meaning lies in understanding *its use* in a community. In *explaining* the meaning of a word, we show *how it is used*. Thus, to learn its meaning is to learn its use in a community. The standard of correctness becomes conformity with the way others use the word, not a feeling of having gone on in the right way. These themes are developed at length the *Philosophical Investigations* (see §560 for a direct echo of this idea). We return to them in §4.

Davidson had read the *Blue and Brown Books* (1958) and the *Philosophical Investigations* (1950) by the early 1960s. It is not a stretch to think that this advice to approach the question of meaning indirectly was one that Davidson found himself in sympathy with. There are two things to notice. The first is their shared view that offering a thing as the meaning of a term is a response to a temptation prompted by a verbal confusion and that it offers no insight. The second is the adoption of an indirect approach, asking not what meaning is but how it is explained. But these ideas take a different form in Davidson's thought. Instead of the question 'What is the meaning of a word?' or 'What is meaning?' he asks 'What is it for words to mean what they do?', which is asking for a kind of explanation of *why* words mean what they do, though not *how we explain their meaning to others*.

Davidson's more abstract approach reflects other influences. His early collaborative work on decision theory (Davidson, Suppes, and Siegel 1957) gave him the idea of a formal theory whose content was derived from how its concepts were applied in the light of evidence that didn't presuppose their correct application. Tarski's work on axiomatic truth theories (Tarski 1983, [1934])

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[4] See (Lepore, Lepore, and Ludwig, Part 1, esp. ch. 4) for a fuller account.
[5] (Bridges, p. 155) makes this connection.

gave Davidson the idea of a formal theory for a language whose theorems enable us to interpret the object language by its satisfying convention T, while its recursive structure offered a compositional account of language understanding. Quine's work on radical translation gave Davidson the idea of adopting the standpoint of the interpreter of another to capture the essentially public character of language (though this theme is also prominent in Wittgenstein). That decision theory sees choice as the result of preference ranking and degree of belief gave Davidson the idea that holding a sentence *S* true can be seen as the result of knowing that *S* means that *p* and believing that *p* (Davidson 2001a, p. 161, quoted below, [1974])) and hence as a datum neutral with respect to assignments of meaning and belief. Illuminating meaning then comes by way of sketching how to confirm a truth theory satisfying Convention T, on the basis of data in the form of correlations between hold true attitudes and conditions in the environment that prompt them, in the context of a theory of speakers as rational agents. The assumption that fixes one element of the two determinants of hold true attitudes is that the speaker is mostly right about her environment. From this we are to infer that those beliefs (and the sentences held true on that basis) prompted by her environment are largely true. This provides the initial targets for the truth theory: the sentences that the theory should validate as true on the basis of what they mean. This assumes that conditions that prompt most of the speaker's beliefs about her environment are what the sentences she holds true on that basis mean (in the context). The correct theory best fits the totality of the data, in the sense that (i) it assigns interpretations that make the speaker out to be largely right about her environment (the Principle of Correspondence), and (ii) otherwise makes her as intelligible a rational agent as possible consistently with the totality of evidence we have about her and her history (the Principle of Coherence).[6]

There are number of elements in this beyond the rejection of the utility of assigning entities to expressions in the theory of meaning that connect with themes in Wittgenstein's work. I turn to these now.

3.   Showing versus saying what a sentence means

There is a striking point of connection with a theme from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Wittgenstein there introduces a distinction between saying and showing.

3.262   What signs fail to express, their application shows. What signs slur over, their application says clearly.

3.263   The meanings of primitive signs can be explained by means of elucidations. Elucidations are propositions that contain the primitive signs. So they can only be understood if the meanings of those signs are already known.

4.121   Propositions cannot represent logical form: it is mirrored in them. What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent. What expresses itself in language, we cannot express by means of language. Propositions show the logical form of reality. They display it.

4.1212   What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said.

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[6] The Principles of Correspondence and Coherence are both subsumed in Davidson's original Principle of Charity. He distinguishes them in (Davidson 2001h, p. 211, [1991]).

In a notebook in 1931 he repeats the general idea in way that echoes a point made about Davidson above:[7]

> The limit of language is shown by its being impossible to describe the fact that corresponds to (is the translation of) a sentence, without simply repeating the sentence. (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 10)

The thesis rests on the picture of theory of meaning. This is clear especially in 4.121 ("Propositions cannot represent logical form: it is mirrored in them....") and 4.1212 (above). According to the picture theory, to represent reality, namely, facts, we must provide a model of the fact. The model itself is a fact, for nothing else has the same structure as a fact. An atomic fact is an arrangement of objects in a state of affairs. Other facts are truth functions of atomic facts. The representation of a state of affairs must have the same number of objects as the possible state of affairs it represents. The elements in the representation name corresponding objects in the possible atomic fact. The arrangement of the names in the representation (itself a state of affairs) represents the arrangement of the named objects in a possible state of affairs. However, states of affairs and facts are not objects. They do not stand in arrangements like objects which thereby realize states of affairs. To attempt to *refer* to them is to attempt to treat them as objects rather than arrangements of objects. Even to attempt to say what we have just said then involves a confusion of facts with objects. Hence the conclusion in 6.54 that what the *Tractatus* attempts to say cannot be said.

6.54   My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them.

At best, we can *show* what the picture theory attempts to say. We use the very sentence (or a translation) to *show* what possible fact we have in mind (the one that is a model of another possible fact). We cannot give insight into what a sentence means, then, without using that sentence (or a translation) which we already grasp.

Davidson's use of a truth theory to provide a meaning theory expresses the same theme. In giving truth conditions for sentences using a metalanguage translation we understand, it shows what the object language sentences means without stating what they mean. In addition, the axioms of the theory, using expressions the same in meaning (relative to context) as those for which they give satisfaction conditions, show what the primitive expressions mean (Lepore and Ludwig 2005, §4.3). A canonical proof of an interpretive T-sentence from the axioms for the primitive expressions in it shows how they contribute compositionally to the interpretive truth conditions of the object language sentence. Thus, the truth theory, and the canonical proof, shows what the sentence means, and how that depends on the meaning of its primitive expressions and how they are combined. What the primitive expressions mean is shown by thinking about how a radical interpreter could confirm a particular theory for a speaker. This gives the idea of showing what sentences mean rather than stating it a precise form.

There are differences as well. Davidson's explanation of why we need to show rather than state what sentences mean does not involve the picture theory or an ontology of facts, which

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[7] Quoted in (Stroud 2017, 136). Stroud writes, "I take the main point to be that you must use some words whose meaning you understand to *say* what a sentence means." In contrast, on my view, Wittgenstein's point is that language *can't* say what it means. We can only draw attention to it by using the sentence (or a translation of it). The point I am emphasizing is a limitation on the theoretical representation of meaning.

Davidson rejects as lacking explanatory value (Davidson 2001i, [1969]). Davidson was motivated by the failure of approaches that tried to directly state what expressions mean to provide a compositional theory knowledge of whose content suffices for understanding. In this respect it differs from the *Tractatus*. For even though Wittgenstein is there committed to denying that we can talk about facts, it is difficult to see how the picture theory can function without them (cf. Frege's difficulties about the concept of a horse (Frege 1997, [1892])). Davidson's approach is a more austere working out of the idea that what something means cannot be stated but only shown and that it is something that can only be shown from within a language with the same expressive resources as that for which it is being shown. The latter theme, however, survives in Wittgenstein's later philosophy (see §120).

4. Meaning as (agreement on) use[8]

This brings us to another theme that finds expression in both Wittgenstein and Davidson, the famous dictum in §43 of the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1950) that meaning is use.[9]

> For a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.
> And the *meaning* of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its *bearer*.

More carefully: we *explain the meaning* of a word by *explaining its use* in the language; hence, its use in the language community grounds its meaning. We can explain the use of an expression even if nothing corresponds to it, including names which lack bearers. This elaborates the theme from the *Blue Book* quoted above. To explain the meaning of a word, we instruct someone in how it is used. In connection with this, Wittgenstein makes the point that ostension can be interpreted in many ways (§28). It works only relative to understanding "what place in language, in grammar, we assign to the word" (§29): "the ostensive definition explains the use—the meaning—of the word when the overall role of the word in the language is clear" (§30).[10] Ostensive definitions then presuppose we already have a language, and it cannot be how words get their meaning in the first place (Verheggen 2017, p. 109). Thus, Wittgenstein rejects the idea that we give the meaning of an expression by correlating it with an object. Knowing the meaning of an expression is not knowing that it is related to some object, but knowing how to use it correctly with other expressions in the language. "To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique" (§199). This introduces another theme connected with explaining meaning—also connected with the discussion of showing versus saying—namely, that to explain the meaning of a word we must use a language and presuppose that those to whom we are explaining it already understand it language (excluding the word whose meaning is being explained). Explanation of meaning takes place internal to use of language, not from a standpoint entirely outside of it (cf. note 14). At one point, Wittgenstein puts it like this: "If there is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments" (§242).

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[8] I say 'on' rather than 'in' use because Davidson denies that interlocutors must use expressions in the same way, though they must agree on the use each makes of their expressions to successfully communicate.
[9] This theme is present also in the *Tractatus* in 3.262 and 3.263. But in *Philosophical Investigations* he abandons the idea that all language has a single underlying form, consisting of names of simples and the form of reality. See especially §§45-80.
[10] The point is made again in §31 about explaining which piece is the king in chess.

The idea that insight into meaning is sought in how expressions are used is reflected in Davidson's adopting the standpoint of the radical interpreter as basic for understanding meaning.[11] Davidson's interpreter identifies hold-true attitudes directed toward sentences on the basis of behavior.

> The interlocking of the theory of action with interpretation will emerge in another way if we ask how a method of interpretation is tested. In the end, the answer must be that it helps bring order into our understanding of behaviour. But at an intermediate stage, we can see that the attitude of holding true or accepting as true, as directed towards sentences, must play a central role in giving form to a theory. (Davidson 2001 (1975): 161)

More than this, the use of a truth theory as a meaning theory elaborates more precisely than Wittgenstein the idea that there's a distinction between the type of role an expression plays in a language and the use that distinguishes it from other expressions of the same type. The type of word is given by the common form of the axiom for classes of expressions in the truth theory. These identify the logico-semantic role of the expressions in the language (see (Lepore and Ludwig 2002) for elaboration).[12] In mapping a truth theory onto the speaker's language, one finds grounds in the speaker's use of expressions for assigning both types of grammatical roles and the uses within those roles that distinguish their meanings from meanings other expressions of the same type.

This connects with the idea that understanding a sentence is understanding a language, for it requires understanding expressions which can combine with others to form other sentences different in meaning. It also gives form to the idea that to understand a language is to master a technique, a complex practical ability to use primitive expressions in combination with one another in a systematic way to produce sentences which have truth conditions that give their meanings—in the sense of being used properly just on the condition that the speaker believes the conditions obtain. The idea that the resources of the language must be used in explaining meaning is evident from the need to find translations in one's own language for the speaker's expressions.

That there must be agreement in judgment shown in the radical interpreter constructing a truth theory on the basis of the Principle of Charity (both the Principle of Correspondence and Coherence). Constructing the theory in one's own language requires finding in the target language the same logic, the same sort of logico-semantical roles, and largely the same concepts. The Principle of Correspondence requires finding the speaker to be largely in agreement with one about the environment, enforcing agreement in judgment about many particular matters of fact. Moreover, since this requires the interpreter to take the speaker to be responding reliably to things that the interpreter can identify, it also requires finding speaker and interpreter to share a similarity space (more below in §9 on Triangulation). The method of constructing the theory requires the interpreter to see the speaker as responding similarly to things that the interpreter finds similar. Finally, the Principle of Coherence, which requires agreement in general judgments that fix our concepts, also requires the interpreter find the speaker to be largely rational and so to agree on norms of theoretical and practical rationality. Thus, Davidson's account of how radical

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[11] Horwich thinks the truth-theoretic approach must be excised to move Davidson closer to Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1950). In contrast, in my view, (Wikforss 2017; Glüer 2017; Verheggen 2017) all get it right. For another corrective to Horwich's thin interpretation of Davidson see (Lepore and Ludwig 2005) and (Ludwig 2015).

[12] This doesn't capture everything Wittgenstein's had in mind. The distinction between color and shape, which he thinks of as pertaining to the place of a word in the language, is not reflected in their logico-semantic role.

interpretation works shows a striking correspondence with important themes in Wittgenstein's description of language and communication.

5.   Rule following

Kripke introduced what he called a paradox based on a reading of Wittgenstein's remarks on rule following (1982), especially, "this was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule" (PI §201). According to Kripke, the paradox is that we cannot seem to find an appropriate ground for saying that someone (even if it is ourselves) is following one rule for '+', namely, plus, rather than another, quus, '⊕' (*x* ⊕ *y* = *x* + *y* if *x* and *y* are each less than 57 and 5 otherwise), when both are compatible with all of her actual behavior. We can't fix it by offering another rule because we can raise the same question about it. *Dispositions* to go on in a certain way are not adequate (the argument goes) because we are disposed also to make mistakes and the rule covers an infinitude, outstripping our dispositions. No *experience* accompanying our application of a rule can tell us how to go on, and it seems doubtful that any distinctive experience is associated with any given rule. Kripke concludes there are *no meaning constituting facts*. He offers a skeptical solution, inspired by Wittgenstein, that aims to give sense to our practices while accepting this conclusion, namely, that the right way lies in conformity with others' use in the community. [13]

On my reading, Wittgenstein offers neither Kripke's paradox nor Kripke's solution. Wittgenstein continues the passage quoted above as follows:

> The answer was: if everything can be made to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.
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> It can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another; as if each one contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another standing behind it. What this shews is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call "obeying the rule" and "going against it" in actual cases.
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> Hence there is an inclination to say: every action according to the rule is an interpretation. But we ought to restrict the term "interpretation" to the substitution of one expression of the rule for another. (§201)

The last sentence shows that Wittgenstein understands an interpretation of a rule to be another verbal formulation of it. In §198 he says "any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning." For an interpretation, being a verbal expression of a rule, tells us how to go on only if it is also meaningful. It then presupposes what it was supposed to settle.[14] The lesson is that there is "a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation* [not a verbal reformulation], but which is exhibited in what we call 'obeying the rule' and 'going against it' in actual cases" (§201). And what we call obeying the rule and going against it resides in having been "trained to react to [the] sign in a particular way" and doing so (§198); and he does so "only in so far as there exists a regular use of

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[13] Kripke's conclusion depends on assuming that there are meaning constituting facts that don't presuppose any facts about meaning or thought content, and so that meaning (and thought content) is reducible to something else. If his argument were correct, since we understand it, the right conclusion would be that meaning is not reducible.

[14] See (Verheggen, 2015@sec. 2) for what I take to be the same interpretation of Wittgenstein's "paradox."

sign-posts, a custom" (§198). Thus, in §202: "hence also 'obeying a rule' is a practice. And to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately': otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it." In short, understanding meaning is mastering of a shared technique for using expressions in communicating with others. New members are inculcated into the practice by training. Success depends on new members going on as others in the community do.

By 1984, with the publication of "Communication and Convention," while allowing that "speech is convention-bound," Davidson denied conventions are "necessary to the existence of communication by language" (Davidson 2001b, p. 265, [1984]). He makes the same point in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (2005a, [1986]), where he identifies agreement in passing rather than prior interpretation theories as essential for communication: all that is needed is in the moment speaker and hearer "assign the same meaning to the speaker's words" (op. cit., p. 277). This can occur in principle without speaker and hearer sharing a practice of using words in the same way.

Davidson, interestingly, took a different position in the Locke Lectures in 1970, unpublished until 2020 (Davidson 2020). He writes:

> Let me focus attention on an aspect of speaking the truth that sets it apart from much of the rest of linguistic behavior .... What helps to distinguish speaking the truth is this: the question whether someone has done it on a particular occasion is wholly determined by systematic facts about the language that must be known to anyone who speaks or understands the language. ... (Davidson 2020, p. 21)

It emerges that what a speaker knows that enables her to say under what conditions a sentence is true are the conventions of the language. This recasts the role of the truth theory. Its axioms now should be understood to express conventions for using its primitive expressions. The speaker knows the conventions of the language by having been inculcated into the system of language use. The truth theory is, in Dummett's phrase, a "theoretical representation of a practical ability" (1993, p. 36). In the Locke Lectures, Davidson conceived of that as competence in the conventions that determine truth conditions. At this point, Davidson's project looks very much in the spirit of Wittgenstein's remarks about rule following and what determines meaning. First, knowing the language isn't a matter of being able to verbally formulate rules for using words. Second, this is because knowing the language is mastering a technique for communicating with others. Third, to master the language is to be inculcated into a conventional practice. Hence, the standard for using a word correctly is determined by how it is used in the community, and to think one is following a rule for the language therefore does not determine that one is.

Yet what Davidson came to believe is that, though "we cannot in practice afford to do without" convention (loc. cit.), it is not essential to communication. This puts some distance between the later Davidson and the later Wittgenstein. If using a word with a meaning is using it in accordance with a rule, then Davidson, contrary to Wittgenstein, allows one can act in accordance with a rule only once (cf. *Philosophical Investigations* §199: "It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule").[15] If one treats 'rule' as synonymous

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[15] Wittgenstein's remarks are too vague to conclude that he was a conventionalist about meaning. But I take him to think meaning something involves, at least, being inculcated into a practice in involving the use of expressions in systematic ways. For contrasting views about whether Wittgenstein was a conventionalist, see (Glock 2010) (for) and (Glüer and Wikforss 2009) (against). (Wikforss 2017) appears to argue not only that Wittgenstein did not appeal to convention but that was not even committed to saying that meaning something involves following rules in any sense, apparently even in the sense of participating in a regular

with 'convention' or 'custom' or 'social practice', however, then Davidson would deny that following a rule is necessary for meaning something.[16] While it is hard to communicate without shared conventions, the trouble is not conceptual, according to Davidson, but epistemic. If this is right, a community practice is not essential for the distinction between correctly and incorrectly using a word or, if to use a word is to follow a rule, for correctly or incorrectly following a rule.

What does determine correct and incorrect use, then? Davidson addresses this in "The Second Person" (1992, p. 116):

> But haven't we, by eliminating the condition that the speaker must go on as the interpreter (or others) would, at the same time inadvertently destroyed all chance of characterizing linguistic error? If there is no social practice with which to compare the speaker's performance, won't whatever the speaker says be, as Wittgenstein remarks, in accord with some rule (i.e., in accord with some language)? If the speech behavior of others doesn't provide the norm for the speaker, what can? The answer is that the intention of the speaker to be interpreted in a certain way provides the 'norm'; the speaker falls short of his intention if he fails to speak in such a way as to be understood as he intended.

If act and intention (to be interpreted a certain way) fail to conform so as to make the speaker interpretable to her audience, the speaker's utterance act is incorrect. It fails to conform to the norm determined by her intention; otherwise it is correct.[17] A few pages earlier, Davidson also writes (citing (Wright 1984)):

> ... we are in a position to say that if communication succeeds, there must be ... intentions on the part of the speaker, and ... if successful communication is essential to meaning, these intentions are essential to meaning. The presence of intentions is important, since it gives content to an attribution of error by allowing for the possibility of a discrepancy between intention and accomplishment. .... Intention would seem to have just the properties needed to make sense of the idea that a speaker has failed to go on as before. (op. cit., p. 111)[18]

Thus, what substitutes for convention is the possibility that the speaker can get the interpreter to see what the speaker intends in making an utterance. The speaker's intentions then provide the

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practice. This would close the gap between Wittgenstein and Davidson, if correct, but since Davidson interpreted him as appealing to a social practice, Davidson's position would not here be derived from his reading of Wittgenstein. In any case, this interpretation of Wittgenstein seems to me to be difficult to reconcile with §§198-202.

[16] Neither Wittgenstein nor Davidson clearly distinguish conventions, customs, and constitutive rules, which are different from one another. See (Jankovic and Ludwig 2022) for discussion.

[17] Davidson says (loc. cit.) that conformity to common practice comes into the picture when the speaker intends to conform so as to make herself interpretable, fails to do so, and so fails to be interpretable as a result. The response relies on intentions determining satisfaction conditions.

[18] Davidson makes the same appeal in (2005b, p. 120, [1994]). That the speaker intends to use a word in the same way as before to sets a standard that would be violated if she did not do so. For this to be a condition on successful communication, then she would also intend that her audience interpret her as so intending and having some knowledge of her prior intentional use of the expression. If she doesn't intend to use her words as before, but her audience thinks she does, communication may fail. In this case, if we say her use was incorrect, and the speaker makes no performance error, we can only mean that she provided insufficient information for correct interpretation.

standard for correctness. But since the goal is to communicate, the speaker must make herself at least in principle interpretable on the basis of public cues to her interpreter, who, she must assume, generally responds to the same things she does.

Davidson denies intention requires "reflection ... conscious reasoning" or "any special feelings" (loc. cit.). Thus, it's compatible with Wittgenstein's insistence that meaning is not grounded in occurrent experience. However, since for Davison an intention is a pro attitude involved in the causal production of action (Davidson 2001e, [1974]; 2001c, [1970]), and Wittgenstein denied that reasons for actions caused them, Davidson's appeal to speaker intention is inconsistent with Wittgenstein's view of what facts determine meanings. In fact, Davidson attributes to Wittgenstein the goal of explaining linguistic meanings "on the basis of non-linguistic intentions, uses, purposes, functions, and the like" ((Davidson 2001a, p. 143, [1974]).

6.   The publicity of language and radical Interpretation

Davidson most frequently mentions Wittgenstein when discussing the social and public character of language and meaning. The intersubjective character of meaning and thought is a constant theme in *Philosophical Investigations*, and it is tied to the recognition that insofar is meaning plays a role in communication, the idea that it might somehow exceed what could be gleaned by others on the basis of behavior is empty. This comes out in Wittgenstein's insistence that we do not learn the meaning of terms for sensations from our own case. Whatever is conveyed publicly by 'pain' will be insensitive to supposed differences between speakers. This is the point of the beetle in a box passage (§293):

> Well, everyone tells me that he knows what pain is only from his own case! — Suppose that everyone had a box with something in it which we call a "beetle". No one can ever look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle. — Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. — But what if these people's word "beetle" had a use nonetheless? — If so, it would not be as the name of a thing. The thing in the box doesn't belong to the language-game at all; not even as a Something: for the box might even be empty. No, one can 'divide through' by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is.

The same point applies to thoughts, beliefs, desires, intentions, and so on, for the same reasons. Words are designed for use in social transactions, language games of one or another sort, and so their function requires that word meanings, that is, their systematic uses, be available to everyone "playing the game."

Wittgenstein's direct influence on Davidson here is unclear. Davidson is explicit about his debt to Quine. The main features of his approach to the theory of meaning come from his realizing that Tarski's theory of truth could be transformed into a vehicle for a compositional meaning theory and the idea he got from Quine that the interpreter's stance was methodologically basic in confirming a meaning theory for a speaker. In his interview with Lepore, Davidson says, "I sort of slowly put what I thought was good in Quine with what I had found in Tarski. And that's where my general approach to the subject came from" (Lepore 2004, p. 258).

Independently of his general commitment to behaviorism, Quine thought we had to be behaviorists about meaning because "Language is a social art."[19] This was the key idea for Davidson.

> The requirement that the evidence be publicly accessible is not due to an atavistic yearning for behavioristic or verificationist foundations, but to the fact that what is to be explained is a social phenomenon. Mental phenomena in general may or may not be private, but the correct interpretation of one person's speech by another must in principle be possible. ... what has to do with correct interpretation, meaning, and truth conditions is necessarily based on available evidence. As Ludwig Wittgenstein, not to mention Dewey, G. H. Mead, Quine, and many others have insisted, language is intrinsically social. This does not entail that truth and meaning can be defined in terms of observable behavior, or that it is "nothing but" observable behavior; but it does imply that meaning is entirely determined by observable behavior, even readily observable behavior. That meanings are decipherable is not a matter of luck; public availability is a constitutive aspect of language. (Davidson 1990, p. 314)

Jim Hopkins argued that Davidson and Wittgenstein's enterprises are "complementary and compatible (at least more than one might have thought)" (Hopkins 1999). In response, Davidson wrote: "Maybe those long hours I spent years ago admiring and puzzling over the *Investigations* were not spent in vain" (Davidson 1999, p. 286). However, it is not until Davidson read the manuscript version of *Word and Object* (in 1959) that he recognized the methodological importance of the stance of the interpreter, and Davidson said that he didn't make a connection between Wittgenstein and radical interpretation until Hopkins drew his attention to it.

Regardless of whether we can trace a direct influence, there are important family resemblances. Two passages from the *Philosophical Investigations*, §206 and §207, noted by Hopkins (Hopkins 1999) have struck many as a precursor to idea of radical interpretation.

> 206. Following a rule is analogous to obeying an order. One is trained
> to do so, and one reacts to an order in a particular way. But what if
> one person reacts to the order and training thus, and another otherwise?
> Who is right, then?
>> Suppose you came as an explorer to an unknown country with a language
> quite unknown to you. In what circumstances would you say that
> the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled
> against them, and so on?
>> Shared human behaviour is the system of reference by means of which
> we interpret an unknown language.

> 207. Let's imagine that the people in that country carried on usual human
> activities and in the course of them employed, apparently, an articulate
> language. If we watch their activities, we find them intelligible, they seem
> 'logical'. But when we try to learn their language, we find it impossible

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[19] In *Pursuit of Truth*, Quine writes: "In psychology one may or may not be a behaviorist, but in linguistics one has no choice. Each of us learns his language by observing other people's verbal behavior and having his own faltering verbal behavior observed and reinforced or corrected by others. . . . There is nothing in linguistic meaning beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behavior in observable circumstances" (1990, pp. 37-8).

> to do so. For there is no regular connection between what they say,
> the sounds they make, and their activities; but still these sounds are not
> superfluous, for if, for example, we gag one of these people, this has
> the same consequences as with us: without those sounds their actions
> fall into confusion – as I feel like putting it.
>> Are we to say that these people have a language: orders, reports, and the rest?
>> There is not enough regularity for us to call it "language".

This is part of Wittgenstein's investigation of rule following, and, hence, of meaning. If I am right, the goal is to show that it rests on a social foundation, a set of practices expressing regularities in use and a shared form of life. In §206 Wittgenstein asks in what circumstances someone observing others (apparently) speaking a language would interpret them as giving and understanding orders, following or rebelling against them. There are, he implies, characteristic forms of behavior that we associated with this (the last sentence). §207 reinforces this. To learn the language of another, there must be a regular connection between "what they say, the sounds they make, and their activities." If there is not enough regularity (of the sort we associate with the relevant linguistic activities), then it is not language.

The discussion following, up to §243, reinforces the moral. It is summed up in §§241-242 (§243 transitions to the discussion of sensations and private language, continuing the thread on the publicity of meaning, but not on shared forms of life enabling shared meanings).

> 241. "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?" – What is true or false is what human beings say; and it is in their language that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life.

> 242. It is not only agreement in definitions, but also (odd as it may sound) agreement in judgements that is required for communication by means of language.

The general moral is that language, and rule following, depends on a community of speakers who as a matter of fact go on in the same way, who react to the same things in the same ways; those regularities are the grid on which we plot the uses of expressions.

§206 and §207 present thought experiments involving an interpreter who approaches a completely novel speech community, who cannot presuppose anything about their language or even that they have one. Insofar, it is similar to the stance of the radical interpreter. It asks how such an interpreter could tell whether others were speaking a language. In this sense, it raises a question similar to, if not the same as, the two questions that Davidson's poses in "Radical Interpretation" (Davidson 2001f, p. 125, [1973]).

> Kurt utters the words 'Es regnet' and under the right conditions we know that he has said that it is raining. Having identified his utterance as intentional and linguistic, we are able to go on to interpret his words: we can say what his words, on that occasion, meant. What could we know that would enable us to do this? How could we come to know it?

Start with similarities. The idea that we must find others sufficiently like us to find them interpretable is common between Davidson and Wittgenstein. In Wittgenstein it is expressed in the idea that our ability to go on in the same way is grounded in our dispositions. We react in similar ways to similar things. We go on, or project from prior experience, in the same way. This idea plays a prominent role in Davidson's later period (1990s), and especially in the paper which makes the

most sustained contact with Wittgenstein, "The Second Person" (Davidson 2001g, [1992]), where Davidson identifies it as essential for the possibility of triangulation, which he sees as essential for fixing the objects of thought (more detail in the §9). It may also be possible to project from this some elements of the Principle of Charity. If interpreting another involves sharing a form of life, it seems essential that we should agree both on the general nature of our environments and by and large share the same basic concepts. This would involve elements of both the Principle of Correspondence and the Principle of Coherence. (See (Hopkins 1999) for an attempt to work this out.)

There are also at least five significant differences. First, and most importantly, the device of the radical interpreter served as the centerpiece for Davidson's approach to language and meaning in a way that it did not for Wittgenstein. As Glüer aptly puts it, "the [radical] interpreter ... is the hero, or main character of Davidson's philosophy" (Glüer 2011, p. 4). Second, this is reflected in the two questions with which Davidson begins "Radical Interpretation." The first question is about what theoretical knowledge would enable us to interpret any potential utterance of a language? This is not about telling whether others *speak a language*. It is about what facts about it could enable interpretation of any of a potential infinitude of utterances. So it is not about confirmation at all. And it is not about what we *actually* know. The idea is that if we could state what would enable understanding, it would give insight into what we actually know, which has to do the same job. As we've seen, Davidson's answer is that we could know an axiomatic truth theory for the language that *inter alia* satisfies Tarski's Convention T. The point is to illuminate how the truth conditions, and hence meaning, of complex sentences depend recursively on the satisfaction conditions, and hence meaning, of their significant parts. The second question is about how we could come to know what would enable us to interpret another's language. This is also not about telling whether others speak a language. It is more ambitious, for two reasons. (a) It is about how to confirm an answer to the first question, and, hence, about how to confirm a largely complete theory for another's language. (b) The confirmation is based ultimately on the behavior of others neutrally described. Third, the idea that an axiomatic truth theory can serve as the vehicle for a compositional meaning theory finds no echo in Wittgenstein's later work. Fourth, Wittgenstein does not commit himself to the austere starting point that Davidson embraces. Fifth, Wittgenstein appears not to have entertained the question what theoretical knowledge we could have about a language that would enable us to interpret any potential utterance of a sentence in it, and so a fortiori he does not offer a detailed account of how to confirm a theory of that sort.

The main points of contact are two: the thought experiment of interpretating others with whom we do not share a language and reflecting on what that tells us about language; and the resulting idea that we must find others very much like us to interpret them. But even on the latter point Davidson's approach offers much more detail. It is not merely the suggestion that we share similar dispositions and forms of life. The procedure Davidson describes enforces three distinct types of agreement. First, we must find the other to be largely rational. This is required by the fact that nothing is agent unless its behavior is interpretable as largely rational. There is no echo of this in Wittgenstein's work. Second, we must find the other to agree with us on at least very many general truths that fix the application conditions of our concepts. Third, starting with hold true attitudes (and later prefer true attitudes (Davidson 2004, [1980]; 1990)), we solve for meaning by holding fixed, by and large, the truth of the speaker's beliefs about her environment. This then enables us, Davidson holds, to infer that the conditions that regularly prompt hold true attitudes are what they are about.

7. Triangulation

Some commentators have seen a connection between Davidson's introduction of the idea of triangulation, especially in the 1990s, and Wittgenstein's later work (e.g., (Verheggen 2017)). This is also one of the contexts in which Davidson makes most frequent reference to Wittgenstein. A brief look at the main ideas here illuminates some of the themes introduced above.

Triangulation appears in two guises in Davidson's work. The first is in the trigonometric sense as an analogy. Davidson uses it to explain a central idea in a transcendental argument to show that we can have the concept of objective truth only in the context of communication. The second is as a device for locating among the causes of environmentally directed thought the objects that they are about. The core idea is that two agents triangulate when there is a common cause of their common responses to something in the environment when they are in communication with one another. The common cause is what their thoughts are about. Both senses of 'triangulation' are important to Davidson's understanding how meaning and thought depend on interaction with others, but only the second concerns us here (see (Ludwig 2011) for the first line or argument).

Triangulation in the second guise aims to solve a problem that became salient for in the 1990s. While Davidson traces the idea of triangulation back to "Rational Animals" in 1982, where it appears in the first guise, the next time 'triangulation' appears in Davidson's work in "The Second Person" in 1992, the emphasis has shifted:

> Involved in our picture there are now not two but three similarity patterns. The child finds tables similar; we find tables similar; and we find the child's responses in the presence of tables similar. It now makes sense for us to call the responses of the child responses to tables. Given these three patterns of response we can assign a location
> to the stimuli that elicit the child's responses. The relevant stimuli are the objects or events we naturally find similar (tables) which are correlated with responses of the child we find similar. It is a form of triangulation: one line goes from the child in the direction of the table, one line goes from us in the direction of the table, and the third line goes between us and the child. *Where the lines from child to table and us to table converge, 'the' stimulus is located.* Given our view of child and world, we can pick out 'the' cause of the child's responses. *It is the common cause of our response and the child's response.* (Davidson 2001g, p. 119, emphasis added, [1992])

Our question is what objective facts about an agent could determine what her thoughts are about.[20] We cannot answer that simply by appeal to what causes a response in an agent, for that doesn't determine which link of which causal chain leading to it is relevant, nor what feature of the relevant link the thought is about. Triangulation is supposed to supply an answer: the right link is where chains from the two interact agents intersect; the feature is the one they each find similar across different cases where they have the same responses. Davidson concludes (loc. cit.):

> If we consider a single creature by itself, its responses, no matter how complex, cannot show that it is reacting to, or thinking about, events a certain distance away rather than, say, on its skin. ...
> The problem is not ... one of verifying what objects or events a creature is responding to; the point is that without a second creature responding to the first, there can

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[20] For assessment: (Ludwig 2011).

> be no answer to the question. … So we can say … that before anyone can speak a language, there must be another creature interacting with the speaker.

This is a transcendental argument for the essentially social nature of meaning and thought. If Davidson is right, a condition on the possibility of thought and meaning is that one be (or have been) communication with others.[21] Communication requires thought. Thought requires triangulation. Therefore, language (and meaning) requires triangulation. Davidson concludes "language is necessarily a social affair" (p. 117).[22]

Davidson begins "The Second Person" with an epigram from the *Philosophical Investigations*, "… meaning something is like going up to someone" (§457). Davidson both connects and contrasts his position with Wittgenstein's. There are two important points of contact, and one of difference. First, an obvious point of contact is that the thesis that Davidson argues for is one that Wittgenstein endorses.[23] As second point of contact, mentioned above, comes out in Davidson's endorsement of the necessity of sharing a similarity space with one's interlocutor.[24]

> For this to work, it is clear that the similarity responses of child and teacher—what, they naturally group together—must be much alike; otherwise the child will respond to what the teacher takes to be similar stimuli in ways the teacher does not find similar. A condition for being a speaker is that there must be others enough like oneself. (op. cit., p. 120)

That there is something more basic than language that we share which makes possible the conformity in behavior that must underlie the possibility of communication is Wittgenstein's response to the puzzle about following a rule. Davidson's identification of a shared similarity space as a precondition for communication is a more specific version of this idea. But, third, as we saw in §§6-7, Davidson rejects Wittgenstein's route to the conclusion that language is necessarily a social affair, namely, that the fundamental norm for correctness is whether one goes on as others in one's community do.

8. Conclusion

There are major interconnected themes concerning the nature of meaning that find expression in both Davidson and Wittgenstein:

- the rejection of the utility of assigning entities to expressions to explain their meaning, and the related idea of approaching the explanation of meaning indirectly;
- the insistence on the necessity of showing rather than saying what sentences mean, and

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[21] In footnote 11 (p. 115), though denying that someone could speak a language who "has never been in communication with others," Davidson seems to allow that *having been* in communication with others in suffices for attribution of a language and objective thought.

[22] Verheggen argues that the two uses of triangulation I have distinguished are intended to be mutually supporting. See (Myers and Verheggen 2016, part 1, esp. ch. 1).

[23] They would also agree that (1) you can mean something only if it makes sense to say that you could make a mistake (fail to follow a norm of meaning) and (2) you can make a mistake only if you are a member of a community of speakers (minimally two). But they would not agree on the explanation of (2).

[24] Finding one thing similar to another requires thinking about them under a certain aspect. Yet, to the extent to which this is a prerequisite for finding another to respond similarly to oneself, the account of the objective facts that fix the object of thought appears to depend on a prior conception of the possibility of thought about objects under an aspect and so is not capable of explaining it.

- the impossibility of reducing meaning to something else;
- the idea that understanding meaning must look to how expressions are used in communicative contexts;
- the importance of the third person stance on understanding language, and
- the essentially social character of language and meaning;
- conceptual ties of semantic and psychological concepts to behavioral;
- the denial of a distinctive inner realm of thought and feeling whose nature is logically independent of its expression in behavior;
- the grounding of meaning norms in the nexus of communicative action;
- shared "forms of life" (minimally a shared similarity space) as an infrastructure for a shared community of speech.

The most significant difference, from which many others derive, is that Davidson's goals are theoretical rather than therapeutic. The shared themes for Davidson find their place in systematic overarching account of the place of language and thought in the natural world. Davidson emphasizes the importance of having a theory for one's subject matter and of giving it empirical content. The theoretical frameworks are provided by a general causal theory of action and agency and an axiomatic truth theory for a language which is to meet constraints sufficient for it to be interpretive. The figure of the radical interpreter takes center stage. Assuming radical interpretability is necessary for language, we explain meaning, thought, intersubjectivity, knowledge of the world, other minds, and one's own mind in relation to the preconditions for being interpretable. Stepping back from details, where Davidson most closely resembles Wittgenstein is not on specific doctrines but on adequacy conditions. He embraced a very similar view of the constraints and affordances of the terrain but different solutions to problems, guided by his central organizing idea.

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