

Interpretation and Skill: On Passing Theory

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1. Introduction

In this paper I want to explore Donald Davidson's rejection of the use of the concept of language, when the knowledge of a language is taken as a sufficient and/or necessary condition for communicative understanding.

After sketching the original presentation of the argument, I will then look at what I take to be the major weakness of that version – the argument against language as a necessary condition – and at Davidson's more recent attempts to shore up the story in that area by way of the 'triangulation' thesis. After criticising that attempt, I will try to show that Davidson's general thesis can be maintained if it incorporates an account which analyses the process – a dialectic of physiological development and nurture – by which pre-communicative beings are brought to communicative competence, without the need for the concept of a language.

2. Language as a Form of Life

I think that we best approach the theory of communication and meaning by applying to it a certain non-reductive naturalism. That is, we should treat the communicative dimension of persons as a fundamentally embodied feature of socialised beings, and (in my preferred reading of the phrase) regard language as a form of life.

In my view, while intentional phenomena, including therefore interpretation and communication, are not to be reduced to the physical, intentionality nevertheless rests and depends on a non-intentional background, which is itself what we might call nurtured physiology, or a trained body.

The background of intentionality is able to be brought to intentionality – but this is only in a manner of speaking a matter of exposing something of which we are not aware. It is better seen as a matter of imposing intentional structure on the non-intentional, or of background taking on intentional structure. The background is not propositional in form, and should not be seen as implicit belief. We need to conceive

of it as flexible and adaptable, in a way seemingly denied to propositional, rule-based phenomena. I thus favour what is known as practical holism, rather than the theoretical holism associated with, for example, Richard Rorty. It follows that the explication of this background must be indirect, through a teasing-out of necessary conditions and presuppositions of intentional phenomena.

While background can in a sense be explicated, it cannot be eliminated. Intentionality always has a background, and any exposure or reflective critique of background always in turn presupposes a background on which the judgements of a reflective consciousness rest.

If we adopt this sort of approach we can avoid the potential circularity of a resolutely intellectualist account of intentional phenomena and its outcomes. Instead, we attempt to clarify and refine notions such as skill, habit, know-how, habitus, and primordial understanding (and their equivalents and alternatives in various traditions), and try to show how the intentional grows out of, draws on, and interacts with the non-intentional.

My own focus has been on the notion of skill in the operation of speech acts. I have argued that standard 'semantic' analyses of speech acts should be supplanted by an account of non-linguistic communicative skills by which we produce and understand situated speech acts. The standard accounts attempt to reduce speech acts to speech objects (to sentences containing an explicit or implicit indicator of force), and then explain our understanding and production of such objects in terms of implicit knowledge of a set of conventional categories. However, so I have argued, this offers no account of our understanding of particular situated acts as instantiations of categories, no account of our understanding of deviant acts, and no recognition of the fact that any conventional form, no matter how clear or explicit, can be used in a way that undermines the supposed conventional significance. Hence, an account of pre-linguistic communicative skills seems required.¹ We will see this issue return as the discussion progresses.

While I recommend the approach I have sketched here, it is important to note some concerns it raises – concerns which I will not directly address in the paper. For one

1 See my 'Communicative Skills and the Constitution of Illocutionary Acts' (1992).

thing, the proposal has nowhere, I think, been stated clearly enough, and that this seems so difficult might be reason to think that there is something badly wrong with it. Secondly, explication of the approach can leave it looking like insincere dualism (if we are talking about background and consciousness), or half-hearted foundationalism (if we are talking about raw feeling and knowledge, for example). A third, and significant, reason for concern is that this sort of approach seems to contain echoes of romanticism. All three issues relate to a broader concern that the proposal asks for (or risks asking for) an end to philosophical discussion. If we invoke skills, or know-how, or background, or habitus, we risk making little more than a gesture: consciousness, understanding, interaction, action, is best seen as a mode of this ..., and this, while the ground of analysis, is not the stuff of analysis, or is something to be covered by a promissory note. I do not think that such concerns are insurmountable, but I think it important that they be acknowledged at the beginning of the discussion.

3. Individualism and Anti-Individualism

One of the most central issues in the philosophy of language and communication is the question of the correct order of priority between individual competence and the patterns of usage or system of signs in which a subject arises and to the perpetuation of which the subject contributes. We can express our options here as the choice between individualism and anti-individualism: on the one hand the claim that existing patterns or systems are some type of sum of the contributions of each individual; and on the other hand the claim that individual communicative competence is only possible when constituted by the individual's being taken up in an already existing, already social, already significant world.

It is probably fair to say that anti-individualism is now the most widely supported of the options. Under the influence of Wittgenstein and others there is a healthy wariness of the solipsism associated with individualism, a sense that the individualist's subject has to arrive on the scene with more baggage than is plausible, and good arguments that private meanings are vacuous.

Yet anti-individualists have their own problems. For one thing, the anti-individualist has difficulty explaining how the story gets going. Say we propose that understanding rests on subjects following and recognising the instantiations of conventions, it is not clear how conventions are set up or how existing conventions

are taken up and followed, without some sort of prior non-conventional understanding. If we grant such understanding, we open the door to the individualist. Furthermore, the anti-individualist has difficulty explaining the relation between theory and instantiation. We might propose that communication is some degree of mutual understanding and that understanding rests on the in-effect possession of a theory of usage or set of linguistic conventions. Yet if we grant that actual practice at least often deviates from the theory or conventions, and that even a formally correct instantiation can be undermined through its being an ironic or in some other way deviant usage of a conventional form, then it is difficult to see how knowledge of shared conventions explains actual understanding or communication. There needs, it seems, to be an account of the understanding which bridges the gap between conventional form and instantiation, and which can accommodate (that is, produce and understand) deviant use of a conventional form – in fact, accommodate the potential of deviant usage. Thus the door is opened to the individualist again, citing this prior understanding as the basis for the social.

4. Davidson's opponent, and Davidson's argument

In 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', Donald Davidson concludes that 'there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed' (1986, p. 446). Davidson takes many philosophers and linguists to have supposed that a language is 'a precise and specifiable set of syntactic and semantic rules' (1994, p. 2), and that in learning a language a person acquires the ability to operate in accord with these rules. The sharing of this ability by speaker and hearer (and the sharing of knowledge of the set of rules) is supposed to be necessary and sufficient for verbal communication. As Davidson puts it,

According to that account, each interpreter (and this includes speakers, since speakers must be interpreters) comes to a successful linguistic exchange prepared with a 'theory' which constitutes his basic linguistic competence, and which he shares with those with whom he communicates. Because each party has such a shared theory and knows that others share his theory, and knows that others know he knows (etc.), some would say that the knowledge or abilities that constitute the theory may be called conventions. (Davidson 1986, p. 442)

Davidson's argument that such an idea is mistaken² rests on the claim that successful communicators need not share such knowledge of a language thus defined, and that someone with only such knowledge could not communicate successfully. The central point of this argument is the claim that 'the theory we actually use to interpret an utterance is geared to the occasion' (1986, p. 441), and that a language could never be such a theory.

That successful communicators need not, and must do more than, share knowledge of a language, is shown, Davidson thinks, by what he takes to be a large part of our linguistic experience. This includes malapropisms that are understood, or course, but also proper names, 'our ability to perceive a well-formed sentence when the actual utterance was incomplete or grammatically garbled, our ability to interpret words we have never heard before, to correct slips of the tongue, or to cope with new idiolects (1986, p. 442), and 'every deviation from ordinary usage, as long as it is agreed on for the moment' (1986, p. 442).³

Phenomena such as these, though no barrier to understanding, could not be interpreted by feeding them into a previously learned theory, says Davidson, since no theory could ever accommodate the specificity of the occasion. If we supposed that expressions were understood by matching them to a rule, any usage, which failed to match, would require a further rule tying this deviation on this occasion to the standard, and this seems to be an impossible requirement. Yet if such phenomena are ubiquitous we are able to get by and we must be able to get by linguistically without rules or conventions. So language is neither sufficient nor necessary.

5. The alternative to language

Now we must ask what Davidson thinks there is if not a language. The answer has two parts. On the one hand, there are prior theories and passing theories, neither of

2 Davidson's argument against the existence of language extends the arguments developed in 'Moods and Performances' (1979) and 'Communication and Convention' (1982a), in which he denied the adequacy of analyses of communication in terms of conventional moods or categories.

3 See also 1994, pp. 6-7. These cases do not include our abilities to deal with ambiguity, to understand the significance of order in conjunctions, and to follow implicature. Davidson thinks that these are hard to construe as linguistic abilities, but they are not the abilities which he thinks challenge the idea of a language (1986, pp. 436-7).

which qualifies as a language in the philosophical sense. On the other hand, there are languages, the things we refer to in our ordinary use of the term, and the things we learn – but these are not languages in the philosophically interesting sense, and they are to be explicated as groupings of idiolects (the linguistic regularities of an individual).

This might be made clearer by looking at the discussion of ‘getting away with it.’ Davidson compares Keith Donnellan, Humpty Dumpty, and Mrs Malaprop. Mrs Malaprop said, ‘if I reprehend anything in this world, it is the use of my oracular tongue, and a nice derangement of epitaphs’, and Captain Absolute (and the audience or reader) understood her to mean something like ‘if I comprehend anything in this world, it is the use of my vernacular tongue, and a nice arrangement of epithets’. Humpty Dumpty concluded an argument with, ‘there’s glory for you’, and when Alice said she didn’t know what he meant, he said, ‘Of course you can’t, until I tell you’ (and he means ‘There’s a nice knockdown argument for you’). Donnellan ended a response to a claim that in making the referential-attributive distinction he was adopting Humpty Dumpty’s theory of meaning, by suggestion that now (that is, after his discussion) he could say ‘There’s glory for you’ and get away with it.

Donnellan can get away with it, says Davidson, because his intentions are correctly connected with expectations, and given the background to his writing the sentence, he can expect that his readers will understand him. But Humpty Dumpty doesn’t get away with it, and can’t intend or expect to, since he knows that Alice lacks the background. Mrs Malaprop, on the other hand, gets away with it without knowing that she does, because her audience happens to have the necessary background. Thus we get an account of getting away with it:

[T]he interpreter comes to the occasion of utterance armed with a theory that tells him (or so he believes) what an arbitrary utterance of the speaker means. The speaker then says something with the intention that it will be interpreted in a certain way, and the expectation that it will be so interpreted. In fact this way is not provided for by the interpreter’s theory. But the speaker is nevertheless understood; the interpreter adjusts his theory so that it yields the speaker’s intended interpretation. The speaker has ‘gotten away with it’. The speaker may or may not (Donnellan, Mrs Malaprop) know that he has got away with anything; the interpreter may or may not know that the speaker intended to get away with anything. What is common to the cases is that the speaker expects to be, and is, interpreted as the speaker intended although the interpreter did not have a correct theory in advance. (Davidson 1986, p. 440)

Davidson says that we all get away with it all the time, and that understanding the speech of others depends on it. All the time, he says, we use and meet a new concept, a new term for an old concept, a new proper name, a new construction; all the time we get away with it, and each time requires an interpreter to change his or her way of interpreting the speech of another, or requires a speaker to change the way he or she speaks to someone who has the new use (see 1986, p. 441).

Given this, we arrive at the distinction between prior and passing theories. For the hearer, the prior theory expresses how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker, while the passing theory is how he does interpret the utterance. For the speaker, the prior theory is what he believes the interpreter's prior theory to be, while his passing theory is the theory he intends the interpreter to use (see 1986, p. 442).

Davidson says that an interpreter comes to a speech transaction, and has at any moment in the transaction, a theory. It is adjusted to available evidence, and takes account of factors such as the character, dress, role, sex, 'and whatever else has been gained by observing the speaker's behaviour, linguistic or otherwise' (1986, p. 441). This is the prior theory. It supplies the starting point for interpretive judgements.

As the speaker speaks his piece the interpreter alters his theory, entering hypotheses about new names, altering the interpretation of familiar predicates, and revising past interpretations of particular utterances in the light of new evidence. (Davidson 1986, p. 441)

The most important thing to note about the prior-passing distinction is that this process of alteration of the prior theory is not just a matter of improving the method of interpretation as the evidential base enlarges. The theory we actually use to interpret an utterance is geared to the occasion: what is correct for this utterance may not have been so for the previous one, and may not be so for the next; and this is in part because a speaker may provide us with information relevant to interpreting an utterance in the course of making the utterance. This occasion theory is the passing theory. It is the theory the interpreter actually uses to understand the utterance.

On the other side, the speaker wants to be understood, and so utters words he or she believes can and will be interpreted in a certain way. This expectation is based on a picture of the interpreter's readiness to interpret along certain lines, central to which is what is believed to be the hearer's starting or prior theory. But the speaker may not aim to prompt this theory; he or she may instead aim to dispose the interpreter to

modify the prior theory – thus the speaker’s view of the hearer’s prior theory remains relevant.

The prior theory is important in communication, as it is part of what is drawn on in the development of the passing theory, but what utterer and interpreter aim for and what success in communication depends on, is that the utterer’s passing theory be the same as or equivalent to the interpreter’s passing theory. Yet this passing theory, the point at which linguistic communication occurs, does not correspond to linguistic competence normally understood; that is, it is not a language, and mastery of such a ‘language’ would be useless.⁴

Davidson grants that in practice most communicators overlap considerably in their language (language in the ordinary sense), and that this is tremendously convenient. His point is, however, that this overlap is not essential, that it is theoretically possible to communicate without any shared practices (see 1994, p. 10).⁵

6. The (Wittgenstein-) Dummett Challenge

I think that the strongest objection to this approach reflects the intuition that while we may grant Davidson much of what he says of malapropisms and the like, they only demonstrate the insufficiency of a language as he has characterised it. Seen in this way, Davidson’s points merely repeat acknowledgments that are commonplace

4 The passing theory is a theory, because when a word or phrase temporarily or locally takes over the role of some other word or phrase the passing theory carries the burden of that role – that is, it takes on the other word’s implications for logical relations to other words, phrases and sentences. So, when we grasp that Mrs Malaprop means ‘epithet’ when she says ‘epitaph’, we must give ‘epitaph’ all the powers ‘epithet’ has for others, and this requires a full recursive theory – even if Mrs Malaprop makes the mistake only once (see 1986, p. 443). If a new term for a new concept arises in a passing theory, then this, it seems, requires a full recursive theory. I take it that there is in principle a limiting case in which speaker’s and hearer’s prior theories match, but even here the prior theory would not be equivalent to the passing theory, since the passing theory is the theory that the prior theory here applies. So again, the passing theory is the theory for the occasion, thus the theory that is used to interpret.

5 Given the characteristics of getting away with it, our approach to error needs to be revised. If language is a necessary condition for understanding, then deviation can be seen as an error of language in the sense of failing to follow a rule we are linguistically obliged to follow. But if we reject that view of language, error in this sense does not exist. We *can* speak of ‘error’ in the sense of failing to make ourselves understood – but here our judgement is based on the outcome of speech acts. If there is success, whatever is said, there is no error. So the tendency to judge linguistic performance in an almost moral light loses its foundation. We can still speak of ‘errors of language’, if we wish, but these now begin to merge with errors of fact – they are failings in our ability to get around in the world. This relates to some of the discussion in the final section.

in the philosophy of language. At this stage, a gesture can be made towards pragmatics, and the task of studying language as a necessary condition for understanding continues.⁶ The objection is a significant threat to Davidson's claim. It can arise either from dissatisfaction with the presentation of the original argument or, more strongly, from clear intuitions and arguments to the effect that there must be something like a language.

Surely, we might say, the success Davidson points to only makes sense against the background of public, learnable regularities. We can grant that there is a great deal of deviation, but claim that deviation is only deviation if there is a standard use, or a standard construction. We can grant that we can accommodate new terms for new concepts, and that we can accommodate new names, but claim that we can only do this because they arise in a context of regularities we already know and share, or are introduced and explained with reference to this context.⁷

Finally, and most importantly, how can Davidson's communicators, each speaking his or her idiolect, mean anything at all, without public, shared practices by which seeming regularity is constituted as actual regularity? Surely these learned and shared regularities and standard usages amount to a language, however difficult it is to define, and are at least necessary if linguistic communication is to succeed. Knowledge of such regularities may need to be supplemented by the ability to translate between regularity and deviation, but that in itself does not rule out the concept of a language. Someone proposing such an objection can then invoke a private language argument and thereby demand the necessity of a language.⁸

However, Davidson has a response to this, in his 'triangulation' thesis. He has made this explicit since 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', and it could be found in his

6 Note, however, that even if we grant this objection, the move to pragmatics will not suffice if it involves, at it tends to, an attempt to *add* a pragmatic dimension to language. It merely amounts to an expansion of the set of rules.

7 See Apel (1984), for an objection along these lines.

8 This final criticism has not been stated in a fully explicit way, as far as I know. Michael Dummett comes closest (Dummett 1986, esp. p. 473), and Davidson clearly takes Dummett to have raised this objection (see Davidson 1994, pp. 10ff).

work beforehand.⁹ The triangulation thesis is Davidson's version of (or alternative to) a private language argument. It is an argument for objectivity and externalism, against scepticism and methodological solipsism, yet it does not, he thinks, force us to accept the necessity of language. The point of the thesis is that simply in virtue of having thoughts we knowingly share a world with similar others; and it is this sharing of the world and response to the world, not language, which underpins the possibility of communication. The thesis can be reconstructed for present purposes in the following way:

A creature, Davidson supposes, can be taught to respond in a specific way to a stimulus – for example, can be taught to say 'table' whenever a teacher points to a table. We ask why the verbal reactions count as 'the same' or as relevantly similar. Davidson's response is that the teacher finds them so – that is, find the stimulus in each case the same, and the response the same. Furthermore, the creature must, in some primitive sense, find the teacher's pointings similar – which is evidenced by the creature's similar response. Davidson calls this an innate similarity response.

It is worth noting parenthetically the nature of the assumption of the innate similarity response. On one level it is a transcendental assumption on a par with the (misleadingly named) principle of charity, and the assumption of objectivity to which the triangulation thesis will lead. That is, it is an assumption that one makes unavoidably as an interpreter. But at another level it is a naturalistic assumption, made by Davidson; that is, a philosopher's assumption about people, rather than just an assumption that people must make. As such it seems to be something of a departure in the context of Davidson's overall approach. I take it, however, that the two levels come together in the rejection of a scheme-content dualism.

Now we might wonder, given sceptical worries, whether the creature responds to surface irritations, sense data, or clear and distinct ideas, rather than tables – we would thus not presuppose the world or other people. But then there can be no answer to the question of what the creature is responding to, since no answer makes any difference. In that case there can be no answer to the question of what the

9 See 'Rational Animals' (1982b), 'The Conditions of Thought' (1988, pp. 196-200), 'The Second Person' (1992, pp. 262-265), and 'The Social Aspect of Language' (1994, p. 15). The account which follows is taken mainly from 'The Conditions of Thought' and 'The Social Aspect of Language'.

creature means, wants, believes or intends – thus no sense to the idea that the creature has thoughts.

Yet while we, from the teacher's perspective, cannot and do not group surface irritations or sense data, we can and do group both the creature's responses and objects in the world.

We now have the first stage of triangulation. The creature finds, say, tables relevantly similar; we do also; and we find the creature's responses to these tables similar. Thus: creature to table, us to table, us to creature. This shows that the stimulus is objective, or as Davidson puts it, 'has an objective location in common space' (1988, p. 198). This objectivity in turn allows us to make sense of the creature's having thoughts, because there can be an answer to the question about what it has a concept of. It has a concept of objects in inter-subjective space.

As yet however, there is nothing to let the creature know that its reactions are relevantly similar. Whatever the stimuli, similar reaction will indicate that the creature found something similar in the situations. But the creature cannot tell the difference between the situation being the same and seeming the same. This discrimination is only possible if teacher and creature can correlate each other's response with the occurrence of a shared stimulus. With the correlation established, there is a ground for distinguishing the cases in which it fails.

That is to say, both the creature and the teacher must take advantage of, and recognise that the other takes advantage of, the three-way relation. This requires, first, that the similarity responses of both be much alike – that they, so to speak, slice and bunch the world in similar ways. Thus, not only must there be an other with whom I share this space, but an other much like myself.

It also requires that both parties communicate, that they understand what each other has in mind, in order that each know of the other that they are so related.

A grasp of the concept of truth, of the distinction between thinking something is so and its being so, depends on the norm that can be provided only by interpersonal communication; and of course interpersonal communication, and, indeed, the possession of any propositional attitude, depends on a grasp of the concept of objective truth. (Davidson 1994, p. 15)

By invoking the notion of triangulation, Davidson has been able to grant that an adequate account of meaning must provide a test of what it is to go on in the same

way, and he agrees that this demands reference to social interaction (1994, p. 15). But it enables him to deny that this means invoking social norms or shared regularities. As he has put it,

there must be an interacting group for meaning – even propositional thought, I would say – to emerge. Interaction of the needed sort demands that each individual perceives others as reacting to the shared environment much as he does; only then can teaching take place and appropriate expectations be aroused. It follows that meaning something requires that by and large one follows a practice of one's own, a practice that can be understood by others. But there is no fundamental reason why practices must be shared. (Davidson 1994, p. 16)

That is, Davidson claims that all that is required is that others recognise and understand our reactions as familiar, and therefore that they understand our practices, or regularities. With this understanding, they can surmise our communicative intentions, and they and we have the possibility of successful communication.¹⁰ They do not have to share our practices, in order to understand us, merely our reactions.

7. Triangulation and Communication

Given this position, we can see that Davidson is an individualist only in an interesting sense. And he turns out to be perhaps less an individualist than many who would champion the cause of a language. For he is not running a privacy theory, and he argues that one's arising in the world is an inescapably social fact. Davidson's position involves rejecting the dichotomy between individualism and anti-individualism, as I characterised it in Section 2, by insisting both that a communicative subject is fundamentally social *and* that such a subject is not thereby the knower of a 'language'.

For Davidson, one's arising as a thinking being presupposes one's sharing a world with mutually aware similar others. This mutual recognition of commonality of response to shared objects is supposed to offer a basis for communication without

10 See Davidson 1986, pp. 434-6, and 1994, pp. 11-12 on literal meaning, first meaning, and communication. See Talmage (1994) for criticism of this distinction – but I think that Talmage's objection is question-begging, to the extent that it relies on (but does not argue for) the assumption that there are meaningful uses of language which are in no way derivative on communicative use. See 'The Second Person' (1992) for an example of Davidson's argument for the primacy of communication.

the mediation of sets of rules or conventions. I can come to grasp what you are about simply because I interact with you in our world, which – because I must as a transcendental necessity presume – I know you find much as I find it.¹¹

I think, however, that the triangulation thesis does not, as it stands, achieve what Davidson hopes. The invocation of the triangulation thesis does not provide the required non-linguistic basis for communication. The thesis seems forced to presume that communicative subjects appear on the scene fully fledged, for it offers no room for an account of their constitution as communicative subjects.

Davidson needed to show, without citing shared practices, how a creature could be said to go on more or less as before. He thinks he does this if he points to objectivity as a prerequisite for thought. However, this objectivity depends on the existence of communicative interaction – since it is through communication that each subject confirms and affirms its place on the triangle of self, other and world.

Now I have no objection to circularity here. That objectivity, thought and communication are interdependent is both interesting and plausible. But it seems that we needed an account that clearly showed how communication is possible without the language to which Davidson objects, otherwise the solution to going on more or less as before is merely grist to the Wittgenstein–Dummett mill.

The effective solution, I think, is to accept shared practices as a necessary condition of fully fledged communication, accept also that a communicative subject is not an all or nothing thing, and then show, by invoking the notion of background skills, how we can share practices without sharing rules.

We have it from Davidson that subjects begin with an inherited propensity to slice and bunch the world much as their fellows do. This is a prerequisite for the possibility of communality and communication. Let us grant that.¹² Yet I doubt that

11 So the question, 'how do you know there's a world out there?' is only a question for a solipsist, an empiricist or a subjective idealist, beginning with an in-here and a questionable out-there. Furthermore, the question misses the point that we're talking about this world that we share, and that talk of a world 'out there' is misdirected. And if you ask, how do you know that there's a world, the answer is, how could you think otherwise? The question of whether we all really slice and bunch similarly, is answered similarly.

12 I think that we must take it that the claim is ontological, and that Davidson allows that these propensities appear in developmental stages. My own view is that such development, while

this gives us Davidson's communicative subject. For communicative subjects deal in a world of objects taken up within and defined by interactive practices. These practices take the objects of Davidson's common world and apply to them a function among other functions of other objects. These used objects are the stuff of communicative interaction, and the capacity to deal with objects at this level is as necessary as the underlying condition to which Davidson points.

At the point at which Davidson leaves his subject it shares with its teacher a response to tables, but to tables as mere stuff of the common world. The teacher, on the other hand, points to the table as an item already taken up in more or less complex patterns of practice and usage. Adapting a convenient distinction, we could say that Davidson's subject takes up the table as occurrent, whereas a communicative subject needs to be able to take up the table as available.¹³

Considered as occurrent, tables are objects of a certain range of relevantly similar shapes. Considered as available, tables are objects that play a range of roles in a number of practices. If someone is to be able to refer to tables and use the concept effectively in communication they must grasp the concept of a table as available. And to do this is to have a grasp of a shared practice.

Were we to conceive of this sharing of practices as the shared grasp of sets of rules for the use of concepts, we would run foul of Davidson's argument against language. He would ask how the knowledge of a set of rules would explain our ability to deal with deviations, to extend concepts and follow extensions of concepts, and so on. He might also ask how a subject without the concept of objectivity dependent on communication could learn rules supposedly necessary for communication. But we are not limited to either sharing practices through the sharing of rules or not sharing them at all.

dependent on inherited characteristics, may not be guaranteed, but also depends on nurture. I will not develop the point here.

13 I adopt this distinction, but not the analysis, from Heidegger via Dreyfus. See Dreyfus 1985, & 1991. For the basic distinction in Heidegger, see *Being and Time*, Part One, Division One, Ch. III, §15. If I understand him correctly, Heidegger sees the capacity to grasp things as occurrent (or 'present-at-hand') as arising from a peculiarly human capacity to abstract from a primary grasp of things as available (or 'ready-to-hand'). I, on the other hand, make the naturalistic move of taking the occurrent as primary (as the outcome of triangulation).

Davidson would be right to claim that this grasp is not something that could operate as a set of rules (a theory of tables, say). Considered as available, what counts as a table (what might be used as a table), and the uses to which a table might be put, varies across contexts and situations, so that no general rules will be adequate. But this shows that in order to work with the concept we require a skilful and flexible grasp of a shared practice, not knowledge of shared rules. And from the current perspective we require an account of the procedures by which such skills are induced.

We might explain this as a process by which a proto-subject with certain physiological propensities and potentialities (including Davidson's similarity responses) is recognised and engaged by others with their already existing practices. Through correction, direction and modelling, this creature comes to embody a background of habits and skills, and develop intentionality towards a world that is, we learn to presuppose, shared with similar others.¹⁴ In all this we would emphasise a dialectical development, and avoid trying to construct communicative subjects with a stroke.

At this point Davidson might object that he was not offering a developmental story, but merely making an ontological claim about self, other and world. I grant that. But his position needs to leave space for a plausible account of how the subject is constituted. This is because while the original role of the triangulation thesis was to make a point about objectivity and thought, when it is invoked in support of the rejection of a language it is asked to supply a basis for communication. But if communication itself is an essential element in the operation of the triangle, then the thesis alone cannot do the job asked of it.

My claim, then, is that we need to be able to conceive of a communicative subject which is not essentially a bearer of linguistic rules, but which is able to engage with others in a shared available world, that is, in a world taken up in and by more or less complex practices. I think that we can conceive of such a subject if we think in terms of an embodied background of the intentional which, through interaction in a world

14 I think that we have reason to doubt that we automatically grasp the intentionality of others. We should, I think, see one's own intentionality and the grasp of others as intentional subjects as part of the same developmental process. See my 'Lying, Liars, and Language' (1992) for a discussion of this development in terms of the development of the capacity to lie.

of others, is nurtured or trained, and so comes to give to the subject the skills and grasp necessary for communicative competence.

8. The Claims of Naturalism

I want to clarify my attitude to Davidson. I think that his rejection of language offers a significant support and addition to, the sort of non-reductive naturalism I outlined at the beginning. If the claim is successful, it forces us to avoid invoking, when confronted by mutuality and understanding, an abstract overarching structure which is ungrounded, ontologically dubious and conceptually hazy. Without that option, we find it more difficult to avoid the complexity of embodied social beings. And it is a useful addition to that approach because many friends of the body remain lovers of the forms.

I have argued, however, that Davidson's analysis of communication needs itself to be supplemented with the approach it supports. That is, the analysis needs to allow for an account of how certain embodied creatures are constituted as communicative subjects in and by the inter-subjective, available world in which they find themselves.

The point I want to draw attention to here is that by invoking the notion of nurtured skill in an account of this constitution, we find the triangulation thesis and the theory of passing theories fitting together – and we do not re-invoke the notion of a language to which Davidson objected. We invoke instead the idea of a subject taking up and being taken up in an inter-subjective world and taken up by that world's shared practices of usage, discernment and appropriateness. A subject thus inculcated will have developed skills, not a knowledge of rules. Or rather, such a subject may by the way learn specifiable rules and conventions, but will as a prerequisite have developed a set of non-intentional, non-linguistic skills as a necessary background to the use of rules and conventions.

This merges with the theory of passing theories because a subject thus trained will be a subject with skills appropriate to the type of theory-formation necessary for the account of passing theories.

Davidson says that we understand each other in communication, not by feeding linguistic input through the rules of a language, but by managing to form equivalent

passing theories, geared to the occasion of utterance. Now left at this, the process of theory formation seems to require the very mechanism (application of the abstract to the particular) that is supposed to be ruled out at the base of communication, and it would leave a gap for the idea of language to return.

Unsurprisingly, this is not Davidson's intention; and he sketches an alternative view. At the end of 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' he says,

we have abandoned not only the ordinary notion of a language, but we have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally. For there are no rules for arriving at passing theories, no rules in any strict sense, as opposed to rough maxims and methodological generalities. A passing theory really is like a theory at least in this, that it is derived by wit, luck, and wisdom from a private vocabulary and grammar, knowledge of the ways people get their point across, and rules of thumb for figuring out what deviations from the dictionary are most likely. There is no more chance of regularizing, or teaching, this process than there is of regularizing or teaching the process of creating new theories to cope with new data in any field (Davidson 1986, pp. 445-6)

In 'The Social Aspect of Language', he comments that

mutual understanding is achieved through the exercise of imagination, appeal to general knowledge of the world, and awareness of human interests and attitudes. (Davidson 1994, p. 2)

Such comments are only suggestive of an account of passing theory formation, and no doubt we are owed more. If we cannot say anything much about such theory formation we return to a problem noted in the Introduction – that this approach may seek to replace analysis with gestures – or we imply by omission a rule-based account.¹⁵

What more can be said would, I think, come out of a phenomenology of communicative skill and an account which explicates the processes of training and nurture, referred to in the last section, through which subjects are brought to competence.

15 In the past, commentators have been irked by Davidson's application of 'interpretation' in the theory of communication. His use of 'theory' in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' has caused related concern for Dummett (1986, pp. 264-5) and Hacking (1986). Davidson denies that his use of interpretation implies that we mostly make an explicit translation, or that his use of theory implies that we know a theory ('the point is not that speaker or hearer has a theory, but that they speak and understand in accord with a theory' [1994, p. 5; see 1994, pp. 3-5; 1986, p. 438]). Nevertheless, the problem with talking of what communicative subjects do in 'as if' terms is

Thus, the account that fleshes out the triangulation thesis would reflect the account of a passing theory-maker, and the story of how someone becomes a communicative subject would amount to the story of how one becomes a passing theory-maker. By bringing them together we remind ourselves that getting around in the world is more than just the skill of an individual, but is in crucial respects a mutual skill, that arises and is developed through a mutuality of practices.

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that we slide too easily into an intellectualist (or cognitivist, or theoretical holist) approach to the background, treating it 'as if' it *operates* propositionally.

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