

Overhearing uninterpreted sounds: challenges in Davidsonian interpretation

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There seems to me to be no reason, in theory at least, why speakers who understand each other ever need to speak, or to have spoken, as anyone else speaks, much less as each other speaks.

Davidson 1994a, 115

Donald Davidson's late philosophy of language is most synonymous with his notorious denial that linguistic communication requires semantic conventions. In a series of papers spanning over a decade and culminating for many in the 1986 article 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', Davidson has argued powerfully, though not uncontroversially, that convention has no place in a theory of communication. His chief target, as he clarifies in the paper inaugurating this string of arguments, is not the truism that speech is bound by conventions, but their role in explaining it (see Davidson 1982, 265).

This paper develops a counterexample to Davidson's elaborate model of conventionless communication, first articulated in his (1986) and defended in his (1994a). The first part contains an analysis of the model and its assumptions. Then, in a second part, I present a case focused around the concept of overhearing. It subtracts active interaction from the model and reveals that, under these novel conditions, communication makes further demands on it, namely conformity of the prior interpretive theory of all but one of the interacting members. The analysis of the case concludes, in the third part, that Davidson's account is unsuited for explaining communication where [313] active interpretive interactions are excluded. And hence, for describing the full range of our linguistic competence.

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Davidson's 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' is ostensibly concerned with explaining our apparent ease in understanding non-conventional or 'mistaken' uses of language. An interpreter hearing Mrs Malaprop has little trouble understanding she means 'a nice arrangement of epithets' by her utterance, and is hence able to understand her as she intended, despite her giving 'derangement' and 'epitaph' a non-standard meaning. But Davidson's further aim is philosophically much more ambitious: to explain *all* communication without appeal to standard, conventional or 'correct' meanings. In other words – as some have correctly summarised his position – to show that communication would not be impeded if people used *nothing but* malaprops (see Ramberg 1989, 101).

Crucial to the Davidsonian project is therefore a redefinition of the notion of 'meaning'. Specifically, it is the idea that 'the sole source of linguistic meaning is the intentional production of tokens of sentences' (Davidson 1993, 170), that speakers 'create the language, [and that] meaning is what we can abstract from accomplished verbal exchanges' (Davidson 1994b, 258; see 1994a, 120, 122; Davidson and Glüer 1995, 81). Meaningfulness is thus a predicate ascribed to utterances on particular occasions only if they have been understood by their interpreter as intended, i.e. with their intended meaning. This concept of meaning involves a reversal of the usual order of explanation. Here, the success of communication is not explained by appeal to meanings, but the other way around: meaning is derived from successful communication. Interpretation is not the business of gaining access to a stable meaning given in advance, but if the intentional utterance of speech by a speaker did not have a meaning in principle accessible to an interpreter, then nothing would (see Davidson 1993, 170). [314]

An additional assumption essential to Davidson's account is that whatever facts are relevant to the meaning of an utterance, they are *public*, observable to an interpreter.

There can be no more to meaning than an adequately equipped interpreter can learn and observe; the interpreter's point of view is therefore the revealing one to bring to the subject. (Davidson 1990, 62)

The conjunct of this and the previous principle yields the obvious: an uninterpretable utterance cannot be meaningful. In other words, verbal behaviour which cannot in principle be interpreted is not linguistic.

We are now better equipped to analyse the model presented in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs'. A constant feature of Davidson's philosophy is the idea that what models an

interpreter's linguistic competence, what describes what she must know if she is to understand a speaker, is a theory. What the theory does is assign meanings to sound patterns. Davidson does not deviate from this principle here, but recasts it slightly in terms of a *prior* and a *passing* theory.

According to this model, in their communicative encounter speaker and hearer have both prior and passing theories for each other. The prior theory for a hearer is the theory she has before her interaction with the speaker and describes the way she is prepared to interpret an utterance by him. For the speaker, the prior theory describes his expectation of the hearer's prior theory, the theory he believes the hearer has (see Davidson 1986, 100-101). This is crucially important in avoiding a Humpty Dumpty-style theory of meaning, where the speaker can mean anything he pleases by whichever words he chooses. Instead, here the speaker's prior theory keeps him in check, for he cannot intend to mean what he believes will be impossible for an interpreter to understand, but must have reason to suppose the interpreter will be able to understand him as he intends to be understood (see Davidson 1982, 277; 1989, 147; 1994a, 121).

But to say that the speaker intends to be understood in a certain way amounts to saying he wishes to be understood according to a theory, and this [315] would be his *passing theory*. Hence, the passing theory corresponds for him to the theory according to which he intends to be understood by the hearer. The hearer's passing theory will then be the one he actually uses in interpreting the speaker. And she will understand the speaker only if she understands him as he intended to be understood. Therefore, understanding is an event described by the coincidence of the speaker and the hearer's passing theories: 'only if these coincide is understanding complete' (Davidson 1986, 102).

The reason for the distinction between prior and passing theories can now be fully stated. Davidson intends to show that the only theory relevant to interpretation is the passing theory. No matter what an interpreter brings to a verbal encounter, no matter her knowledge of the speaker's idiolect and idiosyncrasies, she will understand him if (and only if) their passing theories coincide. Nothing else is relevant to how a speaker is understood. As such, prior theories need not be shared by speaker and interpreter, nor is the prior theory in general unique: an interpreter's prior theory varies with the speaker, and vice versa (see Davidson 1986, 103, 104). This is a more precise, though perhaps unwieldy, way of stating a familiar Davidsonian refrain, that communication is guaranteed even in the absence of shared language: 'each speaker may speak his different language, and this will not hinder communication as long as each hearer understands the one who speaks' (Davidson 1982, 276; see also 1986, 96; 1994a,

115). Davidson concludes that our competence in understanding a speaker's semantic intentions does not call for an explanation in terms of conventions, prior rules, or meanings shared in advance.

Let us return to Mrs Malaprop and examine the model in more detail. She utters the words 'a nice derangement of epitaphs' and her interpreter correctly understands her to mean 'a nice arrangement of epithets'. *Ex hypothesi*, his prior theory did not include this as a possible interpretation of her utterance. Instead, by an exercise of the imagination, intuition, and perhaps luck, he was able to deduce how she intended to be understood and so arrived at the coincidence of their passing theories. The interpreter's prior theory was, of course, essential in achieving this feat, but nevertheless the passing theory was not, and could not have been, something he knew in advance. Nor is it [316] likely to be of much use to him in the future, except perhaps in conversations with Mrs Malaprop, though this may not be true either. A passing theory is nothing more than a theory for interpreting a particular utterance on a particular occasion. And nothing stops Mrs Malaprop from revising her vocabulary. As such, the passing theory is 'geared to the occasion', it includes the anomalous meaning of these words on this occasion and every other correctly interpreted word, expression or sentence (see Davidson 1986, 101-102).

Now, we might think of the interpreter's task as one of *translating* the speaker's words into his own and of the passing theory as a sort of dictionary. Davidson seems to suggest this when describing it as a 'list of proper names and gerrymandered vocabulary' (1986, 102) or as coming about when slots in the prior theory are filled in in novel ways (1998, 325). And some have indeed taken Davidson to mean something like this (see Dummett 1986). But in fact, for Davidson understanding does not involve any sort of translation (see Davidson 1994a, 112-113). It is true that, if pressed, the interpreter will state that 'a nice derangement of epitaphs' as uttered by Mrs Malaprop meant 'a nice arrangement of epithets' (in his idiolect). And this ability is quite essential to communication, for 'two speakers couldn't understand each other if each couldn't (pretty well) say in his way what the other says in his' (Davidson 1994a, 115/6). Nevertheless, understanding does not consist in the hearer translating 'derangement' into 'arrangement', in other words in his ability to map utterances of one idiolect onto utterances of another.

On the other hand, the fact that a hearer will only understand the speaker if he possesses this mapping ability does suggest that these moments are not easy to separate. After all, an interpreter could not take Mrs Malaprop to mean epithet by 'epitaph' if he did not already have the concept *epithet*, and hence a word or expression for it. This is not to say that as

interpreters we never acquire new concepts, but the model Davidson sketches here is meant to explain the skill of already competent interpreters, who already have a ‘mature set of concepts’ (1986, 100). And so, while understanding a speaker’s words does not demand translation into our own, the ability to state that ‘epitaph’ meant the same as ‘epithet’ does require the ability to grasp them as synonymous. [317]

We are now better able to state the necessary conditions for understanding conceived as the coincidence of passing theories. A speaker is understood by a hearer iff

- 1) The hearer understands the speaker as he intended to be understood.
- 2) She is able to map utterances¹ of the speaker’s idiolect onto utterances of her own.

This mapping, of course, does not have to be unique: an obvious part of linguistic competence is the ability to redescribe what was said in different ways. But a minimum one-to-one correlation is required.

Now that the mechanics of the model are clear, I will move to the second part of my paper, the presentation and analysis of my counterexample.

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Suppose Jack and Jill are having a conversation out on a walk. After asking Jill about her absence from John’s party the other night and her explaining she was not invited to it, Jack exclaims: ‘That’s very auspicious! I took it for granted you’d be invited!’. To this, Jill queries: ‘What do you mean?’ ‘Oh, just that I thought you were really good friends and that for sure he was going to invite you.’ Jill replies: ‘Yes, when I heard last week there was going to be a party, I thought it was pretty ambitious that he hadn’t invited me.’ Unbeknownst to them, within earshot, Jane is eavesdropping on their conversation. I will argue in the following that Davidson’s model cannot explain Jane’s ability to understand what she’s hearing.

But the obvious may first be stated: if this exchange deviates only slightly from ‘standard’ English, the reasons are purely expositional. Davidson’s model must account for cases in which no word is shared. It is a cornerstone of Davidson’s theorizing about communication and understanding that the conformity we find empirically, that we are ‘linguistic facsimiles’ of our parents and friends, is no more than a practical crutch in the service of ease of communication, but certainly not necessary for it (see 1982, 276-279; 1986, 96; [318] 1994a, 118). This must be kept in mind moving forward since the overhearer’s

¹ ‘Utterance’ here refers not only to sentences, but also to phrases, expressions or individual words.

comprehension of the dialogue must be explained using nothing more than what the model deems essential.

As we saw above, what the model must explain is Jane's arriving at a passing theory which coincides with the speakers'. The plural here is explained by Jack and Jill taking on the roles of both speaker and hearer, which requires a double coincidence of passing theories: (1) the theory Jack intends Jill to use in interpreting him, which is the same one she does use if she understands him and (2) the theory Jill intends Jack to use in interpreting her which coincides with the one he does use if he understands her. To the specified end, with a slight modification of the requirements above, we derive the necessary and sufficient conditions for an overhearer's understanding. Jane will understand an overheard linguistic exchange iff

- (1) She understands the speaker as the speaker intended to be understood.
- (2) She is able to map utterances of the speaker's idiolect onto her own.
- (3) She understands the hearer as the hearer intended to be understood.
- (4) She is able to map utterances of the hearer's idiolect onto her own.

Additionally, from 2) and 4), we obtain the further:

- (5) She is able to map utterances of the speaker's idiolect onto utterances of the hearer's.

This final condition is not as mysterious as it might first appear. If Jane knows, for instance, that Jack's 'auspicious' means suspicious (condition (1)) and Jill's 'ambitious' means suspicious (condition (3)), then she also knows that Jack's 'auspicious' and Jill's 'ambitious' mean the same (condition (5)), namely what she herself would intend to mean by uttering her word 'suspicious' (conditions (2) and (4)). What we now have to reckon with, however, is the difficult question of the possibility of Jane's meeting these conditions from her position as overhearer. It is to this question that I now turn. [319]

I see two problems with Jane's meeting the above conditions. First, we saw that a speaker's passing theory depends on his prior theory insofar as he can only intend to mean by his utterances what he has adequate reason to believe his hearer will understand as intended. Jack, we will grant, speaks in a way he thinks Jill will be able to grasp. But in order to fulfil conditions (1) and (3), it seems necessary to assume that Jack and Jill have adequate reason to believe Jane is able to understand their speech as intended. In other words, they must possess

a prior theory for Jane. However, a speaker's prior theory is only tailored to what they believe to be their audience. In fact, it was defined as the way the speaker *believes* his interpreter is prepared in advance to interpret his speech. 'There is no such thing', Davidson insists, 'as how we expect, in the abstract, to be interpreted' (1986, 103). And a speaker's stock of prior theories is almost as diverse as his interpreters and can in principle be unique to each. Thus, Davidson's model allows that, in talking to Jane, Jack would not have spoken as he does to Jill. But Jane's understanding necessitates either this, or for Jack to have tailored his speech to both.

We find these complications mirrored on the overhearer's side. For, her arriving at the passing theory depends analogously on her own prior theories: it is on the basis of these – through imagination, luck, wit, and general knowledge of the world – that she builds her understanding of each of the speakers (see Davidson 1982, 279; 1986, 107; 1994a, 110). As such, Jane can only understand Jack and Jill if she is already calibrated to what they expect their interpreter (Jill for Jack and Jack for Jill) can understand, in other words to their prior theories for each other. But such sharing of prior theories is exactly what the model strives to show not to be necessary for communication (Davidson 1986, 103). Consequently, Jane's comprehension is impeded by two factors: the speakers' lack of an appropriate prior theory for her and her lack of an appropriate prior theory for each of the speakers. This is the first challenge.

But we may not so easily grant this. We might suppose prior interaction between Jane and each of the interlocutors could account for her understanding. However, if assuming prior interaction were found necessary and sufficient for explaining comprehension in the overhearing case, then this would entail the necessity of speakers' remaining true to their prior usage of [320] language. But for Davidson it is not a requirement for communication that speakers preserve their speech habits from speaker to speaker or even from interaction to interaction. Moreover, if we find we cannot do without that assumption, then the passing theory becomes superfluous. Once understanding is achieved and passing theories coincide, after a first conversation between two speakers, then they have, so to speak, 'learned each other's language' and hence, since neither will deviate from their own, will continue to communicate without further need for mutual accommodation.

There are certainly some difficulties here, and perhaps Davidson might extricate himself from some of them. But I wish now to set this first challenge aside in order to focus on what I consider to be the main one. This task requires us to first examine what exactly occurs in the interaction between speaker and hearer that guarantees the coincidence of their passing

theories. Consider this suggestion Davidson provides in a later paper of what occurs in face-to-face conversations that allows for communication in the absence of shared meanings.

As they try to understand each other, people in open discussion use the same words, but whether they mean the same things by those words, or mean anything clear at all, only the process of question and answer can reveal. (Davidson 1994b, 255)

At first glance, the overhearing case isolates and extracts precisely this variable of active interaction. Here, the active interpreter is reduced to one, the overhearer, who must interpret an interaction in which the same word uttered by different people does not have a single meaning and in which different words do. Such a *dialogue des sourds* falls silent to any sort of questioning by the overhearer. The reason Jill's probing of Jack will not be revealing for Jane is obvious. Having different prior theories for Jack, they will have different expectations of how he will speak, and the utterances that would thwart them would not match. They would react differently to different words, would be surprised by distinct ones, and would inquire, if given the chance, about the [321] meanings of some rather than others.² Jane will recognize Jill's surprise, but will uncover nothing of what surprised her or why. Hence, we might think that Jane cannot understand the speakers because she cannot interact with them. She cannot properly calibrate to their words, as only the active process of question and answer can show whether they assign the same meanings to them or not.

However, this conclusion again seems hasty. For we have already encountered the sort of considerations which ought to give Davidson reason to resist it: the principle of the public nature of semantic facts. It is in the essence of meaning, Davidson urges, that the only facts relevant to the meaning of an utterance are publicly available and such that a competent interpreter can discover and learn them.

There can be nothing in the literal meaning of our words that cannot in principle be made out by a sympathetic and persistent interpreter. (Davidson 1992, 245)

These facts will make it manifest to speakers which words and expressions they use in concert, which they do not, and which dissimilar words they use with alike meaning. We should therefore give Jane access to the totality of such facts, and allow the overhearer to be in exactly

² Here I ignore the first difficulty, that of Jack's different prior theories for Jill and Jane. But the difficulties obviously cumulate.

the same position as the hearer, the stance of a ‘sympathetic and persistent interpreter’. And yet, it remains unclear of how much help this will ultimately be.

Let us prolong Jack and Jill’s interaction enough to allow Jane to recognize which words the speakers employ uniformly and where they diverge from each other. We have now allowed Jane to grasp that ‘auspicious’ and ‘ambitious’ have the same meaning. And similarly for any other deviation. And this was in fact not an arbitrary concession. Indeed, if Jane was not in principle able to arrive at this knowledge, neither would Jack or Jill, since the facts supporting it are public. But this recognized synonymy between ‘auspicious’ and ‘ambitious’ is consistent with a good many inconsistent interpretations. The point to recognize therefore is that no amount of observation of the salient facts, [322] whatever they may be, will prompt Jane to understand that ‘auspicious’ and ‘ambitious’ mean the same *and* that they mean suspicious.

The reason Jill can adjust to Jack’s vocabulary is not only her prior theory for Jack, though her adjusting, as mentioned, depends on it. Rather, the mechanism works here because Jill must only adjust to a single idiolect. Jill, trivially, knows what she means to say when uttering ‘ambitious’ and can detect, based on evidence from Jack’s behaviour and her prior theory for him, along with further knowledge of what can arouse suspicions, what can seem suspicious and so on, if Jack’s use of ‘auspicious’ corresponds to her use of ‘ambitious’. Jane, on the other hand, has access only to the outward signs of communication, the sounds, nods, tones of voice, raised eyebrows and so on, from which, if given enough time, she can in principle deduce the uninterpreted correlations between their idiolects, but nothing more.

It appears, therefore, upon closer inspection, that the overhearing case eliminates, along with the role played by active interpretation, an additional variable, which remained so far hidden. Consider the following characterization of the positions of speaker, hearer, and overhearer before the interaction in our example:

- (1) Jack does not know what Jill intends to mean by ‘ambitious’.
- (2) Jill does not know what Jack intends to mean by ‘auspicious’.
- (3) Jane does not know what either Jack or Jill intend to mean by these words.

However, crucially:

- (4) Jack knows that he intends to mean suspicious by ‘auspicious’.
- (5) Jill knows that she intends to mean suspicious by ‘ambitious’.

Out on their walk, Jack and Jill's interaction reveals to all parties that they mean the same by their respective use of 'auspicious' and 'ambitious'. So that, finally:

(6) Jack, Jill and Jane know that Jack intends by using 'auspicious' to mean what Jane intends to mean by uttering 'ambitious'. [323]

Now, in virtue of (4) and (6), Jack will know that Jill intends to mean suspicious by 'ambitious' and Jill, in virtue of (5) and (6), will know that Jack intends to mean suspicious by 'auspicious'. Jane, on the other hand, in virtue of (3) and (6), is not able to know what Jack and Jill mean. We must conclude, therefore, that Jane, under the specified necessary and sufficient conditions for communication, cannot understand the overheard conversation. The interaction between Jack and Jill falls, so to speak, on deaf ears: the passing theory is not reached, and so their utterances must remain bare, uninterpreted sounds.³

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The failure of the Davidsonian model to explain communication in the absence of active interaction has brought to the surface the significance of this crucial tacit assumption: knowledge, by each of the speakers, of their semantic intentions, of the meanings they intend to convey with their words. The observation that speakers generally know what they mean when they speak is of course trivial, and for that it escapes notice. It amounts perhaps to little more than the claim that linguistic communication requires at least two participants both of which speak a language. But this triviality assumes quite different proportions once we remove the possibility of active interaction from the Davidsonian picture.

For, in order to explain how Jane can understand the overheard conversation, we must assume her to have prior knowledge of the meanings of either Jack or Jill's words. Principles (4) and (5) act therefore as crucial stabilizers in the model, as Archimedean points which lend essential support to ascriptions of semantic content in the case of non-standard, non-conventional or mistaken uses of 'the same' language. Without this support, Jane's efforts are futile. For her task is analogous to simultaneously interpreting two unknown languages into her own. Contrary to one of the active speakers, Jane's lack of success is due to her inability to

³ Note that there is an additional problem here: Jane's discovery of a regularity in the verbal behaviour of the speakers would seem highly suggestive of speech. But her inability to comprehend it coheres poorly with the principle that uninterpretable verbal behaviour cannot be speech.

hold one of their languages constant. After all, [324] the tracing of synonymy relations between two linguistic items is only illuminating if it is between items one of which is known. And then, of course, it can throw immense light on the unknown. Think only of the role the Rosetta Stone played in deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs. Or Davidson's own example of Mrs Malaprop.

But absent the condition of active interaction, communication can only succeed in virtue of a shared language, a requirement Davidson has built this model to refute. Despite this, the conclusion to draw from this counterexample is not that *all* communication requires shared language. To insist that it must would be to sell our capacities short. I believe Davidson's assumptions about linguistic invention and the insufficiency of conventional explanations of linguistic competence are mostly on the right track. And his model is quite efficient in explaining communication where a shared language is either absent or insufficient for it. My claim is rather that the model is not always adequate and when it is not, some shared linguistic background remains necessary. Our ability to grasp a speaker's semantic intentions, therefore, may not be sufficiently explained by appeal to rules or semantic conventions, but it does seem to require either active interaction *or* knowledge of the semantic intentions of all but one of the parties involved. A prior shared theory for interpretation thus emerges as a necessary but – and this must be stressed – insufficient condition for communication.

Our ability to understand speakers like Mrs Malaprop lures our focus to the exceptional and extraordinary in our use of language. And for good reason. But the force with which these cases attract carries the danger of loosening our grip on the ordinary and its correlative need of explanation. However, does the situation described in this paper, with all its implausibility, not fall prey to the same objection? For the overhearing case might also appear to have little connection to what it purports to clarify, communication in its more ordinary sense.

This is not quite so. In fact, every instance of communication where active interaction is precluded is analogous in the relevant sense to the overhearing case. It goes without saying that these make up the majority. From reading private correspondence, indeed any writing not meant for us to read, to [325] understanding past texts the intended audience of which left little trace beyond those made by a chisel and hammer, most of the time we share Jane's predicament. And it is far from clear that so much of our communicating should depend on accidental factors such as our tendency to be linguistic facsimiles of one another, though communication should not require it. On these grounds, I conclude that we have very good reason to demand that the model we chose to chart our linguistic competence not be vulnerable to the condition of active interaction between speakers. [326]

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