

# **DAVIDSON ON METAPHOR AND CONCEPTUAL SCHEMES**

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The crest of the University of Stellenbosch, featuring a central shield with a figure holding a staff, surrounded by decorative elements and a banner at the bottom.

**THESIS PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF  
STELLENBOSCH**

**SUPERVISOR: PROF W.L. VAN DER MERWE**

**DATE OF SUBMISSION: DECEMBER 2000**

## **DECLARATION**

**I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted at any university for a degree.**

**Signature:**

**Date :**

## FOREWORD

What follows is a compilation of two papers written to satisfy the thesis-requirements of the M.A.-degree in Philosophy by coursework at the University of Stellenbosch. Both of these papers deal with aspects of the philosophy of Donald Davidson and both were written with the aim of providing an exploration of Davidson's views on some controversial subject. What these papers have in common is an origin in a felt need to investigate the motivation for Davidson's abrupt dismissal in the 1970's and 80's of a number of notions fairly widely subscribed to in the philosophies of language and mind. As such, the first paper deals with Davidson's surprising declaration (in his essay 'What Metaphors Mean') that metaphors have no meaning; while the second deals with his dismissal of the idea of a conceptual scheme (in the essay 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme').

While there does exist a connection between metaphors and conceptual schemes and a clear connection between the reasons Davidson has for dismissing the two notions (the dismissal of both notions was to a large extent motivated by reductionist tendencies in Davidson's work and by his opposition to the idea that language can act as an ideal and independent force, structuring cognition), these connections have not consciously been worked out. If the two papers in this compilation are related, this is rather due to a certain interest in Davidson's style of philosophy than to an inherent necessity to present the issues addressed in them together. Reading these two papers together, however, may provide one with an insight into what it is that drives Davidson's project, what his main concerns are and how it is that he typically addresses philosophical problems – in a fashion that is typically uncompromising and

unexpected and (in places) somewhat cynical.

### **Paper 1: ‘Why Metaphors Have no Meaning’**

The first paper in this compilation has been accepted for publication in the South African Journal of Philosophy in the second half of 2001. In it, I investigate the view Davidson holds regarding metaphor and try to summarise what could have been the motivation behind his declaration that metaphor has no meaning – a view that has otherwise met with little support. I attempt to explain Davidson’s surprise-move regarding metaphor by relating it to elements in the rest of his work in semantics, such as the principle of compositionality, radical interpretation and the principle of charity. I conclude that Davidson’s views on metaphor are not only consistent with his semantic theory generally, but that his semantics also depends on his taking the position he does regarding metaphor. Eventually, the debate regarding Davidson’s position on metaphor should be conducted on the level of his views on the nature of semantics, the relationship between language and the world and the possibility of there existing something like conceptual schemes.

### **Paper 2: ‘The Bare Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’**

The second paper was completed in December 2000 and deals with Davidson’s paper ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’ (‘OVICS’), which has become famous for the refutation accomplished in it of conceptual relativism. Via an argument that, essentially, all languages are intertranslatable, Davidson rejects the notion that different conceptual schemes can inhere in the supposed ‘un-translatable’ languages

said to exist by, for instance, Whorf and Kuhn. Critics of Davidson's position have mainly focussed on practical issues, with many holding that his arguments in 'OVICS' ignore the realities of the real intercultural communication situation. In this second paper, I address criticisms of this sort. Davidson's arguments are reconstructed, with attention being paid to their dependence on the idea of practical application in the real intercultural communication situation. With the aid of practical examples, the implications of elements of Davidson's philosophy of interpretation for intercultural communication are evaluated. Finally, radical interpretation is presented as a better model for intercultural dialogue than linguistically relativist models.

### **Appendix**

At the appendix I briefly set out some concepts from Davidson's philosophy of language which are pertinent to the topics I discuss in the two papers. The appendix was neither meant to serve as a particularly thorough account of Davidson's semantic theory, nor as an essential part of my research – rather it is included with the two papers in bounded form as an aid to quick referencing and a further attempt at creating some unified background for the two papers.

Thanks are due to a number of people who assisted me in writing these papers. Particularly, I would like to express my gratitude to my promoter, prof. W.L. van der Merwe for his guidance and support and to Miss K. Gagiano for the editing of the first paper. Heartfelt thanks must also go to prof. J. van Brakel of the Catholic University of Louvain for his recommendations to me on the first paper and for the extensive advice and criticism he provided in my writing of the second.

Stellenbosch

December 2000

**WHY METAPHORS HAVE NO MEANING :  
CONSIDERING METAPHORIC MEANING IN DAVIDSON**

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*Submitted March 2000; revised November 2000*

**Abstract:**

Since the publication of Donald Davidson's essay 'What Metaphors Mean' (1984c) – in which he famously asserts that metaphor has no meaning – the views expressed in it have mostly met with criticism: prominently from Mary Hesse and Max Black. This article attempts to explain Davidson's surprise-move regarding metaphor by relating it to elements in the rest of his work in semantics, such as the principle of compositionality, radical interpretation and the principle of charity. I conclude that Davidson's views on metaphor are not only consistent with his semantic theory generally, but that his semantics also depend on these insights. Eventually, the debate regarding Davidson's views on metaphor should be conducted on the level of his views on the nature of semantics, the relationship between language and the world and the possibility of there existing something like conceptual schemes.

**Abstrak:**

Sedert die publikasie van Donald Davidson se opstel '*What Metaphors Mean*' (1984c) – waarin hy die berugte stelling maak dat metafoor geen betekenis het nie – is sy siening meestal begroet met kritiek, ook van prominente figure soos Mary Hesse en Max Black. Hierdie artikel poog om 'n verduideliking te vind vir Davidson se verassende skuif aangaande metafoor, deur sy siening hieroor te kontekstualiseer teen die agtergrond van elemente uit die res van sy werk in semantiek, soos die beginsel van komposisionaleiteit, radikale interpretasie en die beginsel van rasonale akkomodasie ('*charity*'). Ek kom tot die gevolgtrekking dat Davidson se siening aangaande metafoor nie slegs naatloos aansluit by sy algemene siening aangaande semantiek nie, maar dat die res van sy semantiese teorie ook afhang van sy siening aangaande metafoor. Uiteindelik behoort die debat rakende Davidson se siening aangaande metafoor gevoer te word op die vlak van die aard van semantiek, die verhouding tussen taal en die werklikheid en die moontlike bestaan van konseptuele skemas.

Much has been written about Donald Davidson's article 'What Metaphors Mean', with most commentators finding themselves baffled by his declaration that metaphors have no meaning and only mean what the literal terms of the expression do. It is possibly only Richard Rorty that supports Davidson's views wholeheartedly and it was in fact Rorty's debate with Mary Hesse on the issue that provided the impetus for this article.<sup>1</sup> I shall maintain that many of the discussions regarding Davidson's views on metaphor exhibit a crucial failing in that they fail to contextualise his views on metaphor in relation to the rest of his work in semantics. I hope to fill this lacuna by systematically relating Davidson's thoughts on metaphor to his larger theory of meaning, paying specific attention to the issues of compositionality, radical interpretation and the application of the principle of charity. In the process, I shall attempt to find a reason for Davidson's fairly cryptic declaration regarding the total absence of meaning in metaphor.

I hope to show that for Davidson, (the non-existence of - ) metaphoric meaning is not a spurious issue, but that it is crucial to the rest of his work, in that his negative statements regarding metaphoric meaning are occasioned by larger concerns. Through his views on metaphor, one can gather much regarding Davidson's views on how language works and on the relationship between language and the world; and it is my opinion that the paper on metaphor provides a handy alternative view-point on (or possible hinge of criticism against - ) his position on this relationship. Importantly, Davidson's views regarding metaphor do not only consistently link up to the rest of his work, but the rest of his views also *depend* on them. Besides his views on metaphor being consistent with the rest of his work, I hope to show that the existence of metaphoric meaning or metaphoric truth would

gravely endanger Davidson's entire semantic project and that it is crucial to that project to keep the idea of metaphoric meaning out.

### *What Metaphors Mean*

In 'What Metaphors Mean' Davidson asserts that metaphors have no meaning. This is a bold and surprising claim that he makes and it is perhaps the very boldness of this denial in the face of most current theory that has earned him the chagrin of his contemporaries. A few similar ways in which he states this precise claim though, have not received as much attention – probably as a result. These include the claims that the study of metaphor does not belong to the field of semantics; or that, semantically, metaphor is not an important phenomenon; or that metaphor uses no semantic resources beyond the ordinary (1984c: 245). Far more palatable claims, certainly and they mean exactly what the first claim does.

Part of the resistance against Davidson's statement that metaphor has no meaning results from the fact that many people, on reading that claim, take him to be denying the *importance* of metaphor. Metaphor, according to Davidson, *does* exist and *has* importance, but precisely what that importance is, is not *meaning*; and how it works is not the business of *semantics*, but should be that of some other field(s) of study. According to Davidson, the central mistake that most theoreticians of metaphor make, is thinking that words in metaphor somehow acquire a *different* sense or meaning than their 'normal' (literal) meanings. This view is commonly held by a number of authors on the

subject, such as Richards and Black; and it is due to his vigorous response to Davidson that I shall set up Black as Davidson's archetypical critic. Pre-empting Black, Davidson (in 'What Metaphors Mean') contends that metaphor uses *no* semantic resources (and therefore acquires no new meanings) beyond the ordinary (1984c: 245). It uses exactly the same semantic resources as those on which the ordinary depends; and consequently the words used in metaphoric sentences *mean* exactly what the words in their most literal interpretation mean. This would be the fundamental claim that Davidson makes. What he intends here, I think, but stops just short of saying, is that words acquire meaning in only one way and that is the way which he first outlined in 'Truth and Meaning' (Davidson, 1984a). The idea that words in metaphor somehow acquire a different sense or meaning is for Davidson 'as patently false' as the related idea that the metaphoric sentence somehow conveys a coded message, which through interpretation needs a de-codification from the side of the hearer (1984c: 246).

The fact that metaphor appears to be saying something, and that this something cannot be paraphrased, Davidson explains by claiming that there *is* simply no other meaning *there* to paraphrase – to translate back into literal language – in metaphor: the sentence simply means what it does literally (1984c: 246). What we *do*, in fact, when we unsuccessfully attempt to paraphrase a metaphor, is not translate its metaphoric meaning into a more explicit literal one, but try and evoke what it is that the metaphor *brings to our attention* (1984c: 258 - 260). Describing what metaphors make us notice, on Davidson's view, is saying something about the *world* and not about the language that makes up metaphoric sentences. Davidson stresses that metaphor *is* an important phenomenon and not only in

literature, but also in science; and therefore agrees with philosophers such as Black and Hesse that metaphor accomplishes much: his disagreement with them lies simply in that he thinks that it accomplishes what it does *in a different way* than especially Black would suggest. In fact, according to Davidson, *removing* metaphor from the study of semantics is the only way in which metaphor can properly be understood; and contrary to what one would expect, such a move should make metaphor a more and not less interesting phenomenon (1984c: 246). The question becomes: why is that?

1. *Meaning isn't conveyed anyway*

The crux of the disagreement between Black and Hesse on the one hand and Davidson and Rorty on the other, lies in the former parties' insistence on the *cognitive content* of metaphor, while the latter two deny this. It would be helpful however, to point out that the issue of 'cognitive content' bears a much greater weight in Davidson's work than this specific debate assumes; and certainly one of Davidson's strongest arguments against metaphoric meaning has to follow from his insistence on providing an extensional account of meaning and from his simultaneous refusal to reify meaning.<sup>2</sup> Black's theory of metaphor amounts to the thesis that besides the literal meaning of words and sentences, a second (metaphorical) meaning can be acquired through interaction with other words. According to Black's interaction view, a metaphor has two subjects: a primary and secondary one. Between these, an interacting 'duality of reference' goes to work, as '...the metaphorical utterance works by "projecting upon" the primary subject a set of "associated implications", comprised in the implicative complex that are

predictable of the secondary subject...' (1990: 59) On a sentential level, Black holds that metaphors are cognitive instruments, capable of being used by a speaker to communicate '...novel views of a domain of reference...' that he possesses, to an audience capable of grasping this communication. In the same vein, he stresses the 'representational aspect' of metaphor (1990: 74 - 76). On the level of individual words, also, Black seems to subscribe to a referential account of meaning (at least as far as metaphor goes); and he holds that words can have both literal and extended meanings, the latter of which they acquire through conventional interaction with other words. According to Black, in the context of a particular metaphorical statement, the meanings of the words contained in it, change; albeit only in the minds of the user and interpreter of the metaphor, and only for the moment.

Now, a view such as Black's of course depends on words at all *having* and *expressing* certain meanings; and the mere idea that words have anything like independently existing meanings (between which a 'duality of *reference*' can go to work), allowing them to interact with each other and to project fragments of cognitive content, is of course a complete anathema to Davidson. The first possible criticism from Davidson's side would therefore be that Black holds a reified conception of meaning. This paves the way for all of the implications of the intensionalist/extensionalist-debate in the philosophy of language, to find its way to discussions of metaphor. For Davidson, words do not have any 'meanings': only sentences (or strictly spoken, *entire languages*) have meaning. And the meaning that sentences have is certainly not of the propositional variety, as Black holds. Doing away with intensional notions, such as those Black relies

on in his account of metaphor, was part of Davidson's strategy in semantics from the outset; and his criticism of the conception of metaphor as '*primarily a vehicle for conveying ideas*' (1984c: 246) is completely in keeping with this general strategy of his.

Evnine (1991: 79) identifies the reasons for Davidson's choice to construct an extensional theory of meaning. In keeping with a general move towards ontological simplicity, Davidson rejects the possible existence of such ill-defined entities as meanings or propositions, contending that philosophy can do equally well – if not better – without them. Davidson asserts that one cannot appeal to 'meanings' in constructing a theory of meaning: one has to explain meaning by appealing to something else (1984a: 21). And Black's theory not only *does* depend on *words* having meanings and those meanings somehow interacting with each other; it also depends on a second notion of meaning and that is the one of speakers and audiences grasping meanings and using them to communicate insights regarding the world. The shift that the meanings of words and sentences undergo in metaphor, after all, amounts to '*...a shift in the speaker's meaning – and the corresponding hearer's meaning...*', as Black sees it (1990: 60). Of Black, Davidson could rightly demand that he at least appeal to something other than vaguely defined 'speaker's meanings' in *explaining* metaphoric meaning.

In keeping with his extensionalist heritage, Davidson himself seeks to *explain all* meaning without reference to intensions or cognitive content: appealing to 'meanings' in a theory of meaning is both confused and of no demonstrated use. Now Black's account of metaphoric meaning depends crucially on the idea that the maker of a metaphor can

recognize something (propositional in character) regarding the world and can communicate this to his audience through metaphor. However, such an explanation of the propositional states of individuals as Black appeals to, necessitates giving an account of their beliefs; and, as Davidson has argued in various papers, belief and meaning are so closely connected as to make it impossible to give an account of someone's beliefs without having a *prior* account available as to what the sentences he utters, mean. Appealing to speakers' mental states in giving an account of meaning (as Black does) amounts to putting the cart before the horse, on Davidson's position. Properly, any talk regarding mental states should be reserved for when the process of constructing a theory of meaning has been completed.<sup>3</sup>

The question relevant to this debate, however, becomes: how effective is Davidson's refusal to ground meaning in intensional phenomena as a strategy to deny cognitive content to metaphor? The answer probably is: not tellingly, since explaining why metaphoric meaning *cannot* be grounded in word- or speaker's-meanings, does *not* imply that it cannot find a grounding in something else (as literal meaning can). In a number of ways though, the insistence on grounding meaning in extensional evidence *is* relevant and has direct bearing on what follows. Importantly, the *way* in which Davidson chooses to ground literal meaning in extensionality does not allow metaphors to have any meaning. To this I shall turn directly.

## 2. *The principle of compositionality*

Black attempts to explain how metaphor *works*. ‘Metaphor’, he asserts: ‘...must be classified as a term belonging to semantics...’ (1962: 28) He holds that the phenomenon has a ‘logical grammar’ and that its working can (and should) be explained *semantically* (1990: 53). How would such a semantic explanation of metaphor run, though? Metaphor, Black claims, works by violating rules; but importantly, he stresses, ‘There can be no *rules* for “creatively” violating rules...’ (1990: 55) Thus, he seems to claim for metaphor the advantages of being a ‘semantic’ phenomenon - partaking in the generation of meaning - but without any of the corresponding disadvantages – primarily that its shifts in meaning must be rule-bound. Admittedly, he concedes that not simply anything can be said in metaphor and that the normal rule-bound meanings of the metaphor’s frame dictate which characteristics properly could apply to the focus; but in principle, metaphor still works by *violating* the rules of semantics. Davidson would assert that such a view of semantics and metaphor – of metaphor working semantically, but by doing something unguided by semantic rules – is impossible. As far as the application of words goes, the very compositional nature of language (that makes the generation of an infinite number of sentences possible from a finite number of words) makes semantics a rule-bound affair. No meaning can exist without these rules being followed.

How do words ordinarily work in sentences, according to Davidson?<sup>4</sup> Looking at a language empirically (from the ‘outside’ as Rorty puts it) the whole of the language appears as an infinite range of possible sentences. Each of these sentences can be true or

false. Through knowledge of the language and of the world, the language user can come to know (1) which of the sentences from this totality are true and (2) which conditions in the world must hold, given their truth. All of the infinite number of possible sentences in the language is composed of a finite number of words. The key to being able to use language lies in that, from those sentences which we come to know to be true, it is in principle possible to select and compare different sentences in which the same *words* feature; and structurally to deduce the influence which each of these words have on the truth of these sentences. After comparing a great many sentences, for each of the words of the language, one should be able to deduce a semantic axiom that reflects the stable structural influence that the word has on the truth of the sentences in which it appears. Our ability to use language rests on the fact that we can come to know these semantic axioms and are able to apply them to sentences unknown to us, to deduce which conditions in the world must hold, assuming their truth. This is the principle of compositionality. In the final analysis then, words do not have idealised 'meanings'. All that they have are stable structural influences on the sentences in which they appear. Of course it is possible for a specific word to have more than one structural influence on the truth of the sentences in which it appears (these are officially ambiguous words); but still, these influences that words have, have to be stable and predictable - so stable and predictable that it should (in principle) be possible for all of the structural influences of the word to be contained in a dictionary.

From this last point regarding words, one can deduce another reason why Davidson thinks that words do not change their meanings in metaphoric sentences. As we saw in

the previous section, words in the first instance do not have any ‘meanings’, which can change. Words only have stable structural influences on the sentences in which they appear; which brings me to the second (and most important) point, which is that words exactly have *stable* structural influences on the sentences in which they appear, in Davidsonian semantics. These structural influences are per force *not* subject to surprising change. Davidson’s semantics specifically depends on this characteristic of words, because, if words were liable to change the influence which they have on the truth of sentences in a surprising fashion (as is said to happen in metaphor), this compositional feature of language would fall by the way-side; and language, as described by Davidson, simply would not work.

It is easy to see the problems that something like Black’s theory of metaphoric meaning-change would create for Davidson’s theory of meaning. For any kind of coherent semantic axiom for a word to be deduced, the word consistently has to influence the truth of sentences in a certain way. For instance: from verifiable sentences such as ‘man is a bipedal primate mammal of the species *homo sapiens*’ and ‘T.S. Eliot wrote a poem called “*The Wasteland*”’ one should partially be able to abstract the stable semantic influences which the words ‘man’ and ‘poem’ have on the truth of all of the sentences in which they appear. The existence of something like extended, metaphoric meanings for words to assume would, however, imply that words may acquire potentially unstable influences on the sentences in which they appear. This is as being confronted with the possibility (inherent in the idea of metaphoric meaning) that one may unpredictably have to count a sentence such as ‘man is the poem of being’<sup>5</sup> – or any sentence really, of that

variety – as being true alongside the previously cited sentences regarding men and poems, would seriously hamper one's chances of in fact deducing stable semantic axioms for the words 'man' and 'poem'. Besides their stable semantic functions (which we deduce from all of the true sentences in which they appear), it is said that in metaphor words may end up acquiring a possible infinity of *extra* semantic functions, which are in principle unstable, unpredictable and esoteric. Should words have the potentiality of behaving in such unstable ways, one could not possibly deduce any stable systematic influence for them to have on the truth of sentences; and this is why, for Davidson, a word cannot have a stable semantic influence on the truth of the sentences in which it appears *and besides that* retain the open-ended possibility of acquiring other unstable semantic influences along the way, as Black seems to suggest.

The problem that something like 'metaphoric meaning' would create for Davidson's theory would also work in the opposite direction. Not only must a stable influence be able to be *deduced* from a range of sentences which the interpreter knows to be true; for one to be able to use the language under investigation, it is also necessary that the axioms so deduced can be *re-applied* to sentences which one does not know and that one is left in a position to derive its truth conditions in a reliable fashion. A speaker of English, when confronted with a sentence such as 'the world is a vampire' is easily able to deduce its truth conditions from the standard influences which all of the words contained in it generally have on the truth of the sentences in which they appear. From these influences the truth conditions of this sentence should be deduced to be something like: 'our home planet is a bat of the species *Desmodus Rotundus*' – a truth condition that clearly does not

hold. For the interpreter at all to be able to deduce what is said to be the ‘metaphoric truth conditions’ of the sentence, however, while using only his knowledge of the semantics of English, would be impossible (something which *is* possible for literal sentences, such as ‘vampires are found in the South-American jungle’). This is since what a metaphor such as ‘the world is a vampire’ ‘means’ is always open to re-interpretation; and because it is impossible exhaustively to specify exactly under which conditions this metaphor would be true. Davidson certainly stresses that metaphor is by its very *nature* always subject to re-interpretation when he refers to the ‘...endlessness of paraphrase...’ in which one becomes caught, as soon as one tries to explicate *exactly* what it is that a specific metaphor brings to our attention (1984c: 263). Authors such as Hymers (1998) and Engstrøm (1996) furthermore stress the role that an extra-semantic context plays in determining metaphoric meaning; and involving context in this way further tells against the possibility of deducing a metaphor’s truth conditions from the theory of truth for the language alone. To the issue of the possible *truth* of metaphors and the issue of the impossibility of exhaustively specifying what their truth-conditions are, I shall return in section 4.

### 3. *Malapropism*

Black writes in ‘More about Metaphor’ (and repeating the phrase in ‘How Metaphors Work’) that what the user of metaphor does, is to ‘...[employ] conventional means to produce a non-standard effect, while using only the standard syntactic and semantic resources of his speech community’. Here he seems to support exactly what Davidson

says – that metaphor uses no other semantics than the standard. Yet, for Black, ‘...the *meaning* of an interesting metaphor is typically “new” or “creative” [and] not inferable from the standard lexicon’ (1990: 52). Although using only ‘standard semantics’, it is therefore possible for metaphor to have non-standard ‘meanings’, on his view. Now, contrary to what one would expect at this point, Davidson’s theory in fact *does* have room for the phenomenon of sentences using standard semantics, but still possessing non-standard meanings. A prime example of this is malapropism.

Both Hymers (1998) and Rahat (1992) considered whether, if linguistic communication still seems to succeed even when the rules of semantics are not being followed, this does not allow metaphor to be incorporated into meaningful language. Davidson’s theory in ‘A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs’ (1986) is that it is possible, besides one’s fixed semantic theory (*prior theory*) of a language (which will be a list of semantic axioms – one for each word of the language), to have a *passing theory* of the meaning of words, deviating from the prior theory and allowing the interpretation of words not used in compliance with it. Utilising a passing theory enables the interpreter to ‘...create a new, ad hoc, semantic theory...’ (Rahat, 1992: 316), allowing words to undergo meaning-change – either of a simply passing nature, or of a sort that can be integrated into the prior theory. The question becomes: why can metaphors not simply be accommodated in passing theories (as malapropisms can) and be allowed to regain their status as meaningful sentences of the language in this way? That metaphor should be able to be handled by something like a passing theory, is the view of Hymers and of Kittay, who also sets out a context-dependent suggestion for assigning truth conditions to metaphoric

sentences (1987: 119); and I think an ad hoc ‘passing theory’ of meaning is exactly what Black had in mind with the ‘extended meanings’ that he ascribes to metaphor. Against this view, Rahat argues that there exists a difference in the *manner* in which metaphors and malapropisms seem to call for non-standard interpretations. Malapropism *forces* a temporary semantic change to be made by the interpreter, *at all* to be able to understand what the user thereof actually wants to communicate. Malapropisms are firstly ‘un-semantic’ and simply nonsensical, if such changes are not made. Metaphors on the other hand, are sentences which *are* being used in accordance with semantic rules and do make sense, they usually simply express patent falsities. The user of metaphor is *fully aware* of the falsity of what he asserts and he intends and requires that the interpreter first interpret his words according to the standard semantic rules and understands them as they would normally be understood, for him to make any sense of the *metaphor* which is said to be used, or to grasp its point. Thus, the ‘metaphoric meaning’ of an utterance still firmly depends on the literal meaning thereof. ‘(T)his point’, Rahat stresses, ‘will be lost if one takes the metaphorical utterance as an *irregularity* that calls for some change in interpretation.’ (1992: 321 – 2)

The difference between metaphor and malapropism then lies therein that, typically, the ‘meaning’ of metaphors is something more than just what there ‘is *there* in’ the sentence. Metaphor intends to say much more than it does on face value. As Davidson writes ‘...there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention, and much of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in character.’ (1984c: 263) The interpretation of metaphors therefore takes place on a different plane than the interpretation of

malapropisms. Whereas malapropisms require only one interpretation and can be said fully to be grasped after the successful construction of a passing theory; metaphor requires a double interpretation, in that first the usual meaning of the phrase needs to be interpreted (using the standard semantic rules), before what is called interpretation of the 'meaning' of the metaphor can take place. This interpretation of the metaphor is then also in principle never complete, as metaphors by their very nature are always open to re-interpretation.

#### 4. *The case against metaphoric truth*

Thus far, the account of Davidson's attack against metaphoric meaning has focused on why the necessarily stable operation of words in sentences would make a theory of metaphor such as that of Black untenable. Farrell (1987), however, raises an important issue when he accuses Davidson of in fact *deviating* from his general strategy in semantics on the point of metaphor; because he ignores his first premise in semantics: that sentences and not words are the main conveyors of meaning. In 'What Metaphors Mean' Davidson tends to focus too finely on why it is not possible for *words* to undergo unpredictable meaning-change, while forgetting that metaphoric *sentences are* in fact candidates for truth, can imply entailments and fit into larger webs of belief. If Davidson had any real empirical commitment in designing his theory of meaning, Farrell argues, he would notice that speakers of the language *do* hold metaphorical sentences to be true and meaningful; and that based on the evidence therefore, he should strive towards deducing semantic roles for metaphor to play, rather than denying them a position in semantics on

a theoretical basis. Davidson should ‘...adjust his models to the data...’ says Farrell (1987: 631) and not the other way around, as he implies Davidson does. A theory of language focussing on sentential aspects should (empirically) take metaphorical sentences to be held to be meaningful, and would endeavour to fit them into relations of entailment to provide a semantic account of ‘shared metaphorical schemes’, which enables us to relate ‘whole metaphorical sentences to whole other sentences’ (1987: 632).<sup>6</sup> At this point, the question that would arise (and moving away from metaphoric *meaning*, for a while) is: can one make sense of something like metaphoric *truth*? Davidson would say no, but at this point it has to be admitted that the idea of metaphoric truth endangers his whole semantic project.

The question of whether metaphoric sentences can be said to be true, depends entirely on whether the propositional contents of a set of true metaphors can be fit into a coherent and rational total set of beliefs. In the context of Davidson’s work, the application of the principle of charity forms a pre-condition for the ability to interpret speech. This principle advises one to take the speaker one is attempting to interpret to be largely rational by one’s own lights and mostly correct in his pronouncements regarding the world. For radical interpretation to work, furthermore, one also needs to be able to deduce the truth conditions of the speaker’s pronouncements by paying attention to the conditions which actually hold in the world at the time of his utterance of it. The problem that exists for the friends of metaphor is that (if a person’s beliefs amount to the set of sentences he holds true) the introduction of metaphoric sentences as meaningful truths would introduce a great deal of *inconsistency* and unpredictability in the total set of

any person's beliefs. Metaphoric sentences, after all, are known to make wild claims regarding things in the world (for instance that money makes the world go 'round), that certainly contradict one's more empirical insights (for instance that it is the influence of the sun's gravitational pull that does that). Moreover, metaphors are well-known for their propensity to contradict each other. Consider, for instance, that prudence is a 'rich ugly old maid' if one were to believe William Blake, but the 'mother of all wisdom' if one paid heed to the folk wisdom. Admitting, finally, that sentences with such a propensity for contradiction can even *change their truth values* at a rapid clip (remember, if metaphors were truths, a sentence could be false the one moment and *true* the next – as soon as it is turned into a metaphor), would clash with Davidson's entire program, as the stability of a group of language users' linguistic interaction with the world, which is in principle necessary for radical interpretation to work, would be lost. Due to the inconsistency that is likely to be introduced into any speaker's total set of beliefs through metaphor, it will be difficult to view him as largely rational and correct in his judgements regarding the world (as the principle of charity requires); and (as we have seen) were one to take metaphoric sentences as truths, it would be impossible exhaustively to stipulate what their *truth conditions* are, leaving one unable to interpret the speaker's language radically. Lastly, even if one were to be able to stipulate what *some* of the truth conditions are of metaphoric sentences, one would be unable to deduce what these are from the speaker's observable interaction with an outside world; as metaphors most commonly are used to hint at the non-obvious or at the abstract similarity that exists between two things. Any interpreter attempting to make sense of a metaphor without a prior understanding available of its user's language, would simply be left with no clue as

to how to interpret it.

One could easily object that an interpreter of metaphor will never *be* a radical interpreter, approaching the language with no prior understanding of it. This criticism would miss the point, however. Even though radical interpretation does not reflect our actual interpretative practices, on Davidson's view, it has to be possible *in principle* if linguistic communication is to be possible. And admitting that metaphoric truth is a real and omnipresent possibility, *in its very principle* rules out the possibility of radical interpretation. This is as metaphoric truths will be truths which are likely to contradict many of a speaker's other beliefs (making his total set of beliefs incoherent) and as they are beliefs of which the truth conditions *cannot* be discovered – and cannot be discovered from simply observing the user of the metaphor's interaction with the world.

Thus far, I have taken the line that metaphoric truths necessarily will be contradictory truths; and to this line, the objection could certainly be raised that metaphoric sentences are really more coherent than I contend. Farrell (1987) is of the opinion that eventually (perhaps through the application of artificial intelligence) one will be able to map out a picture of all of the true sentences of the language – both literal and metaphorical ones – and their entailments.<sup>7</sup> The idea is that, through the creation of metaphor dictionaries and the like, it should be possible to map out a complete set of true and coherent metaphors and their entailments. And if a coherent set of metaphors and their truth conditions were available, why could one *not* deduce a workable theory of metaphoric meaning for a language from this? At this point, really, two options are available to the 'friends of

metaphor' (as Black calls those who would give the phenomenon a cognitive explanation) in order to make sense of this idea of a coherent set of metaphors and a description of their entailments. The one option is to see metaphoric sentences as forming part of one large body of sentences – including both literal and metaphoric sentences – from which one consistent theory of meaning for a language can be deduced; while the other is to see metaphoric sentences as being consistent with other metaphoric sentences and forming a stock of coherent metaphors *beside* a set of coherent literal sentences. I shall hold that both choices are untenable.

First to the second possibility. If we had a stock of literally true sentences and a stock of metaphorically true sentences, the question would go, could we then not consistently deduce a 'literal' theory of meaning for the language – in the form of a set of literal semantic axioms for the words of the language – from the one list; and an 'extended' theory of meaning for the language – a set of figurative semantic axioms – from the other? Surely the resultant axioms need not contradict each other and would be as reconcilable as ambiguities are? Before one could make such a view plausible, however, the following problem will have to be dealt with. First, one would need to be able to tell *which* sentences are the literal and which the metaphorical ones, to know which semantic axioms ('literal' or 'metaphoric' ones) are to be deduced from (or applied to) which. For this, one would need to be able to come up with a test for when a truth is a metaphoric one that does not appeal to the notion of speaker's meaning; as the interconnection between truth and meaning would rule such a test out as circular.<sup>8</sup> Rather, an *empirical* test as to when a sentence is used metaphorically and when not would be needed – a test

one could not easily come up with, except if one were to hold that speakers systematically act in certain ways (perhaps by always putting on airs) when uttering metaphors. Accepting such a deep division between literal and metaphorical language, therefore, and realising that one is unable to test which sentences uttered by a speaker belong to which part of the language, one simply could not be in a position to interpret any sentence of the language; due to the uncertainty one would keep on running into of which theory of meaning (literal or metaphorical) to apply in interpreting that sentence.

However, another possibility remains open to the friend of metaphor who holds metaphors generally to be coherent. One could argue that making a distinction at all between metaphoric and literal truths would not be necessary; and that metaphors could fit into one large and coherent set of beliefs, together with all literal beliefs. This argument, of course, would obviate the need for a test for metaphoric truth. It could be argued that from one such a total set of coherent beliefs, a theory of meaning for a language could be deduced without contradiction. Such a move, however, would equate metaphor with a simple form of ambiguity. Engstrøm (1996: 7), for one, holds that metaphor exhibits 'rampant semantic ambiguity', but he still appeals to extra-sentential context in pointing out or explaining what the ambiguous use of metaphoric words amount to. In this way, metaphor is still to be set apart as a special class of ambiguous expression and can therefore not be called a simple ambiguity. Even so, if metaphor were seen as analogous to ambiguity, the question to ask would be: if metaphoric truths were part of a coherent set of truths including literal truths, would we then not simply be admitting that all language is literal? One probably would have to answer in the

affirmative: as Kittay writes ‘...in order to give a semantic account of metaphor within a truth-theoretic semantics, we are required to reduce metaphor to a literal paraphrase...’ (1987: 116). Coming up with a final account of which metaphors are true and which not and what exactly their entailments are (as would be necessary to fit our metaphoric beliefs into one coherent set of all of our beliefs), could be contrary to the very spirit of the metaphoric enterprise, in that it would amount to a mass killing-off of metaphors into paraphrase. At this point, the friends of metaphor seem fast to be running out of options. Yet, one more possibility (besides the idea of reducing all metaphor to literal language) remains open to the friend of metaphor who relies on the view that metaphor need not contradict literal truth: that is to hold that all language is metaphorical – a position held, in fact, by Mary Hesse. To Hesse’s position, I shall turn in my discussion regarding the distinction between meaning and use.

Davidson’s point, to summarise, is that exactly what is special about metaphor – that it works in a different way than the literal – vanishes, when one attempts to incorporate an explanation of metaphor in semantics (1984c: 248 – 249). In this vein, he contends that ‘There is ... a tension in the usual view of metaphor. For on the one hand, the usual view wants to hold that a metaphor does something no plain prose can possibly do and, on the other hand, it wants to explain what a metaphor does by appealing to ... just the sort of thing plain prose is designed to express.’ (1984c: 261) According to Davidson, a category confusion has occurred and what we need to see is for metaphor to be explained on a different plane than our explanations of literal language.

5. *Davidson's theory handles dead metaphor dead easy*

Reimer (1996) writes that dead metaphor poses a serious challenge to Davidson. Given that dead metaphor *has* meaning, he asks (as does Hymers) why metaphor has the *specific* meaning that it does. The only explanation that Reimer could find was that the meaning of the dead metaphor must originate from the *meaning* of the live one. Against Reimer, I would contend that because of his empirical approach to language, Davidson's theory handles dead metaphor dead easy; and that dead metaphors rather pose a challenge to a theory such as that of Black than they do to that of Davidson.

On Black's view, meaning can be divided into literal and extended meaning. Now it is commonly held that certain metaphors, when used frequently, 'die'; and in dying, become candidates for literal truth. On Black's view then, in dying, a metaphor has to pass over from the sphere of extended meaning (metaphor) to the sphere of literal language.<sup>9</sup> As we have seen, failing the ability to appeal to speaker's meaning, it will be quite difficult to decide which sphere of language an expression belongs to; yet, at this point another possibility as to how to decide whether a sentence is used literally or metaphorically, suggests itself. Besides tests taking into account the visible behaviour of a speaker when uttering a metaphor, other tests that can be offered involve surprise, or frequency of use, as metaphors are depicted as those truths which are typically novel and innovative. In this way *metaphors* are novel and surprising expressions, whereas *dead metaphors* (for instance), which belong to literal language, are characterised by their frequency of use. Is this an acceptable thesis, however? Can frequency of use make the

crucial distinction between metaphor and literal language and save a theory such as that of Black? I doubt it. For one thing: how often must a metaphor be used for it to die? And what is to set metaphor apart from a literal truth that is simply not uttered often?

Davidson's theory on the other hand, handles dead metaphor quite effortlessly. When someone utters a metaphoric sentence, he usually utters a patent falsehood (or obvious truth) prompting the hearer to deduce that in his utterance, the speaker is not making a serious claim to truth. The creator of the metaphor might however, through its inbuilt feature of surprise and ability to point out similarities, succeed in prompting the hearer to realise *something* and the metaphor may be used again – by himself and by other people. Eventually, the metaphoric sentence in question could begin to be used so often and in such predictable ways that the sentence takes on a completely stable role amongst sentences which are literal candidates for truth. In this fashion, at one stage or another in the history of English, it became proper for a narrowing in a road to be called a 'bottle-neck', which could result in 'traffic jams'. And the words used in these sentences have acquired such stability and frequency of use in their new roles that they have become commonly accepted ambiguous terms and can be given an additional 'meaning' to this effect in a dictionary.

The *process* of a metaphor dying, is described exactly the same by Davidson and Black, but for Black's theory it holds an uncomfortable consequence, whereas for Davidson it poses no problem. Black postulates *two spheres of meaning* and a metaphor, in dying, somehow has to pass over from one sphere into another. Davidson thinks that there is

only one sphere of meaning and nothing needs to pass over: all that exists are words employed meaningfully in sentences and words not. Davidson views language empirically and frequency of use in a common role is therefore an entirely acceptable way for him to indicate that a metaphor has become subsumed in literal language: a metaphor's death, on this picture, would amount to its *acquiring* meaning. For Black, however, it would be problematic if frequency of use alone were the only distinction between living and dead metaphor, for, is there not supposed to be *more* to metaphor than how often it is used? Much of the defence of the 'friends of metaphor' of the cognitive ability of the metaphor (and the cosy attitude which they assume towards it) rests on their arguments that metaphors are crucial to our way of life in that they assist us to make sense of our world. This point must fully be conceded, but one needs to ask: how many of those crucial metaphors are perhaps dead already? Many metaphors *do* have cognitive content and *can* be explained semantically. Those are the dead ones. And a lot of what the 'friends of metaphor' describe as absolutely crucial metaphors, which we must hold to be cognitive, can be explained semantically as dead metaphors. Beginning to admit the death of some metaphors could go a long way in addressing the problem of explaining what regularly passes as cognitive content in metaphor.

#### 6. *The meaning/use-distinction*

Re-capping somewhat, one problem that would exist for any interpreter if it were in principle possible for sentences at times to deviate in meaning from the standard, is that she would, when striking upon any sentence awaiting interpretation, always be faced with

the doubt whether *it* is perhaps being used metaphorically, and should be interpreted according to non-standard semantics. Faced with this doubt, the interpreter will have to know a way to distinguish between literal and metaphorical uses of language, in order to be able to apply the correct semantic theory (literal or metaphorical) to deduce the sentence's truth conditions; or she will have to err on the side of caution and accept that the sentence's truth conditions *cannot* be stipulated (because the possibility of metaphor plays havoc with providing the truth conditions of sentences) and therefore cannot be interpreted. Any semantic account of metaphor first would have to come up with a fail-safe mechanism to distinguish when words are used metaphorically and when not, for any interpretations of the sentences of the language at all to be able to be produced; and such a mechanism I do not see any of the 'friends of metaphor' coming up with.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, even if one were to come up with a mechanism able to decide when words are used metaphorically, one would be doomed to a view of meaning which is radically split in two: the literal and the metaphorical. The only alternatives to such a split would be to hold that all meaning is literal (as Davidson does) or to hold with authors such as Hesse and Arbib that all meaning is metaphorical - a move which one must concede strikes as more problematic, at least on the face of it. Eventually, Davidson's enemies are stuck with two rather unappetising choices: either live with a language wherein nothing can be said to be 'true full-stop' (as the situation would be, were the argument go Hesse's way), or with a language forever split in two. The only other option is Davidson's. If one finds no other merit in Davidson's views, it at least has to be said that he has a unified view of language; and in this sense his views share more common ground with the other unified view (that of Hesse) than it does with those of Black.

Rorty (1987: 285) suggests that Davidson and Black do not only disagree on metaphor but more fundamentally also on the reach and implications of semantics. As much must be obvious by now. Black holds that it is possible for one set of standard semantic rules to express both non-standard (metaphoric) meanings and standard meanings; and therefore seems to hold that meaning and semantics can be two different matters (1990: 52). Davidson, on the other hand, holds that there is nothing more to meaning than what is produced by the operation of the standard rules of semantics. In the final analysis, then, the debate between Davidson and Black should really shift away from metaphor and should be redirected to the questions Davidson has been asking regarding the relationship between such elements as ‘meaning’, ‘use’, ‘semantics’ and ‘the world’. For Davidson, of course, there *is* a point to metaphor, but the point is not the *meaning* thereof; the point is something else: it is the *effect* that metaphors have on us. With this statement, he draws a sharp distinction between (1) what words mean and (2) what they are used to do: what words mean, is the business of semantics and what they are used to do, is the business of some other field of study – probably *pragmatics*, as Hymers (1998: 270) holds, although Davidson himself never uses the term.<sup>11</sup> Be that as it may, I shall argue that both Davidson’s views regarding metaphor and on the relationship between language and the world *depends* on being able to uphold this distinction between *meaning* and *use*.

Hesse, I think, first notices that what is crucial to an understanding of Davidson's views on metaphor is his denial of the possible existence of something like conceptual schemes, which shape our cognition in a significant way. Like Black, Hesse finds much support

for her arguments regarding the cognitive aspects of metaphor in linking metaphors with models. Black describes metaphors as working by means of the secondary subject projecting an organising scheme onto the primary subject, highlighting certain features of the primary subject and prompting us to see it organised in a specific way. Metaphor's importance then lies in its unique ability to project an organising *scheme* onto the primary subject in this fashion. Of course Davidson holds an equally negative view regarding conceptual schemes as he does regarding metaphor. As Rorty explains, Davidson would regard Black and Hesse's filter-analogy of metaphor as attempting to find '...something hidden inside the sentence, as opposed to something lying outside it...' which can explain our cognition of the world (1987: 296). At least part of the debate regarding metaphoric meaning should therefore turn on whether metaphors can be said to express conceptual schemes.

Hesse attacks Davidson's views regarding the existence of conceptual schemes by expressing her surprise at his 'neglect of the patent fact that different theories and different cultures do parcel up the contents of the world differently' (1987: 300). This 'parcelling-up' of the contents of the world is the result of the use of models and analogical frameworks in science and of metaphor (their parallel) in discourse (1987: 305). Both Hesse and Black regard models and metaphors as '...often alternative and equally adequate ways of explaining the same data... [which] must be... distinguishable from their common empirical content' (Hesse, 1987: 308). The sort of debate that would result here, is clear. Davidson certainly denies that conceptual schemes can inhere in language and *organize or fit a common empirical content* that can be given a completely

theory-neutral description.<sup>12</sup> Just as Davidson holds that no cognitive content can be conveyed in metaphor, so he holds that conceptual schemes cannot contain in themselves a cognitive imprint that it stamps on a prior neutral perception of the world.

Turning to the paper on metaphor, again, Davidson holds that how language *works* is a different matter from what language is *used to do*; and that metaphor should be explained in terms of the latter (1984c: 247). This distinction between meaning and use that Davidson makes, forces the attitude on him that one can describe what language is *used to do* (that is: describing things in the world), *in* language, completely freely from any considerations of how language itself *works*. Hesse, again, holds that how language itself works, influences our descriptions of the world and that meaning and use cannot be separated in this fashion. Now, Hesse's arguments on the relationship between meaning and use holds serious consequences for Davidson's position; as arguing that language itself structures our cognition of the world, commits one to the view that what we do in language, or *what we use it for* (that is: describe the world) is influenced by the very language we use to do so. Meaning and use can therefore not be separated on Hesse's account; and it may be fair to say that *any* theory of language that conflates meaning and use in this way will also commit one to the notion of language as a force structuring cognition. Undermining the distinction between meaning and use in this fashion, undermines Davidson's argument against the possible existence of conceptual schemes; and this leaves his argument against metaphoric meaning open, due to the connection already established by Hesse between conceptual schemes and a body of cognitive metaphors. Finally, undermining the distinction that Davidson makes between meaning

and use could derail his entire semantic project, since showing how metaphor *cannot* be explained on the level of ‘what words are used to do’ (because such a level would not exist, according to Hesse) would necessitate finding a semantic explanation of metaphor. And as a semantic explanation of metaphor would clash with virtually every major element (the compositionality of language, radical interpretation and the principle of charity, at least) of Davidson’s semantic theory, this would put his whole project up for revision. A big challenge to Davidson therefore becomes elaborating on the curt distinction he makes in ‘What Metaphors Mean’ regarding what words mean and what they are used to do.<sup>13</sup>

For now, one thing that I would do, is clarify the distinction that Davidson makes between issues of meaning and issues of use. To my mind Rorty (influenced by Quine) sketches an incorrect picture of language when he describes discourse as a ‘wooded’ area (or *one* area) of which a large part consists of an uncleared jungle of use and a smaller part consists of a cleared area of meaning. On Rorty’s view, all of discourse is divided into two areas: a smaller inner area called ‘meaning’, which would in ordinary parlance be referred to as strictly literal discourse; and an outer area of ‘use’ which would include all other kinds of language use – emotive language, joking, metaphor... tropical talk. (1987: 297 – 311) Hesse picks up on this unfortunate point as well and ascribes to Davidson the view that discourse consists of two areas in this way, while he of course would disagree. Rather, the part of language that Rorty designates to hold ‘meaning’ is for Davidson would entail all of language. All of language is literal and as such has meaning; and while metaphoric sentences of course also belong to a language and

therefore also have meaning, this is simply the literal meaning of the expression used. As such metaphor is mostly patently false and this is where meaning's (language's or semantics's) account of metaphor ends. Tropical talk exists, but different rules for it to play by do not. What is achieved by such talk, furthermore, should be account for on the basis of *what* is achieved and not on the basis of *how* this is achieved. How language works and what metaphors are used to do are entirely different questions. Properly speaking, by holding that language consists of areas of meaning and areas of use, Rorty was not exactly arguing in the Davidsonian spirit in his debate with Hesse.

Of course all of the argumentation under this heading so far has gone to show how important upholding the distinction between meaning and use is to Davidson's project. At the end of section 4, however, I held that one option does remain for the friend of metaphor intent on finding a semantic explanation for the phenomenon; and that is to deny the possibility of making a distinction between meaning and use and to hold with Hesse that all language is metaphorical. This position, I shall not consider in any detail. However, I do imagine that a typically Davidsonian retort to such an argument would be: 'but can one make sense of such a possibility?' Can one really imagine a language that in principle can be contradictory, in which the entailments of expressions are always unclear and changeable and that stands in such a relationship to the world that any observation it ever makes must be a sham?<sup>14</sup> I would suggest that one cannot.

By enlarging cognitive discourse to include metaphor and by according it a central role to play in language, Hesse intends to change our whole conception of such discourse (1987:

297). With this move, she aims at undermining the status of scientific language as a privileged form of expressing knowledge and at reinforcing the cognitive value of more ordinary day-type discourse. It is ironic then, that I think this is one of Rorty and Davidson's aims as well. As I have tried to show, they would hold that one can *only* reinforce metaphor's status by *removing* it from discussions of semantics, by assigning it to a different field of study and (in Rorty's words) *finding some other compliment than 'being meaningful'* to pay to metaphor. Semantics is a rule-bound enterprise: there can be no meaning without rules. And if one would allow for the working of metaphor to be described on the level of semantics, one would make it subject to the same rules and the same predictability – one would, in effect, kill it. One benefit therefore, of drawing a distinction between meaning and metaphor, is that it is a liberating step. Separating discussions of metaphor from discussions of semantics, frees metaphor from needing to meet the requirements concerning the basis of linguistic meaning, allowing those interested in metaphor to go about the business of interpreting them, rather than finding semantic explanations for them. Removing metaphor from semantics frees metaphor to be as whimsical as it needs to be.

### *Conclusion*

Davidson builds his theory of meaning on a pre-theoretical conception of the notion of truth; and as one should turn to truth in evaluating the basis of his semantics, one should also return to truth in evaluating his views on metaphor. The question was posed earlier of whether there can be such a thing as metaphoric truth, to which the Davidsonian

answer was that the idea of metaphoric truth requires a prior explanation of the notion of metaphoric meaning, which one cannot provide. It is true, however, that Davidson's notion of meaning rests on a theory of truth which is from the outset assumed to be purely extensional and purely literal; and a notion of truth which is of course *pre-theoretical* – what the 'real' character of truth is, Davidson cannot address in his theory of meaning. The most general question which can be asked regarding Davidson's views on metaphorical meaning then becomes: 'is he *correct* in saying that words and sentences derive their meaning in a stable fashion from a stock of literal truths'? The fact that this *is* the most important question then probably only proves how interconnected truth and meaning are. If meanings are stable, there are only literal truths; and if there are only literal truths there are only stable meanings. And if meanings are not stable, there are not only literal truths and vice versa. The inter-connectedness of meaning and truth makes it impossible to say. I would argue that only the first possibility is a real one. The only language of which we could make any kind of sense is one that exhibits the requisite stability; and that it is stable is then what our view on language should be. Regarding the *explanation* of the metaphoric phenomenon, Davidson (1984c: 247) asserts that most theoreticians have it exactly the wrong way around: '...metaphoric truth does not explain metaphor – metaphor explains metaphoric truth.' Regarding the concepts of both metaphoric truth and – meaning, one should probably best say that they too are (Davidson's type of - ) metaphors: they are not themselves forms of truth or meaning, but are simply *like* truth and meaning in some surprising ways.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, (1987), pp 283 - 311

<sup>2</sup> See, in this vein, 'Truth and Meaning', (Davidson 1984a), from which I draw most of this account.

<sup>3</sup> Davidson's strategy of refusing to pay attention to something like speaker's meaning (or any 'meanings', for that matter) in constructing a theory of meaning, forms a cornerstone of his whole semantic project and the force of this refusal should not be underestimated. Eynine, certainly, presents it as the crux of Davidson's disagreement with, for instance, Grice and Searle – or with the whole of a number of theories of meaning dependent on the idea of communication-intention (1991: 79).

<sup>4</sup> Here I focus on Davidson's account as given in 'Truth and Meaning', (1984a), and 'Radical Interpretation', (1984b). For a good introduction to Davidson's philosophy of language, see: Ramberg, B. (1989) *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language* Oxford: Blackwell; or Eynine, S. (1991) *Donald Davidson*. Cambridge: Polity Press

<sup>5</sup> This metaphor is from Heidegger.

<sup>6</sup> Farrell further criticises Davidson's philosophy in general when he writes that his 'specific proposal' for a semantic theory undermines his 'general strategy' in semantics. (1987: 635) I doubt, however, that Davidson's project can be so clearly divided into two parts: in giving his account of how language works, Davidson remains dependent on the idea of compositionality.

<sup>7</sup> Also Lakoff's ongoing project is a prime representative of one in this spirit and aims to show how there exist general principles governing the inferences that are to be drawn from metaphors.

<sup>8</sup> As we have seen, without a prior understanding of a speaker's language available, it is impossible to appeal to a speaker's propositional states in order to explain what his utterances mean. As much counts for any theory of language (a point that follows from Davidson's insistence on providing a purely extensional explanation of linguistic meaning). Now, if one wanted to construct a theory of language (from scratch) which would have room for metaphoric meaning as in principle part of language; an appeal to speaker's meaning in explaining any part of that theory of language (explaining when truths are metaphorical, in this instance) would be equally inadmissible.

<sup>9</sup> Clearly, I hold Black to be a theorist of metaphor subscribing to the idea of a language split into the literal and the metaphorical.

<sup>10</sup> For the moment I forget that, even if one were able to produce some of the truth conditions of a metaphor, they can of course never exhaustively be stipulated.

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<sup>11</sup> A number of authors locate an explanation of metaphoric ‘meaning’, reconcilable with Davidson’s views, on the level of viewing metaphor as a form of ‘seeing *as*’ instead of a way of ‘seeing *that*’. In this fashion, what many authors call the propositional content of metaphor can be better explained as an intimation of similarity. In this regard, see Moran (1989) and Hester (1986). Tirrell (1991) holds a more critical view.

<sup>12</sup> This denial of his culminates in his attack on the third dogma of empiricism: the dichotomy of organizing scheme and neutral empirical content. In this vein, see Davidson, (1984d).

<sup>13</sup> The meaning/use-distinction clearly has much to do with Davidson’s realism. According to *that* position there exists a real world that is completely independent of our own ability to describe it. And our linguistic interaction with this world, again, is a neutral one, that does not influence what we see in it. *How* we manage to describe the world and *what it is* that we find in the world, or present in our descriptions of it, therefore remain different matters.

<sup>14</sup> If the reader were to object to this description of what a language in which all meaning is metaphorical must look like, consider that a language that shows any more internal consistency and correspondence with a real outside world, simply runs the risk of becoming a literal language. An objection of this nature, therefore, will only serve to prove Davidson’s point.

**THE BARE IDEA OF A CONCEPTUAL SCHEME:  
RELATIVISM, INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND DAVIDSON**

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**Abstract**

Donald Davidson's paper 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' ('OVICS') has become famous for the refutation accomplished in it of conceptual relativism. Via an argument that, essentially, all languages are intertranslatable, Davidson rejects the notion that different conceptual schemes can inhere in the supposed 'un-translatable' languages said to exist by, for instance, Whorf and Kuhn. Critics of Davidson's position have mainly focussed on practical issues, with many holding that his arguments in 'OVICS' ignore the realities of the real intercultural communication situation. In the present paper, I address criticisms of this sort. Davidson's arguments are reconstructed, with attention being paid to their dependence on the idea of practical application in the real intercommunication situation. With the aid of practical examples, the implications of elements of Davidson's philosophy of interpretation for intercultural communication are evaluated. Finally, radical interpretation is presented as a better model for intercultural dialogue than linguistically relativist ones.

**Abstrak**

Donald Davidson se artikel 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' het beroemdheid verwerf as teenargument vir die idee van konseptuele relativisme. By wyse van 'n argument dat alle tale in beginsel vertaalbaar is, verwerp Davidson die idee dat verskillende konseptuele skemas kan skuilgaan in die veronderstelde 'onvertaalbare' tale waarvan daar sprake is by byvoorbeeld Whorf en Kuhn. Kritici van Davidson se posisie beperk hul hoofsaaklik tot praktiese besware en 'n vername aanklag teen Davidson is dat hy die realiteite misken van werklike interkulturele gesprek. In hierdie artikel spreek ek sodanige kritiek aan. Ek herkonstrueer Davidson se argumente en voer aan dat dit deurgaans afhanklik is van die idee van toepassing in 'n praktiese situasie van interkulturele dialoog. By wyse van praktiese voorbeelde evalueer ek die implikasies van Davidson se filosofie van interpretasie vir interkulturele kommunikasie. Laastens bied ek radikale interpretasie aan as 'n beter model vir interkulturele dialoog as linguisties relativistiese modelle.

## INTRODUCTION

Donald Davidson's paper 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' (1984c, hereafter 'OVICS') must count both as one of the most influential – and controversial papers of a philosophical career characterised by the often curt fashion in which the American chooses to reject a variety of fairly commonly held philosophical wisdoms.<sup>1</sup> In 'OVICS', Davidson challenges the 'very idea' that there can exist anything like a conceptual scheme that inheres in language and structures all cognition of the world; and, in passing, issues some pithy criticisms on matters such as the existence of a completely theory-neutral world or – reality and the possibility of empiricism. Although Davidson's aim in the writing of 'OVICS' was to refute both conceptual relativism and – universalism, his position subsequently drew most criticism from the relativist-camp, with many of his critics responding to the effect that his arguments are too abstract and that they ignore the realities of a real multi-cultural conversation that, if anything, seems to mark the conceptual contrasts that exist between different languages. Davidson's arguments are viewed as forming part of an attempt to cast an *a priori* judgement regarding what is essentially a practical matter – whether different cultures do indeed judge the world differently – and his position is viewed as hopelessly out of touch with the practicalities of intercultural communication.<sup>2</sup> In the present paper I aim to address criticisms of this sort.

Proceeding as it does by means of an argument regarding the *intertranslatability* of languages and resulting in the conclusion that one can make no sense of linguistic relativism, Davidson's arguments are surely *relevant* to the issue of intercultural communication: the question is whether they can indeed be of any practical value in

the matter. While it certainly was not Davidson's aim to become involved in the construction of a manual for the practice of intercultural communication, I hope to show that at least the idea of application in the real intercultural communication situation is present throughout in Davidson's arguments and that (with some imagination) a number of hints for the conduct of an intercultural dialogue can be extracted from the paper. In the first section of the present paper, I shall argue that Davidson's case in 'OVICS' is both relevant to the issue of practical intercultural communication and dependent on the idea of practical interpretation, while in the second section I shall discuss the importance of the empirical nature of Davidson's concept of radical interpretation. In the third section I highlight the advances that taking a Davidsonian approach to the issue of intercultural communication would imply – especially over culturally relativist approaches to the issue.

### **RECONSTRUCTING DAVIDSON'S ARGUMENTS IN 'OVICS'**

Locating a discussion of the possibility of something like a conceptual scheme on the level of language and identifying different schemes with non-intertranslatable languages is not a strategy unique to Davidson. Kuhn's statement of conceptual relativism, for instance, takes the shape of a thesis of *incommensurability* (non-intertranslatability) between different paradigms; and the most common statement of the Sapir/Whorf-hypothesis is that radically different conceptual schemes inhere in those languages that we find hard to translate. Quine, too, holds that conceptual schemes can be identified with non-intertranslatable languages (Baghramian, 1998: 294); and (staying with the connection between languages and conceptual schemes) at one point he explicitly identifies conceptual schemes with metaphors, in holding

that the vocabulary of normal science consists of a set of dead metaphors. (Hymers, 1998: 266).<sup>3</sup>

This identification (of conceptual schemes and non-intertranslatable languages) having been evinced, Davidson argues that one needs to make sense of the possibility of a *failure of intertranslation* occurring between two or more languages, in order to make the idea of a conceptual scheme a sensible one. Such a possibility, he shows, cannot be rendered intelligible; and in the remainder of the paper he proceeds to demonstrate why, in principle, translation between any two languages should always succeed.<sup>4</sup> In what follows, I refine Davidson's polemic to three main arguments (dealing with different aspects of the question of translation), paying specific attention to the dependence of each of these arguments on (at least) the *notion* of practical application in the real intercultural communication situation.

### 1. *The 'Common Ontology'-Argument.*

A first statement of what I shall call the 'common ontology'-argument is found in a passage early on in 'OVICS' in which Davidson writes: 'The dominant metaphor of conceptual relativism, that of differing points of view, seems to betray an underlying paradox. Different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common coordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability.' (1984c: 184) Davidson argues that a precondition for speaking about conceptual differences ('different points of view' on the world) between languages, is the availability of a language similar enough in its conceptual resources to each of the languages in question, to point out where the

differences between them lie. In Davidson's terminology, what is needed to point out the fact that things are 'said differently' by two different languages, is a *common ontology* to indicate exactly where differences of expression occur; yet such a common ontology belies the possibility of radical incomparability, by simply creating too obvious a middle ground between the two languages (1984c: 184).<sup>5</sup> As an illustration (and a telling one in this context), Davidson cites the example of Whorf, who argued for the *incomparability* of the metaphysics instantiated in the Hopi-language with that represented by English, but still managed to express himself *in English* in offering detailed descriptions of the unfamiliar contents of Hopi-sentences. In so doing, Whorf undermined his own claim that Hopi and English cannot 'be calibrated', by showing that, in effect, Hopi and English share a common enough ontology and that English functions quite well in describing what metaphysical convictions the Hopi-speakers hold (1984c: 184). This argument (which surfaces more than once in 'OVICS') Bar-On calls the 'evidential argument' (1994: 149), pointing out that it renders all of the *evidence* that there could be for alleged conceptual differences between languages self-contradictory. According to this argument any evidence that there can be for radical conceptual difference *in principle* cannot be produced, since, as Maker writes '(t)o understand or make sense of a different conceptual scheme is, unavoidably, to make it our own.' (1991: 358)

Dealing as it does with the type of *evidence* that could be offered for conceptual differences, the 'common ontology'-argument is a fairly practical one; and as an illustration of how any claim of incommensurability is self-refuting, the Whorf-example is crucial. After all, it is in imagining oneself to undertake the real task of interpreting a strange idiom, or explaining how it is different from one's own, that the

contradiction inherent in any claim of incommensurability shows best. Davidson admits (in the passage cited above) that '(d)ifferent points of view make sense', but then only if there exists a 'common co-ordinate system' on which to position them. In this context, it is the attempt at *providing* this common co-ordinate system (the attempt at *making sense* of a different point of view) that is self-refuting; and, even without recourse to the Whorf-example, at least the idea of practical communication between different conceptual schemes/languages does occupy an important position in Davidson's argument.

The 'common ontology'-argument also figures in the context of Davidson's attack on what he calls the 'third dogma of empiricism': the dualism of scheme and content. Davidson holds that a dualism of world and conceptual scheme or of 'organizing system and something waiting to be organized' cannot be made sense of; and his dismissal of this dualism proceeds by way of an argument that two metaphors that supporters of the idea of a conceptual scheme (sometimes referred to as 'schemers' by authors more sympathetic towards Davidson's views) commonly appeal to, are non-sensical (1984c: 189 – 195). These are the metaphors of (i) the world being 'organized' differently by different conceptual schemes (a family of similar metaphors are employed by Whorf and Sapir) and (ii) common experience being 'fitted' differently by various schemes (as argued by Quine) (Hacker, 1996: 293). The first of these metaphors, I shall discuss directly, while the second will be discussed under the next heading.

For the metaphor of different languages organizing the world or reality differently to make sense, Davidson explains that both the notion of a conceptual scheme

organizing perception of the world *and* the notion of a completely theory-neutral world or reality that *is* organized by this scheme, must be sensible. In a move involving the common ontology argument, Davidson seeks to challenge this second notion: the idea that we can make sense of a theory-neutral world or reality (the ‘uninterpreted given’, or ‘unsullied experience’), that provides the common input for processing by different conceptual schemes (1984c: 190 – 2). Rorty holds that a theory-neutral reality, such as is talked of here, can be little else but the Kantian thing-in-itself (1982: 14). On Davidson’s position, no sense can be made of such a thing; and what seems most obviously to clinch the point for him in this context is our general inability to provide a *description* of the world as it would be in itself, without resorting to using our own concepts in the process and eventually providing a description of the world quite similar to (instead of quite different from) our own.

Against this point, Child provides a *pro forma* criticism of Davidson’s argument that he (also) ascribes to Nagel: what has been shown by Davidson, Child speculates, is that we cannot form a *detailed conception* of the world without using our own concepts, but, from this, ‘...it does not follow...that that we cannot form the *bare idea* of the world as it is in itself...’ (1994: 57) Bar-On, it seems, holds much the same view regarding the existence of different conceptual schemes and holds that the fact that we cannot provide *evidence* that different conceptual schemes exist (detailed descriptions of truly different schemes, if you like), does not mean that different conceptual schemes are not *possible* (1994: 149). Still, given the common ontology-argument, it seems as if the only notion of a conceptual scheme that Bar-On can defend, or the only idea of a world-in-itself that remains for the Nagel of Child’s criticism, is the notion of a *bare* and indescribable scheme or world-in-itself. And one

must surely ask how sensible such a notion could possibly be: after all, can one really argue that one has made the bare idea of a conceptual scheme or thing-in-itself *intelligible* if one could only assert of it that it is (metaphysically) *possible*?

Child holds that Davidson's arguments regarding the thing-in-itself comes down to arguing the following: '...there could be no such thing as a view of the world achieved from outside all concepts: and investigation of the world is, necessarily, conducted "from a standpoint of engagement"' (1994: 55).<sup>6</sup> Davidson (in 'The Myth of the Subjective') however, denies that he wanted this type of argument (the argument that one is always caught up in one's own 'standpoint of engagement') to form the final word in his dismissal of the very idea of a conceptual scheme. 'The meaninglessness of the idea of a conceptual scheme...' he writes '...is due not to our inability to understand such a scheme or to our other human limitations; it is due simply to what we mean by a system of concepts.' (1989: 160) Unfortunately, Davidson does not elaborate and the interesting question remains as to how much he depends here on a form of transcendental argument. Even though Davidson clearly did not intend to land himself in a position in which the transcendental limits of subjectivity becomes the talking point, it seems that he at least partly did.<sup>7</sup>

As far as the common ontology-argument goes, many of Davidson's critics take the line that, granted, he may have shown how a common idiom is necessary to point out conceptual differences between languages, but, they argue, Davidson was after a proof that *translation* would always succeed between languages and *this* he has not managed to prove.<sup>8</sup> In support of their position, Davidson's critics typically cite examples from the history of anthropology of real failures to translate words or

grammatical constructs belonging to a number of foreign languages *directly* into English; and take these examples as proof that practically, intertranslation sometimes does fail between languages. In this vein, Jennings argues that the Nuer word ‘*kwoth*’, for which the best English translation is ‘God’, cannot be directly translated as such; and points out in a lengthy gloss where the concept of ‘*kwoth*’ differs in its application from the concept of ‘God’.<sup>9</sup> Such a lengthy description of the different extensions of words like ‘God’ and ‘*kwoth*’, Wallace had argued earlier, is not a simple translation of a foreign word into English, but is much more than that: it is an *interpretation* of it, or, a ‘translation plus a gloss’ (1986: 224 – 5). Bar-On eventually sums up the sentiment against Davidson’s position as follows: ‘...providing an explanation or description of allegedly untranslatable material using our language is not in every case tantamount to providing a *translation* [of it].’ (1994: 155)

The above criticisms, however, are all based on a misreading of Davidson’s theory of interpretation. What Davidson’s radical interpreter needs to come up with, first of all, for each foreign language sentence she is confronted with, is not necessarily a direct translation of it, but rather a simple statement of the conditions under which that sentence is true. ‘(F)ar from being a mere correlation of a foreign expression with a home expression...’ Bruce Vermazen writes, ‘...such a statement may amount to just the kind of gloss that Wallace is after...’ (1986: 242) The sometimes quite lengthy interpretations needed by the radical interpreter to make clear the application of foreign words or the truth conditions of foreign sentences then clearly *do* count as translations for Davidson. Furthermore, complaints by a number of authors that counting such lengthy interpretations as *translations* misrepresents what translation is

about seem to ignore the fact that languages are *not* translated word-by-word or sentence-for-sentence – they are translated holistically. Quite rightly, very lengthy descriptions *will* be needed to translate any language, but the success of the enterprise – and specifically its *being* the enterprise of *translation* would show up best at the level of an entire language.

## 2. *The Connection between Truth and Translation*

Davidson dismisses *two* metaphors commonly used to make sense of the idea of a distinction between scheme and content. The first, of different languages organizing the content of a theory-neutral world differently, was dismissed on the basis of the common ontology argument; but the second metaphor, that of different languages fitting common experience differently, he tackles in another fashion. According to the metaphor of language ‘fitting’ experience, sensory experience of the world or reality provides *evidence* for the acceptance of sentences. Different sentences can combine in different ways into whole theories; and (the thought goes) these theories can constitute mutually exclusive conceptual schemes, which can all ‘fit’ the evidence in their own ways. Davidson argues that the metaphor of language ‘fitting’ experience is empty, because the idea of all possible evidence ‘fitting’ a body of sentences is nothing but the idea of truth. Thus, what the schemer’s metaphor boils down to is nothing but ‘...the simple thought that something is an acceptable conceptual scheme or theory if it is true...’ (1984c: 194); and, at the heart of the matter, it simply depends on the idea that there can be different schemes (or theories) that are all *true*, but which yield untranslatable descriptions of how things actually are in the world.

The concept of truth to which Davidson appeals, is Tarski's disquotational concept. In Tarski's work, essential use is made of translation into a meta-language to explain what we mean when we say that sentences are true; and in this light, Davidson argues that we cannot make sense of the idea that a conceptual scheme may be 'true', but may still fail of translation into our language. 'Since Convention T embodies our best intuition as to how the concept of truth is used,' he writes, 'there does not seem to be much hope for a test that a conceptual scheme is radically different from ours if that test depends on the assumption that we can divorce the notion of truth from that of translation.' (1984c: 195) Thus, the requirement for making sense of the schemer's metaphor is set as being able to come up with a test for when a foreign conceptual scheme is truly *different* from ours, though still *true*, that does not depend on the notion of translation.

For Tarski, 'Convention T' provides a test for the material adequacy of a theory of truth. This test requires that, from any definition of the predicate 'is true' for a language, the truth conditions of all of the sentences of that language should follow correctly, in the form of a T-sentence (such as ' "Snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white ', or even better ' "Sneeu is wit" is true if and only if snow is white ') (1944: 344, 350). Convention T functions not in providing a test for the truth of *individual* sentences, but rather in providing a test for *theories* of truth. Now, the relativist's theory of different languages fitting the same evidence differently is itself a theory of truth; and, as such, this theory clearly *fails* the test for material adequacy set by Convention T. After all, it is a premise of the relativist's theory that an object language may have true sentences that we cannot translate and, thus, the theory in

effect denies of itself that it can provide the set of T-sentences required to pass Tarski's material adequacy test. As such, the relativist's theory of truth runs completely counter to all Tarskian intuitions.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, two completely different conceptions of truth are at stake for Tarski and the conceptual relativist, with the relativist precisely choosing to *question* one of the key-assumptions (that the notion of correspondence needs play a role in a truth-theory) on which Tarski's theory depends. Still, the question must be whether the conceptual relativist emerges completely unscathed from his scrap with Tarski. Having denied himself recourse to translation in his test for truth, when testing for the truth of foreign sentences, the schemer is left with nothing but the strong attachment that the user of it shows to a body of such sentences as a sort of *prima facie* indication of those sentences' truth; or with the vague hope that *truth as such* should be measured on the basis of internal coherence instead of 'correspondence with the world'.<sup>11</sup> I shall contend that neither of these ideas may help the relativist out of his predicament.

Depending only on *prima facie* evidence in testing for truth, the schemer could well *conclude* that the foreign language-sentences he encounters are true, however, explain what these truths are, or explain why they are truths, he could not; because his assumptions regarding their non-translatability would from the outset rule out the possibility that he can even come to know what these sentences *mean*. Even a coherence theory of truth cannot be utilised in making the relativist's metaphor of 'different languages all fitting the evidence differently' a sensible one; for how, the question is, would one know *that* a foreign language's sentences all fit together, or

*how* they all fit together, if one did not begin to translate these sentences and relate them to empirical evidence to check for a fit? The schemer's metaphor is one of a conceptual scheme fitting reality, after all; and in order to establish this, systematic points of fit to this reality have to be shown. For *Davidson*, of course, relating a whole body of sentences systematically to the evidence and showing how the truth-values of the sentences making up such a body are interdependent, is a big part of the radical interpreter's task. In fact, showing how a body of sentences fits the evidence and all depend on each other for their truth is not just explaining a scheme's 'fit' to reality (on the schemer's picture), but arriving at a translation for the language (on Davidson's)! Contrary to what the schemer would suggest, Davidson's theory of interpretation may provide the method that does most justice to showing how strange languages in fact *do* fit reality; and far from working in favour of the schemer, the metaphor of showing how languages fit reality (although of course not differently) could be an apt one for describing the holistic and empirical process of translation that Davidson has in mind.

In the schemer's attempt, too, of making sense of the *difference* of a foreign conceptual scheme his assumptions regarding translation count against him; since, having denied himself the ability to comment on the meaning of the foreign language-sentences he is confronted with, he is left with no tool to indicate why or how the conceptual scheme said to be instantiated in that language can really be different from his own. The only way in which the schemer's metaphor of a completely untranslatable theory *fitting* the evidence provided by the world *differently* can make sense, is by means of a *blank assertion* on his part that a sentence is *true*, though untranslatable. Really, then, the schemer dependent on this metaphor has not

progressed much beyond being stranded on the *bare idea* of a conceptual scheme with Bar-On and the Nagel of the example.

Having argued that *prima facie* indications of the truth of sentences will be insufficient as a test for the truth and difference from ours of other conceptual schemes, though, it must strike as ironic that Davidson's theory does have a role (although a much different one) for such assumptions of the truth of sentences to play. In the principle of charity, Davidson advises that one *should* take the strong attachment that the speakers of a foreign language show to the sentences they utter, as an indication of their truth. Where he chooses to go further than the relativist, however, is in using these assumptions regarding the truth of foreign sentences as part of an empirical theory designed to translate that foreign language. Assumptions regarding the truth of sentences, then, is where we need to pass over from the impossibility of making sense of points of view radically different from our own to the positive necessity of applying the principle of charity.

### 3. *The Principle of Charity*

The principle of charity becomes relevant in the context of Davidson's discussion of the possibility that appealing to only *partial* (as opposed to total - ) failures of intertranslation between languages, may render the idea of conceptual difference intelligible. In order to make sense of the idea that a partial failure of translation may occur between languages, we need to be able to imagine a language that shares a common, translatable part with our own, but also contains a part that is different from ours and is not translatable into our own. Making this idea a sensible one, one will

have to show that it is possible to approach a foreign language and its speakers – making sense of them both – while assuming that a significant part of the beliefs of the speakers and the meanings of their sentences are radically different from our own. Through a discussion of the principle of charity in the last pages of ‘OVICS’, however, Davidson proceeds to show that translation essentially *does* depend on making assumptions regarding shared meanings, concepts and (especially) beliefs. A theory of interpretation *not* based on the idea of beliefs mostly shared, becomes clear, simply would not get off the ground.

In essays such as ‘Radical Interpretation’ (1984a) and ‘Belief and the Basis of Meaning’ (1984b), Davidson expounds the view that belief and meaning are interdependent – a conclusion that follows from the interdependence of two tasks that need to be undertaken in the interpretation of speech: attributing beliefs to a speaker and interpreting that speaker’s sentences (Hacker, 1996: 301). The dilemma that exists for any interpreter is that one cannot interpret someone’s speech without knowing a good deal regarding what he believes; and that, conversely, one cannot come to know a good deal regarding what a person believes, without being able to interpret his speech. This problem, Davidson advises we can only overcome by applying the principle of charity. In order to gain an entry point into the speaker’s language, he thinks, one must start out by assuming that the speaker’s beliefs largely agree with one’s own (that it is true according to one’s own lights); and that, on the occasion of the utterance of any sentence by a foreign speaker, one should assign to that sentence truth conditions such as one actually believes hold in the world (and such as seem most relevant) on that occasion.

Applying the principle of charity in the radical interpretation-situation is not an *option* which one can choose for, or a piece of benevolent methodological advice, Janssens and van Brakel argue, rather, applying it is a *pre-condition* for being able to interpret another person's speech at all (1990: 94). Explaining this point, Ramberg stresses that '(t)he field linguist cannot begin to formulate her theory unless she assumes that the [foreign] speaker's attitude of holding sentences true are appropriate on sample occasions...' (1988: 642). If the radical interpreter were to assume that the foreign language-speaker's attitude of holding sentences true was systematically '*inappropriate on sample occasions*' (if the interpreter assumed that the speaker were mistaken regarding the world, or deranged, for example), she would in effect assume that there exists no connection between what the speaker was saying and conditions which *actually* obtain in the world – the very conditions the interpreter *needs* to be able to spot in order to judge what the sentence's truth conditions might be. Likewise, any assumption on the part of the interpreter that a significant part of the beliefs of the speaker she is trying to interpret *differ* from hers would amount to an assumption that all of the truth-conditions of the speaker's sentences cannot be discovered by her, rendering her unable to interpret those sentences. This last option, one could argue, is the option that the relativist wrongly chose to follow in that *he* imagines the foreign speaker to hold all kinds of weird and wonderful beliefs different from his own. Following this option, however, makes no sense, as there could be no mechanism for deciding *what* meanings summarily to assign to the speaker's sentences or what beliefs different from ours to attribute to him, besides arbitrary guesswork. Any interpreter, really, at a stage *before* she understands the language of a foreign speaker could not be in a position to conclude that the speaker holds any beliefs that are radically different from her own. And after an interpreter has come to understand the

language of the foreign speaker and *is* in a position to judge that his beliefs can be different from hers; then the non-intertranslatability issue would already be out of the way, as an understanding of the speaker's language could only have been come by via translation in the first place.<sup>12</sup>

### **THE EMPIRICAL NATURE OF DAVIDSON'S THEORY**

From the discussion of charity, it should become clear that the process the radical interpreter follows in coming up with the truth conditions of the sentences she is confronted with, is an empirical one. For any interpretation of a foreign speaker's language to be arrived at, the interpreter must assume that the sentences uttered by the speaker were uttered truthfully and correctly; and whatever (empirically) appear to the interpreter to be the truth conditions of it, must be accepted as that sentence's truth conditions. No other way out exists.

The schemer's fear, of course, is that if we were always to ascribe our own beliefs to a foreign speaker, we would at best translate his language incorrectly and at worst be doing him an injustice. Concretely, the worry is that if, say, an Englishwoman were to attempt to interpret a language like *isiXhosa* radically, the specifically western beliefs she would attribute to the Xhosa-speaker would interfere with her ability to translate his language with enough sensitivity to reflect all of its specifically Xhosa-accented. Davidson, though, does not seem to hold the possibility of making such a mistake to be a real one. 'Until we have successfully established a systematic correlation of sentences held true with sentences held true,' he writes, '*there are no mistakes to make...*' (1984c: 197) That is, until we have constructed a sufficiently

large body of T-sentences for the speaker's language, on the basis of which to begin interpreting it, we cannot go wrong by attributing the only truth conditions which we *can* attribute to the sentences he utters: the truth conditions that obtain by our own lights.

For example, if the interpreter were to overhear a Xhosa-speaker uttering a sentence like '*la ndoda sangoma*' when pointing to an individual wearing a specific beaded head-dress, she would probably take the ostension as a clue to the sentence's truth conditions, deducing a T-sentence like '*"la ndoda sangoma"* is true in *isiXhosa* iff the speaker is pointing at a man wearing a beaded head-dress at the time of the utterance'. After collecting a great many sentences in which, for instance, the word '*sangoma*' features, the interpreter should be in a position to construct an axiom reflecting the systematic role that the word has on the truth of the sentences in which it appears.<sup>13</sup> A possible semantic axiom for '*sangoma*' could be: 'the influence which a noun has that stands in for a person who often wears a beaded head-dress and who engages in healing illness and communicating with the spirits' (or a much more detailed description of the role of the word than simply the English 'witchdoctor', in any case). Arriving at the truth conditions of all of the sentences in which the word '*sangoma*' features and coming up with an axiom for the word would have been an empirical process. And, in this process, the interpreter would have had to take the speaker's word for it that '*la ndoda sangoma*'. It *could* not seem strange to her that the speaker believes that that man is a *sangoma* (at least not *while* the process of coming up with an axiom for *sangoma* was still underway); and, if the process of interpretation she followed were thorough enough, she could not eventually doubt that the man *is* in actual fact a *sangoma*. After all, all of the signs would probably be there

that the man is a *sangoma*: the man would be treated with an amount of respect and certain identifying traits (like wearing beads) would be visible and the interpreter would notice that the man in question makes and sells *muti*.<sup>14</sup>

The schemer's fear, to re-cap, was that the interpreter's (western) pre-conceptions about traditional healers could creep into her interpretation of *isiXhosa* and form an impediment to her properly understanding the role that the *sangoma* plays in Xhosa-culture. This view, however, is incorrect. At the stage of radical interpretation, *no judgements* are made by the interpreter regarding the speakers of the object language, nor are their beliefs evaluated against hers: they are simply noticed to hold certain sentences true and a theory of truth for their language is derived from that. During the process of radically interpreting *isiXhosa*, the interpreter's own beliefs regarding traditional medicine (her beliefs whether traditional medicine is *good* medical practice, for instance, or whether communication *is* possible with one's forebears) would be beside the point. If the interpreter wanted to understand *isiXhosa*, she would have no choice but coming up with an axiom for '*sangoma*' to the effect that what *sangomas do* is providing the very real service to the community of healing illness and advising on matters of (amongst other things) luck and love.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, in interpreting a foreign language, there is *no* opportunity for the interpreter to assume that the language in question represents a completely different and impenetrable conceptual scheme from her own. Exactly those elements of the Xhosa-cultural life surrounding the figure of the *sangoma* that would be called *impenetrable* to the westerner by the schemer (the *sangoma's* participation in lifting and placing curses, for instance) are the ones that would *have to be observed and*

*understood* by the interpreter for her to be able to come up with a semantic axiom for the word '*sangoma*' that enables her effectively to predict the truth value that Xhosa-speakers are likely to attach to sentences in which the word features. Rather than reflect an attitude of cultural respect toward the speakers of the language being interpreted, an assumption that such a language has a completely different conceptual make-up from one's own, would interfere with the ability adequately to translate it.

Let us imagine for a moment what would happen if the radical interpreter, in the process of interpretation, assumed that the object language represented a conceptual scheme completely impenetrable to her. According to Ramberg, '(s)hould [the radical interpreter] be tempted to regard utterances of the subjects of interpretation as *systematically* false, she would merely be depriving her own theory of empirical bite, by cutting it off from its evidential base.' (1988: 642) The same, I think, would go for assumptions of impenetrable conceptual difference. If the interpreter would assume that she could *not* interpret a particular sentence (due to conceptual differences), she would have no option but to discard all utterances of the sentence as meaningless – in fact throwing a piece of evidence for her inductive theory out of her observations. For such a sentence, after all, she could come up with no truth conditions and, consequently, what she would be left with would be one *less* T-sentence from which to deduce semantic axioms for the words of the language. Even if an interpreter were to assume conceptual difference only in a limited number of cases, or only with regard to some subjects (if she assumed the possibility of a partial failure of translation in other words), due to the holistic working of languages, she would hamper her ability to come up with a translation for a whole *range* of words related to the subject. Assuming that a (western) interpreter can make no sense of the

concept of traditional healing in Xhosa-culture, would – rather than engender respect for this element of it – assign her to complete ignorance regarding the subject. What the relativist's move amounts to, in sum, is simply not being empirical enough in interpretation. The radical interpreter, in constructing his theory of meaning of the language, keeps on revising it in order to let the foreign speaker appear rational; while what the conceptual relativist does, is giving up on the interpretation-process at the first sign of trouble and then assuming a divide between his own rationality and that of the speaker.

The foregoing does not imply that one can never attribute error or a different opinion from one's own to a foreign speaker: attributing a different opinion to a foreign speaker is possible, but then only much later – when enough language is shared to make such a disagreement possible and when a fairly advanced translation of the speaker's language is already available. Furthermore the number of different opinions that the interpreter can assign to the speaker cannot exceed a very small maximum – the maximum amount of different opinions that a speaker can have from one's own, while still appearing to be a consistent speaker of the truth. Still, the issue of when and how it becomes possible for one to ascribe different opinions from one's own to a foreign speaker is an important one and I shall return to this matter in the next section.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

### (i) *Davidson's Realism*

Jennings verbalises one common objection against Davidson's position when he writes (regarding the principle of charity, in this case) that it represents '...a form of conceptual imperialism.' (1988: 348) Any statement to this effect remains a gross misreading of Davidson's stance. A facet of the argument in 'OVICS' that is often overlooked by conceptual relativists is that the attack on the idea of a conceptual scheme was directed against conceptual universalism as well as against conceptual relativism. Thus, the arguments in 'OVICS' herald no return to the type of 'conceptual imperialism' (represented by the idea that all humans share one universal conceptual structure) that relativism was a reaction against.<sup>16</sup> Davidson's view is that there can be no all-powerful paradigm forcibly structuring anyone's cognition. There cannot be multiple *different* schemes, nor one universal one.

It is true that for Davidson, as for the universalist, a likelihood exists that people will share many beliefs regarding the world. As far as he is concerned, however, this similarity in judgement that we are likely to find between people does not follow from a universal conceptual scheme said to structure all human cognition; rather it follows from the causal connection that exists between cognition and the world and from the veridical nature of belief. If people are likely to agree on the whole regarding how the world is, on Davidson's view, this is due to the fact that what people perceive is a real and constant world that is the same for everyone (at least on a local level) and to the

general disposition of human thought and language to represent this world as adequately as it could be represented. In a later paper ('A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', 1986a) Davidson expresses the desire to be considered 'a realist in all departments': knowledge, he holds, is of an objective world that is independent of human thought.<sup>17</sup> To a great degree Davidson's effort in 'OVICS' lead up to his taking this position, since in the 'OVICS'-paper (which remains less nuanced on this point) he drew the outline of a theory of cognition that left mind in *direct* contact with this world. Instead of accepting a picture of cognition that has a conceptual scheme mediating between the world and human understanding, dictating the contact of the one with the other, Davidson proposed to cut schemes out of the picture, denying the existence of any epistemological intermediaries *between* reality and cognition and leaving the mind capable of comprehending reality directly (1984c: 198).<sup>18</sup> This step, still, counts against both conceptual universalism *and* relativism, rendering Davidson's argument a far more subtle one than a simple return to old-fashioned 'conceptual imperialism'.

At least as far as the possibility of effective intercultural communication goes, Davidson's arguments yield a far more positive outcome than conceptual relativism can. After all, Davidson's conclusions are that a discussion between people regarding how the world *really* is, is possible and that such a discussion will not be hampered by systematic problems of incommensurability. A further advantage his position shows over the relativist's, is that it allows us to conclude that (because we all share many true beliefs regarding the world) every person should have an equal chance of success at discovering something valid regarding the world and at communicating this to everyone else. The conceptual relativist, on the other hand, must argue that we can all

only discover truths commensurate with our own conceptual scheme and that we have no chance of communicating these truths to people who do not share this scheme. This last position clearly seems to tell *against* the possibility of intercultural communication and understanding.

(ii) *Political implications*

Of course, the realist tendency in Davidson's theory of interpretation leads to the consequence that, when disagreements between people arise, some of them will be deemed correct in their judgements regarding the world and others wrong. It also seems as if a fear of the political implications of Davidson's arguments on precisely this score is what has prohibited its widespread acceptance for such a long time.<sup>19</sup> The relativist's fear is of course that if we admit that some politically oppressed cultures may be incorrect in some of their views regarding the world, this might serve as an excuse for even more forcibly oppressing them. While Davidson probably would not deny that people are often divided in different camps on how things are in the world (or even that the lines drawn between different camps may correspond to those between different cultures), it has to be stressed that no support can be found in his work for the idea that any one culture needs have a better chance at discovering the truth regarding the world than any other culture and therefore his work supports *no* one political grouping – colonialist or otherwise. Any problem we might find as regards the political oppression of some cultures remains a problem of the abuse of political power and not one of epistemology. After all, the problem of some people's opinions being forced on others does not just appear *between* cultures, but wherever power is abused – even between people speaking the *same* language; and there is no

reason why speakers of one language have to dominate, except common garden-variety arrogance and intransigence.

Remaining with the political implications of Davidson's work, Ramberg (1988) holds that radical interpretation can serve as a model for the critique of ideology. Similarly, I think that (far from being ideologically imperialist), radical interpretation may serve to further the cause of intercultural understanding. Politically speaking, the main advantage of finding a way to employ radical interpretation as our model for intercultural communication, lies in it being a method that relies on all foreign speakers being assumed to be consistent and logical speakers of the truth. Interpreting as a radical interpreter displays the advantage that, in the interpretation process, one can harbour no pre-conceptions regarding the other speaker's inferior capability of judging states of affairs in the world correctly (this puts the radical interpreter one up on the scientific imperialist); and furthermore, it displays the advantage that the speaker's opinions is held to be empirically accessible to the interpreter (putting it one up on the relativist). If, on the basis of this last point, the schemer were to object that the principle of charity is conceptually imperialist, perhaps it should be pointed out that it is not only speakers of western languages who ever interpret other languages: not only would westerners interpret more 'exotic' cultures by their own lights, so, too the exotic cultures will have their day. Perhaps, then, we should systematically amend our philosophical discourse to portray the radical interpreter as a speaker of Nuer or *isiXhosa* and the foreign speaker to be a speaker of a language like German. Surely such a move would counter the charge of conceptual imperialism.

Granted, in the context of our colonial past, accepting the speaker's judgements as true wholesale, and possibly even not understandable by us, does exhibit a certain amount of respect; but it can also amount to a refusal to accommodate the foreign speaker in holding him (with some imaginative re-construction) to be correct by our accounts, to be able to communicate with us and even to be able to teach us something regarding the world.

(iii) *Language-learning for intercultural understanding*

Despite all that has been said, it would be foolish to deny a history of intercultural contact that shows some very real differences of expression to exist between languages. Such differences have been cited at length by Davidson's critics, despite his admission that '(a) language may contain simple predicates whose extensions are matched by no simple predicates, or even by any predicates at all, in some other language.' (1984c: 192) Since Davidson's critics seem fond of using examples, let us turn for the moment to a pat example of a case such as Davidson has in mind. According to Pinker (1994: 64), the Inuit language does not (as is popularly claimed in support of the linguistic relativity hypothesis) have dozens of words available to it for describing different types of snow and the anthropological accounts that exist to this effect form part of an elaborate hoax.<sup>20</sup> Even conceding, as Pinker does, that about a dozen different Inuit words can be discerned for snow (if one counts generously, though, English, too, has about as many words for snow: 'slush' for instance, or 'ice' or 'dry powder') does not commit one to accept that a different conceptual scheme structures Inuit cognition, leading the Inuit to *perceive* or *understand* snow differently: rather, it might simply be easier to express what the

differences *are* between certain types of snow *in Inuit*. There would be no reason to suspect that these differences the Inuit may describe with their dozen words would by any means be lost on the English speaker; or that the English speaker could not (with practice) recognize what the different types of snow are and – using his own language – describe them again.

The fact that some differences of expression occur between English and Inuit when it comes to describing snow, probably would count as what Davidson calls a local ‘breakdown in translation’ (1984c: 192) – a simple failure to translate a word or phrase from a foreign language directly. Despite their serious-sounding name, such breakdowns remain completely innocuous as far as the threat of incommensurability is concerned, for (as was pointed out in the common ontology-argument), at all recognizing that a failure of direct translation has occurred between two languages is only possible against a background of generally successful translation. Such a failure can even (for this reason) be counted as evidence of the *commensurability* of the languages in question.

As far as local breakdowns of translation go, Davidson’s theory holds a positive consequence for intercultural communication in that it helps us realise that other languages<sup>21</sup> occasionally may have better resources available to it than ours for telling us how the world *is*. This realisation should prompt the conclusion that, if we are serious about learning about the world and about expressing our knowledge of it concisely, as scientists we are best served *to learn as many languages as possible* and to begin using them together with our own in scientific discourse. Incorporating a deeper understanding of the semantic resources of different languages into our own

(or simply beginning to use those languages ourselves) can enhance our economy of scientific expression.

A further conclusion regarding local breakdowns of translation suggests itself, however. As we have seen, *recognizing* that a local breakdown in translation has occurred between two languages presupposes ontological similarity between these two languages. It is important to note, though, that the recognition of a local breakdown of translation between two languages should also signal general agreement regarding *how things are in the world* between the speakers of those languages. For an English-speaker to recognize that the Inuit can describe, say, drifted snow more precisely than she can, is after all only possible if she can *recognize* that snow, having drifted and compacted, *is* slightly different from, for instance, freshly fallen snow. Recognizing where and how the application of the Inuit word for drifted snow is different from any English word we have, would be completely impossible if we as English-speakers did not find that there *does exist* a difference between types of snow after all. Learning how to apply the Inuit word for drifted snow then, may prompt an English-speaker to pay more attention to the world and to spot subtle differences between types of snow that she has not recognized before: learning any new language, in this way, can serve as a catalyst for learning about the world, without having to commit to the idea that different languages *shape* our understanding of the world differently.

Michael Root, via a different route, argues for the role that interpreting foreign speakers can have in changing our opinions about the world. Davidson, he holds, has indicated how charity requires of us to assume that the opinions of the speaker we are

trying to interpret, roughly agree with ours. However, there exists more than one way to ensure that the speaker and interpreter's opinions agree: besides assuming that the speaker's beliefs conform to the interpreter's prior beliefs regarding a specific matter, the interpreter can take the onus upon herself and change *her own* opinions regarding the world, to reflect what she thinks the speaker's opinions are. 'To reduce the difference between our minds and the minds of others,' Root writes, 'we have to move something, but the something can be their minds *or* our own.' (1986: 301) (My italics.) Root's point remains a valid one to the extent that, in the course of learning a foreign speaker's language, it may sometimes be advisable for one to change one's *own* opinions regarding how things are in the world, if this allows one to view more of the speaker's beliefs to be consistent or allows one to come up with a simpler and more elegant interpretation of his language. If arriving at a good interpretation of the speaker's language calls for it, one can simply change one's mind regarding the world, in the common use of the phrase: or stated more positively, in the process of learning a new language reject one's old notions and *learn something new regarding the world*. If we accepted the notion that a conceptual scheme structures our cognition, however, in a sense we would be left unable to change our minds, as our conceptual scheme would commit us to being capable of only grasping a limited amount of truths. As far as our opinions go, dropping the notion of conceptual schemes structuring cognition has the consequence of rendering us more flexible to learn things regarding the world. Learning foreign languages radically then show the twin advantages of creating an awareness of the possibly better resources available to languages other than our own for describing the world; and the possible advantage of prompting us to learn some things regarding the world.

(iv) *Radical interpretation as practical intercultural interpretation*

Earlier, it was stressed that – even though the principle of charity advises one to assume great similarity in belief between interpreter and speaker during the process of radical interpretation – it *is* possible to ascribe different opinions to them, but then only after the process of radical interpretation has largely run its course. Any meaningful differences of opinion, after all, can only be ascribed to a foreign speaker on the basis of an available translation of his language – in fact, exactly such a translation is what radical interpretation was designed to help us come by. On this construal of Davidson’s theory, the methodological advice to issue to the interpreter of a foreign language would be something like the following. When at first confronted with a foreign language, an interpreter has no option but to start out by finding a translation for it. In this process, the interpreter has no choice but to apply the principle of charity, assuming that the foreign speaker’s beliefs largely agree with her own. Practically, applying this advice amounts to ‘...holding [the speaker’s] beliefs constant as far as possible...’, while solving for the meaning of the sentences he utters. (Davidson, 1984a: 137). This process having been completed, however, the interpreter could easily return to her original assignation of beliefs to the speaker and revise it to the effect that he actually holds some different opinions from her own. Such a return can *only* be safely effected after a fairly reliable translation for the speaker’s language has been arrived at and, of course, only a very small number of the opinions of the speaker can ever be revised: revising too many of them would destroy all of the work done in coming up with a theory of truth for the language in the first place.

In the dialogue between languages or cultures, it seems as if two stages or processes can be made out: a stage during which speakers of the one language are attempting to translate the language of the other (at this stage no meaningful differences of opinion can be ascribed to a speaker); and a stage during which a translation for that language has become available and differences of opinion can be attributed on the basis of the language that interpreter and speaker (by now) share. The result would be an ongoing process of interpretation, in which one must first ‘solve for meaning on the basis of belief’ until it is felt that enough of the foreign language has been mastered; before reversing the process and attempting to discover the beliefs of a foreign speaker on the basis of this shared language – solving for belief on the basis of meaning, as it were. (Solving for belief in this way could be accomplished by having a simple conversation with the foreign speaker.) Having solved more accurately for a person’s beliefs, these can be held constant again to facilitate a return to interpreting his language (in order to fine-tune one’s semantic theory – local breakdowns of translation can become clear, for example) and so forth, in a constant interplay between solving for meaning and solving for belief. Through this interplay, a type of hermeneutic circle results in which differences of opinion are made intelligible against a shared semantic background, before these differences can be discussed meaningfully, or finer semantic differences can again become clear on the basis of that.

The picture sketched above of a hermeneutic circle of intercultural dialogue seems reconcilable with what Davidson has in mind in ‘OVICS’. In a cryptic passage towards the end of that paper, Davidson writes ‘...we improve the clarity and bite of

declarations of difference, whether of scheme or opinion, by enlarging the basis of shared (translatable) language or of shared opinion.’ (1984c: 197) If any one element makes this passage difficult to understand, I think, it is Davidson’s idiosyncratic use of the word ‘scheme’ here; still, I shall take these differences of ‘scheme’ he refers to simply to mean semantic differences: differences in words or concepts utilised. If one allows this interpretation, both of the elements of the ‘hermeneutic’ of interpretation outlined above (solving for meaning and solving for belief) would be present and Davidson’s position would be twofold. Through taking care to translate as much as possible of strange language accurately and carefully (‘enlarging the basis of shared...language’), the different ways in which different languages can be used to express things regarding the world, can come to light. This point should be familiar from the discussion of local breakdowns of translation. Secondly, though, enlarging the basis of shared *opinion* can also bring more clarity to the differences of opinion that exist between people (‘...we improve the clarity and bite of declarations of difference...of...opinion...by enlarging the basis of shared...opinion’) and may even assist in changing our opinions regarding the world.

In being confronted with any difficulty in the interpretation-process, then (such as being confronted with a sentence that the speaker of the foreign language obviously holds true, but which one holds false oneself, or vice versa) Davidson’s advice would probably be that one should try and overcome the difficulty by enlarging the basis of shared language and the basis of shared opinion. Were the difficulty due to a semantic difference (a local breakdown) this could be pointed out in improving the available translation; while, if a different opinion regarding the world were to blame, these differences of opinion may be more clearly defined (or even eliminated

altogether) through enlarging the basis of shared opinion. All can be considered good and well at this stage, except for the fact that Davidson raises one important *caveat*: we can never be able to say with complete confidence *when* differences between people will be due to their holding different beliefs regarding the world and when it will be due to the utilisation of the different concepts that are available in their respective languages. (1984c: 197). There can never be evidence, Davidson argues, for a circumstance in which people utilise different concepts in explaining states of affairs that cannot also be taken as evidence of simple disagreements of opinion regarding the affairs in question.

In context, this argument of Davidson's was specifically directed against the idea that simple differences in the words or concepts different people use may be distended to insurmountable differences of conceptual scheme. Where we do encounter certain surprising or worrying declared differences between people, Davidson feels, it is simply more natural to speak of differences of opinion existing between them, than of thoroughgoing differences of conceptual apparatus. To a large extent, the argument against conceptual schemes in 'OVICS' is that we can never *know* that declarations of difference between people are due to their approaching the world with a different conceptual scheme; and that, therefore, in difficult cases, we should settle for ascribing to them different opinions regarding the world. Still, I do not think Davidson would have us take this advice as absolute and, indeed, attributing all declarations of difference to differences of opinion would be rash. Even though the option of attributing declared differences between people to conceptual difference is not possible, I think the interpreter can always choose to ascribe these differences to a common semantic difference – a harmless local breakdown of translation that can

always be repaired by improving one's translation of the object-language and discovering what the speaker *really* meant. What we are after, I think, but Davidson does not provide, is some sort of model to aid one in deciding *when* to hold that declarations of difference between people are due to semantic differences and when to differences of opinion. With such an aid in place – and in the next move – remedial action as appropriate to what caused the difference (enlarging the basis of shared language in the case of semantic differences, or enlarging the basis of shared opinion for differences of opinion) can be chosen.

The choice really for an interpreter when confronted with a situation in which she and the speaker attach different truth-values to a sentence, lies in compensating for this difficulty by returning to the theory of meaning for the language and changing *it* slightly (effectively changing the meaning of the sentence, as she perceived it), or deciding that the speaker simply differs from her on a matter of opinion and using a fixed understanding of his language to understand *that*. In choosing which one of these routes to follow, what needs to be made is a trade-off between the value attached to the existing translation for the language and the value attached to one piece of contrary evidence. If one valued the existing translation-manual highly, the difference should probably be ascribed to opinion, while if one were convinced the speaker held a specific opinion not reconcilable with the translation one has come up with, the translation could be worked on. In any event, the best advice would probably be to try both options and see what makes the speaker appear most logical and consistent and allows one to explain his utterances and behaviour best.

Regarding his rejection of *convention* playing an important part in a theory of linguistic ability, Ramberg writes that Davidson has shown language to be dynamic: ‘(r)adical interpretation,’ he holds, ‘will in principle succeed as long as we regard speakers as speaking the truth, continuously reforming our theories of meaning on that assumption.’ (1988: 645) As such, the basic ability needed to be able to use language, may lie not in having one good theory of meaning for the language, but the ability constantly to form new theories of meaning in the shape of the prior – and passing theories of meaning Davidson describes in ‘A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs’ (1986b). I would contend that the ability to know – upon being confronted with a declaration of difference from the side of another speaker – *when* to ascribe that difference to a difference of belief and when to a difference of meaning and the sense to come to a rational solution to the conflict, is part of this ability.

## CONCLUSION

The most positive advance brought by Davidson’s arguments in ‘OVICS’ lies in the refutation he manages of conceptual relativism. Still, a great many other consequences followed in the wake of the writing of ‘OVICS’ and much of its current relevance would lie in what it has to say regarding the relationship that exists between cognition and reality and in the solution it provides to the problem of skepticism. What I have hoped to show is that Davidson’s arguments in ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’ need not only remain influential on the level of fairly abstract epistemology, or on the level of critiques of Kant; rather, they are of real practical value in making it clear to us how it is that communication between people can and should work.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Besides the attack on the possibility of a conceptual scheme in 'OVICS', further examples of the type of dismissal I have in mind include the attack on metaphoric meaning and Davidson's dismissal of the idea that linguistic convention needs to play any fundamental part in a theory of language.

<sup>2</sup> See Forster (1997) for the criticism that Davidson's argument is doomed to fail due to it being '...a priorist relative to the relevant linguistic and textual evidence...'

<sup>3</sup> Bar-On (1994: 150 - 7) provides a well-argued criticism to the effect that failures of intertranslation is in fact *not* criterial of genuine divergence of different conceptual schemes. Besides Davidson's more or less conventional identification of conceptual schemes with non-intertranslatable languages, however, he was also motivated by a practical concern that Bar-On does not address. If one were not to identify conceptual schemes with different *languages*, Davidson holds, the identity of conceptual schemes would have to be accounted for on the level of the mind. This would amount to doubling the problem, since stating the identity-conditions of conceptual schemes in mentalistic terms would be so much harder (1984c: 184).

<sup>4</sup> An important consequence of this strategy is that translatability becomes a criterion for languagehood: if a certain activity cannot be translated into our language, Davidson holds, then that activity cannot be described as speech behaviour (1984c: 185).

<sup>5</sup> The term 'common ontology' may seem a peculiar one for Davidson to use, but, with some terminological leeway granted, I do feel that it is an effective one and I shall stick to it. In this context, one should not take him to be saying that languages represent anything as mysterious as a hierarchy of being: all languages must simply individuate the same things in the world, for us to be able to differ meaningfully regarding them. Even individuating the same things in the world then already indicates a large degree of similarity between languages.

<sup>6</sup> Child quotes MacDowell here. In his paper, 'On the Dualism of Scheme and Content' Child discerns three other themes in Davidson's polemic against the dualism of scheme and content, but on my view, this one is most obvious. For a more in-depth look at other issues surrounding this subject, Child's account remains helpful.

<sup>7</sup> What *should* rather form the talking point for Davidson, I think, would have to be the direct relationship that exists between the world and human cognition. A very important part of Davidson's aim in 'OVICS' was to do away with the epistemological intermediaries (like conceptual schemes) that are said to exist between the world and cognition; and to establish that we are in direct cognitive

touch with an independent and objective world. I shall touch on the realist bent of Davidson's arguments again under a subsequent heading. For an excellent account of Davidson's 'transcendental' arguments, though, see Maker (1991).

<sup>8</sup> For criticisms of this sort, see Wallace (1986), Jennings (1988), Henderson (1994) and Forster (1998).

<sup>9</sup> Nuer is an Eastern-Sudanic language. Henderson (1994) offers much the same argument using the example of the Zande word '*mangu*' ('witchcraft substance').

<sup>10</sup> Hacker draws the conclusion from Davidson's argument on this point that it serves to prove Davidson's much disputed argument to the effect that translatability should form a criterion of languagehood. A failure of intertranslation between conceptual schemes which are both true, is unintelligible (as we saw) and, therefore, all 'schemes' which are true, are intertranslatable. As true conceptual schemes are identified with languages, all languages must be intertranslatable and, therefore, intertranslatability can become a criterion for being a language (Hacker, 1996: 288).

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, Davidson himself supports elements of both the coherence – and correspondence theories of truth; and would prefer to see the two notions reconciled. See Davidson (1986a).

<sup>12</sup> Forster (1997: 153) repeats the mistake of Wallace (1986) when he writes that the classicist or anthropologist actually engaged in the practice of interpreting foreign texts does not and could not practically apply the principle of charity. The mistake, of course, is that the classicist or anthropologist is rarely – if ever – in the position of a purely radical interpreter, in that they mostly approach foreign texts or cultures with an available pre-understanding of the relevant language.

<sup>13</sup> '*La ndoda sangoma*' is roughly translatable as 'that man is a witchdoctor', although 'traditional healer' is often preferred for '*sangoma*'. We assume for the moment that the interpreter has progressed far enough in the process of constructing a theory of truth for *isiXhosa* to have a working hypothesis regarding the axioms for '*la*' and '*ndoda*'.

<sup>14</sup> '*Muti*' can denote a variety of traditional medicines.

<sup>15</sup> At the stage of radical interpretation, the interpreter is not so much interested in the speaker's opinions as she is in his language. The interpreter can thus be said to be more interested in what the speaker's opinions *are*, than in *what* they are. The mere identity of the speaker's opinions would be sufficient to allow her to interpret the speaker's language, while actually evaluating the contents of the speaker's opinions against her own would be besides the point. In this way, it could not *matter* to the

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interpreter if she encountered a whole group of foreign speakers who believed they were Tutankamen – if she knew *that* they believed themselves to be Tutankamen, she could interpret their pronouncements to this effect.

<sup>16</sup> An often-cited example in this context is the one of the linguists Berlin and Kay's theories regarding colour perception, which supports the conclusion that all human cognitive apparatus for perceiving colour is the same. The 'colonialist' slant of the theory is revealed when it explains apparent differences in the ways in which remote cultures perceive and name different colours through an evolutionary account. Berlin and Kay's theory is that all languages evolve to instantiate the same universal scheme when it comes to colour perception and the scheme it evolves towards is the one instantiated by English and other modern western languages. By extension, any language *not* instantiating this model already, is labelled primitive.

<sup>17</sup> The issue of Davidson's 'realism' is a contentious one. Baghramian (1990) remains convinced that Davidson is in fact a realist, while Rorty attempts to find support in Davidson's work for his own anti-realist conclusions. Salinas (1989) holds Davidson to be an anti-realist, mainly because of the attack in 'OVICS' on the possibility of making sense of a theory-neutral reality.

<sup>18</sup> The denial of the possibility of any epistemological intermediaries structuring human cognition of the world, according to Baghramian, was motivated by two reasons. Firstly, no satisfactory account of what these entities are supposed to be is available; and secondly, the introduction of such intermediaries threatens our hold on the world and reality, giving rise to skeptical worries (1998: 297).

<sup>19</sup> Forster (1997), launches a whole barrage of criticisms of this order against Davidson. He holds that Davidson's position amounts to '...a sort of philosophical rationalization for imperialism...' and explicitly raises the question of the conservative political affiliation of supporters of Davidson's position. He writes: 'Quine...who was a major source of philosophical inspiration and encouragement to [Davidson]...is well known for his right-wing views. And it is my impression that such views tend to be common among enthusiasts for Davidson's position as well.' Of Davidson himself, though, Forster admits that '...he is in fact quite liberal or even mildly left-wing in his politics...' (1997: 166 -7)

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, though, Eskimo-Aleut languages generally utilise up to thirty different demonstratives, including demonstratives for 'that one up there' ('*hakan*'), 'that one in there' ('*qakan*') and 'this one unseen' ('*urnan*') (See 'Internet Resources' for reference.) This last example is probably more impressive than the well-worn example of the number of different Eskimo words for snow.

<sup>21</sup> The Eskimo-Aleut language, for example.

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### **Internet Resources**

The example regarding the number of demonstratives that exist in Eskimo-Aleut was found at:

<http://www.britannica.com/bcom/eb/article/6/0,5716,118156+6+109813,00.html>

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## APPENDIX

### 1. Davidson's Truth-Conditional Semantics

The most important theoretical component of Davidson's early work in semantics is his attempt to construct a theory of meaning on the basis of a theory of truth. In this attempt he draws on Tarski's theory of truth for formal languages, eventually constructing a theory of meaning on the basis of (what he calls) a pre-theoretical understanding of what it is for a sentence to be true. A large part of Davidson's project was motivated by the wish to do away with intensionality in a theory of meaning; and the idea that abstract and vague intensional notions such as 'word-meanings', 'speaker's-meanings' or 'cognitive content' can be conveyed to the listener in speech, he rejects along with accounts of meaning dependent on these notions, such as referential theories of meaning or theories of communication-intention. As a more realistic alternative, he seeks to develop a theory of meaning that is fully extensional.

For Davidson, the *sentence* and not the word is the vehicle of meaning; and whatever meaning sentences have, he holds, can be given through stating the conditions under which they are true. Such a statement of the truth-conditions of any sentence (for instance 'snow is white') should take the form of a Tarskian T-sentence, such as

' "Snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white ' '.

Tarski's theory relies on the idea of defining the concept of truth for any language in another language – a meta-language. Properly, then, in Davidson's account, the truth conditions of the sample sentence stated on the right-hand side of the biconditional 'if and only if' should also be stated in a different language than the language that the sentence is in; with a T-sentence like

" 'Sneeu is wit' is true if and only if snow is white "

resulting.

This last type of sentence seems more informative than the first. In it, the truth conditions of a sentence in Afrikaans are given in a meta-language (English) and, via this route, the T-sentence succeeds in teaching the English speaker with no knowledge of Afrikaans something very real about that language: it provides a translation of the sentence by stating the conditions under which it is true.

Davidson holds that, were (for instance) an English speaker able to obtain a list of all of the sentences of the language Afrikaans and construct for every sentence of

Afrikaans a T-sentence stating the truth conditions of that sentence (for instance “sneeu is wit” is true if and only if snow is white’, “die lug is blou” is true if and only if the sky is blue’ and so on, for *every* sentence of Afrikaans), she would have succeeded in coming up with a complete translation of Afrikaans into English.

Coming up with a list of T-sentences – one for each sentence of the language – however, is only one part of the task that Davidson foresees for the interpreter. As a philosopher interested in semantics, Davidson wishes to ask after the role that the finite number of words of any language play in the magnitude of sentences composing it. Looking at the list of T-sentences (one for each sentence of the language), which the interpreter has come up with, she should notice that the same words repeatedly feature in different positions or roles in this list. Rather than attempting to list an infinite number of T-sentences for a language in order to translate it, it would be more useful to the interpreter to abstract a finite set of axioms – one axiom for each *word* of the language – from such a list of T-sentences; which assigns as an axiom to each word *the systematic influence it has on the truth-value of all of the sentences in which it features*. With a complete set of such semantic axioms at hand, the interpreter should be able to deduce the truth conditions of any sentence of the language, whether or not she already has a T-sentence available for it.

At this point it should be clear how truth, meaning and translation into a meta-language are related; and also why Davidson does not think that words have ‘meanings’ – all that words have are more or less constant, predictable and systematic effects on the truth conditions of the sentences in which they feature.

## 2. Radical Interpretation

Under the previous heading, the theoretical possibility of coming up with a large stock of T-sentences for a language from which to deduce the semantic roles of all of the words in that language, was outlined. Working this idea out further, Davidson develops Quine’s notion of radical translation into a larger theory of *radical interpretation*. Radical interpretation is a *theoretical* notion, although it deals, crucially, with the thought of a very real situation: the situation in which a (theoretical) interpreter takes up the task of approaching a completely strange language without any prior means available to translate it, attempting to learn it on the basis of empirical evidence alone.

How Quine and Davidson believe the radical interpreter/translator can succeed in arriving at a translation for the foreign language (call it L) is by paying attention to the utterances of the speakers of L and trying to gather under what conditions these sentences are typically spoken. For instance, the field linguist could notice that the speakers of L utter a sentence that sounds like ‘gavagai’, whenever they point at a rabbit sitting in a bush. On the basis of repeatedly hearing the sentence ‘gavagai’ spoken when a rabbit is sitting in a bush, the field linguist will be able to construct a T-sentence for the sentence ‘gavagai’ of the order:

‘ “*gavagai*” is true in L if and only if a rabbit sitting in a bush is being pointed out at the time of the utterance ’.

Paying attention to the occasion of the utterance of a large number of sentences, the field linguist should be able to come up with a stock of T-sentences (a list of sentences of L and their truth-conditions) for L. On the basis of this stock of T-sentences again, she should be able to start discerning certain words that repeatedly feature in it and to deduce the systematic roles that these words play in all of the sentences in which they appear. Such a set of semantic axioms (one for each word of the language) would form a translation manual for L. Using it, the field linguist should be able to deduce the truth conditions of any sentence that a speaker of L utters, *without* having to pay attention to the occasion of its utterance to deduce what the sentence’s truth conditions are.

It needs again to be stressed that radical interpretation is an entirely *theoretical* notion, although it deals with the thought of a practical eventuality. That practical interpretation essentially works by means of radical interpretation was *not* Davidson’s point – rather the fact that radical interpretation should *in principle* be possible is presented as a pre-condition for linguistic communication.

### 3. The Principle of Charity

In the process of interpreting a foreign language radically, one important control has to be borne in mind: the interpreter needs to apply the principle of charity. This principle advises that at all to be able to relate the sentences that the foreign speaker utters to conditions that actually hold in the world, the speaker must be viewed as a speaker of the truth. After all, if the interpreter were to assume the contrary – that the foreign speaker always utters falsehoods – there would be no correlation between what he says and how things are in the world; leaving the interpreter with no empirical evidence for what the truth conditions are of the sentences the speaker utters.

The principle of charity advises that, in order to be able to interpret any language, an interpreter must take the speakers of that language to make largely the same judgements regarding the world as she does. If this were true, charity would imply that, for the interpretation of language at all to succeed, all people must systematically make similar judgements regarding the world. Since linguistic communication clearly does succeed, some view Davidson’s arguments on this score as a possible refutation of skepticism. The principle of charity bears similarity to Habermas’s thought of an ideal speech situation which must be assumed to exist, were dialogue at all to be possible between speakers, though of course the pedigree of the two ideas are not similar.

#### 4. Holism

According to Davidson, the interpreter's approach to any individual language must be empirical and holistic. Davidson's holism follows from the fact that the semantic axioms the interpreter needs to come up with for every word of the language can only be deduced on the basis of the role that that word plays in the entire range of sentences in which it features. The semantic axiom for 'snow', for instance must be deduced from a whole range of sentences such as 'snow is white', 'snow consists of ice-crystals', 'it snows in winter' and so on. In this fashion, the semantic axioms come up with for any one word of the language, needs to make an appeal to an entire range of sentences.

Furthermore, because all of the sentences of a language is composed of a finite number of words, in order to come up with the truth conditions of any one sentence, one must appeal (via the axioms) to an enormous range of other sentences – one must appeal to the entire language, in fact. ('Snow is white', for instance, is in this fashion related to such diverse sentences as '*snow* consists of ice-crystals', 'the cat *is* on the mat', 'the fridge is *white*' and so on.) In the final analysis, sentence-meaning does not exist in isolation: any sentence's meaning is the result (through the words making it up) of the holistic working of an entire language.

As far as belief goes, Davidson's view is also holistic. If one holds any one belief, he argues, one must also hold a range of others. The belief that classes at the university started this week, for instance, implies the beliefs that the university exists, that classes are conducted at the university, that periods of instruction and periods of holiday alternate at the university and so on. Just as no sentence's meaning exists in isolation, no one belief can exist in isolation.