

Wittgenstein as Davidson on Metaphor*

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This essay has five parts:

First, I explain some fundamental agreements between Davidson and Wittgenstein. I argue that Donald Davidson’s views and Wittgenstein’s views in the *Investigations* arise from some of the same fundamental insights.

Second, I discuss Davidson’s account of metaphor and the agreement between Davidson and Wittgenstein on some of the “facts” about metaphor.

Third, I discuss how Davidson’s conception of metaphor can be extended to deal with metaphor as a phenomenon in historical linguistics. Through a discussion of Davidson’s account of language acquisition, I suggest how an account of the interrelationship between the idiolect and the common language, taking Derridean and Wittgensteinian considerations into account, can lead to an expanded Davidsonian account of metaphor and language. Language as idiolect and language as text turn out to be inextricably intertwined, so that indeterminacies in the common language become indeterminacies in the idiolect.

Fourth, in order to show how such a conception could still be essentially Davidsonian in making truth and truth-definition central, I propose a Davidsonian account of truth that acknowledges in-principle unknowable truth-values. This would allow Davidson to deal with metaphorical indeterminacies in the same way that he could deal with several other kinds of indeterminacy. I argue that this theory is compatible with everything Wittgenstein asserts, except for being a theory.

* The discussion in section 3) is largely a response to questions raised by Dr. Louise Roska-Hardy in discussion.

Fifth, I argue that Wittgenstein could and should adopt this extended and adapted Davidsonian line, if he re-thought some of his assumptions about truth, the use of “true,” and the proper role of a theory of logical form.

1) Some agreements between Wittgenstein and Davidson

The fundamental agreements between Wittgenstein and Davidson can be grouped under three headings:

i) First they both agree that there is no “magic language.” “Magic language” is my term for the “meanings” that allegedly lie behind words. Such meanings would be entities or states that interpret themselves, that mean what they mean in virtue of their essence or by a magic relation. “Meaning in virtue of essence” is characteristic of Locke’s ideas, Husserl’s noeses, and Frege’s senses. Somehow, magic words determine a referent by themselves. Sometimes this magic reference works because states of the soul have an intentional object just in virtue of their intrinsic nature. (Locke’s idea of red could be the idea of nothing else) Sometimes, the tokens in the soul infallibly grasp the appropriate referents. (Wittgenstein’s reference relation in the *Tractatus*.)

All of these versions of “presence” are difficult for a modern naturalist to accept. When I call such entities and graspings a magic language, I mean to assert the obvious naturalistic fact that meanings can only be word-like phenomena. The “magic language” terminology says that the assumptions that philosophers have made about meaning require that thought-tokens have occult features that any naturalism must deny.¹

Davidson expresses exactly this point by treating a theory of meaning as a truth-definition. The best one can do in saying what a person means is to say something that

¹ Quine (1953, 1960) is the analytic philosopher who first and most famously made these points. Derrida denies the magic language by denying presence, the “fullness” of meanings supposedly before consciousness when a person thinks or knows what he means. See Wheeler (2000) for expositions of the relations between Derrida and analytic philosophers.

systematically matches the utterance in truth-value. Roughly, language is explicated or understood in language. If all there is to a theory of meaning is truth-definition, then, as with Derrida, the meaningful language is all there is to meaning. What it takes for a language to be meaningful is not a metaphysics of meanings, but rather human beings acting together in a common world.

Wittgenstein denies the magic language by, for instance, systematically denying the existence of inner states that would be the referents or the “real meanings” behind utterances. In Davidsonian terms, Wittgenstein pictures beliefs, intentions, and reference as parts of a rational interpretation scheme, a language game that does not connect to the world by designating special mental entities, but rather makes sense of human activities.

For Wittgenstein and Davidson, meaning is essentially connected with, although not reducible to a function of, what people think and say in what circumstances. Attributing meaning is action-interpretation, and interpretation cannot be reduced to a set of rules.² If understanding a language is being able to interpret utterances in it, then there is no general algorithmic procedure for understanding languages. Davidson uses truth-definition as a way of saying what an understanding of a language would be, but that truth-definition is not a discovery-procedure, it is rather a description.

Davidson approaches the problem of getting at “the rules of language” by a theory of interpretation that tries to account for the interconnections among sentences while accommodating the actual utterances in circumstances. One important difference from the *Tractatus* and other such metaphysical accounts is that the “circumstances” *are given by the interpreter’s sentences*. Explication of meaning goes from sentences mentioned to sentences used. That is, to give the meaning of a sentence is essentially to produce a sentence with the same

² The irreducibility of interpretation to pre-formulated sets of rules follows from the requirement that interpretation deal with novelty. Just as there is no algorithm for theory-creation, since a novel predicate

use. If “‘Schnee ist weiss’ is true if and only if snow is white” is a correct interpretation, then “schnee ist weiss” has the same use for Friedrich as “snow is white” has for Fred.

Davidson and Wittgenstein differ on the topic of rules. Both thinkers are persuaded by the thought that “rules” would strictly require a language in which to formulate them, which would need its own rules. Wittgenstein directly says that, at bottom, we have to just say “that’s what we do,” without need to justify why what we do is right. Davidson argues, following Quine, that interpretation of another as a rational agent requires treating the person as believing mostly truths and wanting mostly the good. In effect, Davidson agrees with Wittgenstein’s “justification” of practices by observing that, if they are human practices at all, most of them must agree with us. So Davidson gives another argument, from rational interpretation-theory, to show why Wittgenstein was right to claim that practices do not in general stand in need of justification.³

Davidson’s is not a correspondence theory in anything but a trivial sense. Davidson has explicitly argued that there cannot be a realm of facts, that “the world” is not a useful correlative concept to truth, and that there is no “given” that “conceptual schemes” “carve up.” Another difference from a Tractarian view is that “logical form” is treated as a constraint derived from learnability, not something based on a metaphysics of predication, as in the Tractatus. Thus “logical form” is construed as a central language game in thought-having and thought-interpretation, not as a metaphysical thesis.⁴

Wittgenstein eschews such theorizing. He does not discuss logical relations as central, and does not assign a central role to truth. Like Derrida, Wittgenstein supposes that truth requires correspondence, and so the rejection of a given for sentences to correspond to is a rejection of the general applicability of truth. Davidson, on the other hand, makes truth-value and truth-conditions

cannot be deduced non-trivially, so there is no algorithm for interpretation of actions, whether speech-actions or others.

³ This is an interpretation of Davidson’s (1973, 1974, 1975) among his numerous papers on interpretation.

distinct from the factual, from assertion, and from interests we might have in informing one another. In the same way that metaphor is the presentation of sentences with truth-values for purposes other than informing that their truth-value is truth, so commands, questions, sarcasms, jokes, innuendoes, and, in general, different rhetorical forces are employment of sentences with truth-conditions for various purposes.

Davidson proposes an account of how something about the words used affects how the utterance performs its rhetorical function. This is a project that Wittgenstein recognizes as well. In the famous passages with the foreman ordering slabs (1953, "Platte" pp. 24 ff.) Wittgenstein observes that there would be reason to treat the order as a sentence rather than a long word if components of the order occurred in other sentences. Thus Wittgenstein recognizes the project of getting a theory by ascribing structure to sentences and Davidson develops an account of what it takes to carry out that project in a systematic way that will explain the role of "platte" in affecting truth-conditions of all the sentences in which it occurs. For Davidson, the command would be a sentence, with truth-conditions, presented so that the appropriate hearer will make it true.

Davidson agrees with Wittgenstein that there is much more to giving orders and making other uses of language than logic and truth-conditions, but what an order orders is still a matter of truth-conditions. Most of what is usually treated as semantics is, for Davidson, part of the art of interpretation, the unlimited task of figuring out what persons are doing. Thus, unlike Wittgenstein, Davidson develops a theory of truth-conditional meaning that supplies the equipment with which purposive speech-actions can be performed. Wittgenstein rejects ascribing logical form to sentences because he incorrectly connects ascription of logical form to his earlier metaphysics of predication, in which truth is correspondence to fact and true sentences structurally mirror facts. If there is no given, then giving truth-conditions does not mean

⁴ An example of such misunderstanding blocking recognition of the similarity between Wittgenstein and Davidson is Joachim Schulte's (1989).

“corresponding to fact,” except in a trivial sense. If truth is primary, then truth-conditions, given in language, are all there is to “contents”, cognitive or other.

ii) Second, both thinkers deny a “given,” a domain of objects prior to conceptualization which conceptualization categorizes. For Davidson, if there is no given, then truth is not supervenient on being, but is rather fundamental. That is, Davidson (1990,1997) denies that truth is definable or reducible to any other notion. Sentences do not have truth-values in virtue of correspondence to anything, except in the sense that “Fred is a frog” is true if and only if Fred is a frog. “Fred is a frog” has objective truth-conditions, but if language is as good a rendering of what is the case as is available, then there is nothing to add to the truism, “Fred is a frog” is true if and only if Fred is a frog.

This position is anti-metaphysical. Suppose we are asked, “What is required for ‘There are dogs’ to be true?” There are, according to Davidson, two kinds of legitimate answer, the trivial and the scientific. The trivial answer observes that “There are dogs” is true just in case there are dogs. This would be the kind of information I might seek about a Croatian sentence. On the other hand, there is a scientific account: “There are dogs” can only be true given a certain history of mammalian development, a planet with a temperature range in which mammals can live, the absence of successfully competing species, and so forth. The conditions in the world that make it the case that dogs exist are complex and unlimited, and worthy of serious investigation.

Davidson opposes the metaphysical thesis that there must be an intermediate answer, one that is not a matter of scientific enquiry, but that is somehow required in order to understand there being dogs. Such intermediate answers would be theories of facts, states of affairs, properties, universals, and other heirs of Platonic Forms. Davidson, in company with Derrida and Wittgenstein, renounces metaphysics as a required intermediate science.

iii) A third point of important agreement between Wittgenstein and Davidson follows from the first two: Intentions, beliefs, and other propositional attitudes need not have interior referents.

True ascriptions of beliefs are not reports of such interior (brain or spirit) states, but are ascribed to persons, rational agents. The ascriptions are outcomes of our interpretive undertaking. For a speaker to actually be a rational agent is for an interpretive undertaking to be correct. For Davidson, to correctly ascribe a belief to someone is part of the result of accurate interpretation of an action. The accuracy, however, is not a matter of reporting inner states. Likewise for Wittgenstein, nothing in particular has to be going on in my soul or my neurons for an ascription of belief or intention to be correct.

For both thinkers, speech acts and other intentional actions are understood in the context of a background of beliefs, desires, and practices. No state of my neurons suffices to determine that I am somewhat concerned that the reader will misunderstand this exposition of Davidson. That concern cannot exist in isolation, but requires an vast and indeterminate background of belief, desire, social understandings, and the like. In another context (say in ancient Sumeria), the same disposition of neurons would be something entirely different. Davidson says that ascribing any belief presupposes such background, the family of practices in which a language-game makes sense.⁵ Davidson's term for this is "a theory of the other." Any such "theory" must come in large chunks of beliefs and desires, ascribed holistically on the basis of many actions. "Holistically" means that the "rules" for interpretation are "maximization" constraints whose application depends on making maximally coherent the rest of the discourse being interpreted.

2) Davidson with Wittgenstein on Metaphor:

For both thinkers, the literal interpretation of the metaphor of "metaphor," the carrying across of meaning, is not available, since there are no meanings to be carried across. Their intuitions about metaphor are similar as well. Davidson 1978 gives exactly Wittgenstein's account of "secondary meaning." Just as one would not explain "yellow" to someone by playing a

tone that struck one as “yellow,” so, for Davidson, you would not explain “floor” to a new speaker by quoting Dante’s reference to the Earth as a “floor.” Both thinkers also hold that what is intended in a metaphor cannot be put “literally” (e.g. by coining a word), but that somehow the “misuse” of the word is essential to the metaphor saying what the speaker intended to convey. (Wittgenstein says, (1953, p.216) “...I could not say what I want to say in any other way than by means of the idea ‘yellow’,” essentially denying that metaphors can be paraphrased, as Davidson and many others agree.)

Davidson can, with some modification, supply exactly the theoretical account Wittgenstein needs, one that suits Wittgenstein’s numerous remarks that things are said for many reasons besides description, which remarks I take to be Wittgenstein’s observation that speech actions’ have many rhetorical forces. Davidson’s well-known account of metaphor treats a metaphorical utterance as an utterance that is usually literally false, but is produced for a purpose other than informing. Metaphor is thus a rhetorical phenomenon. Davidson would give analogous accounts of commands, questions, sarcasms, and other non-assertive uses of language. As Davidson presents it, metaphor is primarily a phenomenon of individual speech acts, whose metaphoricity is determined by the intentions of the speaker. Sentence types are not metaphorical. Thus, when we talk about repeated occurrences of metaphors, we are talking about repeated speech acts using the same words with the same intention.

For Davidson, intentions, like beliefs and desires, are not self-interpreting states of an organism, but are rather part of the rational interpretation scheme. That is, we ascribe intentions, along with beliefs and desires, in the process of interpreting another’s actions, whether speech actions or other actions. An ascription of an intention need not be a report of an occurrent interior representational state, as Wittgenstein emphasizes again and again. Thus when metaphorical

⁵ Compare Wittgenstein’s (1953, paragraph 162 ff.) of what it takes to be reading. For both Davidson and Wittgenstein, such ascription requires a background of beliefs, desires, actions, and practices, and is not the

speech acts are said to be utterances produced with intentions other than stating that the truth-conditions obtain, this does not usually mean that the speaker silently formulates a thought, "I'll say 'They're crushed,' even though they aren't, because they as if crushed." Davidson does hold that intentions are central to correctness of interpretation, because correctness of interpretation is a matter of getting the description of an action right. But this correctness does not mean that intentions lie behind speech acts in a metaphysical sense.

Davidson requires that sentences have literal meanings to provide a fulcrum from which to make remarks with metaphorical force. A rhetorical theory of metaphor has to have some common element in utterances as a basis to explain how the different rhetorical force says what it says. Davidson's notion of "literal meaning," though, cannot be understood in contrast to any other kind of meaning. Since Davidson denies a given, there is no "sameness in nature" to dictate that a predicate should be applied in a new case. So, a "literally true" predication of "is a frog" is not "forced by the facts."⁶ There is no literal meaning of "love stinks" beyond that it is true if and only if love stinks. Thus, literal meaning amounts to just the truth conditions. So a sentence is literally true if and only if it is true, and it is literally false if and only if it is false. "True" ultimately comes down to bed-rock judgments, where the bed-rock is practices of determining what is the same. Davidson, like Wittgenstein, falls back on practices to give a sense to "literal truth." Davidson need give no further justification for saying that, in this situation, a given sentence is true than "this is what I say." For Wittgenstein, the practices are shared linguistic behavior, whereas for Davidson, the practices are the determinations of sameness implicit in a shared world.

3) Davidson's Intentions, Common Languages and Metaphor

kind of thing that could be identical with a brain- or spirit -state.

⁶ Compare Wittgenstein (1956) on "going on in the same way."

The major difference between Wittgenstein and Davidson is that for Davidson meaning is primarily meaning in an idiolect, whereas for Wittgenstein meaning is meaning in a common language. Wittgenstein is wrong if he supposes that social conventions and following public rules are essential to language (see Davidson 1991, 1997). However, as I will argue, an idiolect, according to Davidson himself, depends on the common, common language to make initial determinations of sameness, i.e. to establish a common world by common extension of predicates. Language is not primarily an individual's private property, even though, once acquired, it can be customized.

Davidson's account imagines a speaker using a sentence with private truth-conditions for some other purpose than to assert that the truth-conditions obtain. For Davidson, metaphor is always a matter of an individual's choice to use a sentence in an other-than-truth-asserting way. Rhetorical force is always under an individual's control, being essentially a matter of an individual's intention, knowing truth-conditions and deciding how to use them. This account is not quite adequate on Davidsonian grounds. Metaphor is also a feature of common languages.

Individual idiolects start from common languages. I cannot pretend to give a proper theory of a common language, but will try to characterize the notion. A common language in effect corresponds to the "prior theory" (as in Davidson) that a speaker of a language ought to have of a fellow speaker qua fellow speaker. That is, a common language is what a reasonable theory-formation would dictate as a prior theory just relative to the knowledge that the other, for instance, "speaks English." A common language is a kind of combination of the idiolects of its speakers, but, as I will argue, cannot be simply derived from idiolects. The combination of idiolects requires substantial agreement on truth-conditions of sentences between any pair of speakers. The predicate "speaks the same language" is vague, ambiguous, and imprecise, so a common language is not a language "in the philosopher's sense."

“What the words mean” depends in the common language on how the words ought to be taken, not on how they are taken or how the speaker intends them to be taken. How they ought to be taken is a matter of what, crudely put, the result of maximization of agreement among the utterances of the language community.

“Rhetorical force” in a common language is determined by the prior theory a speaker should have of a fellow language-speaker. Since a common, public language includes the supposition that the fellow speaker will share beliefs, a common language has implicit an assignment of rhetorical forces to obvious truths and untruths. Thus application of predicates that obviously do not apply have non-truth-assertive rhetorical force in the common language. Other features besides force are likewise part of the public meaning even when they differ from a particular occasion of a speaker. All the “associations,” implicit subtexts, derogatory implications, and emotive loading that, for instance, literary critics discuss are part of some common language.

The common language is not derivative from or secondary to idiolects. Consider the initial triangulation that establishes the difference between thinking one is right and actually being right: A speaker observes what another speaker is responding to by using their common perceptual capacities and assuming a common world. This triangulation instructs the learner about what things really are the same and which are different. The imitation imitates common language responses to the common world, the sets of objects that really are the same, rather than necessarily the imitation of the words themselves. Triangulation with others is the core of getting the idea of the difference between a merely subjective world and a real world about which one can be mistaken. While the speaker need not say the same words in the same situations, the triangulation argument means that the common language, insofar as it embodies other persons’ identification of entities as of the same kind, is in this respect prior to the private language, even though neither “conventions” nor “rules of language” are essential. The basics of language use,

namely applying predicates in new cases, is essentially imitative and therefore builds the common language into the idiolect.

Since it is the common language that is being learned, and therefore the public common world of what objects there are, the private idiolect being acquired inherits all of the indeterminacies of the text-like. That is, Derrida is essentially right to regard text as the fundamental model for language, since, although idiolects can differ wildly, they all start from social triangulation that establishes extensions for predicates and practices of predicate application. Given that foundation, lots of innovation and misdirection are, of course, possible.

Since a metaphor, on the surface at least, proposes an unusual extension for a term, a metaphor being triangulated can be triangulated as either a falsehood with a rhetorical twist or as a literal truth. Much of our speech is rhetorically ambiguous even to ourselves, since it does not affect communication that I decide whether I mean my words as metaphorical or literal. Until very recently, if I had been questioned on the topic, I would have said that the common phrase, "...make your head swim," as in "If you try that, you'll be out of here so fast it'll make your head swim," was some kind of metaphorical extension of "swim" as a mode of movement through water. But "swim" as "dizzy" turns out to have its own indo-european root. Before I looked it up, it had never occurred to me whether the sentences using "swim" were literally true or false. I said "...make your head swim," because that's what you say. It was of no practical importance what the truth-conditions of my utterance were, but it was important that it have truth-conditions. Thus, idiolects and the common language are equal partners in the discovery of the common world. The indeterminacies of the common language return to become indeterminacies of the idiolect.

Metaphors have an especially powerful influence in changing the common world, since metaphors typically *prima facie* alter the extensions of predicates. A metaphor becomes part of a common language by being imitated. When I hear a colleague refer to college administrators as lemmings, I may decide to do the same thing, make the same kind of speech act. In such an

imitation, the words have become a kind of text, and I'm doing something like quoting. Others may, in turn, imitate me, according to their understanding of what I did in speaking. For many fresh metaphors, there is a consensus judgment among the common language users that the application of a term to a kind of case is metaphorical. Metaphor in a common language is a type, not a token, but it is a type of act.

Metaphor death occurs when the consensus becomes less general, and gradually changes to the judgment that what is said is true. Then the consensus is that the application is literal. An application of a term to an extended extension becoming literal is a kind of change in the common world. As new speakers acquire idiolects as versions of the common language, the vagueness and indeterminacy of the common language feeds back into changes in idiolects. Even if idiolects were unambiguous and determinate in themselves, in their own terms, their basis in learning from a common language-speaker yields indeterminacy of the common world to the extent that the common language is indeterminate and shifting.

If such an interdependence relation holds between the private idiolect and the common language, it would appear on the surface at least that Wittgenstein and Derrida were right to say that truth-condition and truth-value ascription are inappropriate to real languages. However, Davidson has a way out:

4) Indeterminacy and Metaphor

In fact, the undeterminability of truth-values fits very well with Davidson's system. I will illustrate below some other phenomena where this must occur and where Davidson can easily make the same sort of response. I will then justify that response and argue that it is one that, oddly, fits very well with Wittgenstein.

The following adaptation of Davidson will take three stages:
First, I illustrate by a few examples the obvious fact that, in English, at least, a large proportion of general terms are dead metaphors, sometimes many-times dead. Thus, if metaphorical slippage

and indeterminacy is a difficulty for truth-value, it is a serious difficulty. I argue that the process of a metaphor dying is continuous. There is no sharp line determining when a general term has ceased to be metaphorical and has become “literal.” Thus the empirical phenomena yield indeterminacy of truth-value and dissemination, rather than utterances with truth-values.

Third, I argue that the only way to preserve a concept of the literal that will serve Davidson’s purposes is to invoke a notion of truth-value that admits in principle unknowable truth-values.⁷ I illustrate the same theoretical move as it solves some other indeterminacy problems.

Fourth, I defend this notion of in-principle unknowable truth-values as a harmless theoretical move that allows use to use truth-conditions and truth-values in all the ways Davidson has shown to be so useful, without importing the metaphysical baggage that Wittgenstein abandoned after the *Tractatus*.

i) Dead Metaphors and the Vagueness of Dying

English etymology is in large part the history of figures that became literal. Nothing in the minds of current speakers would give a clue that “fornicate” was originally a metonymy, an indirect way of alluding to activities in fornication, the arches.⁸ For Davidson, as we have argued, and for Wittgenstein, nothing on the “inside” can tell us whether the speakers of the common language, or even ourselves in our own idiolect, we have crossed the boundary between saying

⁷ Roy Sorensen has urged the acceptability of unknowable truths. In this paper I have basically adapted his idea and extended it to other indeterminacies.

⁸ Let me just list some other examples, which could be multiplied at dictionary length:
“Berth” was originally a space for a ship to pass at sea, then place for a ship to dock, now place on a train to sleep.
“Sobriquet”, now meaning “nickname” originally was a chuck under the chin.
“Futile” from flowing, by a complicated figure for the flowing of words from the foolish, then, by another turn, came to mean hopeless
“Understanding,” “verstehen,” and “episteme” are three relations to standing
“Foundational,” “grundwerke” and “funds” (the resources we have beneath us) are all developments of “bottom,” which shows up anatomically as “fundament,” of course.

something true and quoting a metaphor. Since “what we mean” cannot be explicated in any clearer way than by what we say, and since we say the same thing when we use an expression literally and metaphorically, there is no difference between figure and metaphor other than that, if an utterance is not metaphorical, then it should be true.

Imagine the following: We somehow have a record of all the occurrences of “fornicate” from the beginning metonymic uses to the current literal uses. In this history, if the sentences uttered always have truth-values, there would seem to be a first time that something literally true was said. In brief, there is a vague borderline between the metaphorical and the literal. How can Davidson deal with this indeterminacy of rhetorical force?

ii) Unknowable Truth-Values

First, I remark again that it does not practically matter which interpretation we choose. The interpretation of the actual speech act can go either way without there being a difference in practice. From the point of view of communication and the language-games of reporting what is happening, whether the rhetorical force is metaphorical or not is immaterial, when a metaphor is moribund.

Consider an utterance that is possibly literal, but maybe the use of a not entirely dead metaphor: “Fred was crushed by Susan’s remark.” We can interpret the utterance two ways:

a: The utterance is literally false, and the speaker is using a familiar metaphor to indicate the state of Fred’s mind (Fred is depressed—as a result of having been crushed.) In this case, the hearer gets the message OK.

b: The utterance is literally true, and “crushed” has two senses, one applied to people who have had their aspirations thoroughly defeated and one applied to things which have been pulverized.

While it does not matter which of these hypotheses we choose, it does matter that we are able to choose one or the other. An answer that would not explain the phenomenon is that the utterance has an indeterminate truth-value, or that, given the ambiguity of the situation, it is

neither true nor false. The working of the metaphor requires that the utterance have a truth-value, since it is only by rejecting the “literal” truth as false and then interpreting the utterance that the metaphorical understanding takes place. If the term “crush” has come to have a new meaning, that new meaning is just that it applies to this case literally, i.e. that Fred really was crushed. On either hypothesis of interpretation, that is, the utterance is true or false. This result holds whether we are inquiring about what his words mean or about what the words mean in the idiolect of the speaker.

So, in this indeterminate situation, the theory requires that the utterance have a truth-value, even though it is completely indeterminate which truth-value it has. Nothing about the examination of the speaker’s or hearer’s head will tell you which of the two situations obtains. Without a magic language, intentions are just as subject to figural understanding as overt speech. As Wittgenstein would say, what help does it do to say silently to oneself “crushed” to see what you mean? These are remarks on which Wittgenstein and Davidson would surely agree.⁹ For theorists such as Davidson (Derrida has complex views that would deserve their own discussion), there is nothing in the situation different between extending a predicate to a new case and applying a predicate metaphorically. A thoroughly dead metaphor is an utterance that is literally true. It now has truth-conditions that it did not before. It would have been false, now it is true.

The prima facie oddity of Davidson’s concept of literal truth, then, is that, while sentences occurring in metaphorical utterances have literal truth values, it can often be absolutely indeterminate what truth-value they have. That is, even given all information about the speaker’s mind and history, the context, and the social facts, the sentence uttered may be true or it may be false. Such cases are cases of in-principle unknowable truths about truth-values. That there are unknowable truths certainly seems to be a strange and metaphysical view. It is possible for

⁹ In this sort of case, it is difficult to see how Wittgenstein’s test of whether we would explain to someone what “crushed” means by showing him Fred after his rejection seems ambiguous. That test seems to me to work only when a metaphor still has some zip to it. In English, “blue” seems to have acquired two senses.

Davidson because he takes truth to be irreducible to anything else. The truth-value of a sentence, while it is connected in theoretically important ways to many other concepts (belief, intention, action, knowledge, the existence of objects, valid inference, etc.) is not reducible or definable in terms of any other phenomena. So it is inaccurate to say (as I have in various publications) that truth is a “function of what is said when.” Truth is connected to what is said when, but no algorithm-like function will suffice to eliminate truth. If truth is thus irreducible, then everything else about a situation can be exactly the same while truth-values of sentences differ.

iii) Defense of Unknowable Truth-values

Let me now defend this appeal to unknowable truth-values in two stages: First, I will show how the idea is necessary for Davidson in situations other than metaphorical utterances. Second, I will argue that it is harmless and theoretically justified.

For Davidson, metaphor gives rise to one of several kinds of phenomena that give rise to indeterminacy of truth-values of utterances. To illustrate my adaptation of Davidson, let me discuss two kinds of indeterminacy:¹⁰

Case 1) Vague predicates and the sorites: In common with Wittgenstein, Davidson knows that there are no “sharp borderlines” for any of the predicates of ordinary lived experience. The most striking problem about Fred gradually growing from one meter to two meters tall is the threat that “Fred is tall” at some stages, seems to violate the principle that $(A \vee \neg A)$ or its equivalent, $\neg(A \wedge \neg A)$.¹¹

Such problems about vagueness are a difficulty for any theory that wants to accommodate the predicates of common sense and ordinary life, while taking logical form to be a

¹⁰ Other cases are the sorts of inscrutability of reference and disagreement-based indeterminacy discussed by Quine, and future-tense sentences.

¹¹ I wrote some of the early articles in the now vast literature on vagueness. See Wheeler 1975 and 1979. Vagueness has for decades seemed to me an intractable problem. I think I have now found a way, following Sorensen, 1985, 1988, and 1991, to have logic, a reasonable account of the universe, and the entities and features of ordinary life.

pervasive feature of language. While Wittgenstein can say that such problems do not bother him, since he has abandoned logical form, Davidson cannot. (Also, Wittgenstein cannot abandon logical form in Davidson's sense, as I could argue.)

Case 2) Rhetorical indeterminacies:

An utterance can have indeterminate different logical forms. Depending on the logical form supposed, the inference can be treated indifferently as rhetorical or logical. "Only Fred loves Susan" implies "Fred loves Susan." But that inference can either be based on logic or on conversational implicature. Nothing "internally checkable" will tell you, since in both situations, you move from one to the other immediately. If the inference is regarded as based on logic, then the truth-value of "Only Fred loves Susan" is false when no-one loves Susan. If the inference is treated as logical, the logical form might be, $(\forall x(Lxs \rightarrow x=f) \wedge Lfs)$, for instance. The formally simpler theory ascribing the logical form $\forall x(Lxs \rightarrow x=f)$ would treat the inference as rhetorical, a la Grice. That is, since "No-one loves Susan" is stronger than "Only Fred loves Susan," saying the latter implies that the former is false.¹²

Metaphor is a variety of this last kind of indeterminacy. Vagueness and indeterminacy of logical form might be tolerated as mere puzzles for Davidson. But metaphor, because it is so ubiquitous in corpse-form, and so unclear for most of the corpses whether they are really dead, means that indeterminacy infects much of the language. That is, for a large proportion of predicates in English, there is a period when it is completely indeterminate, given all empirical evidence past, present and future, whether predications using the predicate are true or false. For many such predicates, the sorting into live and dead is still unclear.

Since the theory of interpretation assumes that the other is by and large speaking truths, too many indeterminate truth-values undermine the very system. How can the sentences they are

¹² I develop this case, and the concept of "rhetorical indeterminacy," in Wheeler 1993.

uttering not express either truths or falsehoods? The key to understanding how Davidson can have unknowable truth-values for sentences of the interpreted language is that the underlying assumption, in doing radical interpretation is not that the majority of a person's utterances are treated as true, but that the majority of a person's beliefs are treated as true. But every way of treating a person's beliefs as true requires assigning some true-value to the sentences uttered. That is, whether we treat the utterance as metaphorical or as literal, the beliefs ascribed to the speaker have to be largely true. But some truth-value has to be ascribed in order to interpret the speaker at all. The Wittgensteinian point about this neo-Davidsonian theory is that it makes no difference practically, that is in terms of understanding what people are doing and saying.

So unknowable truth-values, since they are available to Davidson in virtue of his renunciation of the given and his taking truth as a primitive, are in fact required to make sense of the literal in the face of the special case of vagueness constituted by the continuity of metaphorical death.

The Davidsonian theory I propose, then, treats situations in which it does not matter what truth-value a sentence has, but it matters that it have a truth-value, as cases of indeterminacy that are resolved by supposing that the sentences do indeed have truth-values, albeit unknowable ones. This position is possible only if one takes truth to be irreducible, and so sometimes such that all the "facts" can be in without resolving the issue of whether an utterance is true or false.

Finally: How can an anti-metaphysical philosopher such as Davidson (or Wittgenstein) postulate something as counter-verificationist as in-principle unknowable truth-values? There are several considerations justifying the prima facie odd notion that there are in-principle unknowable truths, as a justification for using such a postulation to solve problems:

There are familiar cases in other field where purely theoretical reasons justify asserting non-intuitively justified claims. Take for example the theorem of set theory that the null-set is a subset of every set. Nothing in our intuitions about sub-groups of groups would make us believe

that the null set is a sub-group of any group, let alone all groups. But in set theory, the best definition of subset is $\forall x \forall y (Sxy \rightarrow \exists z (Ezx \rightarrow Ezy))$, which implies that the null-set is indeed a subset of every set. Or, consider the reasons for asserting that for all numbers x , x raised to the zero power is 1. If we want the theorem that $a^n \times a^m = a^{m+n}$ then a^0 has to be 1. This is really a Quinean consideration: that theoretical working is a good reason for a postulation, and that there is no difference between theoretical understanding in philosophy and in physics.

All of these are “don’t cares,” from the point of understanding what people are doing in speaking. The whole point of the theory of interpretation is the understanding of the behavior of rational agents. In the case of such complex actions as speech acts, the theory of interpretation must assign truth-values and logical forms to make sense of infinite inferences. (put this up front.)

It can be true that there are unknowable truth-values without there being any facts for such unknowable truth-values to correspond to. Truth is primitive, and no metaphysical claim is made about any floating entities or anything.

5) Is this a theory Wittgenstein could accept?

One might object that we needn’t do theory, that language is just fine as it is, and just needs description. Wittgenstein seems to be conditionally attached to a correspondence theory of truth. That is he holds that if there were a truth-conditional theory of the logical forms of sentences of natural languages, it would require the fact-ontology of the Tractatus. But Davidson’s kind of theory manages to get the benefits of the sort of organization and systematization that assigning logical form provides without the metaphysical baggage of the Tractatus.

“Truth” for Wittgenstein, besides its connection to metaphysics, seems to be essentially connected to fact-stating purposes, saying how things are. Wittgenstein thus thinks that if logical theory is applied to natural languages, it distorts the practices of natural language use by selecting the “fact-stating” mode. But Davidson regards “saying how things are” as just one of the many

things that can be done with utterances of strings with truth-conditions. A sentence may be produced as a way of giving a command, asking a question, reporting a belief of another, making a joke, and so on. Sentences with truth-conditions are equipment for such tasks. The equipment, though, is potentially infinite. Thus an account of logical form is required to understand how we can learn to use such equipment in a few short years of childhood. Our knowledge of language and inference is too vast to consist of individually-learned connections. Thus, some structure must be assigned to sentences, and that structure must be one that derives meanings of complexes from meanings of components, since there are an unlearnable infinity of complexes. The minimal such theory is a theory of truth-conditions, where truth-conditions are essentially couched in the terms of the interpreting language. Wittgenstein, as noted, asserts the necessity of such an understanding in the discussion of "platte." Davidson can thus be regarded as supplying a theory compatible with Wittgenstein's insights.

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