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Jonathan Knowles

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# Davidson versus Chomsky: The Case of Shared Languages

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Jonathan Knowles

*Norwegian University of Science and Technology*

## 1. Introduction

Donald Davidson and Noam Chomsky are two giants in the contemporary study of language. Davidson is famous for employing Tarskian theories of truth as theories of meaning, and has made several concrete proposals concerning the semantical analysis of various constructions of English, such as belief reports and action sentences. Chomsky is the progenitor of modern theoretical linguistics. For him the analysis of the syntactical structures underlying natural languages is part of cognitive and ultimately biological science, insofar as its goal is to uncover certain aspects of the human brain, conceived at a certain level of abstraction. Both Davidson and Chomsky see a need for theorizing about language in formal or quasi-formal terms, and both see this need as at least partly grounded in the productive and systematic nature of language: its capacity for infinite expression and indefinite structural novelty. Both see this task as in some sense an empirical one, concerning the explanation of human linguistic behaviour.

At the same time, however, there is a large ideological difference in their overall approach. For Davidson, language is to be understood primarily in relation to the world of things and their properties that we talk about, as well as how we—thereby—communicate and interpret each others' utterances. This stance renders facts about speakers' brains—however abstractly conceived—irrelevant to an understanding of language and communication *per se*. Chomsky, by contrast, thinks that the only scientific

study of language will be one that focuses on the mental—i.e. at a certain level of abstraction, neural—structures that underlie language use in us.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of this disagreement, Chomsky and Davidson are united on one further overarching point: that the everyday, common-sensical notion of a language—the notion according to which English, Norwegian, Swahili and so on are different languages, as well as more generally the idea that a language is fundamentally something shared between speakers—has no role to play in providing a scientific or philosophical understanding of language and linguistic competence.<sup>2</sup> Davidson indeed famously proclaims in his paper “A nice derangement of epitaphs” that:

[T]here is no such thing as a language, not if a language is like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed, [that is] a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and apply to cases.  
Davidson, 1986, 446

He also claims in this paper to have “erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around the world generally” (ibid., 446–7). We will be looking closely at the arguments for these claims in the sequel.

Chomsky’s view is similar but subtly different. For him, knowing a language remains a distinct mental capacity from general intelligence, i.e. “knowing our way around the world generally”. Nevertheless, he is sceptical of the traditional notion of language. For him, the object of linguistics should be the mental structure *underlying* an individual’s linguistic speech comprehension and behaviour—the speaker’s *grammar*, or *I-language*, as he also calls it—and the innate precursors that constrain the form these structures can take.<sup>3</sup> An I-language for Chomsky is something

<sup>1</sup> To avoid any misunderstanding: Davidson does not deny the kinds of mental structures Chomsky stresses, nor that they explain something. I elaborate further on their “ideological difference” below.

<sup>2</sup> Sometimes this is expressed in terms of the idea that both Chomsky and Davidson stress the priority of *idiolects*—the language of the individual—over public languages (indeed, Davidson does this himself—see e.g. Davidson, 2005a). Though I will in my discussion of Davidson have recourse to the notion of an idiolect, I choose not to frame the overall discussion in terms of it on the grounds that Chomsky doesn’t even acknowledge the notion of an idiolect as important in linguistic theory, focusing rather on those aspects of grammars that can be seen as fixed by the common innate component (cf. Chomsky, 1986, 16; and for discussion of the point, George, 1990, 294). Further explanation of Chomsky’s position is given below.

<sup>3</sup> The notion of I-language is first introduced in Chomsky (1986, ch. 2). “I-language” contrasts with “E-language” where the prefixes “I” and “E” suggest respectively “internal/intensional/individual” and “external/extensional”. The notions denote in the first

that develops in all normal human beings on the basis of their exposure—i.e. the language faculty's exposure—to linguistic input from their parents and/or others in their early linguistic environment. Competence in language is thus seen as a species property, on a par with being able to walk—not something that we have to learn as we learn, say, the rules of chess.

Insofar as Chomsky also holds that one and the same speaker can come to acquire two or more distinct I-languages—such as someone who is a fluent speaker of both English and Norwegian—it might seem that he would also operate with traditional language categories like those just mentioned. Chomsky indeed allows that in everyday parlance it can be informative to say that this person speaks both English and Norwegian. When it comes to giving a serious scientific account, however, we cannot ignore the fact that there is considerable variation in the actual competencies of those who would qualify as speakers of both Norwegian and English; moreover, the very notion of language employed in talking of “the English language”, “the Norwegian language” and so on is so infected by political considerations that its instances are unsuited as objects of scientific study. What we want to know and can profitably investigate is what enables an individual to speak in the way she does, and ultimately what the basis for this ability (or abilities) is in our common biological inheritance.<sup>4</sup>

Though I am not aware of any commentary by Davidson on Chomsky's views on shared languages, I think it is fair to say that Davidson would find most if not all of Chomsky's criticisms of shared languages congenial to his own line. Davidson also holds that we are (or at least might be) biologically predisposed to acquire language—and, indeed, languages with specific syntactical features—and that there are (or at least might be) certain special parts of the brain dedicated to language use and understanding (2005b, 132–4). However, for Davidson the first point concerns only syntax, not meaning, whilst the whole package concerns the *causal underpinnings* of language competence, not what the latter ac-

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instance different approaches to the *study* of language, rather than to what kind of entities exist: an E-language approach does not in and of itself presuppose that languages in the ordinary sense (like English) exist, though an I-language approach, in focusing on speakers' mind/brains, does strongly suggest they will not be interesting for theoretical linguistic purposes (see further below).

<sup>4</sup> This is an issue on which Chomsky has made many pronouncements over the years; in addition to *ibid.*, see e.g. his (1990) and essay 3 in his (2000). A useful discussion of Chomsky's approach to language can be found in Collins (2008, ch. 6)

tually *consists in*—something which essentially involves communicating about a shared world. When it comes to meaning and communication, we need for Davidson to apply the model of *radical interpretation*, a process whereby an interpreter builds a Tarskian truth theory to interpret the speech behaviour of others (Davidson, 1984; more discussion of this view will follow). A complete such theory gives a *model* of linguistic competence, and knowledge of it would suffice for interpretation, but “claims about what would constitute a satisfactory theory are not [...] claims about the propositional knowledge of an interpreter, nor [...] about the details of the inner workings of some part of the brain” (Davidson, 1986, 438). More generally, Davidson holds the view associated with Frege and Wittgenstein, and accepted by many contemporary philosophers of language (however else they differ), that when speakers communicate there is something independent of both they literally *share*: it is not sufficient (or necessary) for communication that speakers’ individually construed competences—their brains or minds, in the relevant respects—are similar to a sufficient extent.<sup>5</sup> Both of these last two claims are rejected by Chomsky.<sup>6</sup>

In contemporary philosophy of language a good deal of energy has been expended in trying to resolve and adjudicate between the Chomskyan and the broadly Fregean conception of language (i.e. one that stresses irreducibly shared meaning) that is common in analytical philosophy and to which Davidson subscribes (see Stone & Davies, 2002, for an overview). As is often the case with disagreements of a more ideological nature, however, it seems little progress has been made towards a satisfactory resolution, arguments from either side tending to beg the question against the

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<sup>5</sup> This Fregean-cum-Wittgensteinian view of language was brought forcefully to the fore in contemporary debate by Michael Dummett (Dummett 1973). It is not an (obvious) implication of this view that what is shared must be something we are ontologically committed, such as “meanings”.

<sup>6</sup> For discussion, see Chomsky *op. cit.*; also his (1980) where the views are spelled out more fully in opposition to *inter alia* Quine’s philosophy of language, which Davidson builds on. One should be wary of thinking—as Davidson seems to—that there is really no conflict between the views under discussion here, insofar as Chomsky is dealing only with syntax, not semantics, and with causal not constitutive explanation (cf. e.g. Davidson, 2005b, 134). From Chomsky’s perspective there is a conflict precisely because he rejects all semantic approaches to language—i.e. those which understand it primarily or essentially in terms of relations to the world. For Chomsky any systematic study of “meaning” must itself be part of syntax, and thus ultimately a study of a certain property of the brain; moreover, this property is what language *is*. Davidson clearly rejects these claims.

other.<sup>7</sup> What I propose to do here is nevertheless to attempt such an argument, one that restricts itself to the ideological conflict between specifically Chomsky and Davidson, and builds on their fundamental agreement when it comes to scepticism towards shared languages. My target is Davidson's argument against shared languages, and by showing this fails (in a certain way) I aim to strengthen the overall Chomskyan line—at least, within the context of a Davidson-Chomsky debate. More specifically, what I will try to show is that Davidson's arguments against shared languages in "A nice derangement. . ." *understood in relation to his conception of when we can be said to share a language* in fact do not give him the no shared languages conclusion he is after. Davidson's considerations entail, I claim, not that there are *no* shared languages, but rather that there are many more than we standardly assume, and that we all speak very many such languages—in principle, as many as we have interpreters.

I take this demonstration to have a certain interest in its own right. I also think that as a substantive position it is absurd, and should be rejected. I conclude there must be something wrong with Davidson's overall or "ideological" approach to language and communication, and—assuming that the more general objections to shared languages proffered by Chomsky, and which I take Davidson would endorse, are essentially correct—that there is reason to think that Chomsky's overall view instead is on the right tracks.<sup>8</sup>

The remainder of the paper is for the most part a presentation and critique of Davidson's argument in "A nice derangement. . ." (along with

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<sup>7</sup> In the case of Davidson and Chomsky some might want to disagree with this, insofar as there have been attempts to incorporate a truth theoretical approach to natural language semantics within a Chomskyan, cognitivist framework: cf. e.g. Larsen & Segal (1995), Higginbotham (1989). It is unclear whether these attempts really preserve the intentions of the original thinkers sufficiently to be regarded as genuine syntheses. More importantly for our purposes, their main theoretical orientation is Chomskyan, with the Davidsonian metasemantical theses about radical interpretation and publicity of meaning being significantly downplayed or rejected altogether, and thus do not really engage with the ideological debate I am concerned with here.

<sup>8</sup> I am thus excluding from consideration here the view of Dummett, Lewis and others—i.e. of traditional philosophy of language more generally—on which there are shared languages like English and these are the appropriate object of study for a theory of language. I am also taking it that there are no significant alternatives to Davidson's and Chomsky's overall views when it comes to those which reject the idea of shared languages, but even if I am wrong about this, the stature of these two thinkers surely renders it significant to show that Chomsky's is at least preferable to Davidson's.

other, related papers and views of Davidson's).<sup>9</sup> In section 1, I outline Davidson's *argument from malapropisms*, and register some initial worries, plus connections to other views in the literature. In section 2, I present the argument more systematically in relation to Davidson's theory of radical interpretation, focussing on the *principle of the autonomy of literal meaning* and how Davidson aims to preserve this in spite of rejecting shared languages. I end the section with a specification of what conditions Davidson's examples have to satisfy in order to maintain his claim against shared languages. In section 3 I argue that no example can in fact be such as to satisfy these conditions simultaneously. In the conclusion I sketch how a Chomskyan view, fully cleansed of shared languages and indeed the very idea of "sharedness", might plausibly accommodate the phenomena we have been examining as a way of further cementing its preferability.

## 2. Davidson's Argument

The title of the paper of Davidson's we have been referring to—"A nice derangement of epitaphs"—is itself an example, uttered by Sheridan's character Mrs. Malaprop, of the kind of phenomenon Davidson thinks spells trouble for shared languages and traditional accounts of communication (such as e.g. Lewis, 1969). The problem posed by such malapropisms is that we can understand what a speaker means when she utters one, but must, obviously, do so in a way that flouts the shared conventions or rules which, according to these traditional accounts, govern what our words mean. It therefore looks as if these conventions are neither necessary nor sufficient to understand what a malaproping speaker says—even though, says Davidson, there is no reason to think she is not speaking literally; that her meaning is not basic or *primary* (we will return to this). Davidson's conclusion is that we must give up the idea of a language as something shared over time with other people in explaining linguistic communication. But this is just to give up on the notion of a language as it is traditionally understood.

Thus stated, Davidson's argument can seem rather blatantly fallacious. From the fact that the conventions for understanding *some* word are nei-

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<sup>9</sup> The emphasis is nevertheless on "A nice derangement..." and not on other aspects of Davidson's externalism about meaning (e.g. those concerning his theory of triangulation; see the essays in Davidson, 2001). This restriction strikes me legitimate insofar as Davidson continued to see linguistic communication as a vital element in explaining the possibility of meaning and thought.

ther necessary nor sufficient to understand it, it surely does not follow—even if the meaning thereby grasped is literal—that understanding of it would be possible in the absence of *all* shared conventions governing the way we understand *all* words. But this is in fact what Davidson is aiming to deny, and in the following I will try to spell out more fully why he thinks this, and exactly what it is he thinks. (Of course, what he really needs to deny is that these conventions as a whole are not necessary for communication, not that they are not sufficient; the latter thesis is barely controversial in view of indexical words like “I”, “here”, and “now”, as well as aspects of language which are more or less vague outwith concrete contexts of use.)

The initial reactions to Davidson’s rejection of shared languages, published as replies to “A nice derangements...”, bordered on incredulity. Davidson thus seemed to Ian Hacking to be committing philosophical suicide in view of his seminal contributions to semantics for natural languages like English (Hacking, 1986), whilst Michael Dummett mounted a defense of the continued need to refer to communal languages to preserve the broadly Fregean-Wittgensteinian picture of the social nature of meaning (Dummett, 1986).<sup>10</sup> Bjørn Ramberg, however, saw the rejection, neither as a philosophical suicide nor as infelicitous, but simply as the discarding of a further and unnecessary reification, on a par with the rejection of determinate meanings or relations of reference (Ramberg, 1989, 6 and 100ff.) A related view is Richard Rorty’s, who sees Davidson rejection of languages as coeval with his rejection of the idea of conceptual schemes (Davidson, 1994, essay 13; Rorty, 1989, ch. 1). In more recent years, the affinity with Chomsky’s views, discussed above, has been stressed by several authors (e.g. Pietrowski, 199 4; Smith, 1997).

There are many interesting connections and issues to be explored in this literature. What I will be arguing here, something that as far as I am aware no one else has done, is that Davidson’s argument is—at bottom—more or less as fallacious as I set it out above. Indeed, denying the notion of a shared language is not something he can consistently maintain—given his overall framework for understanding linguistic communication and competence. What he says establishes only that there are a lot more

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<sup>10</sup> Davidson has replied to Dummett in his (2005a) where he claims that what he really meant to argue was for a view on which idiolects are prior to shared languages and norms, things he sees as unnecessary for communication and meaning. As far as I can see, nothing in that article alters anything of substance in Davidson’s original rejection of shared languages, or speaks to what I have to say here.



languages than we are disposed to think: each of us speaks, in principle, as many as we have interpreters. It is this, I take it, absurd conclusion that I think should make us sceptical towards the Davidsonian approach to language, meaning and communication.

### 3. The Argument Explicated

First, however, we need to get Davidson's argument and views more clearly into view. As Ramberg stresses in his commentary, Davidson's rejection of language is not *meant* to be a wholesale rejection of his earlier philosophy of language and communication (Ramberg 1989). In particular, linguistic communication is still to be seen through the model of adducing a Tarskian truth theory for a speaker by a radical interpreter. Thus, we must view one who understands another as building a finitely axiomatised and recursive theory of sentences' truth conditions relating the speaker's linguistic behaviour to the public world of objects, properties and events. Moreover, this process is still wholly constitutive of linguistic meaning: there is no meaning in the absence of other speakers to interpret and be interpreted by (at least in principle). On the other hand, whereas the Tarskian truth theory was originally conceived as applying to a shared language, such as German or English (cf. Davidson, 1984), on the new position it is viewed as characterizing the understanding of individual speakers (what is sometimes called an *idiolect*)—and even, in some cases, how that understanding is at a given moment in time. For many this has seemed perplexing. In this section, I will sketch how Davidson's philosophical views of language and interpretation can be seen in this new light, starting out with a *prima facie* conflict between the no-languages view and a principle he endorses known as the *autonomy of literal (or "first") meaning*.

The autonomy of literal meaning is the intuitive idea that what a person means by using a word on a given occasion is in principle independent of what she intends to communicate or implicate by using that word.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Humpty Dumpty in Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* does not

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<sup>11</sup> The notion is explicated thus in Davidson's "Communication and convention" in *ibid*. The idea of "first meaning" is introduced in "A nice derangement..." to distinguish what Davidson is after from the conventional sense of "literal" which would tie the meanings of words to things like their dictionary definitions—something he obviously wants to bring into question. Since Davidson in any case sees such definitions as derivative on practice, I see no need to diverge from "literal", understood as contrasting with Paul Grice's notion of speaker meaning (something which Davidson sees as explanatorily posterior to literal meaning).

mean *That's a nice knock-down argument* by his words "There's glory for you!" simply because he intends them to be taken in that way. The principle is closely associated with the Fregean/Wittgensteinian view of language, to the effect that meaning is something social—something shared in communication, not a feature of any individual's mental state. (What a Chomskyan can say about the autonomy of meaning will be taken up in the conclusion.) Now if radical interpretation focuses primarily on the speech of an individual—an idiolect—it might initially seem difficult to see how the meanings of her words can be viewed as autonomous in this way. For the principle of autonomous literal meaning would seem to imply there is some objective or at least intersubjective fact of the matter about what one's words mean, determined by how things are *beyond* the compass of one's own mental states, including one's intentions. But if one cannot make reference to the language of the community and its conventions to play this determining role, what else can one appeal to?

Davidson's answer is that the appropriate constraints on a speaker's intentions can be socially determined even in the absence of a shared language by reference to the way in which she is *in fact* interpreted.<sup>12</sup> This is clearly something that is not up to her, and hence a gap opens up between what the speaker means by her words and what those same words can be said literally to mean, without having to resort to the canons set up by a linguistic community. To put it slightly formally: an expression, *e*, as uttered by a speaker, *S*, will have (a certain) autonomous meaning, *m*, if and only if *S* intends *e* to have *m* and *S*'s hearer *H* understands *e* to mean *m*. Since the condition is both necessary and sufficient, when Humpty Dumpty says "There's glory for you", he doesn't even mean *There's glory for you*: he simply *mouths off*. Language, meaning and communication thus remain social and non-individualistic for Davidson, for to mean something by a sentence or word, one must be attempting to communicate something *and* be interpreted accordingly.

The autonomy of literal meaning then does not as Davidson sees things require shared languages, for it simply falls out of the process of radical interpretation. But there is more to Davidson's view that we need to bring up. The theory of radical interpretation also involves a view of

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<sup>12</sup> Davidson never puts it quite this explicitly, but that something at least very close to this is in his mind is evident from the discussion of Humpty Dumpty's failure to mean *a nice knock-down argument* by "glory" on p. 440 of "A nice derangement...". See also Davidson (1988, 664–5); and for a slightly different understanding of the requirement that stresses *knowledge* of how one is interpreted, Higginbotham (op. cit.).

meaning as essentially *holistic*, since *systematic*: the meaning of each individual word is exhausted by the contribution it makes to the theorems of the theory—the formulæ whose left-hand sides match the held true sentences, and whose right hand sides state the conditions under which they were uttered, at least in the main.<sup>13</sup> The fact that meaning is both systematic in this way—that it finds its home in a recursive truth theory used for interpretation—and autonomous leads to the next step in Davidson's account of communication without languages. As already noted in the introduction, since all speakers are also interpreters, a truth theory that is empirically adequate in the way we have outlined may also be taken as a model of the competence of the speaker, as well as that of the hearer or interpreter (Davidson, 1986, 438).<sup>14</sup> Given this, we may then equate the intention that one's utterance will be interpreted in a given way—an intention of whose satisfaction I have no guarantee in advance—with the intention that one's hearer use the same theory to interpret it that one uses oneself in interpreting others. The theory that characterizes the competence of the speaker must then also characterize the competence of the hearer if they are to successfully communicate in any given case.

However—and here we reach a further and decisive point in Davidson's tirade against shared languages—the theories of the speaker and the hearer need not coincide *at any other point in time*. This claim is essential to Davidson's idea that we do not need shared languages to exppeaklain communication and autonomous meaning. To elucidate it, Davidson introduces a distinction between *prior* and *passing* theories. The hearer's prior theory "expresses how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker, while the passing theory is how he *does* interpret the utterance" (ibid., 442). The speaker's prior theory "is what he *believes* the interpreter's theory to be, while the passing theory is the theory he *intends* the interpreter to use" (ibid.). Davidson argues that the prior theories need not coincide for communication to succeed: only the *passing* theories—what the speaker intends the hearer's theory to be, and how the hearer does interpret the speaker—need do so. Insofar as prior theories are what most resemble shared languages, the latter are not part of what is essential to linguistic meaning and communication.

What this discussion I hope now has shown is what Davidson must in fact establish if his rejection of shared languages is to be upheld. This can

<sup>13</sup> Cf. his "Truth and meaning" and "Radical Interpretation", in Davidson (1984).

<sup>14</sup> I stress again that this kind of competence should not be equated with a Chomskyan cognitive competence or I-language, which is something individualistic and not shared.

be expressed as follows: For a speaker, S, to mean something by uttering an expression, *e*, both she and her hearer, H, must have knowledge of the meaning of *e* that is:

- (a) systematically characterized;
- (b) shared by S and H; and moreover
- (c) shared at the point of communication, but *not necessarily before or thereafter*.<sup>15</sup>

If the communicants' knowledge is not systematic, then we will be left with no account of how understanding is achieved through radical interpretation. If their knowledge is not shared, then we will not be able to understand them as genuinely communicating, in accord with the Fregean-Wittgensteinian view. But if this shared understanding is necessarily shared before or thereafter (or both), then we will not have cut clean away from the notion of a shared language.

In the following section, I will argue that at least one of these three conditions—the *systematicity condition*, (a), the *sharedness condition*, (b), and the *momentariness condition* (c), as I shall refer to them—cannot be met in the kinds of examples Davidson uses to support his view that there are no such things as languages (and hence by implication that they cannot be met by any example, since the kinds Davidson gives are those which provide the most plausible case).

#### 4. Why Davidson's argument fails

Suppose that a speaker S says to a hearer H "the company's dealings were legal and overboard". H nevertheless understands S as meaning *the company's dealings were legal and above-board*, in accord with S's intention but contrary to the word's conventional meaning. According to Davidson, this is the kind of case that suggests shared languages aren't essential to communication. But can we actually construe it in such a way that this idea is upheld?

Now, however great the temptation, we cannot, if we are to give Davidson a run for his money, construe the example as a case of *error* on S's part in her use of the word "overboard"—at least in the semantically basic sense of "error", pertaining to literal meaning—that H then corrects for to

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 436.

retrieve something like S's speaker meaning. For something to go astray, there must be something for it to go astray *from*, and this latter is precisely what Davidson wants to bring into question as necessary for communication. In my terms, this construal immediately infringes the *momentariness* condition, (c).<sup>16</sup>

Nor, on pain of the same violation, can we plead Davidson's case by considering the more mundane instance of adding proper names to the language of a community (a phenomenon Davidson also uses to support his no languages thesis; cf. *ibid.*, 440). If I am unaware of a name, and then understand someone who utters a sentence using it, I add the name to my own language. But this is (surely) simply a case where shared language *evolves*—not where it *disappears*. One should also bear in mind that though I may not share a language with everyone in my community, I may for all Davidson has shown share it with those with whom I regularly communicate, and it is of course also with these I will tend to share my stock of proper names.

Let us then return to malapropisms. What Davidson wants to say is that S in the example above really does mean *above-board* by 'overboard', consonant with his account, given above, of what it is for an expression to have autonomous, literal meaning; but that this can happen even if S and H do not share prior theories. But describing things this way now seems to run into the problem of satisfying the *systematicity* condition. What H and S share in virtue of communicating will, as described by H, be given by the following truth-theoretic satisfaction clause:

"overboard" is true of an object x iff x is above-board

—and no doubt, in the ordinary way of things, H and S will share much more besides. Notwithstanding, if S and H can have completely different prior theories, then sharing knowledge of the above axiom would have to be regarded, not just as necessary, but also as sufficient for communication in principle. But that axiom cannot alone count as a theory, at least not in Davidson's sense, for the knowledge of meaning S and H share will not be systematic—we violate condition (a).

Davidson—of course—insists that knowledge of meaning must be systematic:

[W]hen a word or phrase temporally or locally takes over the role of some other word or phrase [as in malapropism]... the entire burden of

<sup>16</sup> George (*op. cit.*: § 1) is an example of one who succumbs to this temptation, in my opinion.

that role, with all its implications for logical relations to other words, phrases and sentences must be carried along by the passing theory.

Davidson, 1986, 443

Taking this to heart however, we now face contravening the second condition above: the *sharedness* condition. Davidson's motivation for the idea that meaning is systematic is as we have seen that it is constrained holistically; but if he can help himself to holism to motivate the idea that local changes in the prior theory one uses to communicate on that occasion ramify throughout the whole of that theory in its conversion to a passing theory, then surely he must also accept that these changes ramify *differently* through *different* people's prior theories—since these can and will, *ex hypothesi*, vary. In such cases, what someone means by using an expression on a given occasion may be systematically characterized, but it will not be shared by her hearer—condition (b). Passing theories will be no more shared than prior ones.

It seems, then, that malapropisms do not after all give us examples of speech acts which involve shared, systematic but mere momentary meaning after all. I will now consider two replies that might be made the previous two arguments, an exercise that will serve to underline exactly the kind of picture Davidson is committed to.

To the point that meaning will not be systematic if based on just a single shared clause, it might be retorted that S's and H's prior theories need only diverge to a minimal degree, maybe only in point of the axiom for the malapropism, for Davidson's argument to go through. So the passing theory that includes the non-homophonic axiom clause may be regarded as systematic as well, since everything or nearly everything that surrounds that axiom will be carried over from the prior theories of H and S to the shared passing theory. It is just that this passing theory may be systematic to a lesser or greater extent.

To my last argument against Davidson, it might be objected that I am invoking a notion of semantic holism with which Davidson need have no truck—a notion which may be germane in relation to so-called "conceptual-role" semantics (cf. Block, 1986), but is unnecessarily strong for Davidson's purposes. Here is Jane Heal, contrasting her Davidsonian rendition of meaning holism with that of the conceptual-role theorists:

The crucial difference [between them] is that our holism claims only that for a certain meaning to be expressed, the whole constituted by the person's utterances must be suitable. . . . But we have not said that there will be only one suitable setting in which a given meaning can

occur, so we are not committed to the view that any difference between the two wholes must make every meaning expressed in the one differ from every meaning expressed in the other.

Heal, 1989, 91

So S can express her meaning *overboard* and H can understand her without them having to share the theories they know in point of every detail. Their passing theories need not *completely* coincide. So meaning can, after all, be systematic *and* shared.

For the sake of argument, I shall assume these two retorts are correct in what they say. But they get Davidson nowhere, because they still violate the *momentariness* condition. The first clearly does this. If what is systematic for S and H at the point of communication—at the point where they *share* theories—is so in virtue of what is systematic about their *prior* theories, then their competencies before and thereafter will also be, largely, shared. Davidson could say, if he wanted, that they will still be different. But what he must establish—at least if he is to uphold his no languages view consonant with the Fregean-Wittgenstein constraint of sharedness—is that communication can proceed without shared language of any kind; whereas the plausibility of this first retort rests on precisely the idea that S and H will share something over time to a very large extent.

The second retort does not violate the momentariness condition quite so directly. For it *seems* to be an open possibility that the prior theories of our protagonists H and S might diverge quite wildly as long as *enough* were together at the moment of communication to constitute a systematic passing theory. Thus imagine that H and S speak, as we might commonsensically put it, quite different dialects of a given language, or even two different languages. They might still, it seems, communicate on a given occasion if circumstances were sufficiently felicitous. However, given that what they do when they do so is to construct a theory, the very idea that genuine malapropism could involve genuine communication—which is what Davidson needs for his argument for work—simply palls. For if H is conversing with someone, S, who does not share his prior theory to any degree, what is characteristic of H's understanding of S's malapropisms—namely, non-homophonic interpretation—will be characteristic of his understanding *everything* she says. If H developed his theory of S, the idea that S "malaproped" at some point in the past might become a meaningful hypothesis for H; but it could only do so if construed as an error, or else as a recurrent, albeit idiosyncratic, feature of S's idiolect. In the former case, we defer immediately to a shared language (cf. the second paragraph of

this section). In the latter case, we have, not a case of malapropism, but simply a divergence of S's prior theory from some or other communal norm. But this does not mean that S and H *between themselves* do not share this "idiolect"—or dialect as I am arguing it would have to be. It might be retorted that, in the course of coming to understand S, H's developing prior theory need at no point have included the non-homophonic axiom which S's includes, but that H could nevertheless have interpreted S each time she used a malapropism, in a one-off manner. But this is not in fact possible. Looking back at the course of coming to understand S, H will only have two ways of describing what happened during theory construction. If an expression was added to the theory, then it was understood; if it was not added to the theory, then it was not understood. That is the only rational reconstruction available in the situation we are imagining. There is no room for something that is both understood and yet not added to the theory; no room, that is, for malapropisms.

In effect, the situation we are envisaging, in which H and S do not "share a language" in the everyday sense and are learning to understand one another, is one in which they do nevertheless share some theory, and hence in fact, by Davidson's standards, a language—one that may be rather expressively restricted and that will change more drastically over time than more standard languages, it is true, but shared all the same. Thus the momentariness condition is, in the end, violated by the second retort. For the understanding H shares with S when they communicate depends on *something* shared over time between them, even though what we might call their broader linguistic competence differs. If and when these broader competencies cease to differ, then we will be able to make sense of malapropisms—but then of course also, now in a different way, of the notion of a shared language.

The conclusion we reach is that S and H, if their mutual understanding is to be systematic and shared, must share a language—that is, must share a theory before and after the occasion of understanding. Of course, nothing has required that this language should extend beyond what they have grown to know about one another, and Davidson can still reject the traditional notion of shared language, on which English and Norwegian are languages—as we have seen that there is good, independent reason for doing from Chomsky. Nevertheless, shared languages do survive for Davidson; indeed, his view seems to entail that in principle we must all be seen as speaking as many languages as we have successful interpreters, insofar as these all will have somewhat different experiences of the world,



and thus different linguistic dispositions. But such a view of our linguistic competence is surely absurd. Our only conclusion can be that there is something wrong with the framework that generated it—Davidson's overall philosophy of language and communication.

Someone might reply to this that Davidson can define "shared language" as he wants, and that he can therefore choose a definition on which his arguments still show shared languages don't exist. However, it would be hard to see this as anything other than an *ad hoc* dialectical reaction to the arguments I have provided above—and one that moreover fails to see the depth of the problem. In the 1960s and '70s, Davidson was taken as, and took himself to be, developing semantic theories for shared languages in the traditional sense, an idea which was tacitly assumed to mesh with his conception of communication as something essentially public and steered by radical interpretation. In "A nice derangement... ", Davidson rejects this conception of what semantic theories apply to and hence—he intends—the need for shared languages. I take it then that it would at least be very uncomfortable for this view if it turned out that these theories continued to pick out "shared languages", only of *another* kind than English, Swahili etc. If the traditional notion of shared language is meant to go, then so surely should shared languages generally. I thus take my arguments to constitute a genuine *reductio* of Davidson's overall approach to what language, meaning and communication *qua* phenomena are.

## 5. Conclusion

In the context of an ideological debate between Chomsky and Davidson on language, I take the above to provide a serious objection to the latter and a corresponding lift for the former. Of course, in a wider context, other thinkers might see the problems Davidson faces as a symptom of his rejection of shared languages like English, and thus see my arguments as a reason not to reject the latter. But if we are convinced, with Chomsky and—I take it—Davidson, that such constructs have no scientific legitimacy, we will be more inclined to look instead at what the Chomskyan picture can provide by way of an account of linguistic communication.

In very rough outline, this picture is one that simply rejects the idea of shared meaning in favour of an account that stresses *de facto* similarity in individualistic linguistic competencies as well other aspects of our mental and biological make-up; and hence the idea that there really is anything

to be characterised by what Davidson calls a "passing theory". "Communication" says Chomsky "does not require shared 'public meanings' any more than it requires 'public pronunciations'" (1993, 21).<sup>17</sup> Linguistic communication is successful to the extent that it is because we are similar—biologically, culturally and more narrowly linguistically—but there is no common, abstract currency guaranteeing "a meeting of minds". It would not be feasible for me to provide a fully developed account of this position and to tackle all the various objections to it in this paper—my remit has been first and foremost to show the lacking in another account, Davidson's, which otherwise can be seen as having a strong affinity with the Chomskyan line. In closing, however, I do want to mention a couple of points that any serious development of the latter should in my view stress.

The first is that though the idea of autonomous meaning in the traditional sense of something public falls away, a Chomskyan view of language can naturally do justice to and indeed explain many of the phenomena that traditionally have been seen as exemplifying so-called 'autonomous meaning'. Consider the following sentences:

- (1) He thinks the young man is a genius
- (2) The young man thinks he is a genius
- (3) His mother thinks the young man is a genius

In uttering (1), but not (2) and (3), I would ordinarily be taken to have to be referring to two different males. This feature of language, much discussed over the years, seems to be a function of syntactical constraints that are deeply embedded in the structure of any natural language. In view of this, it seems we cannot refer to the young man in question twice in (1) simply by intending to do so and getting someone else to understand this intention. In this way, language itself—that is, each individual's

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Pietrowski (op. cit.) seems to miss this point in his Chomsky-friendly defence of "A nice derangements...". Pietrowski writes that "successful communication is always a matter of converging *passing* theories; and general intelligence is always implicated here, if only by giving 'tacit approval' to the deliverances of prior theories." (p. 13 of web version, see <http://terpconnect.umd.edu/pietro/research/papers/derange.pdf>, retrieved August 28th 2015). Pietrowski claims there is a categorical difference between passing and prior theories—it is *in virtue of* the latter only that we communicate—in spite of admitting the necessarily strong involvement of the latter in shaping the former. I fail to see what this categorical difference amounts to, apart from a wish to vindicate a Davidsonian line which Pietrowski really, as a Chomskyan, has no reason to do.

I-language—provides constraints on meaning (or reference) that are reasonable to describe as autonomous—even though these constraints need not and for Chomskyans are not literally shared in communication.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, it should be stressed that nothing in the Chomskyan account commits one to a view on which thought and/or language are to be understood on the model of the *representation* of outer worldly items in some inner, neural code. Many influential thinkers, including Davidson, find such *representationalism* suspect and even of dubious coherence, and I am inclined to concur in this pragmatist line.<sup>19</sup> Now talk of “representations” is of course common in all of cognitive science, but in recent years in particular it has been gradually better appreciated—not least by Chomsky<sup>20</sup>—that this can concern first and foremost higher level mental structures, and does not necessarily have any role to play in explaining “thought about the world”, at least in the sense proprietary to the representationalist paradigm. The Chomskyan view seeks only to understand language as a natural phenomenon, insisting that it is a specific neural capacity of human beings that manifests itself in our behaviour and our conscious intuitions. Whether language is representational is thus a moot issue. What should not be moot is that though there are no languages in the traditional sense, at least for serious scientific purposes, there is definitely a specific capacity we humans possess that underlies our use of language, and that can be studied scientifically.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The example is from Chomsky ‘Explaining language use’ in his (2000), p. 35. The idea of connecting this kind of phenomenon to the notion of autonomous meaning *per se* is due to Higginbotham (op. cit.) The example illustrates just one of several phenomena that exhibit autonomous meaning in this “syntactical” sense.

<sup>19</sup> Other prominent thinkers in the contemporary analytic debate who share this overall scepticism towards representationalism are Rorty, Hilary Putnam, Robert Brandom and Huw Price (see especially the latter’s 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Chomsky makes clear his opposition to a semantic or representationalist understanding of meaning and language in ‘Language as a natural object’ and ‘Language from an internalistic perspective’ in his (2000).

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