

**METAPHOR, LOGICAL FORM, AND EVENT
A LINGUIST TALKING TO THE PHILOSOPHER DONALD DAVIDSON¹**

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INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERVIEW

During the first semester of the academic year 1994-95, I had the opportunity to attend a series of lectures given by Prof. Dr. Donald Davidson in the department of philosophy at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. It was a seminar about his philosophy of mind and language. A nice way of understanding Davidson's project is to pose the question: how do we understand other people's thoughts, given that we must rely on external evidence? Davidson has been defending the theory that this question should be answered from a radical interpreter's point of view. The basic idea is that it is constitutive of facts about content that they are accessible to someone in the epistemological position of a radical interpreter: imagine a situation where you are in an alien culture speaking a language of which you do not understand a word, and you cannot count on a translator to help you. Davidson's bet is that with some practice you will eventually be able to understand other people's languages. The situation of radical interpretation represents, so Davidson argues, our day-by-day linguistic interactions: we are always engaged in trying to understand other people's sayings. Thus, how do we arrive at understanding other people's language even when we have, so to say, the illusion that we speak the same language? By attributing to them some degree of rationality, by being "charitable" to them. Radical interpretation is impossible unless Principle of Charity is invoked. Such an assumption of rationality goes along to attributing thoughts and language to other people: I, as an interpreter, believe that my interlocutor behaves in a rational way, and by believing it I believe that he/she has thoughts and language. Notice that such a point of departure blocks the possibility of explaining meaning with the help of convention. Rather to the contrary, conventionality springs from our practice of interpretation.

¹ To professor Donald Davidson all my gratitude for the time spent with my questions.

² To professor Herman Parret my acknowledgment for his helpful comments on the questions. My gratitude to Bruno Dallari and Fátima de Oliveira, who have contributed to this interview sending me some of the questions which compose it.

Given that we attribute to our interlocutor a minimum of rationality, and supposing that we all have an intuitive grasp of truth then, Davidson claims, we may be able to construct a theory of meaning, a way of interpreting someone else's language. Davidson claims that Tarski has showed us how to get rid of the concept of truth in such a way that it is possible to build a theory of meaning within Tarski's framework. Such a theory of meaning would then be completely extensionally adequate, and it would account for the fact that from a finite number of words we can create and understand an infinite number of uses. Two remarks must be added: first the reader should not think that Davidson holds a correspondence theory of truth, because he rejects realist accounts of the mental, while at the same time, he explicitly denies antirealist conceptions. How is it possible to dissolve the dicotomy of realism and antirealism? His answer is by seeing language as a practice, not as a representation of the world. Second remark, Davidson does not hold an atomistic view of meanings, so he does not believe that the meaning of a word is given isolately. His theory of meaning must then at the same time account for compositionality and reject atomism. Davidson holds a holistic view on language. Generally speaking, the sentence "snow is white" has the truth conditions it does, because it belongs to a language that contains indefinitely many other sentences in which "is white" and "is snow" occur.

The difficulty of Davidson's theory of interpretation may be grasped by our brief introduction above. It was my bet that an informal conversation with Prof. Davidson would be a unique opportunity to clarify some of the problems just sketched. Besides there were some specific issues in semantics, discussed by Prof. Davidson, which are of direct interest to a linguist. These were the reasons that pushed me in the direction of this interview.³ Thus, by the end of December 1994, Prof. Davidson kindly accepted to answer my questions.

Although the project of the interview was mine, two other Brazilian linguists have contributed to it: Bruno Dallari and Fátima de Oliveira. Our own objects of study have framed this interview: metaphor, my own topic of study, logical form, Dallari's subject, and the notion of event in a semantics of tense and aspect is de Oliveira's concern. Questions 14 to 16, formulated by Bruno Dallari, propose a discussion about Davidson's notion of logical form and Chomky's idea that logical form constitutes an interface between syntax and semantics. The last question was prepared by Prof. Fátima de Oliveira. It is about Davidson's anchoring his semantics of tense in the notion of event, taken as a primitive.

The questions were presented in written form to Prof. Davidson. We had an initial discussion about them in order to select the ones which were going to compose the interview. A second written version of the questions was handed to Prof. Davidson, who answered them. Based on his answers, a third version of the interview with comments on his answers was sent to him at the beginning of May 1995. In July, a final version of the interview was sent to me. The reader will find here the last version with the addition of some comments, subtitles, bibliography and this brief introduction.

³ My thanks to Prof. Rodolfo Ilari for his support to the idea of interviewing Prof. Davidson.

A final remark about publishing this interview should be added.⁴ Since the interview aims to introduce other researchers to aspects of Davidson's theory, instead of just reproducing the questions and answers, the strategy was to reconstruct, even if briefly, the presuppositions underlying the questions. In other words, each question is preceded by an introduction, the goal of which is to reconstruct the background knowledge presupposed by the question. Some of the questions are accompanied by bibliographical references - the complete reference may be found at the end of the interview - so the reader may continue by himself or herself his or her own discovery of Davidson's philosophy of language. I hope such a strategy enlarges the number of readers, since it should provide clues to help someone who has no acquaintance with his approach.

The Interview

Davidson's background

1. Many authors, for instance Cometti (1994), have placed your reflection, as well as Rorty's and Putnam's, within American Pragmatism, inheriting a philosophical perspective opened by William James, John Dewey, and Charles Peirce. Would you agree?⁵

Reply: *I have never called myself a pragmatist, nor do I think the label fits me very well. I share with Quine and Rorty a rejection of the idea of a "first philosophy", the idea that philosophy seeks a kind of higher knowledge that justifies and underlies science, and this is an attitude to be found in Dewey. But I totally reject the pragmatist view of truth.*

I am happy to be called an analytic philosopher, but since I think most philosophers, from Socrates on, have been analytic philosophers, this doesn't do much to distinguish my views from those of most other philosophers (except a popular handful, mostly recent, who avoid arguments and distrust clarity).

Does rejecting the pragmatism view on truth mean that you do not subscribe to a coherent theory of truth. You have also rejected the correspondence theory of truth. So what is your concept of truth?⁶

Reply: *To have the concept of truth is to have the notion of objectivity, of right or wrong. To know what is possible to be right or wrong entails to believe many other*

⁴ My gratitude to Prof. Eleonora Albano for her support to the publication of the interview, when the interview was still a dream.

⁵ Good introductions to Davidson's philosophy of language are Ramberg (1989), Evinne (1991), and Engel (1994).

⁶ Davidson's most famous papers on truth are "Truth and meaning" (1967) and "Epistemology and Truth" (1988). The literature on Davidson's view on truth is extensive. See, for instance, Putnam (1975) and Larson (1988).

propositions. It was Tarski who showed formally that the notion of true cannot be defined. He showed us how to apply the concept of truth to a language.

Metaphor

2. It is a common practice within Analytic Philosophy to associate the idea of proposition with that of the literal or cognitive meaning. In his first article on metaphor (1954), Black defies such a postulate by claiming that metaphors are cognitive and that it is possible to ascribe to them a metaphorical meaning. In your reply to Black, “What Metaphors Mean” (1979), you ascribe a cognitive significance to metaphors, although you refuse vehemently the idea of metaphorical meaning and the hypothesis that metaphors are propositional. If metaphors are non-propositional, then they cannot be accounted for a semantic theory - at least if we stick to the Analytic tradition. Thus, metaphor is a use of language; it concerns what speakers do with words. It is this framework that imposes a clear-cut distinction between meaning and use, or between “learning the meaning of a word” and “using it once it is learned”. You exemplify this distinction with the situation of an Englishman teaching a Saturnine the meaning of ‘floor’. After the Saturnine has grasped the meaning of ‘floor’, he invites his English teacher to a trip to Saturn. Looking to Earth from space the Englishman says:

(1) Floor.

He intends it to be taken metaphorically, since he has in mind Dante’s verse

(2) The small round floor that makes us passionate.

In other words, he does not intend to extend the extension of the term ‘floor’, but to call the interpreter’s attention to a similarity in the world. From the English teacher’s viewpoint it is clear that he is using ‘floor’ metaphorically, but from the point of view of the Saturnine things are not so obvious. How does the Saturnine know that the Englishman intends to be interpreted metaphorically?⁷

Reply: *We couldn’t explain metaphor without the distinction between learning the first meaning and using it once learned. But as Wittgenstein emphasizes, our basic way of learning words through ostension is always open to misunderstanding. There is no rule for telling exactly what a word means.*

Thus, the Saturnine may conclude that ‘floor’ refers to Earth as well as to floor, extending the extension of ‘floor’. It is only after he has learned a great deal about English that he may understand that his English teacher is talking metaphorically, right?

Reply: *Right.*

⁷ For a discussion about aspects of Davidson’s theory of metaphor, see Crosthwaite (1985), Farrell (1987), Wheeler (1990).

3. Metaphors—so you claim—are not propositional, because they intimate the interpreter to search for similarities in the world, to see something as something else. They are aesthetic experiences. This ability of ‘seeing as’, of perceiving similarities like different events is not at all propositional, and you correctly recall Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit experiment. Nonetheless, when someone is trying to teach the meaning of a word, he or she is also calling the interpreter’s attention to similarities in the world, he or she is also imposing an aspect on the world. In that sense, ‘seeing as’ would be a basic process of the construction of meaning. Whether such-and-such a projection is going to be a recurrent, a systematic use is another question. Can we then say that language is metaphorical?

Reply: *I wouldn’t say “language is metaphorical”. But there is a point here, which is, as the question suggests, that much language learning is a matter of “seeing” similarities.*

Indeed, it is not difficult to see that the notion of grasping similarities plays an essential role in your model of learning language. How do you understand the notion of similarity?

Reply: *The concept of similarity is indeed essential. Inanimate nature doesn’t care about similarities; whatever “joints” nature has are in our conception of it. So the place to start is with the fact that similarity is an interest-relative concept. It is no progress to say we find things similar if we react in similar ways: for when are reactions similar? This is a very deep question on which I have been working lately, but I am afraid it will take a book to answer it.*

4. In your well-known article on metaphor (1979), you propose semantic criteria for the identification of an utterance as metaphorical: At sentential level, metaphors are generally either falsehoods or truisms. However, semantic criteria are neither necessary nor sufficient for the identification of metaphors. When Hamlet says to Laertes:

(3) I shot my arrow over the house and hit my brother

there is nothing in the sentence itself that points to a metaphorical reading. Hamlet’s utterance is literally true, and it is not a truism. Nevertheless, it is used metaphorically in the context of the play. This problem could be solved by including co-textual information: we, readers of the play Hamlet, know that Hamlet did not concretely hurt his brother and that he does not have a brother. Such a solution forces an extension of your criteria. Would you agree that the identification of an utterance as metaphorical may depend on other parameters besides semantic violations? Would you agree that sometimes the decision to interpret metaphorically depends on the interpreter’s “good taste”?

Reply: *My suggestion about how we identify a metaphor was admittedly rough, and you prove the point. No doubt contextual knowledge very often plays a part. But I would despair of a sharp criterion. In that sense, I agree about the good taste of our interpreter.*

First meaning

5. What seems to lead many researchers in the direction of semantic criteria for the identification of metaphorical sentences is the underlying hypothesis that meaning is context-independent. This is precisely the hypothesis you assume: metaphors mean what their words mean literally, i.e. independently of contexts of use. Such a notion of meaning is certainly deficient among other reasons because it cannot account for deictic elements. In your article, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs” (1986), it is the very idea of a context-independent meaning that is put into doubt. In this paper, you argue for a notion of meaning that depends neither on the notion of conventionality nor on the hypothesis of context-free meaning. Instead of literal meaning you propose the notion of “first meaning”. First meaning is the result of a convergence between the speaker’s intention of using words that will be assigned certain meanings by the interpreter - his semantic intention -, and the interpreter’s assignment of such meanings to the words. Moreover, it refers to a regular use in the sense that a word occupies a systematic place within a speaker’s idiolect. Thus, you argue that when Mrs. Malaprop says:

(4) A nice derangement of epitaphs

the word ‘epithets’ occupies the place of ‘epitaphs’. It does not matter whether this is a recurrent verbal behavior of Mrs. Malaprop, what matters is that she intends it to express the idea conveyed by ‘epitaphs’ and that her interpreter understands her intention. In the case of maximal convergence, we would be allowed to talk about first meaning. Let us suppose that S(peaker) and I(nterpreter) are in a situation of linguistic interaction. I speaks an Englisholet (an idiolect of English) and S a Suriolet (an idiolect of Suruí). S utters:

(5) sa:ma?jagasunā:me

Imagine that (5) is uttered when it is raining. I may presume that S means something like ‘it is raining’. Would this situation capture your notion of first meaning?⁸

Reply: *First meaning, like all forms of meaning for me, applies primarily to particular utterances; it is the meaning which must be grasped if the speaker’s intentions (semantic or otherwise) are to be fully understood. Words do not have a systematic place in a speaker’s language, but the language itself may change. I do not know what*

⁸ About Davidson’s view on communication and convention, see his article “Communication and convention”. About this issue, see also Blackburn (1987), George (1990), Jutronic-Tihomirovic (1989)

the speaker S in (1) meant by his words, but how he intended them to be interpreted is his “semantic intention”, and if I is clever or lucky, he may get it. What may be puzzling you is that unless a speaker is fairly consistent over time in his use of words, an interpreter has no chance of figuring out what he means. If the speaker knows he can’t be understood, he can’t intend to be interpreted in any particular way, and so can’t be said to mean anything at all.

If this is so, then it is possible to say that a word like ‘chicken’ is ambiguous: When it is applied to a chicken and when it is applied to a human being. Thus, the semantic theory you are proposing may apprehend these two uses of ‘chicken’. This seems to be your point with respect to the use of ‘gold mines’ to refer to ‘Davidson’s article’ in the example given by Scholtz (1993). Your reply to Scholtz was that if ‘gold mine’ has a recurrent use with respect to intellectual artifacts, then it could be declared ambiguous. My question is: Are you defending the hypothesis that some metaphors may be said to have meaning, although not metaphorical meaning? Or are you saying that ‘gold mine’ when applied to intellectual products is no longer metaphorical, i.e. metaphors would refer solely to innovative metaphors?⁹

Reply: *As I said, I was too stubborn when I claimed that metaphors do not have meaning. My answer is: some metaphors may be accounted by a semantic theory. They may be said to have a secondary meaning.*

One of the points I like most in your article on metaphor is precisely your denial of metaphorical meaning. This seems to be an effort to save metaphor as a non-propositional experience. A metaphor is in this sense an aesthetic experience. You correctly say that one may appreciate a metaphor as many times as she or he reads it. This is certainly the case, at least for me, with the sentence ‘Architecture is frozen music’. There is however, a problem with respect to what we may call “conventional metaphors”, like the use of ‘gold mines’ applied to intellectual products. Would you say that it is possible to distinguish dead from living metaphors? Would you say that conventional metaphors may be accounted for a semantic theory?

Reply: *It seems so, although it would be very difficult to make such a distinction.*

6. Your notion of first meaning aims at abandoning the idea of context-free meaning. The first meaning is the convergence of how the speaker intends/expects his words to be interpreted, and how the interpreter grasps this intention. Does this mean that your semantic theory is pragmatically orientated? Is there a distinction between semantics and pragmatics?

⁹ See Davidson’s “Locating literary language” (1993) for his position with respect to metaphor and meaning.

Reply: *This question is couched in terms I prefer to avoid. All meaning, of any sort is context-dependent. Who would disagree? Only the context of utterances tells you what “language” is being spoken, and therefore what those utterances could mean.*

The point about metaphor is different: a metaphor is understood only by someone who grasps the first meaning (in my sense of “first meanings”). Fancy theories of “metaphorical meaning”, etc., have to do, not with what I would call meaning at all, but with the effect the words have on the hearer.

Intentions

7. Many linguists and philosophers working with pragmatics follow Grice’s account of communication, and his distinction between sentence meaning, utterance meaning and speaker’s meaning. Both sentence meaning and utterance meaning should be part of semantics, the object of which are conventionalized meanings. Pragmatics should study the possible relations between the meaning semantically codified and the speaker’s communicative intention. Semantics and pragmatics then are complementary to each other since the act of communication is achieved when interpreters arrive at the speaker’s communicative intention. To what extent do you agree with this picture? Do you think it is correct to say that semantic and pragmatic are complementary?

Reply: *I am not a close student of Grice’s work, so I’m not sure what the distinctions are he wishes to draw. I don’t believe that conventions helps explain anything important about linguistic communication.*

It seems to me useful to distinguish the very many different sorts of intention which are present in any utterance. First meaning is necessarily intended, and I agree with Grice that this is an intention a speaker must intend his hearer to recognize. In many cases (metaphor is only one example), a speaker intends to get across an idea that is different from, but depends on, first meaning. Where this is also an intention the speaker intends his hearer to grasp, we might call it “speaker’s meaning”. (Of course it could be the same as first meaning) If this is “pragmatics”, so be it; it’s not a word I use with a technical meaning. But there are endless other intentions a speaker typically has.

8. Some authors have criticized the notion of “first meaning” because it is too closely related to the speaker’s intention and the interpreter’s grasping of the speaker’s intention. A too close link between intentions and meanings may lead to a Humpty Dumpty theory of meaning, that is: “when I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean”. Your theory has been accused of Humpty Dumptism. In order to escape from a Dumpty Humpty theory of meaning and at the same time to avoid the notion of convention as playing an essential role in communication, you have used the notion of ‘expectation’ as constitutive of the speaker’s prior intention. The basic idea is that a speaker always intends to be understood. If this is true, then the speaker has to figure out how his interpreter is prepared in advance to understand his utterance, and he has to adapt his way of speaking to the interpreter. How does he work out such adjustments if

he does not presuppose some kind of shared language which is in a sense autonomous with respect to his intentions?¹⁰

Reply: *My theory is not a Humpty Dumpty theory for a simple reason: you cannot intend what you believe to be impossible. My general view is that our ordinary concept of meaning depends on (more or less) successful cases of communication where the speaker is understood as he intended. If we want to say that in situations where it is impossible for an interpreter to guess what is meant, the speaker “didn’t mean what he said”, that’s O.K. with me. How does it matter?*

Since to speak is to intend to be understood in a certain way, a speaker will always speak in a way that he believes will be interpreted as he intends. In this sense, he speaks as he believes his hearer is prepared to understand him. But for me this certainly does not mean that he believes the only way an interpreter is prepared to understand him is in accord with conventional rules. We all (but especially poets) believe our readers or hearers are prepared to figure some things out on the spot.

9. The notion of “first meaning” relies heavily upon the notion of intention. In more recent papers, you have distinguished at least three types of intention. Semantic intention is one of these types of intention: an intention which is not linguistically formulated, and a semantic intention. May I ask what “intentional” means?

Reply: *An intentional act depends on the actor’s desires and beliefs: an agent has a desire, he also has a number of beliefs, he judges that his best decision is to act X, so he has acted intentionally. If this is so, then speaking/interpreting depends on beliefs, desires and choices.*

Given that your approach to language presupposes that there is no thought without language, and that language is intentional, would your description of language allow for an intelligent machine? In other words, do you believe in an intelligent machine which interprets language?

Reply: *My answer to the question is No. It takes much more than seeing what is printed out on a terminal to tell whether there is an autonomous intelligence at the other end. However, there is no reason in principle why we couldn’t make something that thinks.*

10. You have emphasized, like many other philosophers and linguists, a “syntactic” creativity in language, i.e. from a finite vocabulary, we may construct an infinite number of sentences. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that we have, so to say, a “semantic” creativity: a word is displaced to refer to an experience to which it does not systematically refer. The result may lead to a new systematic use, generating ambiguity or polyssemy. For instance, the use of ‘mouth’ for bottles, rivers, ... Another example is

¹⁰ A criticism of Davidson’s notion of first meaning may be found in Hacking (1986). Davidson refuses the accusation of Humpty Dumptism in Davidson’s “James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty” (1989).

the word ‘field’—this is roughly the same argument used by Wittgenstein with respect to the word ‘game’. We have: field for pasture, a football field, a semantic field, a magnetic field, a field of study, a field in set theory, a field of a shield, a field of a battle (field officer), field work,... I am proposing a semantic creativity: an ability to see something as something else. Would you agree that semantic creativity plays a fundamental role in language?

Reply: *Of course some words are ambiguous, and it is sometimes a legitimate question whether what seem to be two meanings are really one. But our informal theories about what people mean by what they say depend on making decisions in this matter, even if they are vague and flexible. A number of the uses of “field” that you list seem to me to involve no ambiguity, while others are terms of art which are accompanied by stipulative definitions. Ambiguity is a problem, but it doesn’t imply an infinity of meanings.*

Interpretation

11. Let me return to example (5) above. One of your aims is to describe the minimum or essential aspects involved in communication. A central notion is interpretation. It is in such a minimalist project that the figure of the Radical Interpreter (RI) makes sense. What are the minimum requirements to a RI? Let us guarantee that a RI disposes of an ability to construct a T-theory, and that he has an intuitive grasp of the notion of truth. Is this the minimum required for interpretation?¹¹

Reply: *The “ability to construct a T-theory” is sufficient if broadly understood. No one could construct such a theory without already having the concept of truth (this is so even on Tarki’s view: see his Convention T, which can be understood only by someone who understands the undefined, general, concept of truth) Someone who can construct a T-theory in my sense must also have the concepts of belief, of desire, of intention, and must understand some concepts like accepting a sentence as true, or preferring that one sentence rather than another be true. Finally, to be able to construct a T-theory for a particular speaker (or group of speakers), one must share with him, her, or them a great many concepts, beliefs and values.*

12. Let us imagine that (5) was said to a RI, who disposes of all the above requisites to interpret. RI may formulate the following hypothetical interpretation of (5):

(6) ‘sa:ma?jagasunā:me’ spoken by S at moment t is true-in- Suruí iff it is raining.

RI has no idea of how to decompose S’s utterance, nor of what exactly the words, if there are words, meant. S’s utterance could also mean: ‘the rain’, ‘raining’, ‘some God is giving us rain’. Moreover I cannot know for sure to what S is referring. The moral is

¹¹ The notion of Radical Interpretation is central to Davidson’s philosophy of language, see Davidson’s “Radical Interpretation” (1973).

that a RI cannot go very far with a sentence. Imagine that I systematically hear (5) when it is raining. He or she may then reduce the spectrum of hypothesis, but he or she still cannot say anything about how many words there are in (5), and what the words mean. He or she may even use (5) successfully, without knowing the meaning of the words. How does RI reach an understanding of the meaning of the words?

Reply: *The RI will not hazard any guess at an interpretation unless he takes the sounds to constitute a sentence which the speaker holds to be true at the times the speaker utters those sounds. But of course a single utterance can give no clue to logical form; logical form emerges only as a number of related sentences are interpreted, and the theory is capable of predicting the meanings of sentences not yet uttered. Nor can a single sentence, no matter how often uttered, yield a tolerable unique interpretation until it is related to many other sentences. To take some of your examples: “the rain” is ruled out because it isn’t a sentence, and so couldn’t be held true; “some God is giving us rain” will ultimately be ruled out because it will be found to entail or be entailed by other sentences containing the elements “God” and “give”, while there is a shorter sentence (“It is raining”) held true at the same times without those elements. Of course, if the culture doesn’t contain both sentences, or they are both always held true or false together, there may be no point in distinguishing: it all depends on many further discoveries about how the word “God” is used, etc.*

The main point is : Interpretation depends on detecting a large network of related ideas and sentences. The earliest hypotheses are always open to revision on the basis of further evidence. The formation of a theory of logical form (a theory of what constitute “words”) also comes at the relatively advanced stage when it becomes necessary to construct a recursive theory.

The above description relies heavily upon the notion of interpretation. If I arrives at a partially right T-sentence, like (6), he has interpreted S’s utterance. Can we understand interpretation as some sort of translation?

Reply: *The answer depends on what you mean by “interpretation”. You always might, by luck, guess what some utterance means. That is the best you could do, given evidence based only on the evidence you mention. True understanding depends on much more, for example knowing the logical form of the sentence, and therefore how it is related to endless other sentences.*

The only quoted expression in (6) is the expression to be interpreted, and it should be clear that (6) says nothing about translation: it states the truth conditions of the utterance. Translation is a syntactical process; interpretation (as I understand it) is semantical—it relates language to world, not to another language.

Conventionality

13. Let me turn now to the problem of defining language. In the above questions one may find the neologisms ‘Englisholect’ and ‘Surriolect’, they were meant to be faithful to your idea that we are always dealing with idiolects. This is a consequence of your rather deranging conclusion in “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs”: “I conclude that there is no such thing as language, not if language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed.” (1986:446) Hacking (1986), among other authors, argues that such a conclusion is totally inadequate. He thinks that it follows from your exaggerated emphasis on ‘interpretation’. Your theory -- so Hacking argues -- is based on atypical cases, cases of malapropism, of slips of the tongue, of mistakes. When we are at home with a language, in normal linguistic interactions, we do not interpret, we treat the words as having the meaning they have in language. What warranties this automatic communication is the fact that both speaker and hearer follow linguistic rules. In other words, conventionality plays a role in ordinary communicative exchanges. Your argument is that following a rule is not a necessary condition to communication, i.e. interpreting does not depend on sharing meanings. The RI cannot follow a rule because he does not know what the rule is, that is, what exactly it is he is looking for. So it is from communication that rules spring and not the other way around. As a consequence sharing a language is not necessary to communication even in intra-language exchanges. Actually, no two people speak the same language. From such a point of view, what is language?

Reply: *My point in “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs” did not depend on special cases like malapropisms, slips of the tongue, but on the fact (generally agreed to by linguists) that, as you put it, “no two people speak the same language”. Of course to say this is to use the concept of language more precisely than we generally do (it is to use it as philosophers often do). My point was that understanding does not depend on speaker and hearer meaning the same things by the same sounds; what matters is that each should understand what the other means. But if this is so, then understanding does not depend on socially accepted rules or conventions. Of course if by a rule you mean only the sort of knowledge that a statement like (6) yields, then all interpretation depends on “rules”. But this isn’t what people like Dummett, Wittgenstein, or Hacking mean by a rule: they mean shared rules. I agree that we frequently do share rules, and this makes understanding much easier than it would otherwise be. I merely insist that this is not an essential aspect of language, and that it is less common than often assumed.*

When I speak of “interpretation”, I speak of what someone needs to know in order to understand someone else. Ordinary interpretation is done effortlessly, partly because we often do mean the same thing (more or less) by the same words, and partly because we are all able to “correct” slips, malapropisms, etc., without conscious effort. What I call interpretation has nothing to do with how long it takes or how hard it is; the smoothest, most relaxed conversation between twins involves what I call interpretation.

If two people's idiolects are sufficiently similar, we say they speak the "same language". Contemporary linguists (and I) consider this a hopelessly vague notion, but of course we can sharpen it if we need to for some purpose. You say (paraphrasing Hacking) that "we treat words as having the meaning they have in the language". Is language something that exists apart from verbal behavior of speakers?

Logical Form

Questions 14 to 16 were organized by Bruno Dallari.

14. Nowadays linguistic analysis has a Chomskian taste. You and Chomsky share at least one important notion, that of "logical form". In the late 60s you postulated the necessity of a structural level of meaning given independently of lexical meanings. The idea was that one could not deduce sentence meaning directly from word meanings, and that an intermediary level should be postulated. This would be a structuring level. Nowadays this is a common procedure in Linguistics, partly because it corresponds to Chomsky's idea of Logical Form. Although Chomsky has often been accused of leaving semantics aside, his most recent approach to language offers a complete account of semantics. In this approach, semantics is decomposed into two parts: the lexicon and the logical form. The lexicon comes before the syntactic decomposition, while logical form works with the output of the syntactic processing. Such a model ensures an autonomy of syntax. Do you still believe it is necessary to postulate an intermediate structuring level? Do you think it is possible to conceive an independent syntax à la Chomsky? Would you subscribe to Chomsky's approach to semantics, and to what extent?¹²

Reply: *I certainly do not subscribe to Chomsky's approach to semantics, which seems to me to have almost nothing to do with what Tarski, and most philosophers, have called semantics. Syntax, in my opinion, has little independent philosophical interest, simply because a serious theory of semantics (in Tarski's sense) necessarily includes syntax.*

I think that what the questioner calls the "intermediate level" which I once "postulated" was no more than what I still call "logical form" (a term I believe I used before Chomsky did). The point of logical form for me was to uncover a semantically significant form, which a formal theory of truth could handle, which did not correspond in many cases to the surface grammar. The idea is explicit in the work of Frege and Russell.

15. Jean-Claude Milner criticizes the attitude of taking the predicate logic as the central device of formal semantics. He argues that the concept of logical form was elaborated by Frege in opposition to the concept of grammatical form. Frege aimed at emphasizing that the logical properties of a proposition do not bare any necessary relation to its

¹² About Davidson's view on logical form, see Cargile (1970). See also Davidson's articles "The logical form of action sentences" (1967) and more recently "Representation and Interpretation" (1990).

grammatical properties. Chomsky's notion of logical form re-establishes the identity between logical form and grammatical form. Would you agree with this position? Do you believe it is possible to completely describe semantic events with predicate logic?

Reply: *I consider the question whether the first-order predicate calculus is adequate to capture all logical form as an open question: we don't know. First-order languages have enormous expressive power; they are arguably adequate to all of science. There is much disagreement as to whether they are adequate to express intentional idioms; I think they are, but I am not dogmatic about it. What I think is a condition on any adequate theory for a language is that we can give a formal semantics for it. Otherwise we are whistling in the dark.*

In the Chomskian perspective, logical form is the last stage of the syntactic processing and, at the same time, the first stage of the next processing. However, this next stage of processing is neither "semantic" nor "linguistic". It is "cognitive" or "psychological". It is better characterized as a level of knowledge in its pure state, i.e. independently of any linguistic shaping. Would you agree that it is not necessary to postulate a semantic level?

Reply: *Without an understanding of the semantics of a speaker, one understands nothing of what is said; semantics is the study of meaning, of how words relate to what they are about. All understanding is "cognitive" or "psychological", I suppose, but why say semantic understanding isn't linguistic?*

16. Talking about logical form, Riemsdijk and Williams emphasize its empirical character. They argue that Logical Form is not an abstract construct to fulfill epistemological purposes, but something that is part of reality, and as such it is possible to be studied empirically. Do you agree with such a position?

Reply: *It is, of course, an empirical question whether some theory of logical form (i.e., a formal semantics) for a language is acceptable. But it is not an empirical question what we mean by "logical form", nor what the standards for a satisfactory theory are.*

Events

Question 17 was organized by Prof. Fátima de Oliveira.

17. In your perspective about how to describe tense and aspect, you defend that the criterion to individualize an event is the relation cause/effect. Adopting this notion of event, two events are identical if they have the same causes and the same effects. Consider the following sentence:

- (7) Mary está a viajar para o Rio de Janeiro.
Mary is travelling to Rio de Janeiro.

How to analyze it taking into account the following observations (these observations are related to the paradox of the imperfect that is typical of sentences in the progressive): if a breakdown occurs in the airplane in which Maria is travelling, and it has to stop in Lisbon, then one could say:

- (8) A Mary estava a viajar para o Rio quando o avião teve uma avaria.
Mary was travelling to Rio when the airplane broke down.
- (9) A Mary estava viajando para o Rio, mas de facto foi para Lisboa.
Mary was travelling to Rio, but in fact she went to Lisbon.

(something one could say afterwards)

Can we say that we have two different events or different phases of a broader event to which ‘to stop in Lisbon’ belongs? In this sense could we talk about successive phases of an event or about successive events?¹³

Reply: *Events can be infinitely subdivided, and the sum of any two or more events is an event (even if the summed events are not successive). Since you do not interpret “Mary is traveling to Rio” as entailing that she gets there, the only event that is involved is that she is traveling. There is also the implication (which the ontology of events doesn’t say anything about) that the intended destination was Rio.*

If events are primitive entities in your theory of action, how should we understand states? How do you define states?

Reply: *I am not sure that states are entities. When we say something is in a certain state, we apply a predicate to it. But Tarski showed how to do semantics without postulating entities to correspond to predicates.*

Thank you very much for patiently and kindly answering our questions.

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¹³ Davidson’s view on actions and events may be found in *Essays on Actions and Events* (1980). About the problem of action sentences, see Cresswell (1974), Lepore (1985), Petit (1984). About Davidson’s notion of event, see Fang (1985).

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