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DAVIDSON, GRICE, AND THE SOCIAL ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE

In his 1990 paper, "The structure and content of truth", Davidson writes:

> What matters to successful communication is the intention of the speaker to be interpreted in a certain way, on the one hand, and the actual interpretation of the speaker's words along the intended lines through the interpreter's recognition of the speaker's intentions, on the other. (Davidson 1990: 311)

To some devotees of Davidson's work this claim may be somewhat unexpected. Even more unexpected may be the footnote that Davidson appends to this claim where he writes: "The influence of H.P. Grice's 'Meaning' [...] will be evident here" (*ib.*: 311, footnote 53). Surprise may for some turn to alarm when Davidson is found writing (as a way of distancing himself from a certain position here):

> There are those who are pleased to hold that the meanings of words are magically independent of the speaker's intentions; for example, that they are dependent on how the majority, or the best-informed, or the best born, of the community in which the speaker lives speaks, or perhaps how they would speak if they took enough care. (*ib.*: 310)

What differentiates the position Davidson wants to hold from the position from which he wishes to distance himself is that the position Davidson advocates "puts no primary weight on the concept of a language as something shared by speaker and interpreter, or by speaker and a speech community..." (*ib.*: 311).

Actually, *devotees* of Davidson's work should not really be surprised by such claims, for Davidson has been saying things like this for a good long time now. In his paper, "A nice derangement of epitaphs" (1986) Davidson shocked many in the philosophical world by writing by way of conclusion to that paper, "There is therefore no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed" (Lepore (ed.) 1986: 446). And what many philosophers and linguists have supposed is that communication operates on the basis of shared conventions or rules. What is shocking is not so much that such a position should be proposed, but that *Davidson* of

all people should propose it. What, after all, are we to make of the idea of a truth theory and its role in the theory of meaning? This is one of the things I want to say something about in this paper.

Another thing I want to discuss in this paper is the relation this later work of Davidson's bears to the work of Grice. We find, for instance, Grandy and Warner remarking in their introduction to a collection of papers devoted to the work of Paul Grice (Grandy & Warner 1986: 39) that Davidson's rejection of the idea that communication requires the sharing of conventions or rules – and more importantly his *reasons* for that rejection – lead him to a position not dissimilar to that of Grice. Indeed, Ian Hacking, in a reply to Davidson's paper (Hacking 1986: 448), has written that the problems of that paper would fit well into a book of essays for Paul Grice. In fact, the very paper to which Hacking was referring – in the same year as its appearance in a collection of papers devoted to the work of Davidson – *was* published in a collection of papers for Paul Grice (Grandy & Warner 1986). And Davidson himself, as we have seen, explicitly acknowledges an affinity between his work and that of Grice. References to Grice are peppered throughout many of Davidson's later papers.[1]

This seeming convergence of the work of Davidson with that of Grice is just another of the things that is bound to evoke surprise and confusion in those who follow Davidson's work. After all, many of us were raised, philosophically speaking, to believe that the work of Grice and Davidson was ranged on opposite sides of a great gulf. In his famous inaugural lecture of 1969 P.F. Strawson wrote of a "struggle on [...] a central issue in philosophy [...] [which has] something of a Homeric quality" (Strawson 1969: 172). He identified on one side of this struggle the work of, among others, Grice,[2] and on the other he gave as an example the work of Davidson.[3] Davidson himself in his early work did not spurn this division. In "Belief and the basis of meaning" Davidson (1974) writes of a tradition, which he associates with Grice, that attempts to explain linguistic meaning on the basis of non-linguistic intentions and uses, and explicitly rejects it. When I wrote my book *Meaning and Mind* (Avramides 1989), one of the things that motivated my interest in Grice's work was an attempt to understand Davidson's rejection of it.

So where exactly *does* Davidson's work stand *vis-à-vis* that of Grice now? That is the main question of this paper. I want to begin, in section 1, by looking at Davidson's more recent references to Grice,

and to explain why a student of his later papers might be forgiven for taking Davidson now to be espousing a position not dissimilar to that which Grice first proposed over 40 years ago. In section 2 I shall explain what I see as the remaining *differences* between the work of these two philosophers – differences that can only be found by digging below the surface of their similarities. The differences between the two are still profound. However, if we are to retain the powerful image introduced by Strawson, we shall either have to alter the allegiance of one of the protagonists (i.e. Davidson), or we shall have to isolate Grice and Davidson and reidentify the nature of their dispute.

1. Davidson, Grice and speaker meaning

It should be remembered that Davidson never denied a certain dependence of language on speaker's intentions and beliefs – indeed no philosopher who wants to give an account of natural language can afford to leave out reference to intentions.[4] But accepting some mention of intention in one's account of meaning is not yet to agree with a Gricean approach to language. Let me put before us a brief review of Grice's programme – highlighting some notable features of it – in order that we may compare it with what Davidson is now urging. Grice, in his work on meaning, is concerned to spell out in detail psychological conditions both sufficient and necessary for meaning. And as is well known, Grice is interested in understanding the phenomenon of meaning as it occurs both within and outside language. As a result, Grice proposes to begin his analysis of meaning with suggested conditions for *speaker occasion meaning*. An important thing to remember about speaker occasion meaning is that it can exist outside language; this is why speaker meaning needs to be tied down to an *occasion* of use. Liberation from occasion – or occasion independence – comes with the move to *timeless meaning*. Griceans such as Lewis and Schiffer propose that this move be made with the help of the notion of convention, but we should remember that Grice himself never liked that idea much. In "Meaning revisited" Grice writes:

> I do not think that meaning is essentially connected with the idea of convention. What it is essentially connected with is some way of fixing what sentences mean: convention is indeed one of these ways, but it is not the only one. I can invent a language, call it Deutero-Esperanto, which nobody speaks. That makes me the authority, and I can lay down what is proper. (Grice 1989: 298)

Grice, then, wishes to keep the idea of conventional meaning apart from that of fixed (or what he calls) established meaning – the later being applicable to ideolects (*ib.*: 124). With this in mind Grice makes two proposals, one to account for timeless meaning of an ideolect, and one also to account for timeless meaning in a community.[5] In neither does he invoke the idea of convention.

Once the notion of timeless meaning is established Grice introduces yet further notions. There is, for example, the notion of the *applied timeless meaning* of an utterance type. This idea is important if we are to distinguish between two or more different meanings an utterance may have within a language. Grice's discussion of applied timeless meaning is part of his attempt to elucidate what he calls the "conventional meaning of an utterance type" (Grice 1989: 119),[6] and his overarching aim in elucidating this notion is to draw attention to a distinction between what a speaker has *said* and what he has *implicated* – either conventionally or nonconventionally (i.e. conversationally) implicated.[7] The "conventional meaning" of an utterance type is taken by Grice to be the coincidence of applied timeless meaning and occasion meaning. Grice considers the possibility of analyzing the notion of *saying* in the same manner, but points out that the existence of *conventional implicatures* drives a wedge between the conventional meaning of an utterance and what is said. This notion of saying remains unanalysed in Grice's work, but it plays an important role, for it is used to introduce the idea of nonconventional – or *conversational* – implicature. Because the idea of what an utterer has said is, for Grice, closely related to the conventional meaning of the words or sentence that he has uttered, it would not be far from the truth if one were to suggest that what Grice wants from the idea of what is said is, roughly, what is otherwise referred to as literal meaning or the autonomy of meaning. It is by relying on this idea that he is in a position to introduce the notion of implicature. Grice is clear from his earliest writing that this distinction between saying and implying is his "wider programme" of which the attempt to give an account of speaker meaning forms only the initial part.[8]

Now Davidson, too, is keen to preserve the autonomy of meaning. He writes, "I take for granted [...] that nothing should be allowed to obliterate or even blur the distinction between speaker's meaning and literal meaning" (Davidson 1986: 434). So there is nothing *too* radical in Davidson yet. But Davidson continues:

> In order to preserve the distinction we must [...] modify certain commonly accepted views about what it is to 'know a language', or about what a natural language is. In particular, we must pry apart what is literal in language from what is conventional or established. (*ib.*)

Thus far Davidson looks to be in complete agreement with Grice: he upholds (or claims to) the important distinction between literal meaning and speaker's meaning, and he renounces the idea of convention. Before explaining why I think the look of things here may be misleading, I want first to continue to look at the ways in which Davidson has begun to look very Gricean in his approach to meaning.

In his paper "The second person" Davidson writes: "My present aim is [...] only to emphasize, following Grice, the central role of intention in communication" (Davidson 1992: 258). In "A nice derangement of epitaphs" Davidson introduces a notion which he labels "first meaning" and again is explicit that what he has in mind here is "(roughly) Grice's nonnatural meaning". Let's see how Davidson explicates this notion of first meaning. (Only then can we ask just how far it corresponds to what Grice had in mind.) First of all Davidson claims that this notion of first meaning is designed to correspond at least roughly to what gets called "literal meaning".[9] By saying that the notion only *roughly* corresponds to the usual idea of literal meaning Davidson wants both to preserve this idea of literal meaning and at the same time to alter our conception of what this involves. As he says – and I quoted a moment ago – what he wants to do is to prise away the idea of the literal from that of the conventional. Instead of the conventional being associated with what is literal in language, Davidson wants the idea of first meaning to be associated with literal meaning. So what exactly *is* this idea of first meaning, what makes it *first?* In answer to this question Davidson writes,

> First meaning [...] comes first in the order of the speaker's or the writer's semantic intentions, and it is the necessary basis for all further investigations into what words, as used on an occasion, mean. (Davidson 1993: 301)

And in another place he writes that the concept of first meaning "applies to words and sentences as uttered by a particular speaker on a particular occasion [...]. Roughly, first meaning comes first in the order of interpretation" (Davidson 1986: 435). The similarity with Grice's work is becoming evident: at the very heart of literal meaning, as Davidson sees it, lie speaker's intentions.

Now this idea of first meaning being what comes first in the order of interpretation is quite important. Davidson points out that, often – that is, in what we could call 'standard' or 'normal' cases – what comes first in the order of interpretation of one speaker by another is what one will find by consulting a dictionary. However, Davidson claims that this idea of a standard or norm as it is embodied in a dictionary must not be understood out of context. It is relevant to meaning because conforming to it is one – often the best – way to be understood. Once we see this, we also see that what one would find by consulting a dictionary is not always what comes first in the order of interpretation. There are cases where we simply have to puzzle out the meaning. Davidson suggests, then, that the best way to explicate first meaning is by reference to the intentions of the speaker. Furthermore, because first meaning is intended to be grasped by an audience, we can also talk about what the audience or hearer must know to be in a position to interpret the speaker. Putting all the pieces together Davidson gives the following account of literal meaning: "how [a speaker] intended to be understood, is what he, *and* his words, literally meant on that occasion. There are many other interpretations we give to the notion of (literal, verbal) meaning, but the rest are parasitic on this" (Davidson 1994: 12).

There are several things to note about Davidson's notion of first meaning. To start with, it lays itself open to a very natural objection, which is this: to say that speakers form express intentions about how their audience will interpret their utterances, and to give central place to this idea in one's account of language, is false to the phenomenology of language use (and, therefore, false). Davidson's reply to such an objection is as follows,

> I agree that the speaker does not usually 'form an express intention', and he does not 'hold a theory', but I do say that even when a speaker is speaking in accord with a socially acceptable theory he speaks with the intention of being understood in a certain way, and this intention depends on his beliefs about his audience, in particular how he believes or assumes they will understand him [...]. I think someone acts intentionally when there is an answer to the question what his reasons in acting were, and one can often tell what an agent's reasons were by asking whether he would have acted as he did if he had not had those reasons. (Davidson 1994: 13)

Davidson is here defending his intentionalist stance exactly as did Griceans like Schiffer and Loar before him – not to mention Grice himself.[10] Strawson writes in defence of Grice's programme in a manner that could have been written by Davidson himself:

> Only a very naive, a far from mature, audience would be unaware of the possibility of honest mistake, or of intention to mislead or of the sheer casualness or carelessness, on the part of the communicator; and only a very naive communicator would be unaware of the audience's awareness of these possibilities. And if this is so, it seems hardly too much to say that it is a part, though normally a subdued or submerged part, of the genuine communication intention, that the audience's response to his performance should be governed by certain (normally subdued or submerged) assumptions regarding his (the communicator's) sincerity and reliability. (Strawson 1980: 284-85)

Indeed, Strawson's way of making the point has implications which, as we shall see in a moment, Davidson himself is to make much of. One could sum up this (we could now call it) Gricean-Davidsonian observation about language by saying that meaning something is a process that is under the rational control of speakers.[11]

Another thing to note about Davidson's notion of first meaning is that is it not at all clear just how Gricean it really is. It may be questioned whether this notion of first meaning can be taken to correspond to Grice's notion of speaker meaning. Of course the notion of first meaning is Gricean in so far as it appeals to speakers intentions, but there is more to Grice's notion of speaker meaning than that. This is a point I shall develop in the second section of this paper. Placing this question to one side for the moment, there is also a question whether – even given Grice's rejection of the notion of convention – Grice and Davidson now agree over the issue of what constitutes literal meaning. There is reason to hold that the notion of first meaning as an account of literal meaning does not add up to what Grice had in mind when he identified the notion of what a speaker *said*.[12] Indeed, Davidson should reject the notion of timeless meaning as Grice introduces it, as Grice's reason for rejecting the notion of convention is not his. Grice simply wants to allow for *other* ways to account for established meaning, while Davidson thinks we can do *without* the notion of established meaning. It is tempting to say that he thinks that we can do without the notion of established meaning altogether, but that would not be right. There is a place for established meaning, and I shall try to say more about it in a moment.

The final thing I want to note about Davidson's notion of first meaning is that, as it has so far been explained, it is not limited to linguistic meaning. Davidson acknowledges this and asks what we need to add to what has been said in order to restrict first meaning to lin-

guistic meaning. He claims that the *usual* answer to this question is to say that in the case of linguistic meaning the hearer shares a complex system or theory with the speaker, a system which makes possible the articulation of logical relations between utterances, and explains the ability to interpret novel utterances in an organised way.[13] Davidson wishes to agree with this, but he wants to understand what it means in his own distinctive way. As a way of explaining this Davidson outlines what he sees as three component elements of the usual claim. They are:

(i) First meaning in language is systematic;
(ii) First meaning in language is shared;
(iii) First meaning in language is governed by learned conventions or regularities.

Where Davidson parts company from this *usual* account of what happens when first meaning is restricted to linguistic meaning is that he thinks that (iii) – learned conventions or regularities – has nothing to do with it. Thus, Davidson advises that we maintain (i) and (ii) as elements in our understanding of linguistic meaning – but that we drop (iii) and modify our understanding of the other two in the light of this.

In order to understand why Davidson finds it necessary to drop (iii) we might refer back to the Strawsonian defence of Grice's programme quoted a moment ago. Strawson, in writing what he does, is aiming to defend his preference for a Gricean account of the speaker's intentions over John McDowell's preference for a simpler intention – the intention simply to *say what is said*, or the intention to perform linguistically in a way appropriate to transmitting a certain piece of information.[14] Strawson's point is that it is not enough to stop where McDowell does. We need to add to the account that the speaker's intention to perform linguistically in a way that is appropriate to transmitting a certain piece of information must be part of an intention that by so performing the audience will recognize the speakers intention and that this be an object of full mutual awareness between the speaker and the audience. Strawson's reason for requiring more by way of the speaker's intentions is that a mature audience will be aware that the following is always a possibility: the speaker can make an honest mistake, or he may intend to mislead, or he may be simply careless or overly casual in his choice of words. In such cases, what the audience must rely on are the speaker's intentions which, though normally "subdued or submerged" can be pressed into service when needs (such as those created by the various circumstances just mentioned) be.

When we turn to Davidson we find that his reason for dropping the third element in the usual understanding of the notion of first meaning is nothing more that an elaboration of this Strawsonian insight. The considerations that Davidson adduces are, he insists, to be distinguished from the sorts of consideration to which Grice did much to draw attention. These Gricean observations could be taken to show us the way in which the three aspects of first meaning in language mentioned above fall short of giving a full account of meaning in language. These Gricean observations include (i) an account of ambiguity – in effect what Grice labelled the "applied timeless meaning of an utterance"; and (ii) an account of the way interpreters understand *implicatures* – be they conventional or non-conventional (i.e. conversational) implicatures. Davidson mentions these as ways in which the *usual* account of first meaning in language is still incomplete and also to distinguish them from the sort of incompleteness he is about to point out. While Grice discussed the first two problems in varying degrees of depth, there were other problems that had not been discussed either by Grice or anyone else. These include the existence of malapropisms, slips of the tongue, new ideolects (which might include the addition of a proper name unknown to the interpreter), and incomplete sentences.[15] The problem introduced by *such* uses of language can only be solved, suggests Davidson, if we let go of condition (iii) – the learned convention or regularity condition – in our account of first meaning.

At this point I want to pause for a slight digression. Animadversions on the notion of convention is not confined to Davidson. There is another well-known rejection of this idea due to Chomsky. I choose a single quotation to illustrate Chomsky's position here:

> Unless the concept of "community norms" or "conventions" is clarified in some manner yet to be addressed – if this is possible at all in a coherent way – one should be cautious about accepting arguments that make free use of such ideas, taking them to be clear enough; they are not. (Chomsky 1996: 558-59)

Although Chomsky and Davidson may agree on this point, there is little else that Davidson says here with which Chomsky could agree. While Chomsky rejects the idea of convention, he rejects as well the idea of language as a social phenomenon. Although Davidson rejects the idea of convention, he is now keen to emphasize the idea of language as a social phenomenon. It is this emphasis that drives him to reject condition (iii) above.

When we do let go of this third condition what we see is that an interpreter or audience is in a position to understand a speaker's utterances on occasions when there has been a less than perfect employment of the language on the speaker's part by dint of such things as the interpreter's exploitation of the surrounding context to come to appreciate the speaker's intentions. Any 'theory' that the interpreter or audience may have in connection with the speaker's language is of no help here. What the interpreter/audience needs to find is a way of seeing what the speaker's intentions are. As Davidson says at one point, what the interpreter/audience brings to bear is not a theory of the speaker's language but wit, luck, wisdom, taste and sympathy.[16] The theory is still there, Davidson maintains, but it is not what comes into operation in the understanding of such speakers. Now Davidson is not content just to make an observation about a few cases where there are slips of the tongue or where the speaker "get's away with it" despite his deviation from the norm. Rather, Davidson wants to use observations about what must be going on in these cases to make a claim about the use of language and communication quite generally. What we learn from the case where things go so very wrong is that the interpreter/audience *does* have something to go on in the interpretation of the speaker. Once we see this it should be clear to us that *this* is what is important to communication – anything else is merely a heuristic. In this connection Davidson writes:

> Using a word in a non-standard way out of ignorance may be a *faux pas* in the same way that using the wrong fork at a dinner party is, and it has as little to do with communication as using the wrong fork has to do with nourishing oneself, given that the word is understood and the fork works. (Davidson 1994: 9)

Just as we don't need to use a fork if what we are interested in is *nourishment*, so we don't need to learn the rules or conventions which govern the speaker's language if what we are interested in is *communication*.

Now this idea that what is fundamental to communication must involve reference to speaker's intentions is entirely Gricean. As well as insisting on these Gricean elements, however, Davidson also now insists his main interest is *not* with the question of how we learn a first language. Rather, he is interested in how people who *already* have a language manage to communicate (or interpret one another).[17] Davidson's point is that, although both the speaker and hearer have somehow managed to acquire a language, in order for them to communicate they need not *share the same language*. Rather, what needs to happen is that the interpreter/audience needs to be able to manoeuvre himself into a position where he is able to understand the speaker (along the lines outlined above). The need for communication – like the need for nourishment – is a powerful need. It can drive the interpretative process in the absence of a shared language.

What then of the rules? An analogy taken from a rather different part of philosophy may prove helpful in understanding the role Davidson now sees for these rules. I have in mind the distinction between act and rule utilitarianism. Both kinds of utilitarian agree that the overarching aim of our acts must be to maximise the greatest happiness for the greatest number; there is, however, disagreement over the best way to achieve this end. The rule utilitarian thinks that this can only be achieved by sticking to certain rules (which rules are adopted because of their conducing to the greatest happiness for the greatest number). The act utilitarian, on the other hand, holds that we must be prepared to give up the rules *in extremis*. According to the act utilitarian, the rule utilitarian loses sight of the fact that it is only the principle that matters and that we must accept that we may sometimes need to break the rule in order to fulfil the principle. In saying this, however, the act utilitarian must not be seen as throwing out rules wholesale. The act utilitarian does accept that most of the time we use and abide by the rules. This we do – and must do – if for no other reason than that it takes too much time to calculate the consequences of every action. As John Stuart Mill writes: "Nobody argues that the art of navigation is not founded on astronomy, just because sailors cannot wait to calculate the National Almanac. Being rational creatures, they go to sea with it ready calculated" (Mill 1975: 276). Mill's point is that these rules must be understood to be merely *rules of thumb*; we can break them when need be. What we must not lose sight of is that it is the utilitarian principle that is of ultimate importance in matters of morality. Davidson's appeal to rules of language is similar to the act utilitarian's appeal to rules of thumb. What we are asked to appreciate in both cases is that what ultimately matters in each case – morality or communication – is divorceable from the rules. We have to understand what matters here by reference, on the one hand, to the greatest happiness principle, and, on the other hand, to the need to communicate. Despite this, we can see that rules still have a very large role to play in our every-

day acts – be they linguistic or moral acts. Compare what Mill says with the following from Davidson:

> We do not have the time, patience, or opportunity to evolve a new theory of interpretation for each new speaker, and what saves us is that from the moment someone unknown to us opens his mouth, we know an enormous amount about the sort of theory that will work for him. (Davidson 1984a: 278)

The analogy with rules of thumb as employed by the act utilitarian may help to clarify Davidson's position with respect to rules of language. And it may help us to defend Davidson's position against some things that Michael Dummett has said by way of criticism of it. Dummett writes,

> in certain contexts such a mastery [of syntax and semantics] may be sufficient, without the need for any discernment of underlying intention: I can very probably ask the way to the station, buy the ticket and enquire when the next train leaves for York and whether I have to change, and understand the answers solely by my knowledge of the syntax of the language and (in a broad sense) its semantics. (Dummett 1994: 258)[18]

Davidson would be the first to agree. As he says, every time we ask for a cup of coffee, give directions to a taxi driver or order a crate of lemons, we must assume that things will proceed along standard lines. But this is employing our rules as rules of thumb – rules that help us out most of the time and which we can use to avoid the more onerous task of figuring out what the speaker means. In practice we employ rules a lot of the time; but we must not be lead by this observation into thinking that this tells us anything about the primary function of language. Davidson writes,

> In the case of our children, or certain poets and writers, we must or do make exceptions, but in general our tolerance of strongly deviant ideolects is limited by clear practical considerations. None of this creates a free-standing obligation, however. Any obligation we owe to conformity is contingent on the desire to be understood. If we can make ourselves understood while deviating from the social norm, any further obligation has nothing to do with meaning or successful communication. (Davidson 1994: 9)[19]

On the question of obligation, Dummett and Davidson sharply disagree. Dummett does, while Davidson does not, take it that we have an obligation or responsibility to the norm even if we deviate from it some of the time. According to Davidson the *only* obligation we have is to speak in a way that will make ourselves understood; responsibility is

neither here nor there where the need to communicate exists.[20] Dummett takes this not only to be wrong, but extremely pernicious. Language for Dummett is a finely tuned instrument. Dummett writes,

> If a youth uses his father's finely honed razor to cut a piece of string, he will not gain much sympathy if he says that the purpose was to cut the string, and that that purpose was accomplished. (Dummett 1994: 266)

It is tempting to agree with Dummett here. But consider the following. Say I use this razor to cut a piece of string that is strangling my small child. In this situation would we pause to consider the correctness of this act when told that this was one's father's finely honed razor? I think not. What Davidson is asking us to evaluate is the idea of language as a fine instrument as against the idea of language as a fine instrument *of communication*. Now the need to communicate is a fundamental need and may override my regard for the instrument I employ much in the way that my need to cut the string around my child's neck may override my regard for the razor as such. Dummett is already convinced that the instrument as such is of value, while Davidson takes it to have only instrumental value. Of course Dummett is right to say that we must not misuse the instrument too much or it won't be available to do the job we require. But Davidson's point is that we do not need to emphasise the *instrument* in order to accomplish this. All we need to do is remember that our purpose in having language is damaged if we misuse it too much. The need is the need to be understood.[21]

If we return to the analogy with forms of utilitarianism, Davidson is like the act utilitarian who is moved to remind the rule utilitarian that by keeping so rigidly to the rules he is losing sight of the fact that the overarching purpose of keeping to the rules is to fulfil the utilitarian principal of increasing the greatest happiness for the greatest number. But perhaps a different analogy from ethics is more suited here. Dummett, in his idealization of the rules, may remind one of Kant. Our commitment to language – like our commitment to moral rules – is not in order to fulfil some *other* principle but has a value in and of itself. But I am not so sure of this. Although Dummett sometimes writes in such a way as to suggest that our commitment to language has some transcendental value, he also defends that commitment because of its instrumental value. It is only if we preserve the instrument that we can continue to communicate, and each generation has an obligation to

pass on this effective instrument of communication to future generations. He gives a good example to back this up: Say a pilot announces: "The plane will be landing momentarily". This is a *mis*use of the English language. However, once one has heard – and managed to understand – the pilot, one is likely to be somewhat concerned when the doctor announces: "You will feel a momentary pain". The instrument has been damaged and communication is, thereby, affected. The way to avoid this, suggests Dummett, is to stick to the rules. But now we must ask: what *is* the best way of fulfilling our aim to communicate, by sticking to the rules or by coming to see the rules as mere rules of thumb which tell us nothing about what really matters to language? In reply to the use of the word "momentarily" first by the pilot and then by the doctor, Davidson might say that what stops us being misled the second time we hear the word – indeed what helps us to understand *both* uses of the word – is not an appeal to shared rules but rather our ability to detect the intentions of the speaker. No one – not even the most accurate speaker of English – has misunderstood a pilot when he has made his, by now, almost standard announcement. We simply do not expect that pilots will touch the ground and take off immediately. Our understanding of the way airports run help us to figure this out. In the case of the doctor, we would very likely take his education in reaching his position as a reason to take him at face value; however, we no doubt also look to see the degree of concern he shows: the more the concern, the more likely we are to tend toward thinking he has picked up the pilot's mistake. And the case of pilots and doctors is a good one because we have a particular interest in understanding what they are saying to us; our well-being – if not our lives – may depend on it. If this is right, then, like the act utilitarian who is unmoved by complaints that he is damaging the rule by breaking it, we may be inclined to think that nothing that really matters is damaged by the pilot's mistake. And his mistake reveals that what really matters in the case of language is our ability to figure out the speaker's intentions. No doubt *sometimes* appeal to the rules of the language may help us here, but that is not what really matters. As Davidson says, what helps us to interpret is not appeal to the rules of the language, but our wit, luck, wisdom, sympathy and taste. He writes,

> The intention to be taken to mean what one wants to be taken to mean is, it seems to me, so clearly the only aim that is common to all verbal behaviour that it is hard for me to see how anyone can deny it [...]. Thus for me the concept "the meaning" of a word or sentence gives way to the concepts of how a speaker intends his words to be understood, and of how a hearer understands them. Where understanding matches intent, we can, if we please, speak of 'the' meaning; but it is understanding that gives life to meaning, not the other way around. (Davidson 1994: 11-2)

2. Superficial similarity, deep difference

The idea that Davidson is now defending – that what is fundamental to communication must involve reference to speaker's intentions – is entirely Gricean. It is that aspect of Grice's work that Strawson has been at pains to defend over the years. Compare the quotation from Davidson with which I ended section 1 with the following from Strawson's 1969 inaugural lecture:

> The particular meanings of words and sentences are, no doubt, largely a matter of rule and convention; but the general nature of such rules and conventions can be ultimately understood only by reference to the concept of communication-intention. (Strawson 1969: 171)
> [T]hese rules are [...] rules for communicating, rules by the observance of which the utterer may achieve his purpose, fulfil his communication intention; and this is their *essential* character. (Strawson 1969: 173)

And Strawson's way of backing this claim in a later paper is, as we have seen, by reference to those uses of language where things go wrong and yet we manage to be understood.[22] Despite the fact that Davidson now pushes things further than Strawson and rejects the idea that the meanings of sentences are largely a matter of rules and convention, both are now in agreement about the role of communication intention. Indeed, the agreement between Davidson and Strawson is now sufficient for us to say that in terms of the Homeric struggle identified by Strawson in "Meaning and truth" we will need to identify the protagonists in such a way as to place Grice and Davidson on the same side. Does this mean that there are now *no* differences of any importance to be identified in the work of these two philosophers here? I think not. There is a difference in their attitude towards the relationship between thought and language – and this difference may be taken to be evident right from the start.

Remember that Davidson, as I pointed out in the previous section,

insists that his interest is with how two people – *each of whom already possesses a language* – manage to go about the business of interpretation. As he writes in one place, "My problem is to describe what is involved in the idea of 'having a language' or of being at home with the business of linguistic communication" (Davidson 1986: 441). And in another he writes, "The approach [...] which I have outlined is not [...] meant to throw any direct light on how [...] we master our first concepts and our first language" (Davidson 1990: 325). It is sometimes difficult to remember that this *is* what Davidson is interested in, and not the more ambitious project which would include saying what is relevant to learning a *first* language.[23] If, however, we do take Davidson at his word here, then it is not at all clear that his interest coincides with Grice's. Where Grice is interested in the idea of nonnatural meaning both within and outside language, Davidson restricts his interest to meaning in language. But can this be right? Even as I introduced the idea, Davidson's notion of *first meaning* looks to be designed to apply beyond language.[24] I think that the problem is that there is an ambiguity in the idea of meaning that is outside language. This might mean (i) meaning that is outside the shared and systematic knowledge that suffices for language, or it may mean (ii) meaning which is prior to the existence of any language. Davidson is quite clear that what he has in mind is (i). He wants to show us the way in which meaning is wider than any existing convention or practice; this is why we can understand speakers who, for one reason or another, go against the rules or the practice. But Grice did not want to restrict his understanding of meaning in this way. Although much of what Grice has to say about meaning can survive if we restrict ourselves to (i), it is clear that Grice is committed in his work to both (i) *and* (ii). Davidson's notion of speaker meaning is *not* Grice's, as Grice's is meant to apply to speaker meaning which may occur in the absence of any established meaning. This is why Grice claims that there is a conceptual priority of speaker occasion meaning over both timeless and structured meaning. In emphasising the primacy of speaker meaning Grice wants to say more than Davidson. Grice intends emphasis of the notion of speaker meaning both to show that intentions and their recognition are fundamental to language *and* to show how we may account for meaning in the absence of language.

Davidson's rejection of the conceptual priority of speaker meaning

over linguistic meaning is reaffirmed in a footnote in one of his later papers where he writes,

> This formulation of the notion of meaning is not, it should be clear, Gricean, for where the present formulation rests on the (at this point unanalysed) concept of understanding, Grice aimed at defining linguistic meaning, as well as nonnatural meaning generally, in terms of intentions that do not involve meaning at all. The Gricean element in my formulation is the dependence of meaning on intention. (Davidson 1994: 12, footnote 13)

The student may find this resistance on Davidson's part to being taken as Gricean curious in the light of other references to Grice in a more positive manner throughout the same paper. But as the footnote makes clear, the Gricean element Davidson is keen to emphasize is *only* the dependence of meaning on intention. What he wants to avoid as much as he ever did is what he sees as the Gricean commitment to intentions in the absence of meaning. In other words, Davidson takes Grice to be committed to the possibility of thought in the absence of language, and it is *this* he wishes to distance himself from.

In saying that Davidson rejects the possibility of thought in the absence of language one must be careful. After all, there must be *a* sense in which Davidson must accept the possibility of thought without language, as he holds that there is no such thing as a language (and he surely must hold that there is thought). What Davidson must be understood to mean here is that there cannot be thought in the absence of the sort of sharing that takes place in communication. But now we must ask what Davidson means when he insists that, although a speaker and interpreter need not share a language, he is assuming that both the speaker and the interpreter each do *have* a language. Given what Davidson holds about language, what can this mean? Surely not that they share a system of rules and conventions with *other* individuals but just happen not to share any conventions between themselves. Rather, it must mean that the theory or recursive account that we could devise for what the interpreter does linguistically does not match the theory or recursive account that we could devise for what the speaker does linguistically. What this way of putting things reveals is that Davidson *is* still committed to the idea that it is possible to construct a theory of the speaker's words and sentences.[25] In effect Davidson is urging that we re-assess our understanding of condition (i) – that first meaning in language is structured – in the light of the abandonment of condition (iii) – the condition that first meaning in language is governed by shared

rules and conventions. First meaning which is linguistic *is* structured, and this remains untouched by Davidsonian considerations regarding convention. This structure is important because it articulates the logical relations between utterances and explains the ability to create and interpret novel utterances. What happens when a word or phrase is misused, claims Davidson, is that the interpreter must still see that word or phrase as slotting into the role played by some other word or phrase and assume "the burden of that role, with all its implications for logical relations to other words and phrases".[26] So what Davidson must mean when he says that he is assuming that both speaker and interpreter already have a language is that such a structure is in order in what they say. And when he claims that there cannot be thought in the absence of language he must mean: there cannot be thought in the absence of the sort of sharing that takes place in communication *and* where there is the possibility of a structure or system being formulable – at least after the fact of that sharing. Understood in this way, we can clearly see that there must still be a line to draw between Grice's work and Davidson's.

Grice aside, however, could we not simply drop the commitment in the work of Grice and Griceans to the idea of conceptual priority while retaining the analysis? That is, if we separate out two components in Grice's work, (i) the commitment to the priority of speaker meaning over timeless, or conventional rule-governed meaning and (ii) the commitment to the priority of speaker meaning over structure, then we could retain allegiance to (i) and drop allegiance to (ii). I don't see that Grice, in any case, *needs* any more than a commitment to (i) given his stated overarching interest in distinguishing between what a speaker *said* and what he *implicated.* Nothing here would be damaged by dropping this talk of conceptual priority.

However, Griceans may still want to talk about stories that might be told. Consider the appeal Schiffer and Lewis make to a certain story when giving an account of how conventions may be thought to arise. Their story makes reference to ingenious ways in which speakers may choose to make their intentions known to their audience in the absence of fixed meaning. They then explain how, from such beginnings, conventions may be thought to arise. Now it looks as if by telling such a story the Gricean is outrightly committed to the possibility of thought without language. But, in taking things in this way, have we not overlooked the fact that this was designed as a *story* – not as anything that

should be taken to have happened? But the problem with taking this as a story is that we do have to agree that it is a story which makes sense; and Davidson would not agree that such a story *does* make sense. Indeed, Davidson has his own story to tell. (Again, not one which is intended to be true of how things actually happened.) Davidson's story is one which involves triangles: between a speaker, an interpreter and a world. Now Davidson's story is not just designed to show us how language might have arisen. He has a larger interest. This larger interest takes us away from the philosophy of language and into the area of epistemology and metaphysics.

Let us look at Davidson's story. It concerns what he calls the "primitive learning situation".[27] Indeed, Davidson's story begins with a very primitive learning situation, one that most of us would unhesitatingly tell: consider teaching a dog to associate the ringing of a bell with the serving of food. We could get to the point where the dog salivates whenever it hears the bell. But Davidson points out that there is a flaw in this simple story. The flaw is this: why do we say that the dog is responding to the ringing of the bell – and not the vibration of air close to his ears, or even the stimulation of the nerve endings in his ears? Davidson's answer is that we say that the dog is responding to the bell because *it is natural for us* to say this. And the same can be said of children, who provide another primitive learning situation. What is natural is that two individuals – say, an adult and a child – respond in a similar fashion to certain stimuli. When this occurs we say that the child is responding to, say, a table. Davidson writes, "Where the lines from the child to table and us to the table converge 'the' stimulus is located" (Davidson 1992: 265).

What does Davidson think should we learn from this story? What he thinks we should learn is that it is a necessary condition for someone's having a language in the first place that there be another individual with whom such "triangulation" can occur. In fact, we learn more than this. We learn that in order for an individual to count as having a language there must be another individual and *a world* which can form the other two points of the triangle which in turn gives content to the speaker's words and sentences. And we learn another thing as well: this triangle which gives content to the speaker's language also gives content to the speaker's thoughts. It is responsible for content full stop. Davidson writes: "The ultimate source of both objectivity and communication is the triangle that, by relating speaker, and interpreter, and

the world, determines the contents of thought and speech" (Davidson 1990: 325). On Davidson's story there cannot be content – hence there cannot be thought until there are two speakers involved with a world.

And there is one more thing that Davidson thinks we should learn from this story. The story not only connects thought with language, it connects both of these with the world in such a way that it no longer makes sense to speak of the possibility of radical Cartesian-style error about the world. The world is in there from the beginning. And without that beginning there would be no thought about the world. Thus, Davidson's interest in language leads him to certain pronouncements in epistemology. Knowledge of the world is possible, and we can see this once we appreciate the way content arises. Dummett once claimed that philosophy of language has usurped epistemology as the heart of philosophy. It is interesting to note that on Davidson's way of doing things, the two go together.

It seems to me that it is in their *wider* concerns that Davidson and Grice reveal their differences. Davidson's wider concern is with issues which fall more squarely in epistemology and metaphysics. Grice's wider concern is with the relationship between semantics and pragmatics. But nothing in Grice's overarching concern with the connections between semantics and pragmatics requires a commitment to conceptual priorities. There is, then, room for Grice to take on board much of what Davidson has to say about the nature of content while maintaining his analysis of meaning. As things stand, however, we do have to draw a line dividing Grice's work from Davidson's over this issue of conceptual priority. Connected with this division is something else. As we saw earlier, Grice and Davidson could be thought to take a similar line on the issue of conventions in language: both explicitly reject the idea. However, Davidson's rejection of the idea is not designed to go against the thought that language is a social phenomenon. As Hacking (1986: 458) has said, Davidson is a "duetist". He holds that there must be an interaction between two people (and the world) in order that meaning, and thought, may emerge. It is this interaction which, according to Davidson, forms the heart of meaning. It is not at all clear that Grice would agree with this. For all the *appearance* of the social in Grice's work it seems that Grice would hold that meaning may be an essentially solitary thing. The interaction of meaning and intention, one could say, goes all the way down for Davidson, while for Grice it begins where the speaker decides. Strawson (1980: 286) has suggested that the Gricean story would seem to give the emergence of language more of the character of an *invention*, while alternative stories make it seem more of a *miracle*. According to Strawson, we need somehow to account for the way in which language *becomes* self-conscious and intentional. Now Davidson, as we have seen, wants to avoid claims about the emergence of language. Nevertheless, his story is designed to say something, if not about how language *did* arise, then about what makes conceptual sense concerning its emergence. It could be said, *contra* Strawson, that it is the Gricean story that makes content (and knowledge) look miraculous.[28] Davidson's story is designed to show how the content of thought and of language emerge naturally. By sticking to what matters most to Grice, it may be possible to marry his work even more closely with that of Davidson's, thereby extending the power and range of his philosophy of language.

Notes

[1] References will be forthcoming in section 1.

[2] The others here included John Austin and the later Wittgenstein.

[3] Other writers Strawson identifies on this side of the "struggle" are Chomsky, Frege and the early Wittgenstein.

[4] Davidson has distinguished three kinds of intention in speech which he describes as (i) intentions that lie beyond the production of words ("ulterior intentions"), (ii) intentions that an utterance should have a certain force, and (iii) intentions that one's words have a certain meaning ("semantic intentions"). See Davidson (1993: 298-99).

[5] Both accounts draw on the notion of "having a procedure in one's repertoire", which Grice explains in terms of "having a standing willingness or readiness" to use certain utterance types to mean that... This notion works relatively smoothly in the case of ideolects, but encounters certain problems in the case of groups or communities of speakers. Grice acknowledges this, but says no more about it. See Grice's "Utterer's meaning, sentence-meaning and word-meaning", reprinted in Grice (1989). Notice that in giving an account of group meaning Grice does not appeal, as do Griceans such as Schiffer and Lewis, to notions such as mutual or common knowledge.

[6] Note that Grice writes of "conventional meaning" despite his lack of enthusiasm for the idea of convention. In a slightly later paper Grice replaces the label "conventional meaning" with that of "central meaning".

[7] See especially "Utterer's meaning, sentence-meaning, and word-meaning", in Grice (1989).

[8] See "Utterer's meaning, sentence-meaning, and word-meaning", Grice (1989: 117).

[9] He is clear about this in Davidson (1993: 300).

[10] For a summary of such Gricean responses see Avramides (1989: 14-6).

[11] Grice writes in "Logic and conversation": "One of my aims is to see talking as a special case or variety of purposive, indeed rational, behaviour" (Grice 1989: 28).

[12] Davidson in one place acknowledges Grice's distinction between what is said and what is implied and adds parenthetically that the former idea is "perhaps what I am calling first meaning" (Davidson 1986: 437). I am suggesting that perhaps these ideas are *not* the same.

[13] See Davidson (1986: 436).

[14] See McDowell, "Meaning, communication, and knowledge", in Z. van Straaten (1980). McDowell, unlike Grice and Strawson, wants to see linguistic communication as a descendent of a kind of instinctive communicative repertoire, which repertoire is not self consciously or intentionally employed (see below, section 2).

[15] Hacking (1986: 452) has added to this list: some things said by students. What Hacking has in mind here is the fact that most students only manage to produce garbled versions of what they are taught. In this respect they are little different from the language learning child.

[16] See Davidson (1984a: 279). See also Davidson (1986: 446).

[17] Dummett questions whether Davidson isn't, after all, interested in the question which he claims to reject – i.e. how one learns a *first* language. See Dummett's "Comments on Davidson and Hacking", in Lepore (ed.) (1986: 463).

[18] David Wiggins also holds a position that, at times at least, looks not dissimilar from Dummett's. See Wiggins (1997).

[19] In "Communication and convention" Davidson writes, "Knowledge of the conventions of a language is thus a practical crutch to interpretation, a crutch we cannot in practice afford to do without – but a crutch which, under optimum conditions for communication, we can in the end throw away, and could in theory have done without from the start" (Davidson 1984a: 279).

[20] In "The social aspect of language" Davidson writes, "It is an accident, though a likely one, if this requires that we speak as others in our community do" (Davidson 1994: 9).

[21] It may be thought that my example is unfair to Dummett. His point is that the razor is finely tuned to act as an instrument for cutting beards, and using it to do things like cut pieces of string is dulling it for its primary purpose. But perhaps it is unduly restrictive to think of language as serving one primary purpose. We use language to do many different things. What binds all these different uses together is the need to communicate.

[22] See p. 121 above and Strawson (1980: 284-85).

[23] Cf. footnote 17, above.

[24] Davidson (1986: 436) writes: "Nothing said so far limits first meaning to language...".

[25] As Davidson says in one place, there in nothing wrong with theory, we must only be careful not to let it lead us to think that it is revealing of what is primary, or fundamental to what we do. And in another place he says that, although we can no doubt construct a theory once the moment of communication had passed, it would do us no good in advance, or even the next time. See Davidson (1984a) and (1986).

[26] In "A nice derangement of epitaphs" (1986) Davidson writes that we must remember that a formal structure applies to the speaker's language "even though its field of application is vanishingly small". This, in effect, is a reply to Ian Hacking who speculates that "Once the passing theory is made essential, recursivity, as a demand is doomed" (Hacking 1986: 455). Hacking does acknowledge Davidson's reasons for holding on to recursivity, but questions whether Davidson is right to think that the systematic relations to which Davidson calls attention require an "all-embracing (recursive or otherwise) system". Rather than think of the interpreter as bringing to bear on his conversation an entire formal system, perhaps all that is needed is a "whole bunch of little, not too closely connected moves" (Hacking 1986: 456). We would, however, be back with Davidson if one thought that the way to understand these "little moves" is by reference to the full formal system.

[27] Davidson (1992: 262). It is important to remember that Davidson holds the following: "The approach [...] I have outlined is not [...] meant to throw any direct light on how in real life we come to understand each other, nor on how we master our first concepts and our first language" (Davidson 1990: 325).

[28] Once language emerges, Griceans such as Strawson tend to invoke the image of bootstrapping as a way of advancing from the primitively linguistic to the more sophisticated. Davids Wiggins has recently invoked another metaphor – this time to support the idea of the development of thought and language in concert. Wiggins writes: "Language is not thought and thought is not language; but they are developed together and extended together. And only in concert can they be *cantilevered* outwards at each successive stage of their development" (Wiggins 1997: 508, my italics).

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