

Davidson as Derridean: Analytic Philosophy as Deconstruction

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I Introduction¹

In America, Derrida's thought had enormous influence in literary theory, popular culture, the social sciences, and elsewhere. It had almost no influence on mainstream American philosophy, which has been dominated by the vaguely-defined "school" of "analytic philosophy."² This essay argues that Derrida's thought has much to contribute to central issues in analytic philosophy.³ In this essay I discuss the relevance of Derrida's early⁴ thought to analytic philosophy by relating it to the thought of two important figures in analytic philosophy, W.V. Quine⁵ and Donald Davidson.⁶ As a preliminary, I argue that there can be meaningful comparison between such diverse philosophers and briefly indicate how mutual understanding and profit is possible between analytic and continental philosophy. I then illustrate some of the central common theses, and show how parallel trajectories resulted in parallel theses, and sketch how Quine and Davidson could have learned by attention to Derrida's work.

¹ In this essay, I will presuppose some familiarity with Derrida's writings and views, given the topic of the conference and this volume. I will not presuppose familiarity with Davidson's work.

² "Little influence" very much understates the ignorance oddly combined with disdain, contempt, and denunciation that characterized almost all analytic philosophers' attitudes toward Derrida. The minority of analytic philosophers who took the time and effort to read and appreciate Derrida's work were secondary objects of this disdain. David Armstrong famously described abstaining from reading Derrida as "intellectual hygiene" that avoided contamination of one's intellect.

As (I think) the only certified American analytic philosopher at the Cardozo conference it is probably my duty to apologize on behalf of my colleagues.

³ And vice-versa. However, the Cardozo conference was a Derrida memorial conference, not a Davidson or Quine memorial conference, so the ways Quine, Davidson and Wittgenstein can illuminate and supplement and Derrida would be the topic for another occasion.

⁴ By "early" I have in mind primarily Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena and other essays on Husserl's Phenomenology*, Northwestern UP, 1973, *Writing and Difference*, tr. Alan Bass, U of Chicago P, 1978, *Of Grammatology*, tr. Gayatri Spivak, Johns Hopkins UP, 1974, "Limited Inc. a b c..." *Glyph* 2, 162-254, "Signature Event Context." *Glyph* 1, 172-97, and *Margins of Philosophy*, U of Chicago P, 1982.

⁵ Quine, W.V., especially *Word and Object*, MIT Press 1960.

⁶ Davidson, Donald, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford UP, 1984, and *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford UP, 1980.

In the last section, I give two examples of how Davidson's views implicitly commit him to theses that Derrida emphasizes.

First, I will discuss Davidson's account of meaning as truth-conditions and show why on his account the use-mention distinction is indeterminate rather than a clear foundation. "Mention" is the analytic parallel to Derrida's "citation," and the use-mention distinction has been a cornerstone of much analytic praxis for nearly a century.

Second, I will show how Davidson's account of metaphor, combined with his holistic views about the intentional family of concepts, implicitly lead him to deny that there is a firm line between figurative and literal language. Davidson would have to agree with Derrida's view that it is indeterminate whether the light metaphors in Plato's *Republic* are metaphors or not. He would certainly also agree that there is nothing in the nature of things (in the sense of a "given") that makes the metaphorical connection of light and the intellect appropriate. Thus Davidson's account of figurative language yields an account that accords with Derrida's views in many works, in particular in his "White Mythology."⁷

II Affinities between Traditions?

a) two views

The project of comparing one philosophical tradition with another can seem to be either philosophically unproblematic or impossible.⁸ The underlying issue is, "Are there

⁷ The present essay develops previously-published work on Quine and Davidson as Derridians. See my *Deconstruction as Analytic Philosophy*, Stanford University Press, 2000.

⁸ It has also seemed to many on both sides of the division to be reprehensible. David Armstrong, a prominent analytic philosopher who has constructed a "Lego™-land metaphysics of individuals and universals conspiring to form states of affairs of which the universe consists, characterizes abstaining from reading Derrida as "intellectual hygiene." Barry Smith, in a 2002 review in *Common Knowledge* of *Deconstruction as Analytic Philosophy* derides attempts to show there is anything in common between analytic philosophy and deconstruction, on the grounds that such attempts treat deconstruction as not absolutely unique in philosophical practice.

philosophical positions and arguments that are really the same in distinct traditions?"

This is a special case of a fundamental philosophical issue in the theory of meaning.

By a "tradition" I understand a background of texts and practices in terms of which a group of philosophers understand and formulate philosophical issues. A tradition shapes what is regarded as interesting, what are regarded as correct ways of addressing issues, and other matters of genre. Philosophy, as a cultural practice, is a literary form. A tradition is a particular literary form. Philosophical traditions are "intertextual" and constitute particular genres of work. The fundamental issue is whether there is anything sufficiently in common among distinct literary forms called "philosophy," i.e. distinct traditions, that could allow meaningful comparison of the work from distinct traditions.

"Meaning-realist" philosophers, those who believe in pre-linguistic meanings or *logoi*, would of course say "yes." Since there are meanings that transcend any particular language, two entirely different traditions could, by expressing those meanings, develop the same line of thought, the same issues, and take the same positions on those issues. Any "yes" answer to the question "Are there philosophical positions and arguments that are the same in distinct traditions?" may seem to *require* belief in shared trans-linguistic meanings that underlie cultural and linguistic practices. Such meanings are what Frege posits,⁹ Quine disparages, and Derrida labels "*logoi*." If there were such meanings, then philosophical problems and the arguments that bear on them would be strictly common elements in different material embodiments. "Philosophy" would be a universal science of natural questions. Exactly the same issues could be dealt with in Chinese, Sanskrit,

⁹ Frege and Husserl have many predecessors and successors in postulating such entities. The most important predecessor is Plato, as usual. For purposes of setting up a dilemma, we have to abstract from Husserl's attempt to incorporate culture into meanings. In very many ways, actually, Husserl's view of "the same idea" in disparate cultural settings is compatible with Davidson.

Medieval, Continental, and Analytic philosophy. The problem of skepticism, for instance, would be a well-defined array of problems that gets articulated to different degrees in any thoughtful reflection about the world.

Quine, Davidson, and Derrida deny the existence of such meanings. The fundamental affinities among their views are consequences of denying that there are such trans-linguistic entities. Some have taken the absence of logoi or meanings to imply that there is no meaningful sense in which different philosophical traditions can be the same or even mutually relevant. These "philosophical relativists" take Quine's, Derrida's, and Davidson's rejection of meanings to show that cross-traditional considerations of philosophers' views are bound to be misleading. A philosophical relativist¹⁰ argues that "philosophical positions" and "philosophical arguments" are so imbedded in, so much a function of, their traditions, the practices and texts from which they emerge, that disparate traditions could not have "the same philosophical problem." "Philosophical arguments" would therefore be "arguments" only within cultural practices, that is, relative to kinds of connection and standards of strength of connection that are peculiar to a particular "discursive practice."

Thus one response to the denial of meanings is the denial of genuine cross-traditional philosophical problems and arguments. Such common philosophical problems and arguments seem to presuppose a language of thought independent of cultures and traditions. If there are no common meanings that different traditions share, there would seem to be no possibility that two cultures or traditions could address the same issues,

¹⁰ Richard Rorty in many of his writings (for the most recent version, see his introduction to *A House Divided*, ed. C. G. Prado, Humanity Books, 2003) seems to me to hold a view like this. Most analytic philosophers behave as philosophical relativists, in the sense that they regard other practices called "philosophy" as just sharing the name with what they do.

since "the same issues" require "the same language" at some level of representation. "Philosophy" for such thinkers is just a label that does not show any "real" commonality beyond the fact that we call the different practices by the same name, just as Wittgenstein described the term "game."

This kind of discussion recurs on many topics. That a philosophical model of a phenomenon is incoherent or presupposes something incoherent does not mean that the phenomenon itself does not occur.¹¹ The only grounds for such a conclusion would be that the philosophical model was essential to the concept. Davidson and Wittgenstein reject the idea that philosophical theories can be so central to human thought.

b) A Davidsonian Approach to Relations between Traditions

From a Davidsonian point of view, both the relativist and the meaning-realist make a similar assumption about what it would take to have "communication" or shared content. Both the realist and the relativist accept the thesis that "saying the same thing" requires language-transcendent meanings. A Davidsonian position denies this. That is, even the view that argues from the *absence* of logoi or meanings to the impossibility of identity of philosophical problems implicitly accepts the logo-centric thesis that only such meanings will account for the possibility of two discourses in disparate cultures "saying the same thing." Thus the consequence the relativist draws from denying essentialism itself presupposes that essentialism about meanings is required for a shared world and sharing of meaning.

This structure, of presupposing the conception under attack, is a characteristic structure of an argument to which deconstruction applies. "Deconstruction" uncovers this

¹¹ Derrida is sometimes interpreted as reaching conclusions that truth, etc., do not exist. I take his use of "under erasure" to be a way of denying a standard philosophical theory about a phenomenon, while still using the word.

presupposing of the thesis being apparently denied. Since Davidson tends not to present his views as criticisms of specific texts, his deconstructions are often only implicit.¹²

A Davidsonian account of interpretation between traditions is analogous to the Davidsonian account of interpretation of one language in terms of another. A correct interpretation of one language in terms of another does not presuppose language-transcendent meanings that are identical across languages. Given that communication is the fundamental linguistic phenomenon, "saying the same thing" must be possible even though there are no trans-linguistic meanings conveyed by language. Thus the conditions for "saying the same thing" must be understood differently, rather than denied, if there are no transcendent meanings. So, for instance, to use Saussure's example, we can correctly interpret "Voilà un mouton" as "There's a sheep" even though "sheep" is not synonymous with "mouton," since "mouton" applies to mutton as well as to live animals.

Davidsonian interpretation rests on understanding other people by ascribing to them interests and beliefs as much as possible like the interpreter's interests and beliefs. Only relative to enough agreement to allow identifying the topic is it possible to ascribe disagreement about that topic. Davidson famously denies that there are "alternative conceptual schemes" precisely because there is no pre-linguistic given relative to which to construct alternatives.

Davidsonian interpretation of Continental philosophy, then, does not presuppose that, for instance, the Continental "problematic" of knowledge is precisely the same as that of Analytic philosophy. Rather, given that Continental philosophers are comprehensible as thinkers at all, and given that Analytic and Continental philosophers

¹² See his "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*.

share their pre-Hegelian history, closely analogous problematics would not be unexpected. So it is reasonable to expect both traditions to ask questions and propose answers that are “the same” in the Davidsonian sense of “same-saying,” which is loose and contextual. Davidsonian interpretation is constrained to ascribe reasonable beliefs and practices to every other human individual and group, and thus to suppose *prima facie* that philosophers will be doing something we can come to understand as philosophically interesting. A Davidsonian can talk about “philosophical problems” without supposing that such problems correspond to trans-linguistic propositions, just as we can talk about French sheep-raising practices without supposing that there is an intensional object “being a sheep” that the two languages express.¹³ Philosophy need not have an essence to be something. If that were a general requirement, not much would exist, as Wittgenstein has shown.

III) Davidson via Quine in relation to Derrida on Thought and Language

Very briefly, my thesis is that Derrida is to Husserl as Davidson, via Quine, is to Frege. A problematic about essentialism and meaning is being worked out in different ways with different emphases but with kindred results in the Continental and Analytic traditions.¹⁴

¹³ Of course, some philosophical discussions will be special to cultures. The aesthetics of ballet will not have an Ancient Chinese discussion, but what is going on in discussions of the aesthetics of ballet will be comprehensible because it is an art, and evaluated as such, and that is comprehensible.

¹⁴ It is worth noting that Frege and Husserl were interested in some of the same problems, for instance the refutation of psychologism in mathematics and logic, and the construction of a theory of meaning that would allow for shared thoughts. They read each others' work. Their refutations of psychologism and their accounts of meaning, though, were quite different in method and began part of the divide between analytic and Continental philosophy.

a) Derrida's rejection of logoi¹⁵

Derrida's philosophical trajectory begins with a critique of the Husserl's view that meaning rests on entities that are carried by, but distinct from, mere tokens. Derrida shows that Husserl's account of such meanings is inconsistent with Husserl's own doctrines. Derrida's discussion then characterizes meaningful marks of any kind, including language, as tokens that are repeatable. That is, language can be iterated and so removed from any meaning-fixing origin, as it is in quotation and citation.¹⁶ The text is thus the most revealing case of language, one obviously separated from an informing intention rather than separated in a hidden way. The informing thought that Husserl supposes gives meaning to tokens would have to be a kind of token that could not be so separated, some kind of entity that was both meaningful and necessarily connected with a meaning-giving act. But no token could have these features. Derrida's view is that any meaning-carrier will have all the properties that language has: For any meaning-carrier, there will be a difference between the meaning and the material embodiment of the meaning. Meanings themselves, the fundamental entities expressed, then drop out, since they themselves would have to be tokens, and so essentially language-like. In a brief phrase, all meaningful items are language-like, and all meaningful items are,

¹⁵ This section is necessarily brief and sketchy, given the complexity of Derrida's work. My "Indeterminacy of French Interpretation: Derrida and Davidson," collected in *Deconstruction as Analytic Philosophy*, Stanford UP, June 2000, is somewhat more complete.

¹⁶ Such a meaning-fixing origin would be the speaker's intention, for instance. If intentions have propositional structure, though, they can be nothing more than "writing" in neuron- or spirit-stuff. Such writing is thus just more writing, and has all the features that overt writing does.

Davidson's account of intention seems different and seems as though it grounds meaning. However, as we will see, Davidson is committed to exactly the same theses about intention, since "intention" is part of the family of irreducible but interconnected intentional concepts.

metaphorically, distinct from their meanings. That is, thoughts can be no better than brain- or spirit-writing.¹⁷

Important aspects of Derrida's philosophy follow from the above theses about language, thought, and meaning. Without logoi, a certain kind of foundation to language and its relation to the world is lacking. The notion of truth as correspondence of meanings to reality requires meanings. The distinction between logic and rhetoric likewise requires the difference between what is contained in meanings, i.e. essential to what is said, and what is merely an aspect of the linguistic clothing of the thought. to what is the case is undermined. These theses are, as it were, the continental philosopher's version of the theses about language, meaning and thought developed by Davidson via Quine's thought.¹⁸

b) Quinean indeterminacy and the denial of meanings

Quine arrives at the denial of transcendent meanings by carrying out a consistent logical empiricist naturalism. The logical positivist tradition from which he emerged had denied essentialism, the idea that there are necessary truths about the natures of objects. However, as Quine argues in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism,"¹⁹ their reliance on "analytic truth" as an explanation of necessities in effect posited essences to words, namely transcendent meanings that the words expressed. Thus the logical positivists, in trying to understand necessity as analyticity and renounce "metaphysical" views about the essences of things, presupposed the very thesis they were trying to deny in the case of

¹⁷ Derrida focuses on writing rather than speech because writing, unlike speech, does not produce the illusion of some direct connection with an intended content.

¹⁸ And Wittgenstein, although that is the topic of another essay. See my "Wittgenstein as Conservative Deconstructor" in *Deconstruction as Analytic Philosophy*, loc. cit.

¹⁹ In Quine, W. V., *From a Logical Point of View*, New York: Harper & Row, 1963.

words and their meanings. "Meanings" were in effect the essences of words. Thus Quine, carrying out the logical consequences of logical positivism, deconstructs logical positivism. The consequences of Quine's thorough-going abandonment of essentialism are very far-reaching: Quine's *Word and Object*²⁰ took this conclusion further, arguing for a conception of language and thought that essentially identified language and thought, and which treated the meaning of a sentence as derived from physical stimulations.

Quine shows that an account of logical structure need not be meaning-essentialist. Logical structure is the effect of accepting obvious truths, and is imposed on any understanding of language. However, that does not make logic different in kind from other information—all knowledge is empirical.

As I have argued in "The Extension of Deconstruction,"²¹ Quine could have further concluded that there is no principled sharp line between rhetoric and logic. Quine is blocked from this move by his insistence on an empirical "given", the stimulus meanings that provide the basis for the application of terms. From the perspective of requiring differences in "stimulus meanings" for real differences in meaning, rhetorical differences would be differences without content, if there were a basis in the "given" that was the core of "meaning." Absent this given basis, on Quinean principles there should be no lines between rhetorical connection, empirical connection, and logical connection. In that case, ways of reaching conclusions are legitimate that Quine did not consider.

According to both Derrida and Quine, there is no isolable "meaning" as opposed to other features of the discourse. Derrida's central thesis, paralleled by Quine's denial of trans-linguistic meaning, means that there is no privileged kind of connection grounded

²⁰ Quine, W. V. O., *Word and Object*, MIT Press, 1960.

²¹ Collected in my *Deconstruction as Analytic Philosophy*, Stanford UP, June 2000.

in logoi or meanings, parallel to Quine's denial of the analytic-synthetic distinction, but stronger, since there are no "stimulus meanings" to sharply define the "empirical" as opposed to the "valuational" and the "rhetorical." Derrida took these consequences of denying meanings seriously and adapted his practice to reflect and illustrate them. Thus his discussions of texts therefore often turn on features of the text other than the logical-inferential meaning. Thus, Derrida's expands the range of things "argument" can be.

The conception of the Web of Belief by which Quine conceives of language predicts indeterminacy of translation and shifting connections among sentences, i.e. among meanings, that is like Derrida's play of differance, albeit framed in the terms of the empiricist tradition rather than in phenomenological terms.

The one empiricist link Quine retains is the idea of stimulations, the given common data from which all meaning derives. This postulation of a "given," a basis on which "conceptual schemes" are constructed, means that Quine conceives of indeterminacy and shifting as relativism.²² A single domain of phenomena, the stimulations impinging on the organism, is capable of being categorized and organized in different ways. Relativism presupposes that there is a ground-level that is conceptualized in different ways, i.e. "organized" in different systems. This link to a given means that Quinean indeterminacy is not quite characterizable as Derridean "play."

Quine's notion of stimulus meaning is a version of the idea of a "given" that is divided up in different ways by different systems of language to yield different "conceptual schemes." As Davidson argues in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual

²² As an example of his thorough-going commitment to this picture, see his "Ontological Relativity," in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, Columbia UP, 1968.

Scheme,"²³ such a pre-conceptual domain of objects is an incoherent notion. Given that Davidson follows Quine's conception of language as sets of sentences, but now without a grounding to tie them to reality in any other way than being true, Davidson's account disconnects language from the traditional kind of control by what is given.

Davidson's denial of the "third dogma" of the "given" in effect means that his thinking is not "empiricist" in any distinctive sense. Thus he also abandons the fact-versus-value distinction.²⁴

Implicit also in Davidson's view is the denial of the distinction between rhetorical and logical connection. Since there is no given to define "empirical equivalence," two expressions that differ only "rhetorically" must be treated as independent.

Davidson follows Quine (and Frege) in treating sentences as the fundamental meaningful unit of language. The basic semantic property of the sentence is its truth-value, whether it is true or false. Truth, for Davidson, has neither a correspondence, a coherence, nor a pragmatist definition. Rather, "truth" is a primitive notion connected with the intentional system of predicates.²⁵ Davidson, following Quine, realizes that interpretation presupposes that people by and large believe truths. Without a "given," though, what utterances or inscriptions are true is unstable, in a way illustrated by the slippage of "metaphorical" into "literal" use described below, for instance.

Davidson thus purifies Quine of the "given" foundation that underlies language use and detaches language from a "foundational" tie to the world. While Davidson does,

²³ In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*.

²⁴ See his articles in the first section of *Problems of Rationality* (Oxford UP, 2004), "The Problem of Objectivity," "Expressing Evaluations," "The Objectivity of Values," and "The Interpersonal Comparison of Values."

²⁵ See his articles "The Structure and Content of Truth," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume LXXXVII, Number 6, June 1990, pages 279-328, and "The Folly of Trying to Define Truth," *The Journal of Philosophy* 94, (1997) pp. 263-278.

of course, hold that the world is what language is about, this world is the population of objects required in order that the truths be true, rather than the truths being what describe a given domain of objects. In a phrase, Being supervenes on Truth, rather than Truth supervening on Being.

If truth is the fundamental semantic relation, a truth-definition is the form of a "theory of meaning." Such truth-definitions in effect give systematic interpretations of another person's language in one's own language. A sentence you use explains what the world has to be like for the sentence of the other language-user to be true.

These interpretation-schemes will be constantly changing, as speaker's change their beliefs and choices of how to say things. Davidson's conception of the idiolect and the "passing theories" that interpreters must use does away with the conception of languages as fixed systems of meaning. But, given any passing theory, it is still a theory that supports counterfactuals about what a recursive infinity of alternative utterances or texts would have meant. That is, Davidson accommodates the fact that language has a formal structure while also accommodating what amounts to a Derridean notion of play in what terms and sentences mean.

The significant difference between Derrida and Davidson is Derrida's apparent dismissal of truth and related notions. Derrida holds that since the concept of Truth classically has been the correspondence of a transcendent meaning with a given reality, the arguments against transcendent meanings means are likewise arguments against the classical notion of truth.²⁶ Derrida's writes of using terms "under erasure," when there is

²⁶ A Davidsonian interpreter will not ascribe to Derrida the view that there are no truths, since that would be absurd. Rather, the Davidsonian, as here, interprets Derrida as talking about the classical, correspondence account of truth.

this conflict between the classical implications of a concept and the necessity to use the concept. "Under erasure" is supposed to disarm the implications of the term.

Davidson, as discussed above, argues that the absence of transcendent meanings shows that truth must be understood differently from the classical way. In fact, truth and truth-conditions, treated as primitive, are central components of Davidson's account of meaning and interpretation.²⁷

However, the rigorous structure of a truth-definition connects language with the world as a system of truths via maximizing agreement with the interpreter's beliefs. The evidence that a particular truth-predicate is appropriate for a person at a given time rests on probabilistic interconnections among parts of the "intentional" family of concepts, and on the interpreter's judgments about truths. While the internal structure of the truth-definition itself is deterministic and fixes the meaning of every sentence in the language, the evidence on which it is based is the shifting and sometimes indeterminate relations among components of the intentional system.

With different metaphors, references, and emphases, then, Davidson's picture of language is much like Derrida's. The consequences Derrida develops, though, are quite different from those that attract Davidson.

IV) Learning from Derrida for Davidsonians

²⁷ The main issue is whether "philosophical" accounts of important terms corrupt those terms by becoming part of their sense. Derrida and Heidegger seem to think "yes;" Davidson and Wittgenstein seem to think "no."

Another issue may be the degree to which we can use words to mean what we want. Derrida and Davidson, I think, would disagree about the social nature of language. See Davidson's "The Social Aspect of Language" in *The Philosophy of Michael Dummett*, ed. Guinness and Oliveri, Kluwer, Dordrecht, 1994, p. 1-16. Davidson holds that, while the extensions of our terms are determined by social interactions (triangulation), an individual can mean whatever she chooses by a particular term. Davidson is particularly interested in authors such as Joyce, who "violate semantic rules."

Derrida, on the other hand, seems at least somewhat influenced by the strand of thought that we find especially in Roland Barthes, which conceives of languages as very strong systems of rules that constrain authors.

a) General remarks:

Derrida and Davidson develop their common theses in very different ways. Derrida is often primarily concerned to show the startling philosophical consequences of what he regards as the incoherence of the notion of transcendent meanings.²⁸ His essays are most often illustrations of how these consequences lurk under the façade of clear coherent expositions. "Deconstruction" is in part exposing indeterminacies and incoherences in texts that purport to give coherent accounts in accord with philosophical groundings that presuppose transcendent meanings. Thus Derrida's focus is on undoing philosophical confidence that transcendent meaning provide determinate foundations. So his emphasis is often on the apparently paradoxical consequences of the lack of transcendent meanings.

Davidson's project is to show that a foundationless account of meaning is adequate to the phenomena, which he conceives of as the truths there are. So Davidson wants to show that "the data," as it were, do not require us to posit meanings or a given, but that things are sufficiently comprehensible without such exotica. Davidson's focus is therefore on explaining how communication is possible, how thought connects with talk, how beliefs and desires relate to action, and so forth without appealing to heirs of the Platonic Forms. Davidson's goal is usually to try to present his view of meaning and truth as close to platitudinous. This emphasis means that he does not often develop or dwell on the prima facie surprising features of his picture of language and thought, but rather downplays indeterminacies that would undermine the impression that his philosophy leaves everything as it is. In a word, Davidson's approach is Later Wittgensteinian.

²⁸ Derrida in effect argues that since the Husserlian strategy of constructing meanings has been shown to be incoherent in his early work, the striking consequences of this incoherence should be exhibited.

Davidson was often concerned to show how ordinary communication could take place in the absence of logoi, and to downplay the significance of the indeterminacy that he sometimes acknowledged.²⁹ Perhaps as a consequence of this project, he focused on utterances rather than texts, since utterances are very often connected to a pretty clear intention.³⁰ However, Davidson is committed to the idea that intentions themselves are sometimes indeterminate, basically because intentions are part of the “intentional scheme,” which means that they are ascribed “inscriptions,” as it were.

So Davidson sometimes continues the philosophical tradition of sticking with the clear cases and brushing “marginal” phenomena off “to another occasion.”³¹ But starting with and sticking to the clear cases masks the core groundlessness he ascribes to meaning and truth. Focusing on texts, or more often considering texts rather than utterances, would have brought out the extent to which Davidson is committed to a foundationless account of communication. I think engaging with Derrida and writing about texts, and unpacking the implications of his view that intentions are in effect just further ascribed texts, would have yielded Davidsonian writings that made explicit this free play of what sentences are truths in an idiolect.

As it is, it seems clear to me that Davidson was aware of the Derridean consequences of his thought, although he may not have been convinced (by me and by Rorty, for instance) that those consequences were Derridean. The consequence of denying a given and making truth the basic semantic relation, so that reference and

²⁹ In this respect he is quite akin to Wittgenstein. See especially his essays on how we acquire language. See for instance “The Second Person,” in Davidson, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, Oxford 2001.

³⁰ I once asked him why he did not discuss texts, and he replied that texts are more indeterminate than utterances precisely because the intention is not coupled with the text.

³¹ There are exceptions. In “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, for instance, he argues that there are no languages in the philosopher's sense of “language.”

predication are explained in terms of truth rather than vice versa, is that, as Davidson says, nothing makes sentences true. Given that he also argues that intention determines truth-conditions for an idiolect, and has to hold that intentions are themselves part of an intentional framework itself constructed with truth as primitive, truth itself has about as much free play as anyone could want.

b) Unmentioned Indeterminacy in Davidson

b1) Use and mention:

Davidson claims that to know a language is to know the truth-conditions of each of its sentences. That is, it is to know every sentence of the form, "Fred is a frog" is true if and only if Fred is a frog.³² The whole point of a truth-definition is to describe understanding of a language without appealing to meanings.

But if you know these truth-conditions, do you understand the sentence? To many philosophers, Davidson's view does not seem to give sufficient conditions for understanding a language. As Harman pointed out,³³ a "disquotational" truth-definitional target sentence can be produced by someone who does not know what the sentence means. That is, "Fred is an amygdule" is true if and only if Fred is an amygdule," and even the general predicate-clause "Is an amygdule" is true of an entity x if and only if x is an amygdule,' can be given by someone who has no idea what an amygdule is.

Many have argued along these lines that "truth-conditions" must be understood in some other way than disquotationally, since such truth-conditions can be given by someone who does not understand the sentence. Accounts of this understanding have by

³² A truth-definition is a finite set of predicate-clauses, connective-clauses, and quantifier clauses that has all such "trivial" biconditionals as logical consequences.

³³ Harman, Gilbert, "Meaning and Semantics," in *Reasoning, Meaning, and Mind*, Oxford UP, 1999.

and large reinstated "meanings" as language-transcendent entities expressed in various languages.

What does Davidson really require of a truth-definition? The important feature of Davidson's idea is that a truth-definition connects a *named* sentence (in the example, named by being quoted) with a clause that is *used*. "Used" means "used to say something," as an expression in a language, rather than as a password, voice-activation door signal, or lyric in a song in a language you do not understand. "Use" in the relevant "sense" of course entails "understand." Thus in the above example, if the person does not know what an amygdale is, he hasn't met Davidson's conditions.

"Understand," and so "use" is part of the intentional family of concepts. The explication of "understand" would involve belief, meaning, action, and other "intentional" concepts. In Davidson's way of thinking, no member of the intentional family of concepts is reducible to any combination of others, though there are a priori connections among members of the family. A Davidsonian holds that "understand," while connected to other concepts, is not be reducible to anything else, but that "understand" has connections to other members of the family.

Thus a truth-definition, as Davidson conceives it, does not amount to a *reduction* of the notion of meaning to something more basic. Rather, he has given a disquotational *criterion* of understanding a language that (of course) presupposes the notion of "use." But "use" is not determinable apart from complicated relations to beliefs and intentions.

As Davidson was well aware, the conditions for using a word or sentence as an expression of a language are quite vague and indeterminate. Consider several cases:

1) The spy you use to monitor activities in one part of the Axis of Evil is a lawyer who sits in on physicists' meetings. Suppose your ignorant spy reports on what the scientists said by something like "They said that the deuterium coagulator had too high a Wilson number." In the "that"-clause, is the spy *using* the words or rather just mentioning, i.e. citing or parroting the words? In the unlikely event that the lawyer can be trained in physics, exactly how much does he have to know in order to be able to use the "that"-clause?

2) American pilots learn to say "Mayday" in distress in imitation of French pilots. They're not speaking French, or using French words as French words. They are communicating. At what point are they using the English word "Mayday" in the new sense? (This is like the traveler who from observation learns that a particular phrase in Pashti gets intrusive merchants to leave him alone in the market. It turns out that the phrase means "I have the plague." In a way, the traveler is using the phrase, and in the Pashti sense, since its effectiveness depends on its Pashti meaning. But...)

3) If one does crossword puzzles, one acquires a substantial vocabulary of words for birds, animals, architectural features, etc., that one has learned only by filling in other words. Do you understand the word "karakul" if you know only that it is a Eurasian animal? Are you using "karakul" when you say, "A karakul is a Eurasian animal?"

Such examples show that the contrast between producing a word as physical mark or sound and producing it as expressing meaning is not really an opposition of two kinds of phenomena. Rather, "citation" is as it were a dimension of language-use. To characterize the situation of "borderline" case such as those above as a "mix" of pure use

and pure mention would suppose that there could be "pure use," the production of a word to express a "meaning" uncontaminated by its physical embodiment.

In sum Davidson's account of meaning as truth-definition in effect treats "meaning" as sometimes indeterminate as to whether it is meaningful or just parroting. Speech itself is sometime disconnected from its author. This is, of course, a Derridean result. The result is already there, undeveloped, in Davidson's philosophy.

b2) Davidson on Metaphors

Davidson's account of metaphor and figurative language³⁴ generally is a rhetorical account.³⁵ Figurative language is figurative *use* of language. In a metaphorical use of a sentence such as "Alice is the cream in my coffee," a writer or speaker is producing a sentence with a truth-value (in this case the truth-value False) for a purpose other than informing the reader or listener. Metaphor is thus a kind of speech-act or inscription-act, akin to sarcasm, understatement, and other speech acts that have some other intent than informing an audience that some truth-conditions obtain.

An utterance or an application of a predicate to an object is figural if the speaker intends to bring about a figural effect by uttering something literally³⁶ false. Metaphor and other figural language is thus, for Davidson, a rhetorical phenomenon rather than a matter of a "metaphorical meaning" that is generated or carried across.

Any account of language and meaning that, like Davidson's, makes words themselves rather than something expressed by words to be primary meaningful items

³⁴ See "What Metaphors Mean," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, pages 245-264

³⁵ In this respect, his view is akin to Paul DeMan's. See my "Metaphor in Davidson and DeMan," collected in *Deconstruction as Analytic Philosophy*.

³⁶ "Literally false" can be understood as "believed false by the speaker," when the topic is one the speaker is not likely to be mistaken about. Davidson, realizing the implicit appeal to non-linguistic meanings that "literal" implies, switches to "first meaning" in later discussions.

will likewise treat figuration as a rhetorical phenomenon. Since there are no meanings “beneath” the language, there is no place for “metaphorical meanings” that words might have.

Many of those who have thought about metaphor and its fuzziness have been concerned with diachronic shift from “metaphor” to “literal.” English etymology, for instance, is in large part the history of figures that became literal, passing beyond the “dead” stage to the stage where the trace of figuration is available only to the scholar. Nothing in the minds of current speakers would give a clue that “fornicate” was originally a metonymy, an indirect way of alluding to activities in fornication, the arches.³⁷

For Davidson, this kind of cultural drift would not be relevant to semantics, since there is no such determinate thing as the “common language” on Davidson's account of language.³⁸ For Davidson, the phenomenon of figural use takes place at the level of the individual speech-act, and so at the level of the speaker's or writer's intention. The vagueness of the borderline between figural and literal historically would just be a problem of determining the intentions of the long-dead, rather than a genuine slippery-slope between figural and literal. Thus if there is any question of vague borderlines between metaphorical use or literal use it arise at the level of the individual speaker.

³⁷ To list some other examples, which could be multiplied at dictionary length:
“Berth” was originally a space for a ship to pass at sea, then place for a ship to dock, now place on a train to sleep.
“Sobriquet”, now meaning “nickname” originally was a chuck under the chin.
“Futile” from flowing, by a complicated figure for the flowing of words from the foolish, then, by another turn, came to mean hopeless
“Understanding,” “verstehen,” and “episteme” are three relations to standing
“Foundational,” “grundwerke” and “funds” (the resources we have beneath us) are all developments of “bottom,” which shows up anatomically as “fundament,” of course.

³⁸ See “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*.

On reflection the indeterminacy of the figural depends on no temporal drift or larger cultural group. At the level of the individual speaker on a single occasion, whether an utterance is literal or figural is often indeterminate. For moribund familiar metaphors, an individual's utterance corresponds to *no* determinate "propositional" intention. A "moribund" metaphor calls forth no leap of the imagination in either reader or hearer. Moribund metaphors are ubiquitous in normal language-use, and show that we can use language to communicate without intending any particular proposition. There are often no determinate truth-conditions we intend our utterances to have. That is, we often communicate effectively without having any determinate "meaning" in mind.

Consider two kinds of case where it is implausible that an individual's use of what could be a metaphor corresponds to a determinate "propositional" intention. These sorts of cases show that we can perfectly well use language for communicative purposes without having intended propositions, i.e. entities that carry determinate meanings and truth-values, behind those uses.

The first kind of case involves imitation of speech acts, so it uses the phenomenon of citation, discussed above. Suppose the Chief Meteorologist says to his assistant, discussing an occluded front, "That's a rather pusillanimous air mass." The assistant thinks this is a fine phrase, and takes to using it himself to describe occluded fronts. The assistant has no idea whether "pusillanimous" applies literally to occluded fronts or not, but uses the phrase as appropriately as his boss. Here the intention is to *say the same thing*, whatever that was, that someone else said. As this phrase is picked up by other to whom "pusillanimous" is a new word, of course, it may be understood as literal, and therefore as true. Perhaps another polysyllabic person will mistake the phrase, in these

meteorological mouths, as a metaphor. This can transmit metaphoricity indeterminately. Citation, I would conjecture, is one of the devices by which "metaphors" become true utterances or inscriptions in a culture.

The second kind of case is indeterminacy of metaphoricity that is internal to individual speakers and writers. This second kind of case is ubiquitous. Until a couple of years ago, *if* I had been questioned on the topic, I would have said that the common phrase, "...make your head swim," as in "If you try that, you'll be out of here so fast it'll make your head swim," or "This drug makes my head swim," was some kind of metaphorical extension of "swim" as a mode of movement through water. But "swim" as "dizzy" turns out to have its own Germanic root. This doesn't show that I was using the term literally, of course. In my idiolect, there may just have been a single term "swim."

Before I looked it up, it had *never occurred* to me whether the sentences using "make your head swim" were literally true or false. My intentions in speaking did not depend on having any other "propositional content" than "makes your head swim" is true of A if and only if A makes your head swim. I said "...make your head swim," intending that I be understood as meaning something like "make you dizzy." But that would happen whether I was speaking metaphorically or literally. In the former case, I would be saying something false, but appropriate; in the latter something true. It was of no importance which truth-value my utterance had, and so of no importance which of two propositional contents my utterance had. But the utterance had truth-conditions I understood: "This drug makes my head swim' is true if and only if this drug makes my head swim."

If there were two predicates, "swim1" and "swim2" each would have different sets of connections with other predicates. But these differing sets of connections would

correspond to the differing communicative intentions in saying, on the one hand “swim2,” and on the other hand “swim1” metaphorically intended. That is, I didn't mean that your head might swim the Australian crawl or would get wet without a bathing cap. But those different connections don't differentiate between routine metaphorical intention and different truth-conditions. In neither the metaphorical use of “swim1” nor the literal use of the distinct predicate “swim2” would you intend the hearer to suppose that your head might do the crawl.³⁹

If our intuitions about metaphoricity are not a good guide for “swim,” there is little reason to think they are a good guide for “crush,” “drive,” “view,” or any number of other common predicates.

Intuitive conjectures about metaphoricity made on reflection have little bearing on anything, as the “swim” shows. If on an occasion of utterance I have no belief about and little concern for whether what I say is true or false, I can hardly have a proposition in mind being expressed by my use of a sentence. Much of our speech is harmlessly rhetorically indeterminate even to ourselves. It is not required for communication that I decide whether I mean my words as metaphorical or literal. It is often the case that little hangs on our intending or not intending to assert seriously the truth-conditions of what we say.⁴⁰

³⁹ Another example arose during a conference. I mentioned that my guinea pig Celeste was now dead, and the person I was speaking to assumed that I meant “experimental subject,” perhaps because of the improbability of an adult male having a cavey for a pet. I took him to be interpreting my remark as a metaphorical use of “guinea pig,” rather than a literal one. On looking it up, I'm not so sure. The *American Heritage Dictionary* says “experimental subject” is another *meaning* of “guinea pig” (requiring another clause in a truth-definition), for what that's worth. Was my understanding of his understanding of my use of “guinea pig” correct or not?

⁴⁰ The diachronic history of “word-senses” in the common language at a time is part of that by which “world views” and opinions about what is what evolve. The “common language” and a person's idiolect are connected in the triangulation by which a person learns correct application-conditions of predicates, even when the person chooses to use different predicates for those extensions. A person learns what the

The paradoxical appearance of the above claims that it is indeterminate what we mean, in that we are ignorant of the truth-conditions and intention of what we say stems from forgetting that intention is among the terms in the family of concepts that are applied holistically in interpretation. That is, just as in the famous examples of indeterminacy of interpretation that trade on putting disagreement into meaning-difference or belief-difference, this other kind of indeterminacy trades on interchanging truth-conditions and intentions. Given the mutual irreducibility but inter-connectedness of the "family" of intentional concepts, truth, meaning, belief, intention, et al., and the inductive, theory-constructing way in which interpretation arrives at truth-conditions, intention is not reducible to any other phenomenon. But that means that intentions, at least in some cases, are indeterminate, even to the person that has them. And that is clearly the case for moribund metaphors. Indeterminacy of metaphor is indeterminacy to the speaker (as self-interpreter) as well as to the interpreter. Indeterminacy of metaphor is a case where the illusion that "we know what we mean" has little intuitive force.⁴¹

In Davidson's presentation of his theory of metaphor, intention is presumed to be transparent to the speaker, at least. This is misleading. Davidson focuses on striking literary metaphors, but metaphors pervade all writing and speech. For the clear examples of metaphoricity Davidson is concerned with, the intention is clear, and the metaphors are

extensions of terms are by seeing what is said when. That is, the criteria for "is an F" and "is the same F as" are what the interlocutor applies the same term to. Thus, idiolects and the common language are equal partners in the discovery of the common world. The indeterminacies of the common language return to become indeterminacies of the idiolect. See my "Wittgenstein mit Davidson uber Metaphern," in *Wittgenstein und die Metapher*, ed. Arnsward, Kertscher and Kross, Parerga, Berlin, 2004.

⁴¹ "Literal" in fact gives us a good contemporary example of how this can lead to indeterminacy in interpretation. Consider "literally" and "crushed" in "The Packers literally crushed the Colts." "Crushed" may be a metaphor or another "sense" of "crush." "Literally" itself may mean literally "literally," in which case, given the mores of football, it is a metaphor, or something else, a kind of intensifier.

clearly metaphors. When metaphors are tired, however, the intention can be indeterminate, and so also the truth-conditions.

On Davidson's own philosophy of mind, intentions are part of the intentional framework ascribed in interpretation, not phenomena that are independently determinable. Intentions are thus indeterminate in the same way and for the same general kinds of reasons that beliefs and meanings are. Of course, intentions are often clear, and what a person meant, both truth-conditions and rhetorically, is determined much of the time by that person's intention.

Davidson's real implicit view of metaphor, then, agrees in its fundamentals with Derrida's view in "White Mythology."⁴² (There is of course a great deal more going on in "White Mythology" than merely giving an account of figuration.) Davidson is explicitly and overtly committed to the view that there are no "given" natural resemblances, that the metaphor of "metaphor," the transport of a meaning, is not the right theory, and that "sensory content" is not what makes words meaningful. The above discussion shows that Davidson is also committed implicitly to there being no principled line between the metaphorical and the literal.

⁴² Derrida, Jacques, "White Mythology", in *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 207-271.