

Conventional wisdom

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1. The claim that ‘there is no such thing as a language’¹ has been called ‘remarkable’, ‘startling’, and ‘downright astonishing’.² In brief, most of those who have written on the view for which Donald Davidson has argued in his ‘A nice derangement of epitaphs’ find the Davidsonian claim simply incredible. Thus, for example, Dummett has gone so far as to say: ‘Whatever force [Davidson’s] arguments may have, they cannot sustain the bald conclusion, but cry out for some account of an indispensable concept’, namely, the concept of a language (1986: 465–66). But this is to miss the point of Davidson’s arguments. For Davidson’s claim is not that *no* sense can be given to the idea of a language (as Dummett seems to suggest); it is, rather, that there’s no such thing as a language *if* ‘a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed’ (446; cf. 436). In particular, Davidson’s aim is to show that ‘we should give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions’ (446). *That* is the intended force of the argument.

Of course, even this idea – that our language is in no way convention-governed – seems only slightly less incredible than the idea that there’s no such thing as a language. David Lewis has written: ‘It is a platitude – something only a philosopher would dream of denying – that there are conventions of language’ (1975: 166). But while even Davidson himself – and in the very paper in question! – suggests that ‘the standard view’ of a language ‘must in *some* sense be right’ (436; italics added), it turns out that the sense in which this is so, according to Davidson, is so platitudinous and so near circularity as to be uninteresting (437). And if ‘only a philosopher’ would deny that there are conventions of language, ‘the reason may be that only a philosopher would say it in the first place’ (Davidson 1981: 265).

Well, perhaps so. But before we decide this question we’d better be sure that we appreciate what, exactly, a convention of language is supposed to be. Otherwise, we’re liable to end up *having* to accept Davidson’s argument for the uselessness of the appeal to convention in explaining our linguistic interactions. For, as it’s set up, Davidson’s argument (to which we’ll turn presently) against the idea of a language in the sense of a system of shared, convention-governed meanings *is a good one*. That is, *given* what Davidson takes a linguistic convention to be, it may well be that we

¹ Davidson 1986: 446. Hereinafter, references to this article will be given by internal citations, giving the relevant page number(s).

² Ramberg 1989: 1; Bar-On and Risjord 1992: 163; Hacking 1986: 447.

can't avoid the 'bald conclusion' at which so many of Davidson's critics have balked. Unfortunately, Davidson's detractors have failed to appreciate this; as a result, to the extent that they've tried to identify the flaw in Davidson's argument, they've offered different, and on the whole rather unconvincing, diagnoses of where it has gone wrong.

Later in this paper, I'll remark briefly on what some of these alternative diagnoses are, and why I find them implausible. My main concern here, however, is to show that Davidson has misunderstood his intended target – he, and perhaps 'many philosophers and linguists' as well, has failed to understand Lewis' account of what a linguistic convention is supposed to be. Once we remind ourselves of how such conventions are supposed to enable communication, however, the Davidsonian argument for the conclusion that 'there is no such thing as a language' simply goes away. But first, the Davidsonian argument itself.

2. Recall that Davidson's rejection of the notion of a language comes with the rider, '... not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed' (446). And just what have 'many philosophers and linguists' supposed a language to be? The answer, according to Davidson, comes out when we see what is supposed to render 'first meaning' – roughly, Gricean non-natural meaning³ – specifically linguistic. Here, we're told that the received view is that the 'first meanings' of a language are (1) 'systematic,' (2) 'shared,' and (3) 'governed by learned conventions or regularities' (436). In short: in the case of first meaning that's specifically linguistic, speaker and hearer ought to be understood as sharing 'a complex system or theory' which 'makes possible the articulation of logical relations between utterances, and explains the ability to interpret novel utterances in an organized way' (ibid.). *That*, according to 'most philosophers and linguists', is what enables linguistic communication.

No sooner is this received view articulated, however, than it comes to grief. In particular, even supposing there to be first meanings which satisfy (1) to (3), there being such in no way advances our understanding how it is that malapropisms, for example, can be made sense of, since malapropisms and their kin 'introduce expressions not covered by prior learning, or familiar expressions which cannot be interpreted' given only the abilities set out in (1) to (3) (437). Thus, phenomena such as 'our ability to interpret words we have never heard before, to correct slips of the tongue, or to cope with new idiolects' appear to threaten the description of linguistic competence widely held to be correct (ibid.). In particular, the culprit here seems

³ "A meant-NN something by *x*" is roughly equivalent to "A uttered *x* with the intention of producing a belief by means of the recognition of this intention". Grice 1957; reprinted in Martinich 1990: 76.

to be (3). For while (1) and (2) might survive if understood 'in rather unusual ways' (446), as an attempt to capture some feature of 'first meanings' in virtue of which we can be said to 'share a language', (3) seems to be at best superfluous and at worst outright incompatible with how linguistic communication actually proceeds:

[T]he interpreter comes to the occasion of utterance armed with a theory that tells him (or so he believes) what an arbitrary utterance of the speaker means. The speaker then says something with the intention that it will be interpreted in a certain way, and the expectation that it will be so interpreted. In fact this way is not provided for by the interpreter's theory. But the speaker is nevertheless understood; the interpreter adjusts his theory so that it yields the speaker's intended interpretation. (440)

Thus, speaker and hearer come to share a theory as to how the speaker's utterance is to be interpreted, and the attempt at communication succeeds. What's essential, however, is that here 'the speaker expects to be, and is, interpreted as the speaker intended *although the interpreter did not have a correct theory in advance*' (ibid.; italics added). Whereas, if we were to insist upon the correctness of principle (3), we'd have to say that such correct interpretation would be possible only by virtue of the interpreter's having a 'systematic knowledge or competence' which 'is learned in advance of occasions of interpretation and [which] is conventional in character' (436). So, plausible though it may seem, (3) is actually incompatible with linguistic communication's being possible even when malapropisms, e.g., are involved. For what the preceding reconstruction of linguistic communication shows is that it is the coincidence of the passing theories of speaker and hearer – i.e., the speaker's being interpreted as he intends – that underwrites this phenomenon. But such a shared passing theory, because it is as evanescent and particularized as it is, could hardly be "what anyone (except perhaps a philosopher) would call an actual natural language' (443), much less one that satisfies requirements (1)-(3).

3. While it's worth asking whether the conclusion of 'Derangement' undercuts a good deal of Davidson's earlier work,⁴ we shouldn't find Davidson's drawing that conclusion at all surprising, really. For while the Davidsonian corpus has much in it concerning the development of a theory of meaning for natural languages, it also contains remarks regarding the nature of linguistic communication which form the basis of the argument of the paper under discussion.⁵ In particular – though it lacks the 'aston-

⁴ See Bar-On and Risjord 1992 and Hacking 1986 for some discussion of this issue.

⁵ Bennett (1985: 603), Hacking (1986: 449), and Ramberg (1989) have noticed this.

ishing' (etc.) conclusion of the later paper – Davidson's 'Communication and convention' (1981) contains the argument at the heart of 'Derangement': namely, the argument against convention's playing any interesting role in linguistic communication. Here, though, rather than targeting the beliefs of 'many philosophers and linguists', Davidson seeks to discredit the idea that Lewis' account of convention in particular might shed some light on the phenomenon of linguistic communication:⁶

According to David Lewis a convention is a *regularity* R in action, or action and belief, a regularity in which more than one person must be involved. ... What exactly is the necessary convention [in the linguistic case]? Regularity in this context must mean regularity over time, not mere agreement at a moment. If there is to be a convention in Lewis's sense (or in any sense, I would say), then something must be seen to recur over time. The only candidate for recurrence we have is the interpretation of sound patterns: speaker and hearer must repeatedly, intentionally, and with mutual agreement, interpret relevantly similar sound patterns of the speaker in the same way (or ways related by rules that can be made explicit in advance). (Davidson 1981: 276–77)

The trouble is, however, that there are many cases (malapropisms, e.g.) in which communication succeeds even though 'what is shared' (a particular interpretation of the speaker's words) is neither known, nor specifiable by anything known, in advance; and what *is* known in advance (including supposed 'conventions' of language) cannot suffice to account for how communication takes place (ibid.: 278). Ergo, what is shared, and what makes communication possible in such a case, cannot be conventional in nature; ergo (several years later), 'there is no such thing as a language' if a language is supposed to be essentially conventional in character.

4. Now, as noted earlier, diagnoses *have* been offered as to what, exactly, is wrong with the Davidsonian argument we've just (re)encountered. One thought is that Davidson is guilty of conflating speaker meaning and linguistic meaning.⁷ But this is implausible, not to say uncharitable, given that Davidson prefaces his argument in 'Derangement' by evincing an awareness of this distinction and insisting that 'nothing should be allowed to obliterate or even blur [it]' (434).⁸ The most common diagnosis of the

⁶ Like Ramberg and Davidson, I take Lewis' *Convention* (1969), as well as his 'Languages and Language' (1975) – which Ramberg, but not Davidson, fails even to mention – to provide the measure of any account of convention (Ramberg 1989: 113, n. 1).

⁷ See, e.g., Bar-On and Risjord 1992: 185–86.

⁸ Though I think questions can be raised about the details of what Davidson says regarding this distinction (especially 434–35), of the distinction itself he's certainly well aware.

source of the trouble in Davidson's argument, however, is that Davidson is confused about the distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions: linguistic conventions, those who take this line point out, mightn't *suffice* for every case of linguistic communication, but that doesn't mean that they're not *necessary* for communication.⁹ But it's important to recognize that, in addition to imputing to Davidson outright dim-wittedness, this proffered diagnosis fails to take seriously Davidson's going out of his way to allow that '[a] general framework or theory, whatever it is, may be a key ingredient in what is needed for interpretation' (444). Yet, surely, the very fact that his conclusion is so 'startling' should tip us off to the fact that Davidson sees himself as doing something more significant than making the banal point that linguistic communication is more than merely a matter of the conventional meanings of words. *His* point is that when we examine the linguistic phenomena closely, it becomes doubtful that there *are* conventional meanings. Here is why he thinks this:

Recall the core idea of Lewis' account of a convention. A convention, Lewis tells us, consists of a regularity in action, or in action and belief, that perpetuates itself because it serves some sort of common interest¹⁰. And (3) tells us that such conventions underpin and constrain linguistic meanings. The trick, however, is one of *finding the appropriate sort of regularity*. In fact, Davidson contends, this cannot be done. After all, it's a necessary condition of there being a convention on Lewis' account that '[e]veryone conforms to R.' (Lewis 1975: 165) And even if Lewis *does* say that 'a few exceptions' to the 'everyone' 'can be tolerated,' (ibid.) is it really plausible to suppose, in the face of the manifest *abundance* of nonliteral uses of speech (of which malapropisms are but one example),¹¹ that these are merely 'a few exceptions' to the rule? Hardly. In fact, a brief perusal of any introductory text on pragmatics ought to lead one to suspect that, if anything, literal usages of language are the exception rather than the rule.

⁹ See: Bennett 1985: 603: 'In Davidson's hands, this modest and not unfamiliar point is made to look radical and iconoclastic ...'; Bar-On and Risjord 1992: 186, n. 30: '... even if a malapropism phenomenon helps show that the assumption of a shared, stable set of linguistic conventions does not suffice to explain what goes on in linguistic communication, it does not show that the assumption is not a necessary one.'; George 1990: 285, n. 24: 'Some of Davidson's commentators [George cites Ramberg 1989: 106] seem to move easily from the thesis that an account of linguistic competence like that which might be provided by current linguistic research is not sufficient to explain our ability to communicate to the thesis that it is not even a necessary or interesting component of such an explanation.'

¹⁰ Lewis 1975: 164. Lewis, of course, places further conditions on there being a convention; but it is the core idea that concerns us here.

¹¹ A nonliteral use of speech is one in which speaker meaning and word meaning diverge.

Here, I submit, we've come to understand why it is that Davidson is led to suppose that there's no such thing as a language. Davidson's led to think this because a language is supposed to be conventional in character; but there simply aren't any regularities in our linguistic behaviour which could serve to underwrite such conventions. Thus, Davidson isn't conflating speaker meaning and linguistic meaning; he's shown that we need to reconceive linguistic meaning if this distinction is to be sustained. Similarly, he hasn't confused the claim that conventions aren't sufficient for communication with the idea that they're not necessary for it; he's cast doubt on the idea that conventions are even necessary for communication, inasmuch as we do communicate even though the conditions for the existence of linguistic conventions simply aren't satisfied.

Or such, at any rate, is the *right* way to read the argument of 'Derangement'. And, as I said previously, rightly understood that argument *looks* like a pretty good one after all. In fact, however, Davidson's argument is only as good as the operative conception of what a linguistic convention requires; and, as I want now to argue, the operative conception of what a linguistic convention ought to look like rests upon a misreading of Lewis' account. So:

It's true enough that, on Lewis' account, a convention requires a certain sort of regularity 'in action, or in action and belief.' Note, however, that nothing has (yet) been said about what, in the case of linguistic conventions, the requisite type of regularity is. To get clear on this matter, however, we need to distinguish between, for example, 'an intentional conformity to a regularity' (Ramberg 1989: 100) – which is what Ramberg portrays as Lewis' general conception of a convention – and a regularity in intention to conform to a regularity. In the former case, the regularity *just* is the 'intentional conformity.' In the latter case, however, there is a regularity there all right – it's in the intention to conform to some *further* regularity, though whether this intention results in the intended sort of behaviour (the 'target regularity', we might say), is a separate issue.

But note that in order for Davidson's argument to go through as designed, we've got to ignore the distinction just made.¹² For while our linguistic exchanges might exhibit a manifest lack of 'intentional conformity' to the proper and literal meanings of words – I take this to be what Davidson has shown – they also display an abundant regularity in this: speakers (regularly) intend to conform to the (further, target) regularity of *only saying 'S' when they believe 'S' to be true*; they try ('with a few exceptions') not say, for example, 'That's a nice arrangement of epithets' unless

¹² See Ramberg 1989: 100, e.g., for an illustration of how easy it is to conflate these ideas: 'A convention is an intentional conformity to a regularity. It involves ... the nested beliefs of the conveners in their mutual intent to conform....'

they take it that the object in question is a nice arrangement of epithets.¹³ Of course, it's all too obvious that speakers don't always succeed in this (witness Mrs. Malaprop!). We hearers know this. But we also know and expect speakers (on the whole) to be truthful in the manner just indicated: on the whole, then, our attitude towards what others say is 'trusting'. And it's in virtue of these facts – i.e., in virtue of what Lewis calls the convention of truthfulness and trust – that we're able to use (a) language to communicate in spite of the fact that this convention often fails to issue in an actual conformity to the literal meanings of words; moreover, *by (Lewis') definition*, it's in virtue of our having the convention of truthfulness and trust that we have a language.¹⁴

4. If the foregoing argument is correct, what leads Davidson to his 'astounding' conclusion is actually a misunderstanding of the sort of thing that there being a convention requires. In particular, contra Davidson, it's just false that the only candidate for the sort of regularity which a (linguistic) convention requires 'is the interpretation [by speakers and hearers] of sound patterns' (1981: 277) – a regularity *in (mutual) intention* to interpret 'sound patterns' in the same way seems to be all that Lewis' account of convention requires. Of course, one might for one reason or another find fault with Lewis' account of conventions and/or its application to the linguistic case.¹⁵ But I hope it's now clear that if there's something wrong

¹³ Similarly, in the case of conversational implicatures: though S might say 'The door's right behind you!' with the intent to get the hearer to leave, (typically) S won't say this unless he thinks (among other things) that there is a door right behind the person he's addressing. So, as Grice insisted, 'the calculation of the presence of a conversational implicature presupposes an initial knowledge of the expression the utterance of which carries the implicature' (Grice 1957: 159). Austin similarly maintains that, e.g., the illocution/perlocution distinction must be made in terms of convention (Austin 1975: Lectures 9ff.).

¹⁴ See Lewis 1975: 167. 'My proposal is that the convention whereby a population P uses a language L is a convention of truthfulness and trust in L. To be truthful in L is to act in a certain way: to try never to utter any sentences of L that are not true in L....' See, also, Lewis 1969: 177ff. In *Convention*, only the convention of truthfulness is explicitly mentioned, but it's not as though there's a separate convention of trust. That is, in the former (1975) work Lewis is simply using a more perspicuous label for what is in fact the same convention described in his book.

¹⁵ Most recently, Davidson has offered the following argument against the applicability of Lewis' analysis of convention to the linguistic case: 'If the purpose of using language is to communicate, there is no need of a convention to make you talk in a way you think will be interpreted as you intend' (1993a: 119). This argument, it seems to me, represents a different line of objection than the one pursued in 'Derangement'. (Hence its merely being mentioned here). As with the argument of 'Derangement', however, Davidson here betrays a misunderstanding of Lewis' view.

with that account, it's not that it requires a bizarre, unrealizable, or implausible regularity in our (psycho-)linguistic behaviour.¹⁶ The regularity is there; one just needs to know where to look.¹⁷

Granted, my reconstruction of what's conventional in language doesn't quite match up with (3). For while the convention of truthfulness and trust might well underpin the conventional meanings of words, it's not as though such meanings are *constitutive* or *exhaustive* of what is conventional in a language.¹⁸ So, if (3) really does capture what 'many philosophers and linguists have supposed' to be the sum and substance of convention's contribution to linguistic communication, I reject it.¹⁹ This is not because I (like Davidson) think that (3) does capture convention's supposed contribution to linguistic communication, and that convention,

In the passage just quoted, Davidson treats the interest we have in communicating as though it is supposed to lead to the adoption of a linguistic convention; if this were so, adopting the latter convention might well seem superfluous. But as Lewis has said '[a] convention is so-called because of the way it persists, not because of the way it originated' (1975: 181). A better way of thinking of the matter, which I can only briefly sketch here, is as follows: we have the convention of truthfulness and trust because it serves the interest we have in communicating (this is why the convention persists); but it's not as though this interest and this convention are separable, as Davidson implies; rather, the convention is self-perpetuating precisely because it represents how to achieve this goal.

¹⁶ Though Kemmering (1993) implies that he believes Lewis' account of convention is essentially correct, and though he says much with which I am in sympathy, it is not clear that Kemmering remains faithful to that account.

¹⁷ Part of the problem in knowing where to look for the regularity in question, surely, stems from Lewis' talk of 'a regularity in action, or in action and belief': given that we're focusing on linguistic conventions, the 'natural' regularity in action to look for is a regularity in speakers' literal usages of utterances – which, I've argued, is precisely the wrong place to look. See Bennett 1976: 178–79, for a different though related concern about Lewis' choice of this phrase.

¹⁸ In one of his most recent writings, Davidson claims that '[w]e cannot define successful communication in terms of shared meanings, practices or conventions since we have no idea what meanings are until we can abstract them from occasions of use' (1993b: 145). Neither I, nor Lewis for that matter, wants to define successful communication in terms of conventions. Secondly, Davidson's claim is almost certainly true if we take 'occasions of use' broadly (i.e., so as to refer to any and all occasions of use): meanings do 'depend on the actual practice of someone or some group' (Davidson (1993a: 117). Taken narrowly however it is false, as we can differentiate between the meanings of words and their use on any particular occasion. Or so say I and Lewis; Davidson is free to disagree, but thus construed his claim is far from obvious.

¹⁹ Evidence in support the idea that Lewis' account of convention, at any rate, has been misunderstood, and thus that (3) might really be the received view of the (putative) role of linguistic convention can be found, for example, in Schiffer (1992: 12), where he suggests that conformity to a set of such conventions would require 'one not to

thus conceived of, fails in fact to facilitate this activity. On the contrary, I reject (3) because (3) makes it look as though to locate the requisite sort of regularities we need only look at how people actually use words – which is precisely the idea Davidson exploits in arguing for his conclusion.²⁰ I conclude, then, that we should neither ‘give up on the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions’ nor try to find something new to say about ‘how convention in any important sense is involved in language’ (446). Rather, I think we need to take a hard look at the conventional wisdom on this matter and refamiliarize ourselves with what’s really required for there to be a linguistic convention.^{21, 22, 23}

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utter’ a sentence unless one means what the utterance means. I’ve suggested that what would be required is that one try not to do this. Interestingly, in a discussion of Davidson’s argument in ‘Derangement’ that’s actually quite critical of it, Bennett seems to misconstrue Lewisian convention in just the same way as Davidson and Ramberg do: see Bennett 1985: 602. The treatment of convention offered by Akmajian, Demers, and Harnish, eds. (1984: 392–98) in connection with what they call ‘The Message Model’ of linguistic communication seems more straightforwardly to show that at least some philosophers and linguists conceive of convention along the lines of (3). On the message model, convention facilitates linguistic communication because the ‘conventionalized meanings’ of terms provide a neutral means of transmitting information, thereby sufficing for communication. This model of linguistic communication is rejected as implausible by the authors, and rightly so. But the view of linguistic conventions it involves is itself quite implausible.

- ²⁰ That he is construing linguistic conventions in just this manner would explain Bilgrami’s (1993) evident willingness to take Davidson’s argument against convention’s applicability to the linguistic case as sound.
- ²¹ To the objection that the real character of convention makes linguistic communication look more like Davidson’s own positive account of this matter than like (1) to (3), I say: so much the worse for those who think (3), in particular, captures the essential character of linguistic convention, and so much the worse for Davidson’s own positive account if he thinks that we ought to abandon the notion of convention altogether.
- ²² So it is significant and unfortunate that Ramberg, e.g. (1989: 113, n. 1), begs off looking at Lewis’ account of convention in any detail.
- ²³ Thanks are due to Terry Tomkow, who first gave me the idea for this paper, and to Marga Reimer, David Schmidt, and Dave Truncellito, for their comments on earlier drafts.

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