Making sense of Davidson

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1 Introduction

Last year, while teaching an introductory course in the philosophy of language, I had an epiphany. I finally thought I understood how to make sense of Davidson's *Truth and Meaning*. More precisely, I thought I understood what his explanatory target was (or should be), and what kind of explanation he was offering (or should be offering). In light of this understanding, all the standard objections to Davidson (the ones you typically encounter in philosophy of language textbooks) suddenly seemed irrelevant. In particular, as I will argue, the so-called "extensionality objection" loses all traction.

2 What is the the explanatory target?

Let us start with the explanatory target. It is fairly safe to assume that the main reason languages have evolved is that they can be used for *communicating facts about the world to other people* (e.g. by saying 'There is a bear in the cave!'). That languages can be so used is remarkable, and it requires some kind of explanation. Let me give you an example. In episode nine of the third season of Game of Thrones, Sam has just told Gilly (who cannot read) how to get past the Wall. The following dialogue ensues:

> Gilly: "How do you know all that?"
>
> Sam: "I read about it in a very old book."
>
> Gilly: "You know all that from staring at marks on paper?"
>
> Sam: "Yes."
>
> Gilly: "You're like a wizard."

Apart from the fact that Gilly also is a wizard (she learns how to get past the Wall from listening to Sam's voice), her reaction is understandable. But what, more precisely, is the nature of Sam's wizardry? Let us assume that Sam has observed certain marks on a piece of paper, e.g.

> There is a large weirwood tree where the river bends, and the entrance to the tunnel is located one hundred paces west of it.

Using this observation, he concludes certain things about how to get past the Wall, e.g. that there is a large weirwood tree at the bend of a river, and that the entrance to a tunnel is located one hundred paces west of it. How does he do that? What other assumptions does he rely on? How does he arrive at the conclusion? Presumably, no one has told him previously that **if** the above marks should appear on a certain piece of paper, **then** there is a large weirwood tree at the bend of a river, and the entrance to a tunnel is located one hundred paces west of it. Presumably, Sam has never encountered this particular combination of marks before, and neither have you! The number of possible combinations is astronomical. Consider:

> There iſ a large weirwood tree where the road bendſ, and the entrance to the tunnel iſ located two hundred paceſ eaſt of it.

If Sam had observed this combination of marks, he would have concluded that there is a large weirwood tree at the bend of a road, and that the entrance to a tunnel is located two hundred paces east of it. Presumably, no one has told him previously that **if** the above marks should appear on a certain piece of paper, **then** there is a large weirwood tree at the bend of a road, and the entrance to a tunnel is located 200 meters east of it. It is more reasonable to assume that, in each case, Sam arrives at the corresponding conclusion relying on some more general assumptions.

3 What kind of explanation does Davidson offer?

When asking how Sam performs his wizardry, we are not necessarily interested in an explanation at the level of cells or molecules in Sam's brain, or at level of stimulation of his nerve endings. Gilly would probably prefer an explanation that would enable her to perform the same magic. To take another example, suppose you saw Pythagoras accurately predict the length of certain roof beams by measuring the length of certain other roof beams. You want to know how he did it. What assumptions did he rely on? How did he arrive at his conclusion? Perhaps you want an answer that will enable you to perform the same task. Someone might satisfy your curiosity by telling you that Pythagoras was relying, in part, on the following general theorem of his:

> In a right triangle, if c is the length of the longest side, and a and b are the lengths of other sides, then $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$.

From this theorem, infinitely many less general conclusions can be derived:

> If the shortest sides of a right triangle are 3 and 4 meters, respectively, then its longest side is 5 meters.
>
> If the shortest sides of a right triangle are 6 and 8 meters, respectively, then its longest side is 10 meters.
>
> etc.

What you have been given, essentially, is a folk-psychological explanation of Pythagoras' behavior. Analogously, by "measuring" the page of an old book, Sam accurately predicts the location of a tunnel under the Wall. What Davidson is offering, essentially, is a folk-psychological explanation of Sam's behavior.

A folk-psychological explanation of a person's behavior presupposes that the person can form beliefs, entertain hypotheses, make observations, and draw conclusions. It also persupposes that a person can act in accordance with her beliefs and desires. Although these abilities (i.e. the phenomenon of intentionality) are as much in need of an explanation as the ability for communication, Davidson does not offer much on that score. His question is rather: given that we are able to do these things (form beliefs, entertain hypotheses, make observations, draw conclusions, etc.) how can we communicate? This, of course, is a more tractable problem than the problem of intentionality. Perhaps it is even trivial? As usual, the devil is in the details.

4 Truth and meaning

What is it to understand a language? Presumably, it is a matter of interpreting the language in a certain way. What is it to interpret a language? For the purposes of a folk-psychological explanation, an interpretation of a language may be regarded as a theory about how the syntactic objects of the language relate to other things in the world. What other things? Ideas? Tables and chairs? Yes, possibly. It depends on the interpretation. To interpret a language is to assume some such theory when observing (utterances or inscriptions of) syntactic objects of the language, and to draw conclusions thereof in accordance with that theory. What matters for successful communication in a language is that our interpretations of the language are sufficiently similar.

On the face of it, a theory used for interpreting a language should say something about the *meaning* of its syntactic objects. In *Truth and Meaning*, Davidson argues that this is a non-starter. To explain why, it is sufficient to consider a simple language L of propositional logic with only two sentence letters, 'P' and 'Q', and with only two connectives, '$\neg$' and '$\wedge$'. In L, we can form infinitely many sentences: 'P', 'Q', '$\neg P$', '$(P \wedge Q)$', '$(P \wedge \neg Q)$, '$\neg(P \wedge Q)$', etc. Suppose we want to say something about the meaning of every sentence of L. In an attempt to provide an interpretation of L, suppose we begin by declaring that

(1) a. 'P' means that grass is green.
b. 'Q' means that snow is white.

Ultimately, we would like to be able to infer that

(2) a. '$\neg P$' means that it is not the case that grass is green.
b. '$(P \wedge Q)$' means that [grass is green and snow snow is white].
c. '$(P \wedge \neg Q)$' means that [grass is green and it is not the case that snow is white].
d. '$\neg(P \wedge Q)$' means that it is not the case that [grass is green and snow is white].

The problem is how to formulate general principles concerning the meaning of complex sentences, e.g. in terms of the meaning of their parts:

- For every L-sentence φ: $\ulcorner \neg\varphi \urcorner$ means that ... [1]

[1]The expression '$\ulcorner \neg\varphi \urcorner$' is short for 'the concatenation of '$\neg$' and φ'.

- For every L-sentence φ and ψ: $\ulcorner(\varphi \wedge \psi)\urcorner$ means that ...

The following does not work:

- For every L-sentence φ: $\ulcorner\neg\varphi\urcorner$ means that it is not the case that ...
- For every L-sentence φ and ψ: $\ulcorner(\varphi \wedge \psi)\urcorner$ means that [... and ...]

We still do not know how to replace the dots! The problem is that expressions such as 'what φ means' or 'the meaning of φ' belong to the wrong syntactic category: they are not sentences of English (the meta-language in this case).

We could, of course, specify a *translation* from sentences of the object-language L to sentences of the meta-language (English, in our case):

(3) a. 'P' translates to 'grass is green'.
    b. 'Q' translates to 'snow is white'.

(4) a. For every L-sentence φ: $\ulcorner\neg\varphi\urcorner$ translates to the concatenation of 'it is not the case that ' and the translation of φ.
    b. For every L-sentence φ and ψ: $\ulcorner(\varphi \wedge \psi)\urcorner$ translates to the concatenation of '[', the translation of φ, ' and ', the translation of ψ, and ']'.

But without additional assumptions, we would still not be able to infer that '$(P \wedge Q)$' *means that* grass is green and snow is white. All we can hope to infer is that '$(P \wedge Q)$' *means the same as* 'grass is green and snow is white'.

In general, knowing how to translate between two languages is not sufficient for understanding either of them. Someone could tell me how to translate between sentences of Finish and Chinese; I would still not know what the sentences of either language meant. Of course, if I knew how to translate from Chinese to a my own language (a language I already understand), I would understand Chinese. But this does nothing to explain how I am able to understand my own language in the first place!

According to Davidson, to interpret a language is rather to make assumptions about the conditions under which sentences of the language are *true*. To interpret L, we assume that

(5) a. 'P' is true iff grass is green.
    b. 'Q' is true iff snow is white.

We also assume that

(6) For every L-sentence φ and ψ:
    a. $\ulcorner\neg\varphi\urcorner$ is true iff it is not the case that φ is true.
    b. $\ulcorner(\varphi \wedge \psi)\urcorner$ is true iff [φ is true and ψ is true].

Using ordinary reasoning, we will be able to infer for instance that

(7) a. '$\neg P$' is true iff it is not the case that grass is green.
    b. '$(P \wedge Q)$' is true iff [grass is green and snow snow is white].
    c. '$(P \wedge \neg Q)$' is true iff [grass is green and it is not the case that snow is white].
    d. '$\neg(P \wedge Q)$' is true iff it is not the case that [grass is green and snow is white].

On their own, these consequences are hardly of any empirical value. But coupled, for instance, with the additional assumption that

(8) Only true L-sentences are uttered.

we will be able to infer that grass is green from observing an utterance of 'P', that grass is green and snow is white from observing an utterance of '$P \wedge Q$', etc.

5 The extensionality objection

It is quite common to interpret Davidson as claiming something like

(9) Knowing the meaning of a sentence is knowing the conditions under which it is true.

Personally, I think that interpretation is mistaken. As it stands, the claim is open to the following objection. Knowing that

(10) 'Gräs är grönt' is true iff grass is green.

is arguably not sufficient for knowing that

(11) 'Gräs är grönt' means that grass is green.

In order to know (10), it is sufficient to know that 'Gräs är grönt' is true, and that grass is green, without knowing what 'Gräs är grönt' means. Hence, the argument goes, knowing the truth-conditions of a sentence is not sufficient for knowing what the sentence means.

In response to this objection, it is sometimes noted that if you have derived (10) from more general facts like

(12) a. For any object x: 'grönt' applies to x iff x is green.
b. 'gräs' refers to grass.
c. For any term t and predicate P: $\ulcorner t$ är $P \urcorner$ is true iff P applies to the referent of t.

then you probably do know what 'Gräs är grönt' means!

More generally, the objection seems to be that there are true theories of the above form that, even if known by a speaker, would not enable the speaker to understand the language. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that my favorite color is green. Consider a theory of Swedish containing the following axioms:

(13) a. For any object x: 'grönt' applies to x iff x has my favorite color.
b. 'gräs' refers to what grows on lawns.
c. For any term t and predicate P: $\ulcorner t$ är $P \urcorner$ is true iff P applies to the referent of t.

Assuming such a theory, a speaker would not be able to understand Swedish. When encountering an utterance of 'gräs är grönt', the speaker would only be able to infer that what grows on lawns has my favorite color.

But so what? Davidson's discovery is that

(14) There is a theory with such-and-such properties that, if believed by a speaker, would enable the speaker to understand Swedish.

But the objection seems to be leveled at the following claim:

(15) Every theory with such-and-such properties is such that, if believed by a speaker, would enable the speaker to understand Swedish.

The explanatory target is how it is possible to understand a language, and how communication is possible. By comparison, consider the question of how life is possible. The answer is that

(16) There is a sequence of states satisfying such-and-such laws of nature that starts with a primordial soup and ends with the presence of single cell organisms.

The answer is not the (probably false) claim that

(17) Every sequence of states satisfying such-and-such laws of nature that starts with a primordial soup ends with the presence of a single cell organisms.

In order to successfully interpret a language, it is arguably neither necessary nor sufficient that the theory employed is true. In order to understand our language L earlier, it is sufficient to make the following assumptions (which, being an atheist, I take to be false):

(18) a. 'P' is holy iff grass is green.
b. 'Q' is holy iff snow is white.

(19) For every L-sentence φ and ψ:
a. $\ulcorner \neg\varphi \urcorner$ is holy iff it is not the case that φ is holy.
b. $\ulcorner (\varphi \wedge \psi) \urcorner$ is holy iff [φ is holy and ψ is holy].

(20) Only holy L-sentences are uttered.

By assuming it, a speaker would nevertheless be able to infer all the relevant conclusions.