

Interpreting Individual Speakers Belonging to Linguistic Communities

Individual minds vary from each other — with respect to their particular psychological history and configuration — within what we might describe as a continuous spectrum of possibilities. Individual minds determine the way in which speakers invest their utterances with meaning. Words belonging to public languages may be thought of as discrete units that introduce some form of stability and punctuation to that initial fluid space of possible meanings. Linguistic interpretation, I believe, must take these two dimensions into account.

The first dimension is emphasized by Donald Davidson's distinctive proposal in foundational semantics. According to Davidson, the words uttered by a speaker, at some communicative event, will carry a meaning only if the speaker intends those words to carry that meaning, and the interpreter manages to adequately recover that meaning intention. Thus, meaning begins to emerge in the speaker's communicative intention, which, in its turn, must be taken as the result or emanation of the speaker's whole mind or system of thoughts, but is only consummated when the interpreter manages to adequately recover this intention and interpret the speaker's words accordingly. The interpreter's double investigation into the speaker's meanings and thoughts is to be guided and made possible by the principle of charity. That is, the interpreter must search for those ascriptions that would reveal the speaker's states, behavior and interactions with environment and peers, as generally rational.

The second dimension is emphasized by standard forms of social semantic externalism, such as those developed by Hilary Putnam (1975) and Tyler Burge (1979) in the seventies. They claim that factors external to the individual speaker, and possibly unknown to the her, determine the meaning of her words. In this presentation I will be exclusively concerned with external factors of meaning determination that arise from the speaker's social environment. The hypothesis is that certain social institutions and mechanisms allow words of a public language to retain their community meaning even when uttered by a speaker whose mind does not perfectly contain or reveal that meaning.

In my presentation, I address the apparent conflict between the Davidsonian and the standard externalist approach. Both Ernest Lepore and Matthew Stone, in "Convention before Communication" (Forthcoming), and Claudine Verheggen, in "From Triangulation to Semantic Externalism" (2016), have recently articulated some latent tensions and raised various obstacles to the possibility of agreement between both views. They extract opposite consequences from this common judgement of fundamental disagreement as to which approach is on the right track and which must be abandoned. On my part, I question the inevitability of the disagreement itself. I explore a number of tentative solutions to the challenges that Lepore and Stone and Verheggen raise in search for a way to render compatible the Davidsonian conception and the standard externalist doctrine, and to save the

valuable insights that each provide. Interpretation is still about describing the fluid occupation by speakers of a continuous space of possibilities, but this can only be accomplished by speakers accepting and constructing together some limits, interruptions and stability.

Ernest Lepore and Matthew Stone argue that the Davidsonian model is at odds with our intuitive and regular practice of ascribing standard community meanings to the words of a speaker even in cases where the speaker is, to some important extent, uninformed and undecided about the features that specify those particular meanings and distinguish them from other meanings in the vicinity. Furthermore, they question the ability to reach those standard meanings by means of the interpretative method proposed and characterized by Davidson.

In response, I distinguish two ways in which the speaker's mind and communicative intentions can play a decisive role in determining the meaning of the words she utters. Only one of these ways is incompatible with the relevant kind of partial incongruity of mind and meaning. I also argue for a less strict understanding of the interpretative method proposed by Davidson, and identify the admissible additional resources that allow for a desired conformity of Davidson's method to the practice and results of ordinary linguistic interpretation.

Claudine Verheggen rejects the standard doctrine of social externalism which she takes to falsify the proper ranking of relative importances between accurate understanding and conformity to community norms. She argues that the privilege of conventions and standards prescribed by externalism would compromise linguistic communication. In her view, the peculiar mind of each speaker is likely to justify frequent reinterpretation of her words - that is, ascriptions of meaning that diverge from the standard or community meaning.

The matter here is one of degree. I agree that sometimes reinterpretation is justified, and I do so for precisely the reasons that Verheggen puts forward. However, I find that she's too prompt to accept or recommend deviant ascriptions; this is so, in particular, for a number of cases where reinterpretation would actually be in conflict with the externalist doctrine. In support of my position, I pursue two lines of reasoning that build on ingredients native from Davidson's framework. First, I argue that a more accurate understanding of the speaker, in cases of the relevant type, is achieved not by a change in the interpreter's meaning-theory but by supplementing the problematic standard ascription with further ascriptions. Second, I argue that, in cases of the relevant type, holistic considerations still favor the standard interpretation — or, at least, that it is not obvious that they favor some available alternative.

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