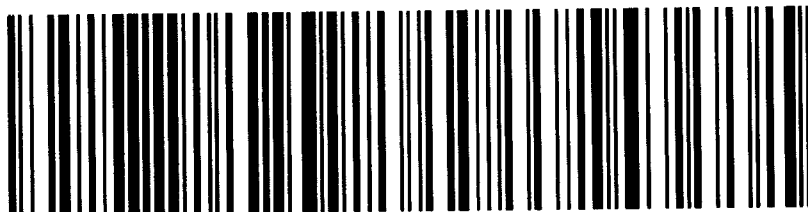


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Philosophy of Language without Meaning, and without ... Language

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This paper is an attempt to give a criticism of all those theories of language which try, whether in a 'strong' or 'weak' form, to dispense with a theory of meaning. Such theories can be found in recent times in philosophy, increasing in frequency during the last decade. They are usually constructed with the intention of overcoming the paradoxes of the connection between language and reality. Here we shall try to demonstrate, however, that such attempts make the contact in question even more paradoxical. It is perfectly appropriate for philosophers to seek sophisticated, even baroque explanations, but they must not forget the principle requirement that language communication is unavoidably grounded in the opposition between the language-user and reality, and that the latter plays the central role. What we have witnessed in the last decade is something like an anti-realist euphoria that goes together with numerous extravagant theories of language which due to their extravagancies, lose the clear picture of language function.

In looking for the beginning of this movement toward philosophy of language without meaning we might look at the 'early' and 'late' philosophy of Wittgenstein. In the *Tractatus* we find one of the best examples of a theory of language reckoning with reality (see Wittgenstein 1922:4.01: "The proposition is a picture of reality.") and dealing with many related facts (that the contact between language and reality has the character of *Abbildung*; that "man possesses the capacity of constructing languages without having an idea how and what each word means." (Wittgenstein 1922:4.002), etc.). *Philosophical Investigations*, on the other hand, tries to replace these early theories with a well known theory of language games according to which the word or proposition receives its meaning thanks to the language

game in which it is used and not to the objects to which it refers. The language game in its turn, receives its meaning only in use, or more generally stated, in a system. Because, as Wittgenstein said to Waismann: "I can seek something only in a given system; but not to seek this very system." (Waismann 1967:32).

Later on such theories were developed by both of the most influential post-war schools in the analytic philosophy of language: the theory of speech acts of John Austin, John Searle and Paul Grice and the school of logical pragmatism of Willard Quine and Donald Davidson. In this paper I will not, of course, analyze the work of all these thinkers, each of whom has his own original theory of language. The object of my criticism will be limited to Donald Davidson, and more precisely — the later developments in his philosophy of language (see Davidson 1986). I undertake this criticism not for exegetic purposes, but with the intention of proving that philosophy of language without meaning is an impossible dream.

Following Quine, Davidson started, more than twenty-five years ago, by denouncing the so called 'third dogma of empiricism', i.e., the dualism between 'conceptual scheme' and 'empirical content' (Davidson 1973-74). Such theoretical considerations encourage Davidson to believe that propositions are true or false not because "they correspond to reality" (see Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, 1051b, 5-20), but because they cohere with all other propositions. This theory, of course, does not "guarantee that what is believed is true; but that the biggest part of beliefs in the coherent total net of beliefs are true" (Davidson 1983:424). To fill this gap Davidson accepts the "presumption in support of the truth of belief", following Quine's 'principle of charity'.

In his striving to overcome the dogmatism and infelicities of the conventional 'two-world' theory of language, Davidson further proposes a peculiar 'oscillating' theory of language which rejects as useless for explaining the real functioning of the articulate communication not only the theory of meaning, but language itself, at least in the usual sense. He says there is no language in the sense of some *a priori* theory through which we communicate. If we want to speak of theories in the process of communication at all, it is better to refer to two 'theories' which are more like amorphic skills or dispositions than like *a priori* schemas as language is usually conceived. The first theory is that very skill with which we began the communication. It is something like a bare awareness that we will succeed in the following process of communicating because of our previous successes in simi-

lar situations rather than an *a priori*, detailed knowledge of what we shall do concretely in this process. In other words, the act of talking-understanding fits the Augustinian model of explanation: When nobody asks us, we know that we shall communicate without problems. But when they require us to explain what we shall do in this act of communication, what is our *a priori* knowledge of it, we can do little. We could enumerate, if we have a good memory, the vocabulary of the language we are going to speak, and if we had good marks in grammar school — its grammatical rules, but that is all. In the moment of the communication (speech) act, however, this 'theory' actualizes and is transformed into a second or 'momentary' theory which now is one and the same for both communicators. The disposition now turns into a real act, the possible skill becomes a real language fact. The communication is realized in this oscillating between the two preliminary 'theories' and the common 'momentary' theory. What is most interesting for us in this case is the fact of the convergence of the two preliminary 'theories', skills or dispositions. The question arises how it is possible that these two skills, for which neither of the speech agents had an actual knowledge, could unite in the moment of speaking, could be one and the same. What are the grounds of this identity?

To answer this question, let us dogmatically give one exegetic suggestion. Davidson's theory of language is developed only as part of a more general effort to resolve one of the most enigmatic problems in epistemology: How we recognize and how we express senses which are absolutely new for us. This problem is put in the form of aesthetic (in the general sense of the word) questions, connected to such phenomena as: The understanding of jokes, similes, metaphors, the so called 'malapropisms' (puns, plays on words), etc. The phrases that introduce such tropes involve senses which are not covered by their literary meaning. And what connects them to any other conventional act of communication is that in both the convergence of the two preliminary 'theories' unite in one 'momentary' theory. Consent is realized via "wit, luck and wisdom" (one might add intelligence, intuition and good taste in thinking).

To better understand this idea of Davidson let us look more closely at his theory of metaphor. According to this theory, "metaphors mean what the words that express them mean". So the sentences in which a metaphor appears are true in the usual, literal sense. Davidson opposes this comprehension to the well-known theory of metaphor of Max Black, according to which beyond their literal sense, metaphors have another, second sense

which actually gives that very new knowledge which makes metaphor indispensable both in aesthetics and in science.

What is interesting in metaphor (and in other tropes) is not its double sense, but the fact that it is not difficult for the interpreter to understand the speaker in the way the latter wishes to be understood. This is possible because there is a difference between what the speaker has in mind when he pronounces the phrase and what the interpreter understands when he hears it, on the one hand, and the single shared sense of the phrase, on the other. So what is needed in metaphor is an 'artistic success' on the grounds of which the convergence of the two initial theories of speaker and interpreter is realized. To describe all this in other words, metaphor has always only one sense, yet is in its nature ambiguous, and this ambiguity is due to the different private (preliminary) 'theories' of the speech agents. It is just this characteristic which distinguishes metaphor from other 'multi'-phrases. It causes hesitations in the process of interpretation and this hesitation continues even when we have already accepted a given interpretation. In this way the metaphor urges us to make a series of comparisons, oscillations between different interpretations, and this stimulates our insight and makes it useful for our cognition. So, together with Austin, Searle and Grice, Davidson believes that metaphor "works" not because of what it means, but because of what it does.

But in addition to its implicit affinity to Grice and Searle, this theory of Davidson is very close to Wittgenstein's aesthetics. According to Davidson, metaphor, with all the peculiarities of its functioning, is similar to jokes, dreams, etc., as long as it urges us to assess a given fact not via its statement or description, but through what shows itself but could not be said, through some picture. As he says: "The words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture." (Davidson 1984:263). And here compare Wittgenstein's remarks: "Describe the aroma of coffee. Why can't it be done?" (1953:610), or even: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." (*Wittgenstein* 1922:7).

To assess Davidson's theory of language without language we must first of all remind ourselves that what it actually does is to play a trick which is well known from the history of philosophy and whose purpose is to solve the paradoxical dualism between form and content. So, in the same way in which Davidson tries to dispense with any *a priori* theory, Kant tries to prove that the *a priori* form and its content could not actually exist separately, but exist only in the very moment of their meeting in experience.

Or, to look at an example of a theory of knowledge proposed just two years ago. The Israeli philosopher Eddy Zemach believes that the meanings in our thoughts and their place in the actual functioning of thinking could be explained better on the analogy of the gold backing of bank notes. To participate in the money exchange we must not always have this gold backing in mind. The mere knowledge of, and belief in its existence are sufficient for this purpose. In the same way, we usually use language without any direct awareness of the meanings of propositions which we utter or interpret. We just know that we know them from our past attempts to point with them out, and this knowledge is sufficient for the functioning of language (Zemach 1987).

We can conclude that Davidson's theory of language without meaning and without ... language has a clear philosophical character and this state of affairs suggests to us the type of discoveries that can be made by it. And although there is no consent among philosophers with regard to the question of what any type of philosophical inquiry can give us, we can point out some generally respected opinions on this matter, say that of Wittgenstein and Waismann, according to whom philosophy cannot find new facts, it can only throw more light on the facts already well known to all of us.

So, what we can hope to do in the philosophy of language is not to find some new principle, superceding the principle of contact between language and reality which, among other things, is widely recognized by common sense. We can only penetrate deeper and deeper into this opposition, gaining points of view from which we see this interaction more clearly and in more detail (Waismann 1956; Milkov 1988). It must be acknowledged that Davidson's theory of language tries to do, in principle, just this. What I object to, is that in doing so, Davidson forgets the very nature of any possible language theory, that it must be grounded in the language-reality opposition. So he has fallen into a kind of relativism which is used by such extremists as Rorty as a proof of the inconsistency of the so called 'mirror problem' (Rorty 1979:259-265) which I believe is the most scandalous event in recent philosophy.

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