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Donald Davidson’s Approach of Malapropisms – Understanding Communication from the Standpoint of the Concept of Passing Theories

Abstract : This paper focuses on Donald Davidson’s article „A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs”. The importance of this article resides in the shift that Donald Davidson makes in his work from the formal approach to language to a pragmatic one. This shift is not relevant only in the case of Davidson’s philosophy, but it epitomizes a more general move or change in the field of philosophy of language. Moreover, „A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs” is a valuable philosophical input in the study of communication; concepts like *malapropism*, *first meaning*, *prior theory*, *passing theory*, *shared interpretation* are put together in a systematic way by Davidson. The resulting image about language, communication and the process of understanding is still fruitful today, even though more than twenty-five years have passed since the first publication of Davidson’s study.

Keywords: communication, malapropisms, first meaning, prior theories, passing theories, language user, Donald Davidson.

In his article “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs” (1996), Donald Davidson offers an interesting solution to the problem of meaning and to the connected problems concerning the understanding and the use of natural language. This solution is surprising if we are to compare it to Davidson’s prior writings in the field of the philosophy of language. Davidson (1996, 475) literally says at the end of his article that concerning the use of language and the problem of understanding he found “no learnable common core of consistent behavior, no shared grammar or rules, no portable interpreting machine set to grind out the meaning of an arbitrary utterance”. What made Davidson choose such a point of view?

Davidson starts his research from an interesting linguistic phenomenon named *malapropism*. Malapropism is, shortly put, the wrong use of a word or of an entire phrase due to the confusion with a similar word or phrase, seldom with an extra-effect, namely a humorous one. This humorous effect can be intentioned (as Davidson himself presents at the beginning of his article), and in this case the malapropisms become a rhetorical tool, or unintentioned, being caused by the lack of knowledge on the speaker’s part. To give an example from literature, Thomas Mann used malapropism as a main trait in order to build one of his side characters of his masterpiece *The Magical Mountain*.

1. Why Malapropisms?

Davidson thinks that phenomena such as the malapropism are critical for theories inside the philosophy of language, perhaps even more challenging than indexicality or metaphor. What is interesting about malapropisms is the fact that they are no rare phenomena. On the contrary, we meet them quite often in everyday speech. Nevertheless, people reach, in a relevant number of cases, an agreement on the meaning of what they say. Simply put, they understand each other, in spite of the mistakes. How are we to explain this fact? How do people understand the meanings of the words *beyond* the conventional meaning, or rather *in spite of* the conventional meaning? Let us mark the fact that in the simplest cases we, as speakers, rely on some mechanisms: context, syntactical redundancy, aural or graphical similarity. But in the more complex cases, even though these elements might be present and active, they are not enough to form a base for the understanding process.

Let us give an example. Let us presume that B hears, during a local news bulletin, the following assertion made by A, an eye-witness at some event: “That person was in a subterfuge when she got hit. The guiltability fully belongs to the driver. He is the moral authority of this deed”. B, after several minutes of hesitation, and, maybe, even astonishment, tries to understand what A wanted to say. Let us assume that B does not remember any sentence prior to A’s utterance, and he was not paying attention to the anchor’s words at the beginning of that piece of news. He is forced to make a *semantical reconstruction* only with A’s words at hand and his knowledge of the English language. After some time (which in most cases is fairly short), B offers this interpretation: “A misused ‘subterfuge’, ‘guiltability’ and ‘moral authority’”. Given the fact that the story is about a driver and someone who got hit, a car accident must have taken place. What A really wanted to say is: “The person was in the refuge when she got hit. The guilt belongs to the driver. He is the author of this deed”¹. But – we have to point this out – this is an *interpretation*. In Davidson’s terms, we are witnessing a *theory*. In fact, this is what is really happening: B is building up a theory in order to understand A. Most of the times, this type of theories turns out to be successful. They succeed in “catching” the meaning of the speaker, (the speaker intending that this meaning be “transmitted” to the listener - even though this is a difficult point¹). But we have to keep in mind the fact that B’s theory may prove to be false: maybe, in the above example, the right way to interpret it was to place the *semantic accent* on the word “subterfuge”, understood as “undercover”, and on the word “hit” as a slangy substitute for “killed”. Maybe A’s testimony is connected to a story in which the killed person

¹ At a minimal level, in such cases only the conventional meaning is transmitted, if the word transmitted is to be used. I think this is an important point if we want to avoid a Humpty Dumpty theory of language.

had been working undercover, was discovered, and someone depicted as the “driver” gave the killing order, and this is his guilt.

If we want to use the concepts that belong to an ontology of state of affairs, the two interpretations (given only for exemplification, one can obviously extend their number) that B can give to A's statement lead us to a Quine-type *inscrutability of reference*. This goes hand in hand with another thesis of Quine, that of *indeterminacy of meaning*. Even if we have a (common) background of understanding, we must not just leave out the cases of misunderstanding. Misunderstanding seems to be as natural as the understanding. We can build other cases, too, and we can also build more complex cases (as in “This is a fortuitous situation”), in which we have trouble distinguishing between *right usage* and *wrong usage* of language, as in the case of malapropisms. In these cases, B-the listener has to venture even further, creating riskier theories if he wants to understand what A has got to say. The malapropisms are indeed important for the understanding of the way in which the language works. It is time for a few details.

2. First Meaning

Davidson starts with the fact that “the widespread existence of malapropisms and their kin threatens the distinction, since here the intended meaning seems to take over from the standard meaning” (Davidson 1996, 466). We have to see how we position ourselves philosophically when we think of the concept of *standard meaning*. Davidson prefers to use the term *first meaning*. Davidson does not give a definition of this concept, and this may be a source of difficulties. He only says that this concept may be applied to words and sentences that are uttered by a particular speaker on a definite occasion. In case of *normal, standard*² communication situations, the first meaning is the one available in dictionaries, or, perhaps more clearly, the first one in the order of interpretation. Davidson adds some extra-precision: these traits can be applied to any form of meaning, not only at the linguistic level. In order to restrict the concept of *first meaning* to the linguistic level we have to see that “the hearer shares a complex system or theory with the speaker, a system which makes

² This is not taken further, also. Davidson uses the principle of charity on himself, relying on our own intuition, as readers, that we understand what he means. Of course, this can lead to difficulties. We might guess that normal or standard situations include those statements in which the terms are used inside primary language games, focused on the referential function of communication, excluding any kind of discursive distortion (playful, tyranny of meaning, individual-Humpty Dumpty), there are common conventions for the two or more persons that communicate, those persons are sane, people respect the linguistic conventions in an altruistic way, and not for individual gain (David Lewis's rule) etc. But no matter how many such conditions we would add, it would still be hard to give an answer to questions such as: which of the errors are considered as belonging to the standard use of language and which are already a form of non-standard use, what about speech acts that are truth-value free, the truth-value gaps that Strawson was talking about? Are all the truth-value gaps to be judged in a similar way?

possible the articulation of logical relations between utterances, and explains the ability to interpret novel utterances in an organized way” (Davidson 1996, 467). These observations are clarified in three principles (Davidson 1996, 467): a) the first meaning is systematic b) the first meanings are shared; c) the first meanings are governed by learned regularities and conventions. These principles have to face a lot of difficulties, Davidson thinks. Ambiguity, indexicals, propositional attitudes, probability sentences are just a few examples. In any case, the interpretation work that addressees must perform often exceeds their linguistic competence. Davidson insists upon the difference between what he calls *first meaning* and what the speakers want to tell uttering their messages, what they *imply* when they use those messages. Of course, Davidson mentions the name of Grice³ at this moment, his well-known works being an important effort of understanding this phenomenon at a theoretical level.

Malapropisms sometimes outrun, sometimes test our linguistic competence. A confrontation with the malapropisms is a confrontation with phrases we have not learned yet or with phrases that we might know, but that require a totally different interpretation from the one we are familiar with. We might need new abilities to cope with this situation. Davidson thinks that these abilities include the capacity to syntactically rebuild a sentence, to interpret words we have never heard of, to silently correct the errors of others, to adapt to a new idiolect. Davidson thinks that we have to try and see how the above principles have to be modified in order to explain – partially, at least – the phenomenon of malapropisms.

In the case of the first principle, this requires that “a competent interpreter [should] be prepared to interpret utterances of sentences he or she has never heard uttered before. This is possible because the interpreter can learn the semantic role of each of a finite number of words or phrases and can learn the semantic consequences of a finite number of modes of composition. This is enough to account for the ability to interpret utterances of novel sentences” (Davidson 1996, 468). That means that a person has a system or a mechanism that enables him/her to offer an interpretation of what someone says. This system, Davidson says, can be imagined as being similar to the theory of truth introduced by Tarsky. This theory must be recursive in form and must have a finite base. We are not in possession of such a theory (one that is fully satisfactory) just yet, but the way to grasp it does not include as necessary steps the appeal to the propositional knowledge of a speaker or the appeal to brain functioning. In the middle of our research we should have a discourse on the competence of the interpreter, and this theory must also obey the rule of recursivity.

For the second principle, Davidson (1996, 469) stipulates that “for communication to succeed, a systematic method of interpretation must be shared”, a method that Davidson calls *theory*. The fact of having in common a

³ See Grice (1996), for instance.

method of interpretation (Davidson 1996, 469) means nothing else than “the interpreter uses his theory to understand the speaker; the speaker uses the same (or an equivalent) theory to guide his speech. For the speaker, it is a theory about how the interpreter will interpret him. Obviously this principle does not demand that speaker and interpreter speak the same language”. The method of interpretation or the theory ensures a way of understanding that is not monolingualistic, but plurilingualistic. What must happen is the equivalence between the interpretations of A and B⁴. Davidson thinks that the first two principles are compatible with the existence of malapropisms, but in combination with the third one, the difficulties seem to arrive.

3. A useful distinction

To underline the stake, Donald Davidson talks about Keith Donnellan's distinction between the *referential use* and the *attributive use* of a definite description. Today, we see Donnellan's distinction as a classical one in the field of philosophy of language, but it might be useful to revisit it now. Donnellan notices the fact that in the existing literature on reference a lot of authors assume one philosophical principle that can be named the *principle of identifying descriptions*. According to it, a name is not efficient enough to refer to a person or to a thing if it does not have the support of some descriptions that would explain its use. This principle is found both at Frege and Russell, for whom a name is tied strongly to a finite description (Devitt and Sterelny 2000, 65), and at Searle and Strawson, for whom a name is loosely connected to many (possible) descriptions, for a big number of language users in a community. Russell's explanation of how descriptions work can be summarized in the following manner: “if ‘C’ is a denoting phrase, it may happen that there is one entity *x* (there cannot be more than one) for which the proposition ‘*x* is identical with *C*’ is true” (Russell 1996, 204). For Bertrand Russell, the name is practically an abbreviation of the description or, as Donnellan says, a *substitute*, the name being tied to just one description. Strawson, on the other hand, thinks that in reality we connect a name with a uniquely referring set of descriptions and that the force of an expression such as “This is X” is the fact that it can produce a sufficient number – not specified by Strawson, unfortunately – of true assertions about X.

Donnellan thinks that, no matter the formulation of this principle, we can argue both that a proper name can have reference even if we do not have satisfaction of the conditions stipulated by the principle, and that there are situations in which the satisfaction of those conditions does not guarantee our success and we may end up with an object that simply is a fake reference

⁴ Davidson mentions only the process of understanding the messages of the speaker, but as we know, speaker and listener switch sides frequently during everyday sequences of communication. So, his theory has to be valid for both of them.

(Donnellan 1972, 356-357). This happens because the principle of identifying descriptions is a two-stage thesis: first, it asserts that the user of a proper name must produce a non-circular set of descriptions; second, it postulates that the reference of a proper name, if any, has to fit a sufficient number of identifying descriptions. Let us take some significant examples for the limits of this theory.

1) In the case of a proper name like “Aristotle”, Donnellan argues, a student and his professor understand the same thing when someone utters “Aristotle was Alexander’s teacher”. Even though there may be a huge difference of knowledge between the two, they still mean the same thing. Moreover, there is the possibility that even if they both asserted the existence of someone named Aristotle, only the professor might know enough details about Aristotle and might be capable of producing right identifying descriptions. Of course, we cannot accept that the person designated by the student did not exist (lack of descriptions), while the person designated by the professor existed (presence of descriptions).

2) If a child makes a brief and accidental acquaintance of someone named “Tom”, will he/she be able to identify “Tom” with the use of definite descriptions? Donnellan thinks that in this situation the descriptions are not really helping us, at least not in the standard manner (Donnellan 1972, 364).

3) If someone organizes an experiment in which the only possibility to distinguish object A from object B is its position in space, then the simple inversion (unknown by the subjects of the experiment) of the position leads to a failure in reference. The identifying descriptions are wrongly tied to the real objects. Donnellan produces another similar example (“the philosophy teacher”) that is even more interesting because of the *double reference* phenomenon.

These situations, even though they seem artificial at first glance, are very suggestive for the difficulties that arise when someone adopts the principle. More, the theory of descriptions assumes that the language user is very well informed about a multitude of situations and details that are to be found in the practice of reference. Devitt and Sterelny (2000) show that this places an unnecessary epistemic burden on the shoulders of the user. Donnellan asks if it is really necessary that the user of a name should identify the reference by the means of definite descriptions (Donnellan 1972, 364).

In his article “Reference and Definite Descriptions”, Donnellan introduces a new distinction that implies that we need a new interpretation of the theory of descriptions as it was developed by Russell and Strawson. After Donnellan, there are two very different uses of definite descriptions: “a speaker who uses a definite description attributively in an assertion states something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so. A speaker who uses a definite description referentially in an assertion, on the other hand, uses the description to enable his audience to pick out whom or what he is talking about and states something about that person or thing” (Donnellan 1996, 233). Keith Donnellan thinks that Russell understood and used definite descriptions only in their attributive sense Strawson, in the same vein, discussed mainly about the

referential use of definite descriptions (in his article *On Referring*), but did not notice that descriptions can have another type of use that is non-referential.

For Donnellan, Strawson and Russell make two common assumptions: a) we can understand the way a definite description functions even if it appears in a sentence that is independent of any context or occasion of use; b) when the problem of identifying an object that fits the description arises, it is usually assumed that the object exists. Both Russell and Strawson agree that when the presupposition of existence is not satisfied, there is a problem with the truth value of the assertion that contains that definite description. As we already know, Russell analyses such assertions as being false, while Strawson analyses them as lacking truth value (Russell 1996, 221). From Keith Donnellan's point of view, it is possible for the truth value to be affected in a different way in function of the relation between the sentence and the type of use. Russell's and Strawson's intuitions were good, but only in the case of the attributive use of descriptions.

We talk about the *attributive use* when a speaker uses a definite description in order to assert something about an object or a person that fits that description. In the *referential use*, the definite description is just a *tool* made to perform a certain function, mainly to draw the attention to an object or a person. In the case of attributive use, "the-so-and-so" in which the reference is described is very important, while in the case of referential use this aspect is no longer important. Generally, there are two uses of the expressions of the form " ϕ is ψ ": in the first one, "if nothing is the ϕ then nothing has been said to be ψ ". In the second, the fact that nothing is the ϕ does not have this consequence" (Donnellan 1996, 234). That means that in the referential use we can refer to a person, we can identify her/him even if that person does not fit the description. In the attributive use, if nothing fits the description, then we cannot further communicate (effectively).

Keith Donnellan provides some more examples ("Smith's killer is insane", "Who's the man who drinks Martini?", "Bring me the book on the table!") in order to show that his distinction is really valuable and should not be restricted to assertions only, being flexible enough for other language games. Also, these examples prove once more that the principle of identifying descriptions does not cover important situations or aspects of everyday communication. His criticism of Russell and Strawson can be summed up as follows: "Russell's [theory] does not recognize the possibility of the referring use, and Strawson's [...] combines elements from each use into one unitary account" (Donnellan 1996, 239).

Perhaps his most powerful example of all is the one with the man carrying a stick. If I see a man walking and I ask "Is the man with the stick the history teacher?" I could be in one of these four referential situations: 1) There is a man carrying a stick. In this case, I succeeded in the act of referring. 2) That man does not carry a stick, but an umbrella. In this case, I succeeded in referring to a person, even if he does not carry what I predicted in my message. The

people I asked the question may give me the answer, correcting my error. 3) I made a confusion between a man and a simple stone. In this case, I still have referred to something, even if in an erroneous manner. Of course, the initial question seems absurd for the people that should answer me. 4) There is no thing in that place. Only now am I entitled to say that my utterance has no reference, or, in Donnellan's terms, I am in a situation of "genuine failure to refer at all". This example proves once more the complexity of relationship among language, mind and reality, and the multitude of nuances that are to be found in the natural languages. These nuances, we may say, are used frequently, in the daily communication. Donnellan thinks that when we talk about attributive and referential uses of definite descriptions, we have to know that the choice always belongs to the speaker, and that the use is "a function of the speaker's intentions in a particular case" (Donnellan 1996, 239).

What should we use, given the fact that the theory of descriptions seems faulty? In Donnellan texts, we find the promise of another theory that is causal in nature⁵. Keith Donnellan does not explain fully how is the listener capable of recognizing the use of the description that has been chosen by the speaker. Even if we accept that the use is function of the speaker's intention, this does not solve the listener's problems. "Context" is not an universal answer, if we think, for example, at the differences between oral and written communication.

Nevertheless, Davidson accepts Donnellan's distinction as important, but not his whole picture about language use (see, for example, Kaplan (1996) and Searle (1996) for deeper details). Davidson is not accusing Donnellan (as Alfred MacKay does) of embracing a Humpty Dumpty theory of language; also, he does not see a necessary connection between Donnellan's distinction and the situation in which the words change their meanings (Davidson 1996, 470). Davidson believes that we must know the distinction between the meaning and the reference of the words and the meaning implied by the speaker. This distinction helps us solve the Humpty Dumpty problem because, as it happens also with Lewis Carroll's character, we cannot hold this position if we accept the existence of a *first meaning*. Even if we overcome this obstacle, both Donnellan and the malapropisms describe a certain "tyranny" of the speaker, which is bothersome for the majority of the theories of language. Davidson (1996, 470) synthesizes this situation saying that "the 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

⁵ Here is a sample of that (Donnellan 1972, 377): "It seems clear to me that in some way the referent must be historically, or, we might say, causally connected to the speech act". In the same vein, Donnellan makes, in the following paragraph, a very interesting analogy between certain types of games and the goal of some theories of reference. Devitt and Sterelny (2000) make a very sharp analysis about the causal theories and the causal-descriptive hybrids. See also Kripke (2001).

theory so that it yields the speaker's intended interpretation". We have, thus, a lot of cases in which the interpreter does not have a theory that is sufficient for the understanding of the speaker. The competence that he acquired up to this moment does not seem totally helpful. The understanding takes place because the listener makes all the necessary efforts of adjusting his theory until he gets a suitable fit.

Davidson does not hesitate to say that special situations need not be mentioned in order to prove the above points. Even the situation of names – that was carefully studied in the field of philosophy of language – is still a problem. For him, the emphasis placed on demonstratives is only a partial solution.

4. From prior to passing theories

For Donald Davidson, the interpreter has, in any moment of his verbal communication activities, a theory⁶. This theory is always adapted to the elements that identify the person with whom he communicates (sex, attitudes, behaviours, language habits etc.). The moment the latter brings into the discursive sequence unknown or new elements, the former starts a dynamic phase of restructuring his theory. This reconfiguration can take the form of introducing new hypotheses, of changing the interpretation of some phenomena from the past (a common past for the speaker and the listener, for example), of adopting another interpretation for some concepts (in politics, for instance, concepts like "enemy" or "ally" are not only relative themselves, but they are the objects of a continuous process of transformation, so that, from a communicational point of view, the language users should prove a general flexibility besides their competence and their capacity of adjusting their theories). This reconfiguration is also adapted to the *particular* communication situation because the speaker gives – usually! – relevant information for the interpretation when communication takes place. It never happens in practice that A would say to be "I would like to talk to you about X. But before that, please listen to me for half an hour, while I will tell you what I want you to understand from me, what my presuppositions are, how you can interpret me starting with my unhappy experiences I had last year etc.". Davidson's remarks strengthen the idea that the difficulty in oral communication partially resides in the temporal pressure that is felt by the participants. This pressure does not include only the need to focus, to respond quickly, to memorize rapidly, but also everything that is connected to the effort of adjusting one's theory.

From the speaker's point of view, he wants to be understood⁷, so he builds his speech hoping to provide enough elements so that he might get a good

⁶ This can be seen, of course, as a development of Davidson's ideas from "Radical Interpretation" (1984).

⁷ We leave aside the cases in which misunderstanding or difficult understanding are set as goals by the speaker/the writer.

interpretation from the listener. In order to succeed, the speaker has to have a realistic image about the interpretation potential and availability of the listener. The speaker must have an opinion about the prior theory of the interpreter/listener. The speaker is not forced to create his messages so that the listener might understand them simply by applying his theory (the theory that the speaker already has knowledge of). Sometimes, the speaker can act totally different: knowing the theory, he creates his messages in a way that makes the interpreter change his theory since the very beginning of the communication sequence.

Davidson introduces a useful distinction between *prior theory* and *passing theory*. The listener has an initial and a passing theory, and so does the speaker. From the listener's point of view, the prior theory consists in the way he is *prepared* to offer an interpretation to the speaker's messages, while the passing theory consists in the *actual* interpretation he provides. From the speaker's point of view, his prior theory consists in what he *thinks* about the listener's prior theory, while his passing theory is that theory that he *hopes* the listener will use in order to understand him. This distinction, Davidson claims, has as a main effect the deconstruction of our belief according to which our knowledge and our use of the natural language have as main base some regularities that, in time, form conventions (the third principle). Davidson thinks that we have to adopt a philosophical position that is opposed to that of David Lewis (1996), including the aspects connected to linguistic competence and verbal communication. We need passing theories in order to understand each other, and this is the main shared element makes communication successful. The process of understanding is thus defined as the *coincidence of the passing theories*⁸. Any form of deviation may be acceptable if people establish a form of agreement; the contextual or partial meanings that arise must not be driven back or denied, but understood inside the passing theory.

Davidson knows that one objection that may appear would concern this very concept of passing theory. Why should we accept the name *theory*, as long as it is something particular and it cannot be learned? Davidson's answer clarifies the matter: "when a word or phrase temporarily or locally takes over the role of some other word or phrase, [...] the entire burden of that role, with all its implications for logical relations to other words, phrases, and sentences, must be carried along by the passing theory" (1996, 473). A superficial look on the functioning of the natural language might make some people believe that the initial theories are better candidates for explaining the linguistic and the communicational behaviours. But this idea is confirmed only in very simple cases. Davidson thinks that in real communication situations the initial theories are not shared, and thus they are not conditions of a successful communication. The malapropisms are a strong proof of that.

⁸ Davidson (1996, 472) says that "the passing theory is where, accident aside, agreement is greatest".

One question constantly arises: should we stick to a formal approach of the natural language or should we try to combine our intuitions about grammar with a basic vocabulary that has a certain amount of interpreted words? Davidson is rather skeptical about the possibility of creating a global theory about language and its functioning. All the theories of this type have in common the impossibility of describing the element that the speaker and the listener share, and also the way in which they understand each other using that element. First, any general frame that uses concepts such as *grammar* or *rule* and wants to become a broad theory fizzles out when it comes to offering a solution to the problem of the interpretation of utterances in a definite, particular situation. We need, in fact, such a *frame*, but it is not enough. Davidson compares it with his concept of *prior theory*: it has all the qualities, but also the disadvantages of such a theory.

Second, we might wonder whether such a general frame should be or is different for different communicators. It should be able to cover all the linguistic phenomena, including the deviant cases. At first glance, the best strategy to accomplish that task would have as a starting point the idea of a universal grammar. But Davidson is skeptical once again. Citing a linguist, Davidson announces an alarming result for the theories of universal grammar: even for the speakers of the same dialect, the differences in terms of grammar seem bigger than the differences in terms of speech acts. There is empirical evidence that suggests that the goal of understanding the peers is more important than the goal of understanding the grammar structures correctly. The result, in fact, is even stronger: what we really have in common are communicational and pragmatic elements rather than the grammatical structures.

In order to understand each other, our passing theories have to reach a convergence point, beyond the differences between our initial theories. Two people share the same language if their passing theories have a tendency of convergence. This convergence can have different degrees. The degrees measure the linguistic similarity between the communicators. The ability of interpreting a sentence is the ability to create acceptable passing theories.

5. Criticism

Of course, this explanation comes with a cost. Davidson admits that even if he offered a better justification of what really happens with the functioning of natural language and he surpassed the standard theories, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" still does not say something fundamental, namely *what language is*. If we accept the lines developed in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs", then we have to abandon the usual concept of language. In fact, Davidson eliminates the border between the knowledge of language and the general mechanisms of human adaptation. The lack of strict rules that would govern upon the passing theories transforms the ability of making correct passing theories into a form of *practical wisdom* (*phronesis*). This is a negative

result for the formal theories. The proponents of formal theories can, of course, criticize further Davidson's arguments. What still remains interesting about Davidson, though, is the fact that he, up to a point, made a radical change in his options: first, he built a semantics for the natural language using Tarski's ideas (discussed in Romania by Dumitru (2004), for instance), but now proposes a total reconfiguration of our view on language. But the most important lesson is that we should try to think about language in an "outside the box" manner, beyond our usual schemata. One way of doing it is the conceptualization of language against a more naturalist background, where environmental adaptation and information plays a role of the same importance as in the field of biology.

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