

Davidson's Semantic Externalism: From Radical Interpretation to Triangulation

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Abstract

The received interpretation of Donald Davidson's philosophy has it that his thoughts underwent a significant change between his early work and his later work, in particular, between his work on radical interpretation and his work on triangulation. It is maintained that the kind of semantic externalism Davidson advocated in his later work is importantly different from that advocated in the early work. Indeed, it is sometimes even maintained that his semantic externalism emerged only, roughly, in his later work. I argue that Davidson's semantic externalism has always been not only holistic and historical, but also social and non-reductionist. His work on triangulation, by supplementing the early work, reinforces these earlier conclusions and vindicates some of his early assumptions, in particular, his claims that language and thought are essentially public and that their possession requires having the concept of objectivity. I end the paper by articulating what I take to be the most significant differences between Davidson's version of externalism and more orthodox versions.

Keywords: Radical interpretation, triangulation, semantic externalism, meaning.

1. Introduction

In the last forty years of his life, Donald Davidson developed a highly distinctive version of semantic externalism, which has been largely unrecognized as such, and which has important consequences for his philosophy unrecognized by Davidson himself. The main purpose of this paper is to correct these lacunae.

Semantic externalism can be either physical or social, or both. According to physical externalism, the meanings of utterances and the contents of thoughts are determined in part by factors belonging to the physical environment of speakers and thinkers. According to social externalism, they are determined in part by factors belonging to the social environment of speakers and thinkers. Davidson advocates both kinds of semantic externalism (externalism for short in what follows). What makes his view distinctive is that, according to him, the physical side of externalism can be secured only through the social side. This, to

begin with, makes room for a unique version of physical or, as Davidson calls it, perceptual externalism. But the social side is itself unorthodox in that it is not a version of the community view most frequently propounded by social externalists.

Though Davidson's version of externalism came to be fully developed in his work on triangulation, it does have its seeds in his work on radical interpretation. As he himself writes in 1991, he "has for some thirty years been insisting that the contents of our earliest learned and most basic sentences ('Mama', 'Doggie', 'Red', 'Fire', 'Gavagai') must be determined by what it is in the world that causes us to hold them true".¹ And earlier on: "The causality plays an indispensable role in determining the content of what we say and believe. This is a fact we can be led to recognize by taking up...the interpreter's point of view".² And towards the end of his life: "what a speaker means by what he says, and hence the thoughts that can be expressed in language, are not accidentally connected with what a competent interpreter can make of them, and this a powerfully externalist thesis".³ However, that reflecting on radical interpretation yields externalism has seldom been emphasized by his commentators,⁴ and Davidson's writings about triangulation have not received the attention they deserve, in part, I think, because they have been deeply misunderstood—a secondary aim of this paper is to correct this, too.⁵ In fact, the argument for externalism can be seen as coming in two steps, one provided by the considerations of radical interpretation and the other by the considerations of triangulation. Thus, the work on radical interpretation establishes the broad externalist claim according to which the causes of speakers' basic utterances, such as "There is a cow", play a crucial role in determining their meaning (and the causes of their basic (propositional) thoughts play a crucial role in determining their content—from now on, for simplicity's sake, I shall focus on language). The work on triangulation answers the further question how the relevant causes are isolated as the determinants of meaning. The answer to this question reveals the indispensable role of the social.

I start by reviewing Davidson's motivations for reflecting on radical interpretation, the assumptions it relies on, and its procedure. Next I present the triangulation argument, focusing on how reflections on triangulation supplement reflections on radical interpretation. I argue that, with the work on triangulation, some of Davidson's earlier conclusions are being reinforced and some of his early assumptions, in particular, his claims that language is essentially public and that its possession requires having the concept of objectivity, are being vindicated. I end by articulating what I take to be the most significant differences between Davidson's version of externalism and more orthodox versions.

¹ Davidson 1991a: 200.

² Davidson 1983: 150.

³ Davidson 2001b: 11.

⁴ Peter Pagin, e.g., maintains that it emerges in the early 1980s (Pagin 2013: 235). And there is no recognition of Davidson as an externalist in Burge's 1992 "state of the art" article, nor, more recently, in Haujioka 2017.

⁵ Of course many have recognized the externalism yielded by triangulation—see Bridges 2006, Amoretti 2007 and 2013, Bernecker 2013, among others.

2. Radical Interpretation

As Davidson makes clear in his introduction to *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, his goal in engaging in the radical interpretation thought-experiment is to answer the question, “What is it for words to mean what they do?”⁶ He thinks that the best way to answer it is by considering what it would take to understand a foreign speaker from scratch, that is, without any knowledge of what her words mean or any detailed knowledge of her propositional attitudes (as detailed knowledge of these would require knowledge of her language as well), and of course without the benefit of bilingual intermediaries or dictionaries. This approach is non-question-begging in so far as it does not involve at the start the notion that needs to be explained. It does, however, make an important assumption about meaning, namely, that it is essentially public, which Davidson always urged: “[t]he semantic features of language are public features”.⁷ “There can be no more to meaning than an adequately equipped person can learn and observe”.⁸ It must also be stressed that reflecting on radical interpretation, precisely because it is designed to answer the question what it is for words to mean what they do “in a philosophically instructive way”,⁹ is not supposed to tell us simply how meanings can be attributed to speakers, but also, and more importantly, how meanings are determined or constituted. The ultimate goal is not the semantic theory—a description of a speaker’s meanings—that doing radical interpretation is supposed to yield but the meta-semantic or foundational theory that emerges from reflecting about radical interpretation; it is to illuminate philosophically the nature of meaning by telling us how meanings are determined or constituted.

As is well-known, Davidson argues that we would have an answer to the question what it is for words to mean what they do if we reflected on how to construct a Tarski-style theory of truth for a speaker. For, if properly constructed, such a theory would enable us to understand any utterance of a speaker by giving us, for any such utterance, its truth-conditions. These could be derived from a final set of axioms that would tell us, for every primitive semantic expression and every rule of combination, how they contribute to the truth-conditions, and hence to the meaning, of any utterance in which they occur. Davidson himself came to acknowledge that the prospects of an all-encompassing theory along these lines are dim, wondering “whether, or to what extent, such theories can be made adequate to natural languages”.¹⁰ At the same time, however, he never doubted that “they are adequate to powerful parts of natural languages”.¹¹ Note also that he did not think that “speakers and interpreters actually formulate such theories”, but that, “if we can describe how they *could* formulate them, we will gain an important insight into the nature of the intentional (including, of course, meaning)”.¹² Moreover, an answer to the ques-

⁶ Davidson 1984: xv.

⁷ Davidson 1979: 235.

⁸ Davidson 1990b: 62.

⁹ Davidson 1984: xv.

¹⁰ Davidson 1993: 83.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Davidson 1993: 84.

tion “how a competent interpreter might come to understand the speaker of an alien tongue” not only should “reveal important features of communication”, but also “throw indirect light on what makes possible a first entry into language”.¹³ Therefore, despite the limits of the theory, there may still be a lot to learn from reflecting on how a theory of truth and interpretation could be constructed.

The basic idea is for the radical interpreter initially to connect utterances of sentences held true by the speaker with observable events in their shared surroundings. To use held true sentences as part of the primary evidence on which to build a theory of interpretation is non-question-begging, since Davidson thinks that held true sentences can be detected independently of knowing either their meaning or the belief they express. The next step is to employ the principle of charity and to assume that speaker and interpreter share many of their beliefs, focusing, in the first instance, on beliefs about current events around them. Thus it is, tentatively at least, to interpret utterances of sentences held true as expressing the beliefs the radical interpreter has herself formed in the circumstances, e.g., the belief that there is a rabbit in their vicinity or the belief that it is snowing around them. Of course, single occasions of utterance will not do to finalize an interpretation. Initially it could be thought that the foreign speaker’s utterance of “Gavagai” means there goes something furry, or there goes something four-legged, or there goes something cute, rather than there goes a rabbit. It is only when the expression will have been used in numerous other circumstances, and contrasted with numerous other expressions, that its meaning may become settled. In fact, Davidson thinks that it is only when the interpreter knows all the axioms of the theory for a speaker that she may be able to understand the speaker’s language.¹⁴ And knowing an entire theory will require that the interpreter expand the principle of charity and make further assumptions concerning the speaker, such that by and large her beliefs are rational, i.e., true, justified and consistent, and her desires and patterns of preferences reasonable and coherent. As Davidson came to insist, however, “charity prompts the interpreter to maximize the intelligibility of the speaker, not sameness of belief”,¹⁵ nor, I should add, rationality.

For the purposes of this paper, knowing the bare bones of the process of radical interpretation should suffice.¹⁶ One thing to emphasize at this stage is that the thought-experiment reveals the thoroughly holistic aspect of meaning.¹⁷ Recall that what we learn about how a radical interpreter attributes meanings to a speaker’s utterances also teaches us how meanings are constituted. Thus, since meanings can be attributed only holistically, they are also constituted holistically. Indeed, meaning is holistic in that the meaning of an expression depends on how it is used in many different circumstances in connection with many other expressions. To put it in another way, the meaning of an expression depends on the many beliefs one has about what the expression is about. It is not the case, though, that all the uses or beliefs are relevant to determining its meaning—this

¹³ Davidson 1991b: 210.

¹⁴ Davidson 1973: 139.

¹⁵ Davidson 1984: xix.

¹⁶ For details, see especially Davidson 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1990a and 1993.

¹⁷ Davidson also takes it to be a presupposition. See Davidson 1984: xv.

would have the odd result that any change of belief results in a change of meaning. Thus the belief that rabbits are four-legged animals may be central to what 'rabbit' means for a speaker. But the belief that rabbits make for delicious dinners may not be so.¹⁸ There is, for Davidson, no principled way to draw the line between those beliefs that are essential to the meaning of a word and those that are "merely" beliefs about the referent or extension of the word, apart from saying that the latter may come and go whereas a speaker would be more reluctant to relinquish any of the former.

Another noteworthy consequence of reflecting on radical interpretation in order to illuminate philosophically the nature of meaning is that the theory the radical interpreter comes up with cannot be stated in reductionist terms, that is, without saying what it is that the speaker means by her words. Recall that the truth-conditions that can be derived from the axioms of the theory are to be meaning-giving. The goal of the radical interpreter is to match every simple expression of the speaker's repertoire with one of her own. Initially this is accomplished by looking for something in the world the expression refers to or designates. This is why the theory is in the first instance extensional—meanings are given in terms of items in the world that they are about. But the theory cannot be purely extensional, on pain of providing interpretations that cannot explain the speaker's behaviour, linguistic or otherwise. A purely extensional theory would not distinguish between 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' as that which matches a speaker's utterance of 'Hesperus'. The same entity is being picked out by each name. But the failure to distinguish between the names would make it impossible to explain why the speaker is thrilled to discover that Hesperus is identical with Phosphorus. If the names contributed in the same way to the truth-conditions of the speaker's utterances, and hence to their meanings, there would be no room for thrill—the speaker would have known all along that Hesperus and Phosphorus are identical. But this is to say that, in stating the axioms of the theory, the radical interpreter must be careful to pick out the entities referred to or designated in a way that reflects how the speaker thinks about them, which is another way of saying that the interpreter must pay attention to many of the beliefs a speaker expresses with a given expression.

Meaning is also obviously externalist, since what speakers mean by their basic utterances necessarily depends, at least in part, on what in the world around them cause them to produce those utterances. This is clearly brought out by the radical interpretation thought-experiment, the lessons of which, again, concern not just the attribution of meaning but also its constitution. The radical interpreter has no choice but to take the objects and events around them that cause the speaker's utterances to be determining, at least in part, their meaning as well as the content of the beliefs the interpreter herself takes the utterances to be expressing. This becomes all the more obvious when an interpreter's initial assignment of meaning turns out to be untenable, forcing the interpreter to probe the speaker and to scrutinize their common surroundings to arrive at the proper interpretation. I take this externalism to be the most fundamental significance of the claim that meaning is truth-conditional, as Davidson understands

¹⁸ Davidson writes: "we have no [firm] way of distinguishing between the relations [among beliefs] that define the state of mind (or the meaning of an utterance) and those that are 'merely' contingent, and so do not touch content" (Davidson 1995: 15).

truth-conditions. What partly determines the meaning of basic utterances is what in the world makes them true. That is, it is the obtaining of the truth-conditions of basic utterances that partly determines their meaning. This remains the case even if the theory of truth cannot apply to every part of language, even if there are expressions, or grammatical structures, that cannot fit the truth-conditional mould. The core of the theory that provides us with the meanings of a speaker's utterances is truth-conditional. Indeed this is what makes it possible for the radical interpreter to get started.

The answer so far to the question what it is for words to mean what they do is for them to be used, in the first instance, in such ways that they can be understood by a radical interpreter; thus it is for at least some words to be used to refer to features of the environment shared by speaker and interpreter and which have caused them both to respond in certain ways. Therefore reflecting on radical interpretation establishes perceptual externalism in its broad terms: as Davidson puts it before claiming he had advocated the view for three decades, "the contents of our thoughts and sayings are partly determined by the history of causal interactions with the environment".¹⁹ What Davidson did not do, however, when reflecting on radical interpretation, is spell out how the causes of speakers' basic utterances are singled out. This is done in his writings on triangulation.

3. Triangulation

The conclusion of the triangulation argument is that only someone who has interacted linguistically with another person and the world they share, that is, only someone who has triangulated linguistically, could have a language and thoughts.²⁰ As Davidson makes clear, the argument is initially premised on perceptual externalism, which he expresses in this context as "what determines the content of ...basic thoughts (and what we mean by the words we use to express them) is what has typically caused similar thoughts".²¹ This is a more precise formulation of the broad externalist thesis, for what is introduced here is the idea of the meaning-determining causes being *typical*. This is as it should be, for we would not want to say that, even for every basic utterance a speaker produces, something in her environment is currently causing it, or that, for every basic utterance which is currently being caused by something in the speaker's environment, it has to be true. (Also, no externalist claims that, for every basic word a speaker uses, she must have at some point been responding to what in the world caused her to use the word in the way she does.) But this brings into focus a problem that was not addressed before: what are the typical causes of speakers' basic utterances?

At first blush, it might seem that this is an easy question to answer. The typical causes are those that a speaker is responding to when her utterances are sincere and the conditions of perception are good, such that, say, a table, or a rabbit, is clearly visible in the vicinity of the speaker and the speaker herself has

¹⁹ Davidson 1991a: 200. Note that this also indicates that Davidson took his early version of externalism to be historical, contra what some commentators have thought, e.g., Lepore and Ludwig 2005: 337. For discussion see Myers and Verheggen 2016: 68-71.

²⁰ The circularity of the claim will be addressed in due course.

²¹ Davidson 1991a: 201.

good eyesight and is not under the influence of, say, drugs or alcohol. After all, it might be added, why have other externalist theorists not asked that question? Thus Tyler Burge, for instance, simply declares that “[t]he natures of such states [thoughts about water] are determined partly by normal relations between the person...and the environment”.²² And Hilary Putnam simply assumes that the meaning of ‘water’ is determined by the liquid around us that, in normal circumstances, causes us to use the word.²³ But note here that I have just introduced another word—‘liquid’—in order to pick out the typical cause of uttering ‘water’ and what in the world determines, at least in part, the meaning of ‘water’. This points us towards the problem adumbrated by Davidson: how are we to decide that it is tables or rabbits rather than colours or materials or surfaces or shapes or chunks of the world surrounding tables or rabbits that are the typical causes of a speaker uttering ‘table’ or ‘rabbit’? Of course, we will be helped to do so if we can ascertain that the speaker who utters ‘table’ or ‘rabbit’ is talking about a piece of furniture or an animal, but how do we ascertain that? What are the typical causes of a speaker uttering ‘piece of furniture’ or ‘animal’?²⁴ To be sure, if the typical causes of some utterances are already fixed, we may be able to use these utterances to fix the typical causes of other utterances. But how do any typical causes get fixed to begin with?

Davidson maintains that the question what the typical causes of her basic utterances are is not a question a person who has never interacted with others, a lifelong solitary person, could answer. Consequently, it is not just that a solitary person could not know what she means, but that there is nothing that she could mean by her utterances.²⁵ As Davidson stresses in his seminal article, the problem is not “one of verifying what objects or events a creature is responding to; the point is that without a second creature responding to the first, there can be no answer to the question”.²⁶ “[T]here would be no saying what a speaker was talking or thinking about, no basis for claiming he could locate objects in an objective space and time, without interaction with a second person”.²⁷ This indicates that the question what the typical causes of a speaker’s basic utterances are is not a question we could answer if we were just observing that speaker. A fortiori, neither could the radical interpreter who is simply observing the foreign speaker.

As the latter quote might suggest, the problem, for Davidson, is in fact two-fold. For it is not just that, for a person who has not interacted with others, the distal causes of her responses are ambiguous or indeterminate. According to Davidson, such a person could not even distinguish between distal causes and proximal causes, such as stimulations at the surface of her skin, or between typical causes and other causes in the causal chain that led to her utterance, all the

²² Burge 1986: 125.

²³ Putnam 1975: 225.

²⁴ See Wittgenstein’s remarks on ostensive definition (Wittgenstein 1953: §§ 28-30).

²⁵ Thus the problem is not merely epistemological but metaphysical, which is of course reminiscent of how Kripke understands the sceptical problem about meaning and rule-following he finds in Wittgenstein’s paradox. (See Kripke 1982. I compare Wittgenstein’s and Davidson’s treatment of the sceptical problem in Verheggen 2017.)

²⁶ Davidson 1992: 119.

²⁷ Davidson 1992: 121.

way to the original big bang.²⁸ As he writes: the causes of a solitary person's responses are "doubly indeterminate: with respect to width and with respect to distance. The first ambiguity concerns how much [what 'part or aspect'] of the total cause of [an utterance]...is relevant to [meaning]...The second problem has to do with the ambiguity of the relevant stimulus, whether it is proximal (at the skin, say) or distal".²⁹ Call these problems respectively the "aspect problem" and the "distance problem".

Now Davidson distinguishes between two kinds of triangulation. Primitive triangulation is the kind of triangulation even non-linguistic creatures can engage in. It occurs when creatures are reacting simultaneously to each other and to common stimuli in their surroundings, as in the example of two lionesses trying to catch a gazelle and coordinating their behaviour by watching each other and the gazelle and reacting to each other's reactions.³⁰ According to Davidson, the distance problem can be solved for creatures who engaged merely in primitive triangulation. Thus the interacting lionesses can be said to be reacting to a distal cause, say, the gazelle, rather than to their sensory stimulations. Given the interaction, the cause of their reactions can be isolated as the common cause of their reactions, what is situated at the intersection of the lines that can be drawn between the lionesses and the object of their reactions. It must be stressed, however, that these creatures have no concept of what it is they are reacting to. Concepts, understood as elements of propositional thoughts, come only with language and thus with the second kind of triangulation. This kind of triangulation is fully linguistic. It occurs when creatures are reacting linguistically to each other and to common stimuli in their surroundings, as when a child who has become "aware of the possibility of error" triangulates with her teacher on objects or events in their surroundings; or as in a "situation in which two participants are equipped with thought and a language, but lack a common language [and the] problem is for each to understand the other: the problem of radical interpretation";³¹ or when participants do by and large understand each other but ostension is needed to determine the cause, and hence the meaning, of one of the speakers' particular utterances. In short, linguistic triangulation is just a subset of interpersonal linguistic communication.

I have argued elsewhere that solving the distance problem does not actually require even primitive triangulation.³² Non-triangulating creatures can rightly be described as reacting to features of their environment. I think, in fact, that the distance problem is not a problem. But I must emphasize that, even for Davidson, solving the distance problem is of no help in solving the aspect problem and thus of little help in answering the question what the typical causes of speakers' basic utterances are. For Davidson, to say that the distance problem can be solved by triangulating non-linguistic creatures is only to say that we are allowed to describe these creatures as reacting to features of their environment, that is, to distal causes. Solving the problem does not yield an answer to the question what specifically these features, i.e., what the relevant distal causes,

²⁸ Davidson 2001b: 4.

²⁹ Davidson 1999: 129-30.

³⁰ Davidson 2001b: 7.

³¹ Davidson 2001c: 294.

³² See Myers and Verheggen 2016: Ch. 1.

are; and so to say that some responses can be regarded as responses to distal causes is not tantamount to saying that the meanings of these responses are now determined. They are not because the crucial problem, the aspect problem, still needs to be solved.

Why is this a problem a solitary person cannot solve? First it should be made clear why it is speakers who have to determine what the causes of their basic utterances are. The reason, as I already suggested, is that, considered by themselves, the features of the world causing us to respond in certain ways are multifarious. For any given cause, it is similar to others in many respects. This is so no matter how regular a speaker's responses may appear to be. Indeed, this is so no matter how many people may together be giving what appear to be the same responses.³³ As long as they produce these responses passively, so to speak, these can be described in any number of ways. Davidson expresses the problem this way:

Since any set of causes whatsoever will have endless properties in common, we must look to some recurrent feature of the gatherer, some mark that he or she has classified cases as similar. This can only be some feature or aspect of the gatherer's reactions [...], in which case we must once again ask: what makes these reactions relevantly similar to each other? (Davidson 2001b: 4-5).

This is a question speakers need to answer if the causes, and hence the meanings, of their reactions are to be fixed. But this is not a question a solitary person, or a group of non-triangulating people, could answer. Again, why not?

The reason, as Davidson has often acknowledged,³⁴ was first brought to the fore by Wittgenstein. For a solitary person to determine what the causes of her responses are is for her to determine which causes are the same as which or, to put it differently, it is to determine which responses are correct and which incorrect. After all, to determine the meaning of an expression is thereby to determine what conditions of correctness govern its applications. Thus a solitary person needs to be in a position to distinguish between what seems to her to be the same cause and what is in fact the same cause, or between what seems to her to be the correct response and what is in fact the correct response. And she needs to do this in an objective way. If she can draw the distinction in any way she pleases, the distinction is not in fact genuine. To put it differently, a solitary person needs the idea of independently existing things affecting her in certain ways and of her responses to those things being correct or not depending on the things themselves and not on her saying so. But a solitary person is not in a position to have this idea and thus to make the relevant distinction. How indeed could she get the idea of objectivity when all she has at her disposal is her own subjective point of view?

It is easier, I think, to understand the predicament the solitary person is in if we first look at what makes it possible for people triangulating linguistically to distinguish in an objective way between what seem to them to be the same causes and what are the same causes. They are in a position to do this precisely because, by interacting with each other and the world they share, they are in a po-

³³ As made clear by Davidson 2001b: 8.

³⁴ See, e.g., Davidson 1994.

sition to recognize the possibility of different perspectives on their environment and the possibility of being sometimes mistaken about it. Davidson writes:

Once these correlations [between interlocutors' reactions and external phenomena] are set up, each creature is in a position to expect the external phenomenon when it perceives the associated reaction of the other. What introduces the possibility of error is the occasional failure of the expectation; the reactions do not correlate (Davidson 1999: 129).

By triangulating linguistically with each other and the world they share, interlocutors are in a position to disagree on what is currently happening around them. More importantly, what people who triangulate linguistically can do, and the solitary person cannot, is settle their disagreement in a way that is not simply up to one or the other interlocutor. They can do this, not only because there are two of them, but also because their dispute is linguistic. A solitary person who "settled a dispute" with a non-linguistic creature would again settle it in a way that is entirely dependent on her. Note further that settling their disagreement can occur only if there are also things they agree on and, to begin with, if they agree on what their basic utterances mean and so on what in the world has contributed to determining their meaning. As Davidson has urged repeatedly, they do not have to agree to mean the same thing by the same words—though given how meanings are determined, in part by shared features of their environment, they are bound to agree on many. But they have to agree on what the speaker means by her words. Now, this agreement is also something that they have worked out together. They have worked together at narrowing and nailing down the causes of their basic utterances so that their meanings are eventually determined. But then it might be said that, since the meanings of their words are the product of a decision, since they are partly determined by the causes they took to be the same, triangulating people, too, are not really distinguishing between what are the same causes and what seem to them to be the same causes. This, however, would be to forget that their agreeing on the meanings of their utterances is the result of negotiations that did require distinguishing between what is the same and what seems to be the same. Moreover, once the meanings of expressions are fixed, that is, once the conditions of correctness governing their applications are fixed, whether these conditions are met or not is an objective matter, which cannot depend on the mere say of the speaker as it does with the solitary speaker. In other words, triangulating people eventually settle together what conditions of correctness govern the applications of their words, but they do not decide when these conditions are met.

What is the answer now, in view of the triangulation argument, to the question what it is for words to mean what they do? It is, for some of them at least, to have been used in linguistic triangulating situations. The meanings of basic words are partly determined through regular connections between triangulating interlocutors' utterances and features of the world around them that caused them to produce the utterances and that have been understood as the particular features they are by both interlocutors, that is, features which both interlocutors have agreed are the features relevant to determining the meanings of the speaker's words. Thus, the social view Davidson advocates is not of the communitar-

ian variety—as I noted earlier, speakers do not have to mean the same thing by any particular expression.³⁵ Of course, not all words have their meaning determined in a triangular way. The meaning of many words can be explained by means of other words, and someone could in that way introduce a new word that would never be used. As I suggested earlier, it is also not true that, for every word that refers to some feature of the world around us, one must have triangulated on that feature in order to mean something by it. But “there must be a causal history of that person that traces back, directly or indirectly, to triangular experiences”.³⁶

4. From Radical Interpretation to Triangulation

I take Davidson's views from radical interpretation to triangulation to be continuous. This has been widely contested. Kathrin Glüer, for instance, has suggested that the radical interpreter is a mere “dramatic device”, which can be dismissed once the thought-experiment is over.³⁷ This, if right, would be significant, for it would indicate that Davidson shifted from the claim that one needs only to be interpretable to the claim that one must actually have been interpreted, in order to be a speaker.³⁸ For one thing, however, there never was, on Davidson's part, any acknowledgement of such a significant change of mind. On the contrary, many of the quotations I have provided are evidence that he meant the triangulation argument further to develop and refine views he had introduced earlier on. As already mentioned, he even explicitly says that radical interpretation is an instance of triangulation.³⁹ For another, philosophically more important, thing, the question to which triangulation is supposed to be an answer, viz., the question what the typical causes of speakers' utterances are, is a question that the radical interpreter would need to answer as well. If she did not, she would simply not be in a position to understand the speaker since she could not know what specific features in their surroundings contribute to determining the meanings of the speaker's basic utterances. And of course, if the radical interpreter needs to triangulate with a speaker in order to understand her, then the speaker herself must have triangulated with others in order to have a language. (Recall once more that reflecting on radical interpretation is meant to tell us not only how meanings can be attributed but also how they are determined or constituted.)

Some of the conclusions established by the triangulation argument reinforce those that follow from the considerations of radical interpretation. Pretty evidently,⁴⁰ the triangulation argument further demonstrates that meaning is thoroughly holistic since meanings cannot be determined piecemeal but as words are used in multiple triangular situations, which are needed for speakers

³⁵ Thus Davidson never gave up the view that meaning is not essentially conventional. See, e.g., Davidson 1986.

³⁶ Davidson 2001c: 293.

³⁷ Glüer 2011: 136. See also Pagin 2013: 230-31.

³⁸ This interpretation is also advanced by Lepore and Ludwig 2005: Ch. 19.

³⁹ Davidson 2001c: 294.

⁴⁰ Though this, too, has been contested—see Bernecker 2013: 447.

to single out the specific causes of their basic utterances.⁴¹ What the triangulation argument also further establishes is the thoroughly non-reductionist character of Davidson's account of meaning.

Recall that the radical interpreter cannot in the end give a description of the meanings of a speaker's expressions—a semantic theory—without saying what the expressions mean. Likewise, as we have seen, merely describing regular connections between speakers' utterances and items in the world around them would not amount to specifying their meanings. But neither can we say that merely describing regular connections between triangulating speakers' utterances and items in the world around them is sufficient to capture their meanings. We have to think of the speakers themselves as taking those connections in specific ways, that is, we have to think of them as speaking meaningfully. What speakers must do in order to have a language, i.e., fix the specific causes of their basic utterances, is something we can think of them as having done only if we think of them as having a language. Thus in the end we cannot give an account of the nature of meaning without thinking of people who already use expressions meaningfully. This has of course struck many commentators as blatantly circular. Davidson's account is indeed circular, as is to be expected from a non-reductionist account. But it is not viciously circular—it is still a constructive account even though it is non-reductionist. As might also be expected from a non-reductionist account, it provides only necessary conditions for words meaning what they do and not sufficient ones. But the account, I should think, is far from uninteresting, indeed, far from uncontroversial.

The triangulation argument does not just reinforce claims Davidson had made while reflecting on radical interpretation; it also vindicates claims he endorsed as soon as he started reflecting on language and thought.

To begin with, the argument, as I have construed it, vindicates Davidson's claim that only a person who has the concept of objectivity can have a language and thoughts. This is a claim Davidson made shortly after he introduced the radical interpretation thought-experiment, together with the claim that being a "member of a speech community" is needed for possession of the concept. The contrast between truth and error, he maintained, "can emerge only in the context of interpretation, which alone forces us to the idea of an objective, public truth".⁴² But he himself never made explicit the connection between, on the one hand, the claim that possession of the concept of objectivity and possession of a language necessarily go hand in hand and, on the other hand, what is required for meaning to be determined.⁴³ As a result, most commentators have understood his triangulation argument as an attempt to establish two independent claims, one about meaning determination and one about the possession of the

⁴¹ Needless to say as well, only a significant history of using words in triangulating situations could make it possible for their meanings to be determined.

⁴² Davidson 1975: 70.

⁴³ Though his insistence that our being able to say that creatures are reacting to distal causes is not sufficient for their having a language but that they must also be reacting to the interaction strongly suggests the connection between the two claims. See Davidson 1992: 120 and 2001c: 13.

concept of objectivity.⁴⁴ And it has been commonly argued that Davidson contended that primitive triangulation is needed to solve the problem of meaning determination, and that he was wrong about this. To repeat, I do not think that primitive triangulation needs to be present in order to describe creatures as reacting to distal causes, but doing this is not sufficient for saying that meanings are determined, for the aspect problem still needs to be solved, and linguistic triangulation is needed to solve it. Furthermore, though it may be conceded that linguistic triangulation is needed to have the concept of objectivity, it has been argued that people do not need to have the concept in order for the meanings of their words to be determined and thus in order for them to have a language.⁴⁵ What I have argued is that the two tasks cannot be separated. Linguistic triangulation is needed to determine meanings because it is needed to have the concept of objectivity which is required to determine meanings. Note that the tasks are accomplished concurrently. Given the non-reductionism—since there is no explaining in detail how a language is first acquired⁴⁶—the best we can say is that it is only of people who have triangulated linguistically that we can make sense of their having the concept of objectivity and of their using expressions meaningfully. This is the result of acknowledging that speakers themselves have an important role to play in determining meanings. And this role is essential to the solution of the aspect problem.

The triangulation argument also vindicates an assumption Davidson made at the very start of his enquiry into meaning, viz., that it is essentially public. In effect, the argument does this by vindicating perceptual externalism. Here is how.

Recall that the assumption that meaning is essentially public prompted Davidson to reflect on radical interpretation. As we saw, externalism easily follows from these reflections. But suppose that the assumption is not being made; and suppose that externalism is being denied and that it is maintained that the determinants of meaning are to be found instead within speakers, in the form of mental pictures or representations, or of abstract entities grasped by the mind, or of dispositions. The problem, then, for the internalist is similar to that facing the externalist asking the question what the typical causes of speakers' basic utterances are. What the internalist needs to specify is how the allegedly meaning-determining picture, or abstract entity, or disposition is to be taken. For, in and of itself, a picture can be understood as representing many different things, an abstract entity can be taken as the symbol of many different things, and a disposition to utter words in certain ways can be understood as a disposition to use words with many different meanings. If Davidson's non-reductionist lesson holds, then anything, internal or external, that is not yet seen as meaningful, could not, by itself, determine the meaning of an expression.⁴⁷ But, if the triangulation argument holds, then it takes two to fix whatever specific features contribute to determining meaning. These features have to be triangulated upon. But then the items that, in the first instance, determine meaning can only be ex-

⁴⁴ See, among others, Pagin 2001: 201, Lepore and Ludwig 2005: 408, Bridges 2006: 295, Glüer 2011: 235, Bernecker 2013: 450.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Andrews and Radenovic 2006.

⁴⁶ Davidson 2001c: 293.

⁴⁷ Even meanings will not do, as it must be specified which words are associated with which meanings.

ternal, for no internal items could be triangulated upon. Thus perceptual externalism is vindicated and, with it, the claim that meaning is essentially public.⁴⁸

I end with a brief comparison of Davidson's externalism and orthodox versions.

5. Davidson's Externalism vs. Orthodox Versions of Externalism

I shall focus on an orthodox version of perceptual externalism, in part because Davidson himself did, on multiple occasions, address orthodox versions of social externalism.⁴⁹ However, though he did discuss orthodox versions of perceptual externalism as well, he never articulated the deep metaphysical difference that, I think, is the origin of the different versions of perceptual externalism, and which the triangulation argument brings into relief.

The version of perceptual externalism I have in mind is the one Putnam introduced over four decades ago with his Twin Earth thought-experiment. Suppose there is a planet, Twin-Earth, which is identical with Earth in all but one respect: the liquid called water on Twin Earth, which tastes and quenches thirst like what is called water on Earth, is not composed of H₂O molecules but of XYZ. As a result, according to Putnam, the very meaning of 'water' is different on Earth and Twin Earth. When an inhabitant of Earth and her doppelgänger on Twin Earth utter the word 'water', they are talking about different liquids. They may do so even unbeknownst to them, as they definitely would if they were living in 1750, before the molecular structure of what is called water was discovered. This is to say, according to Putnam, that the extension of words, when this is understood, at least in the case of most natural kind words, as the fundamental nature of the referent of a word, plays a crucial role in determining their meaning. Indeed, the extension plays the crucial meaning-determining role, as it is the only feature a change in which could cause a change in meaning. Stereotypical properties associated with the referent of the word, such as, in the case of 'water', colorlessness, transparency, tastelessness, etc., though they may initially help us to identify the referent of the word, are neither necessary nor sufficient for something to fall under a given kind, and so for the word to have the meaning that it has. In the end the only external feature that determines the meaning of a word like 'water' is its extension.⁵⁰

This version of perceptual externalism is strikingly different from that defended by Davidson, for whom the specific features that cause us to respond in certain ways and determine in part the meanings of these responses are to be fixed through the multiple linguistic uses and beliefs of interlocutors who triangulate on those features. Putnam's idea, as Davidson expresses it, "is that if I learn the word 'water' while experiencing H₂O, the word must henceforth refer only to substances with the same microstructure".⁵¹ However, Davidson continues, "I do not see why sameness of microstructure is necessarily the relevant

⁴⁸ Of course, if the internal items we are thinking of do have a definite meaning, then they no longer have to be taken in specific ways. But the question then becomes, what determined their meaning? And, if Davidson is right, the answer can only be externalist.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., Davidson 1994 and 2001b. See also Myers and Verheggen 2016: Ch. 3.

⁵⁰ Putnam 1975: 234.

⁵¹ Davidson 1991a: 198.

similarity that determines the reference of my word 'water'".⁵² Indeed, as we saw, according to Davidson, what makes a given cause similar to another and thus the specific feature that determines in part the meaning of a word is itself fixed not simply or necessarily by the beliefs speakers may have about the microstructure of its referent, but by beliefs concerning other properties such as, e.g., in the case of water, its being odorless, potable, etc.⁵³ Now, what accounts for this striking difference between the two versions of perceptual externalism?

The key, I believe, to understanding this lies in the fact, alluded to earlier, that orthodox externalists like Putnam never pause to ask the question what the typical causes of speakers' basic utterances are. Why do they not? The reason may be two-fold. On the one hand, it is because, I think, they take the world around us to be ready-made, so to speak, that is, to be structured in such a way that language latches on its components without our having to contribute to this. The features of the world that cause us to use words in certain ways are already determined. All we need to do is to try to discover what they are. On the other hand, someone like Putnam does not seem to be in the business of giving an overall account of meaning. As I alluded to earlier, he uses the word 'liquid' in order initially to identify the referent of water. But he does not tell us in turn how the meaning of 'liquid' was determined to begin with. Even if this is indeed not Putnam's aim, it remains puzzling why, according to him, some beliefs rather than others are to play a privileged role in determining the relevant features of the world some words refer to and in turn in fixing their meaning, how they could indeed do this before anyone was in a position to have the relevant beliefs, and how they could do this even for speakers who lack the relevant beliefs. Only a certain kind of metaphysical picture, of the sort suggested above, can motivate this, leaving the relation between language and world rather mysterious. But if Davidson is right that the connections between speakers' basic utterances and their typical causes are not ready-made, the relation between language and world as conceived by orthodox externalists is not just mysterious; it is incoherent. There is no way we can think of the world as causing us to react in certain ways unless we already have reacted and thought of these reactions in certain ways. And this we have been able to do by triangulating linguistically on features of the world we share with our interlocutors.⁵⁴

6. Conclusion

To sum up the main train of thought of this paper, I see no reason to deny that Davidson's triangulation argument builds on his earlier work on radical interpretation in a way that involves no significant changes. The kind of semantic externalism Davidson himself claims to have always endorsed is thereby better supported, as some of its fundamental assumptions have been vindicated.⁵⁵

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Davidson 1987: 29.

⁵⁴ For further discussion of Putnam's views, see Myers and Verheggen 2016: 77-83. See also Amoretti 2007.

⁵⁵ What about, it might be asked, Davidson's famous (or rather infamous) claim that meaning is indeterminate, such that, for any theory of interpretation an interpreter may come up with for a speaker, there might be another that fits the evidence equally well,

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and his related claim that reference is inscrutable, such that there may be many equally good ways that we could keep track of it? (See, e.g., Davidson 1979.) Are these claims compatible with those made about triangulation? It might be thought that they are not since, after all, the triangulation argument tells us exactly how the typical causes of speakers' basic utterances are fixed, and hence how their meanings are determined. But Davidson himself never gave up the indeterminacy and inscrutability theses. I think the key to understanding how these theses are compatible with the claims made about triangulation lies in the holistic character of meaning. But establishing the compatibility is a difficult task which, partly for want of space, will have to await another occasion.

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