Radical Interpretation and Intercultural Communication

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1. Radical Interpretation.

Davidson's radical interpretation is an adaptation of Quine's (1960) famous thought experiment of *radical translation*, in which a field linguistic is faced with a speaker of a language he does not know. The linguist's task is to create a translation manual from the alien's language to his own, i.e., to understand him, and this without the aid of a dictionary, or of an informant that can serve as a translator. Thus all that the linguist has to go on is the speaker's overt linguistic behavior. What the linguist can learn about the alien's language in this situation, given sufficiently rich and long interaction, encapsulates all that can ever be learned about any person's linguistic behavior. Hence, according to Quine's inter-subjectivist (some would say behaviorist) view of language, what the linguist can come to know in radical translation is all that there is to know about what any person means by his words.

Davidson (1984a) retains Quine's inter-subjectivist view of linguistic meaning: He holds that meaning must be accounted for in terms of what is publicly available in linguistic interaction, rather than in terms of, e.g., internal representations that are somehow associated with words and sentences in each speaker's head. However, Davidson introduces several significant changes into Quine's framework. Here are three of the most central such changes. *First*, Davidson holds that the linguist's feat (which captures what we all do in understanding each other) should be conceptualized as relating the other's words not to the linguist's own words, but to the world they both share. Admittedly, the linguist uses his own language to express, e.g., what the other's referring expressions refer to. However, what are established in this process are connections between (some of) the other's words and objects in the world (as conceptualized by the linguist). Thus the result is better thought of as interpretation rather than translation. *Second*, the change from translation to interpretation leads Davidson to use the notion of truth in his account of meaning. That is, Davidson's interpreter establishes systematic connections between the other's language and the world, and the primitive notion applied in this process is truth: The interpreter assigns truth conditions (derived from a so called truth theory, expressed in his own language) to the sentences uttered by the speaker. And *third*, Davidson's notion of radical interpretation takes into account not only linguistic meaning, but also belief and desire. (This is as opposed to Quine, who dismisses such mental states as not amenable to rigorous philosophical analysis.) Thus Davidson views his interpreter as using the (meager) publicly available information that he has in order to break into the interconnected system of speaker's beliefs, desires and meaningful utterances. Meaning is assigned to both mental and linguistic components of this system together in the process of interpretation, and therefore intentional, meaningful thought and desire are viewed as inherently dependent on interpersonal linguistic interaction.

This, in a nutshell, is the foundation of Davidson's philosophical outlook on language, an outlook which he continued to elaborate and develop since its inception until his death in the beginning of this century. We turn to see how this highly influential view of language bears upon an issue which was not central to Davidson's interests as a philosopher, namely intercultural dialogue.

2. Radical Interpretation and Intercultural Dialogue.

It is evident from the above characterization of radical translation and radical interpretation that both describe situations of intercultural communication: In both cases we are presented with scenarios in which people from completely alien linguistic and cultural backgrounds are faced with each other and eventually succeed to communicate. However, it is also clear from the foregoing brief overview that neither Quine nor Davidson, who designed these thought experiments, were intent on addressing issues of intercultural communication. Rather, the objective of each of them is to make a philosophical point with regard to linguistic meaning and interaction in general, and the situation that each envisions is supposed to capture this point and underline its force and consequences.

However, contrary to this acknowledged explanatory role we can now turn this picture around and ask: How does the philosophical outlook on language and thought that is expressed and supported by Davidson through his talk of radical interpretation bear upon the very situation that is described in this scenario, viz. intercultural dialogue? Does this outlook offer us any insights concerning such dialogue and its place vis-à-vis everyday, intra-cultural communication?

The direct, immediate answer to these questions is positive: The Davidsonian outlook does bear upon the relation between intra- and inter-cultural communication. Its major consequence is that there is no philosophically significant difference between these two kinds of interaction, that essentially they are not two kinds of interaction at all, but one. The reason should be clear. The workings of any type of linguistic interaction are brought out by the radical interpretation parable, according to Davidson. This is true for interaction across cultural lines, which is outwardly more similar to the parable itself, as well as for intra-cultural, everyday such interaction, which is outwardly dissimilar to the parable. The outward dissimilarity of typical language use to radical interpretation should not deceive us, tells us Davidson: It does not involve any intuitively appealing notions such as mutual access to a common store of shared meanings, or a friction-free transfer of mental contents. Rather, in these close-to-home kinds of language use too all that we can go on in the ascription of contents to utterances is overt language use. Therefore everyday linguistic interaction is not different from any actual or hypothetical interaction with an alien—be it an extra-terrestrial or a human from a different continent.

Of course, no one should deny the obvious fact that there are great differences between linguistic interaction within and across cultural lines (not even philosophers, who, as David Lewis (1975) says, are notorious for denying obvious facts). Clearly it is one thing to engage in conversation with a person who shares your language, and an altogether different thing to do so with someone who does not. But the question, of course, is in what sense are these two scenarios 'different things'? Practically they obviously are, but the question is whether they are philosophically different as well—that is, for example,

whether language works differently in the two cases. A plausible picture is that indeed in one case language supposedly works as a transparent vehicle for the transmission of thought, and in the other case as an obstacle in the way of such a transmission. But the crux of the radical interpretation set-up can be rightly described as the rejection of this picture: This set-up encapsulates Davidson's rejection of the transmission model of linguistic communication in favor of a constitutive view, in which both linguistic and mental contents are given rise to in the context of communicative linguistic interaction. Once this alternative view is adopted it can be accepted that the acknowledged practical differences between intra- and inter-cultural dialogue do not express a deep chasm between these two types of interaction, but rather hide a surprising affinity.

This consequence of Davidson's position can be challenged in the following way. For the sake of the argument, the objector would say, let us accept that linguistic meaning is constituted inter-subjectively. However, most plausibly this is done within the borders of a linguistic and cultural community, according to the rules and conventions of this community. But when such a community is engaged in a dialogue with another, meaning is already constituted on both sides of the cultural line, and therefore cannot be said to arise through the interaction across this line. Rather, meaning needs to be transmitted across the cultural gap (be it narrow or wide), exactly in tune with the conception of communication that Davidson rejects, according to the account presented above. Thus we get an internalist view of meaning in the intercultural level that supervenes on an inter-subjectivest view of meaning in the intra-cultural level.

And what about the radical interpretation scenario? That is, how does this alternative position vis-à-vis intercultural dialogue bear upon the utility of this scenario to the conceptualization of linguistic meaning in general? The objector's answer to this query would be that indeed the difficulty in Davidson's conclusions as regards intercultural communication highlights the shortcomings of his thought experiment in explicating linguistic meaning: The 'one-on-one' character of radical interpretation hides the essential role of social convention in constituting inter-subjective meaning.

Now Davidson's philosophy is not without means to answer this challenge. A major component of such an answer is the rejection of the view that convention is essential to language use and to linguistic meaning. Davidson is well known for his debate with, e.g., Michael Dummett on this issue. Dummett (1978) and others claim that the very basic 'moves' of language—e.g., that of making an assertion—depend on social convention: Such convention constitutes the conditions for their performance in the same way that the rules of chess constitute the practice of playing the game. Davidson's (1984b) position, on the other hand, is that the role of convention in language is more similar to the role it plays in eating than in playing chess: There are many conventions associated with language use, some of which are clearly very convenient and useful, but they do not constitute the practice of interpretation. In principle, interpretation (like eating) can be achieved without appeal to convention, through local, contextual interpersonal interaction (Davidson, 1986).

It is obviously beyond the scope of this paper to defend Davidson's outlook and delve into the debate concerning language and convention. Rather, it is my aim here only to show how Davidson's position on convention bears upon the issue at hand, viz. intercultural communication. If indeed convention is not constitutive of language, as Davidson maintains, then the transmission model of inter-cultural communication can, and should, be rejected. A linguistic culture is not a tightly-knit conventional system, as this model suggests, but rather a much looser aggregate of innumerable local interpersonal interpretation processes that take advantage of convention but do not depend on it or are completely governed by it. (This is not to deny that some aspects of culture are conventionally constituted, but rather only to suggest that language, which undoubtedly plays a major role in culture, is not so constituted.) Therefore there is no justification for a clear-cut distinction between communication within the bounds of convention and across such bounds, as the objection suggests. Rather, in all cases we have contextual interpretation that may or may not appeal to the resources of shared conventions. Thus the primacy of the radical interpretation scenario is upheld.

The upshot of these considerations may be summarized as an attack against the very expression 'intercultural communication'. When juxtaposed with the term 'interpersonal communication' the former term creates the impression (or expresses the presupposition) that indeed two kinds of communication should be distinguished—one between persons, the other between cultures. But the thrust of Davidson's position is that cultures are not really engaged in communication—only people are. Cultural similarity is just one factor (albeit a very important one) that can affect the success of any given concrete act of communication between two (or more) individuals.

3. Conclusion

I argue to have shown in the foregoing discussion that Davidson's philosophy of language, as epitomized by the radical interpretation thought experiment, bears in a significant way upon the question whether and how intercultural dialogue differs from intra-cultural communication: It is a consequence of the Davidsonian outlook that no great difference between the two cases exists. Furthermore, it was shown how Davidson's views regarding the role of convention in language support the implications of his radical interpretation parable for intercultural communication. Thus I claim that the explicit consideration of intercultural dialogue and the way Davidson's philosophical system applies to it helps bring out the connection between different themes in this system, and is therefore of a broader value than mere 'applied philosophy' (if there is such a thing at all). This outcome is in tune with the natural expectation that the discussion of intercultural dialogue in the context of the philosophy of language should be beneficial both for understanding such dialogue and for understanding language.

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