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How might a Davidsonian rescue the normativity of meaning?

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INTRODUCTION[1]

The question of the normativity of meaning is a central theme in Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (1982). In this monograph, following the later Wittgenstein, he imposes a constraint on meaning which can be called 'meaning normativism'. According to meaning normativism, if I mean something by an expression, I *should* use terms in a certain way. The crucial point here is that the obligation should not be *hypothetical*, i.e. should not be produced by something extrinsic to the meaning of the expression; rather, it should be *categorical*, i.e. it should be produced by a necessary condition of meaning.[2] So, what a meaning normativist is searching for is something which is, firstly, a necessary condition of meaning and, secondly, produces certain obligations. A number of candidates for this role — such as truth, intention, and rationality — have been proposed by normativists, but the prospects that any of them will satisfy both conditions appear to be dim.[3] In this paper,

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[2] The reason is obvious: if something which is not necessary for meaning produces obligations, it does not entail that meaning is normative. For meaning to be normative, meaning itself, or rather something whose existence is necessary for meaning, should produce obligations.

[3] With respect to truth, Boghossian (1989) is a meaning normativist, while Glüer (1999a, 2001), Wikforss (2001) and Hattiangadi (2006) are meaning anti-normativists. With respect to intention, McDowell (1992) and Millar (2004) are meaning normativists, while Hattiangadi (2006), Glüer (1999b) and Dretske (2000) are meaning anti-normativists. Regarding rationality, Bilgrami (1993) is a meaning normativist, while Glüer (2001), Pagin (Glüer, Pagin 1999) and Wikforss (2001) are

I propose another candidate — *linguistic communication*. It will be argued that it meets both above-mentioned conditions, because linguistic communication is a necessary condition for language (and thereby for meaning — for if there is no language there is no meaning) and the following conditional holds:

(1)   If I want to linguistically communicate with others in a linguistic community, I should use my terms in a certain way.

Both conditions will be shown to be satisfied by reference to Davidson's triangulation thesis; thus in section 1 I give an account of the triangulation thesis. In section 2 I show why linguistic communication is a necessary condition of meaning; and in section 3 I show why conditional (1) itself holds. The conclusion is that meaning normativism holds; and, since it has been demonstrated to hold by means of crucial reference to a thesis proposed by Davidson, it may be justly said that a Davidsonian can rescue the normativity of meaning.

1. DAVIDSON'S TRIANGULATION THESIS

According to Davidson's externalism, what determines the content of a thought is what *typically causes* that thought (Davidson 1991). For example, what determines the content of a chair-belief (a belief about a certain chair), is the particular chair which typically causes that belief. The identification of the typical cause cannot, according to Davidson, be achieved simply by considering a single person, because a person normally stands in many causal relations to objects and events in her environment. Davidson poses the problem and his solution as follows:

> The cause is doubly indeterminate: with respect to width, and with respect to distance. The first ambiguity concerns how much of the total cause of a belief is relevant to the content. The brief answer is that it is the part or aspect of the total cause that typically causes relevantly similar responses. What makes the responses relevantly similar in turn is the fact that others find those responses similar […] The second problem has to do with the ambiguity of the relevant stimulus, whether it is proximal (at the skin, say) or distal. What makes the distal stimulus the relevant determiner of content is again its social character, it is the cause that is shared (Davidson 2001b: 130).

In other words, to identify the typical cause, firstly it must be determined which of the many causal paths that extend between the person and the environment is the relevant path; and secondly it must be determined where on this path the relevant cause is located. According to Davidson, to achieve both of these determinations, a second person is needed. It is the second person, on this view, who makes the judgment that the first person's responses, across the different situations in which the relevant cause is operative, are *similar*; and the exact location of the stimulus is then

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meaning anti-normativists.

determined by the intersection of the lines of causation which extend from each of the persons in the direction of the stimulus:

> It is a form of triangulation: one line goes from us [i.e. the second person] in the direction of the table [i.e. the relevant stimulus], one line goes from the child [i.e. the first person] in the direction of the table, and the third line goes from us to the child. Where the lines from the child to table and from us to table converge 'the' stimulus is located (Davidson 2001a: 119).

Thus, the second person has two roles: first, to provide a standard of similarity for the first person's responses by consciously correlating the responses of the first person with objects and events in the first person's world;[4] and second, to participate in identifying (for the first person) the stimulus to which the first person is reacting. For the second role to be played, the two persons need to know that they have the same object in their minds, since otherwise it might be the case that they are having similar reactions to different stimuli. The only way to know this, according to Davidson, is that they should begin to speak and ask each other what they are thinking at that moment. Thus the determination of the content of a thought requires a triangle. At one apex there is the person whose content of thought is to be determined; at the second apex there is another person who (i) judges as similar the responses of the first person in situations in which the relevant stimulus of the first person's thought is present, as well as (ii) determines the location of the stimulus; and at the third there is the relevant stimulus itself. Although the second person can participate in the process of identifying the similarity in the first person's responses, to identify the intersection of the lines of causation which extend from each of them in the direction of the stimulus, they need to know that they are both thinking of the same stimulus in the given situation. For the latter to be accomplished, they must establish linguistic communication with each other. Thus we may propose:

(2)   The determination of the content of thought requires linguistic communication.

2. WHY IS LINGUISTIC COMMUNICATION NECESSARY FOR LANGUAGE TO EXIST?

Thus far it has been shown that, according to Davidson's triangulation thesis, there is no determination of the content of thought, and thereby no thought at all, without linguistic communication. Elsewhere, in his no-priority thesis, Davidson (1984) argues that language and thought are interdependent — it follows that there is

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[4] It is the second person who acknowledges that the first person is behaving in a fashion that is verbally sufficiently similar in similar situations in which the stimulus is present. The first person, by herself, is incapable of recognizing this, because for her there is no distinction between *seeming* to behave similarly and *actually* behaving similarly.

no language without thought. Thus the following argument can be framed by way of an explanation of why linguistic communication is necessary for language to exist:

Premise 1:   There is no language without thought [*Davidson's no-priority thesis*].

Premise 2:   There is no thought without linguistic communication [*Davidson's triangulation thesis; set out in (2), above*].

Conclusion: There is no language without linguistic communication [*from premises 1 and 2*].

Therefore, a language spoken by only one person is impossible, or rather, if there is no linguistic communication there is no language. Assuming that if there is no language there is no meaning, which seems plausible enough, linguistic communication is a necessary condition of meaning. This then leaves us with another question, to which the next section of the paper is devoted: Why does the conditional (1) itself hold?

3. WHY DOES THE CONDITIONAL (1) HOLD?

A Davidsonian who is committed to radical interpretation might object that the conditional (1) itself does not hold, since what is needed for successful linguistic communication is just that the interlocutors interpret each other in a charitable way, i.e. that they attribute to each other by and large the same beliefs as those that they themselves would entertain in those situations, and thereby come to understand what each other's terms mean. If this is the case, linguistic communication can be successfully established without using terms in a certain way.

My response to this objection is that a Davidsonian who is committed to the triangulation thesis cannot allow that linguistic communication could be characterized by radical interpretation, for, if she does, the triangulation thesis itself will be caught up in a vicious circle. In this section, then, I first consider the circularity objection raised against Davidson's triangulation thesis; second, I try to show how the objection can be blocked by not radically interpreting each other in the manner depicted above; and finally, I try to explain how linguistic communication without radical interpretation is possible.

3.1. The circularity objection raised against Davidson's triangulation thesis

According to Davidson's triangulation thesis, in order to know what the content of her own belief is, a person needs at least one another person to acknowledge the similarity of her verbal reactions in the presence of a common stimulus. The simplest way to make sure that her reactions are also reactions to what the second person is entertaining in her mind would be to ask the second person. However, according to

Davidson himself, in order to understand what the second person says in response, the first person needs to ascribe her own beliefs in that situation to the second. Thus, to know what the content of her belief is, the first person must appeal to her own belief. This is the circularity objection which Glüer (2006) has raised against Davidson's triangulation thesis. Roughly, the objection seems to have the following form:

Premise 1:   We appeal to thought in order to establish linguistic communication [*Davidson's radical interpretation thesis*]

Premise 2:   We appeal to linguistic communication to determine the content of thought [*Davidson's triangulation thesis*]

Conclusion: We appeal to thought to determine the content of thought.

The argument is obviously valid. If its premises are true, then Davidson is committed to embarrassing circularity in his account of the genesis of thought. Regarding the soundness of the argument, the first premise comprises a description of what is done during the process of radical interpretation. According to Davidson's theory of meaning, what someone means by an expression must be interpretable by others. For this interpretation to be possible, the interpreter's beliefs must overlap, by and large, with the speaker's in similar situations; or, to be more accurate, the interpreter has to assign beliefs to the speaker that are similar to her own in those situations. This latter idea is what Davidson emphasizes in his well-known Principle of Charity, according to which:

> [We] solve the problem of the interdependence of belief and meaning by holding belief constant as far as possible while solving for meaning. This is accomplished by assigning truth conditions to [native] sentences that make native speakers right when plausibly possible, according, of course, to our own view of what is right (Davidson 1984: 137).

In other words, according to Davidson, the hearer comes to understand what the speaker intends, by assigning to the speaker the same beliefs as she herself, by and large, would have in those situations. For example, if someone whose language you do not know at all (hence the term "radical"), in a situation in which it is raining, says "It is raining" (in her language), you assign to her the same belief that you yourself would have if you were in that situation, namely "It is raining". The content of the assigned belief, according to Davidson, constitutes the meaning of her expression (that it is raining). So, in interpreting each other, which is necessary for linguistic communication to take place, communicators appeal to the thoughts (here, specifically beliefs) they assign to each other. Thus premise 1 seems to be true.

Regarding premise 2, as has been argued above, we appeal to linguistic communication in the process of determining the content of thought. So premise 2 seems also to be true. Hence, if we want to read Davidson's triangulation thesis in the light of what Davidson proposes in his radical interpretation thesis, the content of thought is indeed determined in virtue of thought itself, which is a vicious circle.

3.2. Blocking the objection

Let us look closer at the objection and see how it can be blocked. Davidson has already told us that linguistic communication is successfully established not because communicators feel compelled to use terms in a certain way, but because the interpreter comes to know what the interpretee intends by her use of the terms. Thus it seems that Davidson cannot appeal in his triangulation thesis to linguistic communication as a condition of the possibility of thought, for, according to his own thesis of radical interpretation, linguistic communication requires appeal to thoughts. However, the circle can, I think, be broken by drawing a key distinction between the triangulation scenario and the radical interpretation scenario. In radical interpretation, the interpreter needs to determine the meaning of the interpretee's terms. What needs to be fixed, given the choice between belief and meaning, is *belief*. In the triangulation scenario, on the other hand, the first person needs to determine the content of the second person's belief. What needs to be fixed, given the choice between belief and meaning, is *meaning*. This is why in triangulation scenarios in which linguistic communication is a means to know each other's thoughts (as happens in ordinary acts of linguistic communication between members of the same linguistic community), linguistic communicators should not (or rather, need not) appeal to each other's thoughts, and thereby no circularity occurs. But if so, one may ask, how is meaning fixed between communicators without appealing to each other's thoughts? The answer lies in Kripke's (1982) skeptical solution, which also shows why the conditional (1) holds.[5]

3.3. Linguistic communication without radical interpretation

Kripke observes that in *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein (1953: § 65), replaces the question of the nature of meaning and truth with two radically different questions:

> Wittgenstein replaces the question, "What must be the case for this sentence to be true?" by two others: first: "Under what conditions may this form of words be appropriately asserted (or denied)?"; second, given an answer to the first question, "What is the role, and the utility, in our lives of our practices of asserting (or denying) the form of words under these conditions?" (Kripke 1982: 73).

Let us try to set out what the assertability conditions, utilities and roles of *forms of words* or sentences are. Imagine a scenario in which Jones is a member of a linguistic community such as ours. Now consider the sentence "Jones means addition by '+'". In this scenario, the assertability conditions of "Jones means addition by

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[5] Here, the skeptic puts forward an argument to the effect that there is no meaning-determining fact. Kripke, however, following the later Wittgenstein, tries to show that we can accept what the skeptic says and nonetheless speak of meaning and truth.

'+'" are Jones's satisfactory performances with '+'. According to Kripke, they amount to the fact that Jones comes up often enough with the answer that most of the rest of his fellow speakers in the linguistic community give when asked a particular query containing '+'. If these conditions are satisfied, it can appropriately be asserted that "Jones means addition by '+'". The role of the utterances of "Jones means addition by '+'" and the like is that Jones's linguistic community *accepts* him as a person who can generally be 'trusted' to act as they do in transactions involving the use of '+'. One aspect of its utility is that of enabling people to discriminate between those who can and those who cannot be trusted in transactions involving '+'.

According to Kripke, therefore, linguistic communicators attribute meaning to each other's terms without knowing each other's thoughts in that situation. Meaning, according to Kripke's skeptical solution, is attributed by a competent user of a language in a linguistic community to anyone who respects the relevant assertability conditions, that is, to anyone who uses terms in a way sufficiently similar to the way other competent language users in that linguistic community do. If so, meaning is not fixed by thoughts assigned to each other but by the *uses* of terms, which need to be sufficiently like others' uses. So the conditional (1), given at the outset of the paper, should be modified as follows:

(1')   If I want to communicate linguistically with others in a linguistic community, I *should* use terms in a manner that is sufficiently similar to the way other members of that linguistic community do.

This gives us an intersubjective account of the normativity of meaning according to which the source of the obligations of meaning lies in the intersubjective linguistic relations which hold among the members of a linguistic community. On this account, there are *primitive requirements* that we, as competent speakers of a linguistic community, impose both on ourselves and on Jones when we say things like "Jones means addition by '+'". That is, whenever Jones satisfies the relevant assertability conditions for, say, meaning addition by '+', we are primitively required to ascribe to him that he means addition by '+'. If Jones does not satisfy these conditions, we are again primitively required not to do so. Accordingly, Jones also *feels required* to use '+' in a certain way, that is, our primitive requirements *oblige* him to put his uses of '+' in tune with ours. In fact, when someone means something by an expression (or, to put it more accurately, when other members of a linguistic community ascribe to someone that she means a given thing by an expression), she has already felt required to fit her uses of that expression to those of others. By primitive requirements I mean requirements which are produced by our being located within a set of linguistic customs, not by our following certain rules. For otherwise the rules themselves would need to be interpreted and this would lead to a regress. Instead, being located within a set of linguistic customs and seeing, sufficiently often, how others use terms to mean something, directs us (blindly, however) to use words to mean the same things as others do.

4. CONCLUSION

Linguistic communication, therefore, is a good candidate for fulfilling the two conditions of meaning normativism set out in the introduction. For, as argued in section 2, linguistic communication is itself a necessary condition of language and thereby of meaning (for without language there is no meaning); and as argued in section 3, linguistic communication produces certain obligations regarding how to use a given term. So linguistic communication is a necessary condition of meaning, which produces certain obligations. Thus, meaning has a constitutive part which is obligation-producing or, as we might prefer to put it, meaning is normative.

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