ARE NATURAL LANGUAGES NECESSARY?*

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SUMMARY: Against Davidson's criticism of the usual notion of a natural language, Dummett and most philosophers of language have argued that such a notion is necessary to account for the normativity of meaning and to avoid declaring meaningless much of our everyday talk on languages.

This paper tries to show that both worries are unjustified by arguing that: 1) It is possible to talk of linguistic mistakes without commitment to natural languages in the usual sense; 2) The rejection of natural languages in the usual sense does not entail the possibility of non-trivially private languages; 3) The rejection of natural languages in the usual sense does not entail that conventionalized languages do not exist, but only that their existence is not necessary for linguistic communication.

KEY WORDS: convention, linguistic mistake, Davidson, Dummett

RESUMEN: Frente a la crítica de Davidson a la noción usual de lenguaje natural, Dummett y, con él, la mayoría de los filósofos del lenguaje sostienen que dicha noción es imprescindible para dar cuenta de la normatividad del significado y para evitar declarar carente de sentido buena parte de nuestro discurso ordinario sobre los lenguajes.

El trabajo trata de mostrar que ambas objeciones son injustificadas argumentando que: 1) Puede hablarse de errores lingüísticos sin necesidad de aceptar la existencia de lenguajes en el sentido usual; 2) La crítica de los lenguajes naturales en el sentido usual no implica la posibilidad de lenguajes no trivialmente privados; 3) La crítica de los lenguajes naturales en el sentido usual no implica que no haya lenguajes convencionalizados, sólo que la existencia de éstos no es una condición de posibilidad de la comunicación lingüística.

PALABRAS CLAVE: convención, error lingüístico, Davidson, Dummett

One of Davidson's many highly controversial theses is the following:

> There is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases. And we should try again to say how convention in any important sense is involved in language; or, as I think, we should give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions.[1]

Davidson often protests the tendency to quote the beginning of this text out of context. But, even in context, the claim sounds strange enough to have provoked an important controversy. The discussion involves many deep issues central to the philosophy of language and I will not attempt to do justice to all of them. I will focus on what I take to be the two reasons why most philosophers, following Dummett, tend to find the notion of a language indispensable. The first is the idea that only if we accept that there are such things as languages we can account for the normativity of meaning (sections 1, 2 and 3). The second is the view that the rejection of languages would force us to declare meaningless much of our everyday talk (section 4). My conclusion will be that both worries are unjustified, for languages in the usual sense are not necessary for communication.[2]

1. The Normativity Argument

Roughly summarized, the argument is the following: If there were no such thing as a language, in the very sense many

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[1] Davidson 1986, p. 446.

[2] Davidson's views are defended in Davidson 1986. For the objections, the classical reference is Dummett 1986. My criticism of Dummett's arguments for the necessity of natural languages does not entail that natural languages in the usual sense do not exist or that they are not actually used in communication.

philosophers and linguists have supposed, we would be left with idiolects, or, more narrowly, with the habits of speech of an individual when addressing a particular hearer at a particular time.[3] Thus, Davidson's position allegedly collapses into a version of Humpty Dumpty's view of language, the view that "it is the speaker who attaches the meaning to the word by some inner mental operation".[4] Humpty Dumpty is free to mean by "glory" whatever he wants, for instance, "nice knock-down argument", for there is no set of conventions in virtue of which his use can be said to be mistaken.[5]

But, the argument follows, meaning is normative, i.e. subject to rules, and it makes no sense to talk of rules unless there is the possibility of distinguishing between actions according to the rules and actions that violate them. According to Wittgenstein's well-known argument, languages cannot be private, for, if they were, there would be no criterion to differentiate between following or breaking its rules. In private languages, like Humpty Dumpty's, there are no linguistic mistakes.[6]

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[3] The formulation is Dummett's. See Dummett 1986, p. 469. "Habits of speech" must be understood as temporal stages of idiolects, not in the wider sense of the whole set of speech dispositions, which, of course, do not depend only on the meanings the speaker attaches to words at a particular moment, but also on his beliefs and the rest of his life circumstances.

[4] Dummett 1986, p. 470.

[5] The relevant well known passage of the dialogue between Humpty Dumpty and Alice in *Through the Looking Glass* (p. 253) is the following:

". . . There's glory for you!"

"I don't know what you mean by 'Glory,'" Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't —till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument,'" Alice objected.

"When *I* use a word," Humpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean —neither more or less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master —that's all."

[6] See Dummett 1986, p. 470. See also Kemmerling 1993, Gorman 1993 and Valdés Villanueva 1999.

   Consequently, the core of the normativity argument is: if
there were no such things as languages, then there would be no
such things as linguistic mistakes, an unacceptable conclusion.
In what follows, I will discuss this argument assuming that the
possibility of mistakes is necessary for something to qualify as
linguistic behavior.

2. *Was Humpty Dumpty Right?*

Alice's answer to Humpty Dumpty is that one cannot make
words mean whatever one wishes. Words have the meaning they
have. But this line of answer appeals to conventional mean-
ings and is therefore incompatible with the rejection of such
things as languages. Does it follow from Davidson's position
that Humpty Dumpty was right? The answer is no, but for a
different reason. Humpty Dumpty was wrong in using "glory"
to mean "nice knock-down argument" because he could not
reasonably expect Alice to understand his very peculiar idiolect,
not because he was violating a convention.

   This point is important, for one of the reasons to take lan-
guages and not idiolects (or habits of speech of an individual
when addressing a particular hearer at a particular time) as ba-
sic rests, I think, in failing to distinguish between idiolects and
private languages. If by private language we mean a language
spoken by a single individual, then, by definition, idiolects are
private languages. Consequently there must be something wrong
in arguments against private languages, for it is a plain empirical
fact that private languages in this trivial sense exist. Actually,
no two individuals speak exactly the same and, therefore, every-
body is, in this trivial sense, the speaker of a private language.[7]
Of course, the private languages private-language arguments
talk about are private in the stronger sense that the meanings
or rules of use of the words are accessible only to the speaker.
But the idiolects Davidson talks about are not private in the
strong and philosophically interesting sense. The starting point
of Davidson's analysis of malapropisms that lead to the rejection

   [7] See Davidson 1993a, p. 117.

of the usual notion of language is the *factum* of communication. Interpretability in principle, even by a radical interpreter, is for him a criterion of languagehood.[8] Language is a social practice, and, as Davidson has stressed, there is no language without an interpreter.[9] And there can be no successful interpreter if there is no possibility for the audience to find out what the speaker means. This rules out Humpty Dumpty's bizarre use of "That's glory for you" to mean "That's a nice knock-down argument for you". And this would entail that speakers must follow some convention only if conformity to a convention was the only way to make oneself understood. But this is not the case, for nonstandard successful uses of words are a ubiquitous phenomenon. Idiolects relevant for the argument are not private languages, for they must be interpretable, in principle, by the audience. A condition not met by Humpty Dumpty, whose behavior, by Davidsonian standards, would not count even as linguistic behavior. Humpty Dumpty was wrong.

3. *Mistakes*

Let's turn to linguistic mistakes. There is an apparent puzzle. We have assumed that the possibility of mistakes follows from the normativity of meaning.[10] But it seems that we cannot give sense to the idea of a linguistic mistake when talking only of the habits of speech of an individual addressing a particular hearer at a particular time.

What is a linguistic mistake? Something obvious that should be always taken into account is that it makes sense to speak of a mistake only relative to some aim. If the aim is to use the Spanish sentence "*Boris entiende*" with the meaning attached to it by the Spanish Royal Academy of Language, then it is

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[8] See Davidson 1974. Davidson's claim is stronger, for he takes translatability to a familiar tongue to be a criterion of languagehood. But, as I have tried to show elsewhere, this claim is both false and unnecessary for Davidson's aims (see Hernández Iglesias 1994 and 1999, and Davidson's response in Davidson 1999).

[9] See Davidson 1992.

[10] And that meaning is normative. On this point see Bilgrami 1993 and Davidson 1993b.

a mistake to use it to mean anything different from "Boris understands". If it is your intention to use it according to the meaning colloquially attached to it by some social groups, then it is a mistake to use it to mean anything different from "Boris is gay". If you want to use it in an idiosyncratic sense given to the sentence by, say, you and your partner, whatever this sense may be, then it would be a mistake to use it differently. There is no reason to think that the possibility of an absolute mistake is essential to linguistic communication.

Two cases then should be distinguished. One is the case in which the speaker does have the intention of speaking conforming to some convention (if there is one) or, simply, conforming to the usage of some group. In this case, the speaker can be said to have made a mistake, even if he succeeds in communicating. This is the case of Mrs. Malaprop when, by saying "a nice derangement of epitaphs", she both intends to mean "a nice arrangement of epithets" and to talk according to standard linguistic rules. By "epitaph" she means "epithet"; she does communicate to the audience her opinion about how well some epithets are arranged and, at the same time, she makes a mistake, because it was not her intention to make a pun but to speak in the standard way.

The second possibility is that there is no intention on the part of the speaker to conform to standard use of words. This is the difficult case, for it seems unclear with respect to what the speaker could be mistaken. It seems that, whatever the speaker may mean by whatever he says, he must be right, and this entails that "right" or "wrong" have no application.

To address this problem, I must first summarize the account of communication proposed in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs". According to it, two kind of semantic theories are involved in interpretation: the prior and the passing theories. Davidson defines them in the following way:

> For the hearer, the prior theory expresses how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker, while the passing theory is how he *does* interpret the utterance. For the

speaker, the prior theory is what he *believes* the interpreter's prior theory to be, while his passing theory is the theory he *intends* the interpreter to use.[11]

How can a linguistic mistake be described in this conceptual frame without appealing to linguistic conventions? There are three possible kinds of mistakes on the part of the speaker:

1. The speaker can hold a false belief about the prior theory of the interpreter, that is, speaker's and hearer's prior theories are not the same (cases IB and IIB in the Appendix). This happens in the following example: The standard meaning of the Spanish word "*entiende*" is "understands", but colloquially it can also mean "is homosexual". Let's suppose that if I say "*Boris entiende*" to a colleague meaning that Boris is gay but not realizing that my colleague belongs to a fundamentalist extreme right cult and, therefore, his prior theory does not include "homosexual" among the possible meanings of "*entiende*". In this case my colleague will interpret me, following his prior theory, as meaning that Boris understands (case IB2a). If he finds the statement that Boris understands strange, maybe he will try to construct a passing theory. If the context gives enough clues and my colleague is smart enough, maybe, in spite of my mistake, he will interpret me correctly as meaning that Boris is gay (case IB1). If the context does not give enough clues or my colleague is not smart enough, he will build a wrong passing theory, mistakenly interpreting me as asserting, say, that Boris is very fond of women (IB2b).[12]

[11] Davidson 1986, p. 442.

[12] In these examples the speaker is talking normally, for he wants to be interpreted according to his prior theory. An example of a IIB case would be if I said "*Boris entiende*" to my colleague mistakenly believing that, as a member of a fundamentalist extreme right wing group, he ignores the colloquial meaning of "*entiende*", but nevertheless meaning that Boris is gay, hoping that he will be able to understand what I mean. Case IIB1a would happen if my colleague did not ignore the colloquial meaning and interpreted me correctly, thinking, mistakenly, that I was talking normally. Cases IIB2a and b are similar to IB2a and b. An instance of IIB1b would be the following: my colleague and his fundamentalist friends usually say "*entiende*" to mean

2. The hearer can wrongly take the speaker to be speaking normally while the speaker is speaking deviatingly (with respect to his prior theory) or, conversely, take the speaker to speak deviatingly when he is speaking normally. In this case, both the speaker and the hearer can be responsible for the misunderstanding. Whose mistake it is depends on whether there was enough evidence for the hearer to find out whether the speaker was or was not speaking normally.

3. In the case where both prior theories are the same and the hearer rightly interprets that the speaker is talking deviatingly (again with respect to his prior theory), the hearer can fail to find a right passing theory. Again whether there is a mistake on the part of the speaker depends on whether there were enough clues available to the hearer to find out the right interpretation.[13]

It is the first kind of mistake that corresponds to the ordinary notion of linguistic mistake as a violation of linguistic conventions. And maybe we should reserve the term "mistake" only for mistakes of this kind. What is important is that, within this conceptual apparatus, and without commitment to the usual notion of language, we can give sense to the concept of a linguistic mistake. It is worth noting that the definition of a linguistic mistake as a mismatch of prior theories is close to our intuitive concept and, as the taxonomy in the appendix shows, does not collapse into the notion of communication failure: communication can succeed in spite of the speaker's linguistic mistakes and it can fail without the speaker making any mistake.[14]

"good homophobic Christian" and he interprets me as saying that Boris is a good homophobic Christian.

[13] Note that the use of the words "normally" and "deviatingly" carries no commitment to linguistic conventions, for they are relative to the speaker's prior theory. "Normally" here means according to the speaker's prior theory and "deviatingly" means not according with the speaker's prior theory.

[14] Another kind of speaker's mistake can be added. The speaker can fail to use the words he wants to use (that is the case of slips of tongue). In this case, the mismatch holds between the words S wants to utter and the words S actually utters.

From Davidson's conceptual framework it is then possible to define linguistic mistakes. In the cases in which there is the additional intention on the part of the speaker to conform to the linguistic uses of some group, a second kind of mistake is possible: the mistake of using a prior theory very different from the ones by which the members of the group usually interpret each other. But this additional intention, although frequent and important, is not essential to linguistic communication.

4. *Conventions*

If my point above is correct, it is possible to talk of linguistic mistakes different from violations of conventions. This answers the normativity argument, but not Dummett's other related *reductio ad absurdum* of Davidson's position, that is, that it entails that words like "English", "Spanish" or "Basque" have no reference; that textbooks, dictionaries, grammars or political vindications of them lack a subject matter, and that sentences like "I don't speak Hungarian very well", "Urdu is my first language" or "Basque is a living language" are meaningless.[15]

This argument rests on the confusion of two different theses: the thesis that there is no such thing as a linguistic convention, and the thesis that conventions are not a necessary condition for linguistic meaning. The first is the thesis Davidson may seem to defend[16] and is, I think, clearly false. The second is the one I think he does defend.[17]

The first claim contradicts the obvious empirical fact that there are lots of explicit linguistic conventions. But this is not the crucial issue. The interesting problem is whether conventions are essential to language, and this cannot be settled just by pointing to actual linguistic conventions. Language existed before conventions. Normalizations of languages are made when needed to ensure communication. For instance, when a language

[15] See Dummett 1986, p. 465.

[16] Or actually defends. Since my point is not exegetical, I will not pursue this issue.

[17] Or should have defended.

becomes the official language of a territory, or the usual communication vehicle of a community for which precision and terminological unity are particularly important (i.e. a scientific community). The fact that we usually call English, Spanish or Basque natural languages obscures this point. What we call natural languages is something much more artificial than we usually believe. This artificial nature of what we somehow naively call natural is more evident, but not bigger, in minority languages that, like Basque, have not been official and systematically used and taught in schools until recent times. Non-normalized languages never used in educational institutions and without a written literary, scientific or legal tradition often have no written grammars, spelling rules or dictionaries. In other words, they lack explicit conventions and their identity criteria are very vague. But, obviously, persons who don't speak a normalized language do speak and succeed in communicating with each other. Conventions are needed for certain purposes in certain particular situations. They are not a requisite for linguistic communication.

A possible rejoinder to what I have said is that it applies only to explicit sets of conventions, but not to the tacit conventions that allegedly pre-exist normalization. Let's assume, for the sake of the argument, that non-normalized, genuine 'natural' languages have implicit sets of conventions, whatever this is. A first difficulty is that this view seems to rest in the naive view of linguistic normalization as a basically descriptive task. But the establishment of an official standard language to be used by judges, ministers, lawyers, functionaries, schoolteachers, journalists or translators of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is not simply a descriptive task. Language-normalizers are not just making explicit a set of pre-existing rules. Very often they are inventing words or deciding which ones are 'the right ones', what spelling and sentence constructions are 'correct' and even what letters or sounds 'belong' to the language. In other words, they are creating a standard language. Sometimes they even have to give a name to the language in question (an issue sometimes even more controversial than the rest).

Of course, it could be argued that each of the different dialects had, before normalization, its own set of implicit conventions (the conventions the descriptive linguist is supposed to make explicit). The fact that only one of them or a sort of new meta-dialect becomes the standard language does not mean that the rest did not have conventions, although these conventions will never be codified and will be progressively overridden by the novel explicit ones. The trouble here is that, once we leave strongly explicitly conventionalized languages, what we find is a cluster of different dialects, which, in turn, are abstractions of different more local dialects. In addition to horizontal varieties, we find a cluster of different 'languages' correlated with social, generation or other groups, which, ultimately, are abstractions of idiolects. Once we take this complexity into account, it is difficult to defend that languages have clear identity conditions.

Summarizing: the more normalized (that is, the more 'artificial') a language is, the more explicit its conventions are, the more constitutive is the role these conventions play, and the clearer its identity criteria are. In absence of normalization, identity criteria for languages are very vague. I want to stress that I don't find anything wrong with this vagueness and that I have no nominalistic prejudices against abstraction. As usual, vagueness is not a problem. The problem lies in theories that essentially presuppose that some entities have more sharp-cut identity conditions than they actually have. What I object is the assumption that such abstract and only vaguely definable entities are the object of the analysis of meaning and that their existence is a pre-requisite of communication.[18]

5. *Conclusions*

The subject of Davidson's essay "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" is apparently modest: the interpretation of malapropisms. But the analysis given has far-reaching consequences. The most spectacular is, of course, the conclusion that languages do not exist. It falls beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate Davidson's arguments for this thesis. My point has been

[18] See Pereda 1998.

to defend the plausibility of its conclusion against the widely held view that the rejection of languages is clearly false, or even absurd. My conclusions are that:

1. It is possible to talk of linguistic mistakes (different from communication failures) without accepting the existence of languages in the usual sense.

2. The rejection of natural languages in the usual sense does not entail the possibility of private languages.

3. The rejection of natural languages in the usual sense does not entail that we cannot speak about conventionalized languages, but only that the existence of conventionalized languages is not a possibility condition of successful linguistic communication.

Carefully scrutinized, Davidson's controversial thesis is not as strange as it is usually taken to be. Davidson has written that, "as so often in philosophy, it is hard to improve intelligibility while retaining the excitement".[19] This holds, as I believe he would be happy to accept, for his own assertion that there is no such thing as a language.

Appendix: Taxonomy of Linguistic Mistakes

S = speaker. H = hearer
S1 = Speaker's prior theory. S2 = Speaker's passing theory
H1 = Hearer's prior theory. H2 = Hearer's passing theory
In bold: mistakes of kind 1 (see § 3)
In italics: mistakes of kind 2 or 3 in which there are none of kind 1 (see § 3)

CASE I: S1 = S2 (S speaks normally)

A) H1 = S1 (No speaker's mistake)

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[19] Davidson 1974, p. 183.

1) H2 = H1 = S1 = S2 Successful communication
2) *H2 ≠ H1 = S1 = S2 Communication failure (H wrongly interprets S as speaking deviatingly)*

B) H1 ≠ S1 (Speaker's mistake)

1) H2 = S1 = S2 ≠ H1 Successful communication (H finds a right passing t.)
2) H2 ≠ S1 = S2 ≠ H1 Communication failure (H doesn't find the right passing t.)
   a) H2 = H1 (H rightly interprets S as speaking normally)
   b) H2 ≠ H1 (H wrongly interprets S as speaking deviatingly)

CASE II: S1 ≠ S2 (S speaks deviatingly)

A) H1 = S1 (No speaker's mistake)

1) *H2 = H1 = S1 ≠ S2 Communication failure (H wrongly interprets S normally)*
2) H2 ≠ H1 = S1 ≠ S2 (H rightly interprets S as speaking deviatingly)
   a) H2 = S2 Successful communication (H finds a right passing t.)
   b) *H2 ≠ S2 Communication failure (H doesn't find a right passing t.)*

B) H1 ≠ S1 (Speaker's mistake)

1) H2 = H1 ≠ S1 ≠ S2 (H wrongly interprets S as speaking normally)
   a) H2 = S2 Successful communication (H uses a right passing t.) (linguistic luck)
   b) H2 ≠ S2 Communication failure (H doesn't use a right passing t.)

2) $H2 \neq H1 \neq S1 \neq S2$ (H rightly interprets S as speaking deviatingly)

   a) $H2 = S2$ Successful communication (H uses a right passing t.)

   b) $H2 \neq S2$ Communication failure (H doesn't use a right passing t.)

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