HOW DO SENTENCES DO IT?

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> If it is asked: "How do sentences manage to represent?" – the answer might be: "Don't you know? You certainly see it, when you use them." For nothing is concealed.
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> How do sentences do it? – Don't you know? For nothing is hidden.
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> But given this answer: "But you know how sentences do it, for nothing is concealed" one would like to retort "Yes, but it all goes by so quick, and I should like to see it as it were laid open to view."
>
> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 435

Accounts of sentence understanding

1. In his essay "Truth and Meaning" Donald Davidson writes,

> It is conceded by most philosophers of language, and recently even by some linguists, that a satisfactory theory of meaning must give an account of how the meanings of sentences depend upon the meanings of words.[1]

P. F. Strawson, on the other hand, writes, in his essay "Meaning and Truth",

> … we must acknowledge … that the meaning of a sentence in general depends, in some systematic way, on the meanings of the words that make it up …[2]

Although Strawson is here engaged in a polemic against Davidson, they are apparently agreeing on how sentences mean: the meaning of a sentence is dependent on the meanings of the words (or expressions) of which it consists. This might not be thought surprising: after all, one might think,

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[1] "Truth and Meaning", in Martinich (ed.), *The Philosophy of Language*, 3rd ed. New York & Oxford: Oxford Univeristy Press, 1996, p. 92.
[2] "Meaning and Truth", Martinich, op. cit., p. 104.

the conviction they share is self-evident. The idea that the meanings of sentences are dependent on the meanings of their constituent parts must be the starting point for any meaningful inquiry into linguistic meaning, must it not?

If asked to give our grounds for this conviction, we might spell it out roughly along the following lines: obviously, some kind of general ability must underlie the fact that we are able to learn to speak and to use and understand sentences in an infinite array of different situations; otherwise this latter ability would be a mystery. And the fact that this ability is shared by the members of a language community, in turn, is what explains the fact that communication by means of words is possible.

In fact, the choice of Davidson and Strawson as representatives of this view is more or less arbitrary; it would not have been hard to find analogous ideas expressed by a number of philosophers within the analytic tradition (and probably beyond it).[3] In this essay, however, I wish to question this line of thought.

2. What kind of claim are we actually making in saying that the meaning of a sentence is dependent on the meanings of the words in it? Are we formulating an empirical hypothesis which is meant to explain our language ability as a psychological phenomenon, or are we laying down a logical condition for calling something understanding?

If it is supposed to explain events occurring at various points in time, such as the communicative success of various speakers at various occasions, it would evidently have to be understood as an empirical hypothesis. What we wish for, it seems, is an empirical explanation of the fact that most of us acquire the enormously complex ability to understand one another's talk and to make ourselves understood.

This image seems to be what gets expressed by Davidson in the way he continues the passage quoted before:

[3] On this, cp. Sören Stenlund, "On the Concept of Language in some Recent Theories of Meaning", *Synthèse* 79 (1989), 51-98.

> Unless … an account [of how the meanings of sentences depend upon the meanings of words] could be supplied for a particular language, it is argued, there would be no explaining the fact that we can learn the language: no explaining the fact that, on mastering a finite vocabulary and a finitely stated set of rules, we are prepared to produce and to understand any of a potential infinitude of sentences.

(While Davidson does not express this as his own view, he cautiously comments that he senses "more than a kernel of truth" in it.[4])

Of course, it is conceded, context too plays a part in communication. For instance, in the case of indexicals (words like "I", "you", "this", "now", "there") as well as that of ambiguous expressions, the speech situation must be relied upon to supply the pieces that are missing in order to give the sentence a determinate sense. The part assigned to the context, however, is clearly specified by the sentence itself.

This, then, seems to be no more than common sense. The fact that we are able to understand an endless variety of sentences in all kinds of different situations, it seems, can only be explained by the fact that our language forms a system consisting of parts working together in a determinate fashion to produce meaning. Now, regarding this as an empirical explanation means regarding it as one alternative among several which should be tested against empirical evidence. Saying that different parts of the language "work together" would then purport to describe (albeit in a fairly loose and general way) what goes on in individual users of language when they interact. Even if one may think that this particular hypothesis has a strong ring of plausibility, taking a scientific attitude demands that we subject it to scrutiny. We should be open for surprises: "folk linguistics", like many other forms of folk wisdom, may well turn out to be inaccurate.

However, this is not the attitude we actually find among most philosophers writing about these issues. There seems to be a strong inclination to think that this cannot be a mere empirical hypothesis. Thus, as we saw, Davidson suggested that without an account of how the meanings of sentences depend upon the meanings of words, "there would be no explaining the fact that we can learn the language". Here, the assertion has the ring of the *a priori.* We seem to be up against what Wittgenstein called a metaphysical "must"; something that appears like a necessity because we have

[4] As we shall see, Davidson modified his view later on.

not made it clear to ourselves whether we are expressing our determination to speak a certain way or formulating a hypothesis that is subject to testing.

Let us look more closely into the suggestion that mastery of language is gradually built up from learning the meanings of words. What seems to speak in favour of this idea is that it may appear that children learn to speak (and to understand speech) by learning the meanings of different words. Now, it is clear that learning to speak happens by stages. However, the idea that those stages could consist in more and more words being added to the child's vocabulary (the way one might study German by gradually acquiring a growing vocabulary) is problematic. We may see this if we ask ourselves what might be a counter-example to this hypothesis. It would presuppose that someone understood a great many words but did not understand sentences consisting of those words. In this case, it is hard to see what understanding the words would come to. (This is so if one supposes that understanding words is a sufficent condition for understanding sentences. If one assumes that the understanding of words is a *necessary* condition, a similar problem arises but in the opposite direction: in that case, one would have to be able to imagine cases in which someone understands a number of sentences but does not understand the words in them.)

Evidently, we can imagine no counter-examples to the idea that language is learnt through the learning of vocabulary. This lends it the appearance of a *necessary* truth, whereas the conclusion should perhaps be that the claim is empty.

We have all, of course, witnessed little children gradually picking up words, coming to use them in new contexts; or being bewildered on hearing some word they have never heard before. Or children gradually discovering the scope of some concept, extending a word to cover ever new instances, then being corrected until their application of the word gradually comes to match that of other speakers. How can anyone deny that language-learning proceeds by learning the meanings of words? Now to be sure, this may be a useful way of describing the way the learning proceeds, as long as we are clear that *this does not explain what makes this process possible*. We can describe what the child has mastered by saying that she has already learnt the words *"x", "y"* and *"z"*, but we should be confused if we thought that the concept of word meaning had a role in how the learning happened. It simply is not a question of the child *learning one thing through the other*.

Before a child learns to speak, there is no linguistic instruction separable from the overall interaction between the child and her surroundings. It is only when a child has learnt such

sophisticated words as "word", "means", "name" or "is called", that there can be such an activity as specifically teaching him the meaning of some word. Until then, children learn to communicate by means of language simply by taking part in communication by means of language.[5]

3. If this argument is correct it is unclear what it would mean to entertain the idea that the understanding of sentences is based on the understanding of words *as an empirical hypothesis.* Should we, then, choose the second option, and argue that the understanding of words is a *logical* condition for the understanding of sentences? This means that we should not say that someone had understood a sentence if it turned out that he had not understood the words in the sentence. There is much that speaks in favour of this view of things. It seems self-evident that the understanding of an utterance must be bound up with something beyond the present situation. The question whether someone understood what was said cannot be isolated from questions about his ability to respond adequately to a great number of other utterances.

How are we to characterize the requisite background? We might be inclined to regard it in the light of what it is to have mastered a foreign language. If a native speaker of English wishes to show that he has understood a sentence in Chinese, he may do so by indicating what the words in the sentence mean in English and maybe too by explaining how the sentence is constructed in grammatical terms. Someone who speaks only Chinese or who has not studied grammar is not in a position to do this. But we think that his understanding would show itself in his understanding its logical properties, e.g. he understands what is entailed by it, what is excluded by it (and the same for other sentences containing the same words), etc.

If this is what we mean by saying that an understanding of sentences presupposes an understanding of the words in the sentences, there is nothing problematic about the idea. What it means, strictly speaking, is that we would not call a person's relation to any sentence *understanding* unless he had a similar relation to other sentences. In saying this, we have not committed ourselves to any view of exactly *what* other sentences he must have this relation to. In fact, once more, we have not

[5] This observation might throw light on Wittgenstein's remark, *Tractatus* 3.263:

> The meanings of primitive signs can be explained by means of elucidations. Elucidations are sentences that contain the primitive signs. So they can only be understood if the meanings of those signs are already known.

The point could be expressed as follows: our understanding of the particular sings evolves (can, at first, only evolve) from an understanding of things people say.

maintained a connection between two things: the understanding of words and the understanding of sentences, but are simply speaking about one thing from two different perspectives. We are, however, in danger of overlooking this, and telling ourselves that we have given an account of how sentence understanding is possible.

For some reason we find it hard to stick consistently to the purely logical reading of this idea. The idea that an understanding of words and grammar explains how linguistic communication is possible is constantly hovering in the background. I now wish to give a closer illustration of what is problematic about this idea.

Grammarbook understanding

4. Suppose all the words in a sentence are familiar to me and I am able to make out the syntax. In that case, let us say, I have a "grammarbook understanding" of the sentence. The view I am discussing could then be expressed as the view that this kind of grammarbook understanding is what ultimately underlies and makes possible communication by means of language.

We might illustrate this idea by thinking of the way a student might go about doing translation exercises from the Latin. Latin eloquence is often marked by sentences that are quite compressed or convoluted (or both), so translating them may be a demanding chore in which one has to decide which words go together, what things are implied, which of a large number of possible senses should be assigned to a given word, etc. Of course, understanding things said in our own language is normally much more straightforward, and thus we understand sentences without actually having to disentangle them. But just because of this, it will be thought, the Latin case is useful in bringing out the kind of ability on which the understanding of sentences is dependent.

In fact, I would argue, the Latin case does provide a useful comparison, but in a way that is quite the opposite of what was intended. It is true that if I do not have an overview of a sentence, I may have to start out by performing a grammatical analysis, deciding on the relevant senses of the words, etc. Still, the test of whether I have succeeded is the fact that the end result makes sense. It is only if I am able to imagine a situation in which this might be a thing to say that I can be confident of having hit on the right analysis. The methods of analysis I use are merely a heuristic device, they are not what constitutes my understanding of the sentence; for if they were, I would have no

recourse for judging the success of the analysis. So I need to have an independent grasp of what makes sense. [6]

In fact, the phrase "making out the syntax" (which corresponds, I believe, to what linguists call *parsing*) is ambiguous: on the one hand, it might mean formulating a hypothesis as to what the syntax of a sentence *might* be, and on the other hand, it might mean coming to see what the syntax actually is. That is to say: on the one hand it refers to an activity, on the other hand to an achievement. Or, as we might also put it: in one case, it is a matter of being true to the grammar book, in the other case, of being true to the utterance. The idea we are criticizing rests on the failure to distinguish between these two. This leads us to suppose that the result we get if we identify a possible syntax (which might be done more or less mechanically by following the grammarbook) will *be* the syntax of the sentence. In fact, on this view this is *all we can do*. Thus, if we find that several syntaxes are compatible with the same sentence, we have no recourse for deciding which is the right one, since that would entail that we had some independent way of judging which reading made more sense. Analogously, provided we had hit on a possible syntax, we could have no reason to judge that the reading we came up with failed to make any sense at all.

For an illustration, consider the epigram that Jacques Turgot wrote about Benjamin Franklin:

Eripuit fulmen coelo sceptrumque tyrannis.

The obvious rendering of this is

(1) "He snatched lightning from the sky and the sceptre from the tyrants."

However, grammatically speaking there are several other conceivable translations, such as the following:

(2) "He snatched the lightning and the sceptre from the sky for the tyrants", or
(3) "He snatched lightning and the sceptre from the sky by means of the tyrants."

[6] This does not entail, of course, that if the sentence makes sense, I have in fact hit on the correct reading.

It might be illuminating to compare the translation of a Latin sentence with the solving of a jigsaw puzzle. Finding a possible syntax is like finding some way of arranging the pieces in which they all fit together geometrically. A machine might do this. But this does not mean that we have succeeded in solving the puzzle, since the picture may not come out right, and then we have to try some other geometrically possible arrangement. This is something we need to *see*.

Then again, it might be the case that the arrangement is correct but we fail to see it. There are various possibilities here. We may fail to make out the picture because it represents something we are not familiar with, say, a piece of machinery or an animal we have never seen before. Having been shown the object, we might then be able to make it out in the picture. Analogously, if we are puzzled by the Franklin epigram, it may fall into place if we are told about his exploits with the lightning rod as well as in connection with the American Revolution. Before that, it may strike us as sheer nonsense.

On the other hand, we might fail to make out the picture because we are not looking at it in the right way. Later on a new aspect may dawn on us. Analogously, even though we are familiar with Franklin's achievements, we might fail to see how the image of snatching a sceptre from tyrants could be said to fit anything he did, until it struck us that the sceptre can be seen as symbolic of British power.[7]

To continue with the comparison, in either case it is only when we are confident that we have got the whole picture right that we may be able to say what the individual pieces represent – what looked like a piece of sky may turn out to have been a piece of the blue scarf of the woman in the foreground, etc. And the same goes for the lexical and grammatical elements of the sentences. Just as in the case of the jigsaw puzzle, the context reflects back on the way the sentence is seen to hang together. It is our understanding of the utterance that enables us to hear the grammar in what was said.[8]

Addressees and bystanders

5. In fact, classroom exercises may be of two clearly different kinds. The Turgot epigram was a sentence that had been formulated by an actual person for a given purpose for an actual audience.

[7] Further: manufactured examples in grammarbooks might be compared to the ambiguous pictures in psychology textbooks, like the famous duckrabbit, where there is no correct or incorrect way of seeing them.
[8] There is an analogous point to be made in ethics.

However, many exercises are not if this kind. Sentences like “Jack and Jill went up the hill” or “Bo Beep has lost her sheep”, as it were, have no existence outside the classroom. They do not express judgments about any specific individuals, or any given points in time. If the sentence “Jack and Jill went up the hill” is encountered in a grammarbook, there is no correct answer to the question whether they went on foot or rode in a car, whether they were people or dogs, etc. The choice of context is arbitrary. These questions cannot be raised since the person who formulated the sentences did not *mean* anything by them. They are not addressed to someone. They cannot be understood or misunderstood, only be handled correctly or incorrectly in the context of the grammatical exercise to which they belong. The sole criterion of a successful analysis, in this case, is that the grammar allows for it. There is no distinction between a possible analysis and the correct analysis (or parsing).[9]

Where historical examples are concerned, on the other hand, there *is* a question about the right reading. They were written or spoken for a particular occasion, by someone who was addressing an audience and who meant something by what she said. The difference could also be expressed as follows: in the historical case there are *addressees*, in the made-up case there are not. Suppose, for instance, the historical text is a letter addressed to a particular person. In that case, she is the addressee, and we are bystanders in relation to the original act of communication. The task of the student, in such a case, is to make out what the sentence meant to the addressee. In the made-up case, no such distinction exists.

The failure to distinguish between these two kinds of exercise cases makes us overlook the distinction between the two senses of “making out the syntax”; for in the made-up case the two senses coincide. This results in a view of linguistic meaning that could be called “addressee neutral”. (The fact that we tend to overlook the distinction between these kinds of example is itself symptomatic of the predominant view of language that I am discussing.)[10]

6. What does it mean to be an addressee? When someone is talking *to you* in the context of a human activity, you are not meant simply to try to recognize what she is saying as something a person might conceivably say. Her words may, for instance, demand a response on your part, the particular

[9] If the student proposes parsings that are conceivable but very farfetched it may nevertheless be regarded as a sign of poor judgment or lack of cooperation.

[10] Might it be suggested that some of the arguments of the deconstructionists depend on regarding all uses of language as though they were classroom exercises of the made-up kind?

response required being dependent on the specifics of the situation. Thus, what will constitute an adequate response to a sentence like "The new refrigerators will be arriving tomorrow" will probably vary depending on whether these words are uttered by a salesperson to a prospective customer, by a representative of the transport firm to the store manager, by the store manager to a worker in the store who is supposed to clear a space for the new products, by gangster boss Tony Soprano to one of his underlings in the course of planning a heist, etc.

If any such background is lacking, there is no determinate way in which the speaker's words are to be taken. If a stranger walks up to you in the street and tells you, out of the blue, "The new refrigerators will be arriving tomorrow", your primary difficulty may not be that of guessing what refrigerators she is talking about or where they will be arriving, but what kind of thing she is doing in speaking to you. You may suspect that she is mistaking you for someone else, that what is going on is an artistic happening or a psychological experiment, that she is mentally disturbed, or that it is all part of an advertising drive. If no such assumption holds up, you simply have no idea how to relate to her words; you have no relation to the speaker in which her words might play an intelligible part. You have no reason to think that you have received a (regrettably incomplete) piece of information. The classroom examples, however, make us overlook the fact that typically, when one person speaks to another in the stream of life, the *kind* of remark she can be understood to be making is more or less severely restricted by the circumstances in which she is speaking (not only as to the likelihood of what she might be talking about but as to the intelligibility of what she is saying).

In a commonly held view of sentence meaning, however, the difference between the classroom cases and the real-life situation tends to be ignored. The only difference, it is thought, is that in the one case one simply has to figure out the sense of what is said, in the other case one has, in addition, to go on to apply it. The core achievement of *understanding the sentence spoken* is the same in both situations. In fact, it might be said, the classroom case is a purer example of what is involved in understanding speech, since there is no distraction here from the particulars of the situation. On the other hand, it may be conceded that the task of understanding is made simpler in the real-life situation by the fact that more of the context is supplied from the start. However, one does not consider there to be any important logical difference between the cases. What is immediately given to the addressee in the latter case could just as well have been made explicit in the utterance. If we commonly abstain from making the context explicit in a speech situation, we do so merely to save time.

This view of the matter, however, disregards the fact that the *logical relation* between the sense of what is said and the listener's response is wholly different in the two cases. In the normal case the addressee is not supposed to try to reach a *verdict* about the meaning of the utterance. Rather, by responding as he does he as it were completes the utterance. He is *in* the context and *part* of it. For the speaker to have the ability to communicate (and the wish to do so) is for her to express herself in such a way that the addressee *will* respond appropriately. If this fails – if the addressee has to try to guess at her meaning or gets it wrong – then to that extent communication has not taken place. The situation, then, is exceptional in that respect, and the way to rectify it is by reference to situations in which communication does *not* fail. We should not begin by looking at exceptional cases if we wish to get clear about the way language enters into communication.[11]

The bystander's understanding, on the other hand, is secondary in relation to that of an addressee. Imagine, say, that some FBI agents manage to intercept Soprano's call. For them, it is a question of trying to figure out what the call would mean to the person he is talking to. The task is perhaps made more difficult for them by the fact that their knowledge of the context may not match that of the addressee. (Soprano might avail himself of this fact by minimizing the verbal content of the message and relying maximally on the context, in order to prevent possible eavesdroppers from catching on.) But the amount of knowledge is not the crucial difference between them; in fact, we could easily imagine a case in which a bystander knows more about the context (as understood by the speaker) than the addressee does.

The bystander's success is partly dependent on how much of the context is supplied to him. However, the context is not "supplied" to the adressee: as was said, he is right *in* it. For him, it does not enter as additional information, but rather it forms the background in which the speaker's utterance takes on the significance it has. His task is not to reach a verdict about the utterance, but to respond in some way. For the addressee, some aspects of the context do not enter in such a way that a description would have served as well. For one thing, when a speaker utters words in order to say something to another, there is the question in what capacity she is speaking, and the question in what capacity the addressee is spoken to. If a question arises as to the reliability of the speaker or

[11] Of course, the purpose of communication is not always that the primary addressee should understand what is said. Thus, in drawing up a contract one party might formulate some condition in such a way that the other party will not realize its significance; still the author of the contract will want to be able to argue, if a conflict should arise, that the condition was unequivocally (however unclearly) stated in the contract.

her authority for issuing commands, it cannot be resolved through her assuring us that she is reliable or has the requisite authority. This must be presupposed in the act of speaking.

For the *bystander* the addressee (or at least how the speaker thinks of him) is part of the context he will have to consider in trying to get clear about the message. The addressee, on the other hand, will not normally think of *himself* (or of how the speaker thinks of him) as part of the context: his response, of course, will not normally be based on surmising his own likely response. It is only when there is a glitch in the process of communication that such considerations will arise. If the addressee misunderstands his assignment, for instance, there may be an argument about whether the fault was with the speaker or with him. They might argue about the way the words used by the speaker would normally be understood. In this case they will take up a perspective on the earlier interchange that is in some respects like that of a bystander. But the possibility of this perspective is derivative from cases in which communication succeeds spontaneously. (At the same time, it is an important aspect of what it means to communicate with words that there *is* such a thing as bystander's understanding; this is what provides the space for disagreement on whose understanding was correct. Unless one could appeal to bystanders' understanding, any disagreement would be reduced to a clash of wills.)

The example I have been discussing is a simple one, in which the response called for is fairly determinate and immediate. Conversation, of course, does not always have such a specific or practical purpose. Someone may tell another about the events of the day, they may reminisce about a trip they took together, or be engaged in small talk, she may ask his forgiveness, declare her love, tell him about her grief, chew him out, etc, etc. Sometimes the addressee is primarily called upon simply to listen. Even here, though, certain ways of responding may be seen as a failure to understand; this may come out in "fine shades of behaviour"[12], or in the way the addressee continues the conversation, how he relates to the speaker later on, etc. Of course, here the line between "appropriate" and "inappropriate" may be quite fleeting, and may become a matter of controversy. (Thus, an adequate reaction is not necessarily the type of reaction the speaker wished for or expected.) Then again, the question who is being addressed, or how the line between addressees and bystanders is to be drawn is often indeterminate, as when someone strikes up a conversation in a room full of people, cries for help in a crowded street, writes a letter to the editor, publishes a poem, etc. It is perhaps misleading to speak of addressees and bystanders as well-

[12] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* IIxi, p. 203.

defined roles in the first place; rather we should think of them as different perspectives on what happens in communicating with words.[13] Nevertheless, we should keep in mind the logical distinction between these perspectives.

For those involved in a linguistic interchange, then, understanding is not primarily a matter of reaching a verdict; it becomes one only if something goes wrong. To believe that the purpose of communication is that the addressee should reach a correct verdict is to mistake communication for a kind of charade, where the point is not so much getting a message across as testing whether one is *able* to get it across by some specific method. In that picture of language we are all bystanders.[14]

Attempting to combine the general and the particular

7. Some philosophers, having acknowledged the role of the particular context of speaking, have advanced some such view as the following: our understanding of what someone is saying is not based on words and grammar alone, but results from the coming together of the utterance itself and situational factors, or, as it is often put: of semantics and pragmatics. This type of view is suggested, for instance, by Rush Rhees in the following passage:

> The point of a remark lies in the way in which it comes into the conversation. … *But it is also the kind of thing of which you cannot give any general account.* And it is only partly a matter of what the meanings of the expressions which are used in the remark are, and the grammar of the remark itself.
>
> On the other hand, it *is* partly that. And that is what makes the account of the matter so difficult. The difficulty lies very largely in trying to see the connexion or the relation between the meanings of the words and the grammatical construction of the remark – the relation between all this, which is in a way general, which could be learned by someone who was learning the language … and the point of the remark as it occurs in the conversation which is not something that could be learned in this way. *On the other hand, the relation of the remark to the rest of the conversation does depend on the general meanings of the expressions used in it; this is undoubted.*[15]

[13] This helpful suggestion was made by Oskari Kuusela.
[14] What is at issue here, it should be clear, is not to what extent understanding is reflective. It is not a matter of affirming or denying that some kind of cognitive machinery is engaged on some level of consciousness or physiology.
[15] "Language, speaking, and common intelligibility", in Rhees, *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 265. First and last italics mine.

This passage is from a manuscript not intended for publication, and it may not represent Rhees's considered view. I mention it here because it gives an interesting illustration of the way the issue of words and understanding may bewilder us. According to Rhees, the point of a remark, being "the kind of thing of which you cannot give any general account" may at the same time be dependent in part on certain general features of language. But this sounds confusing: how can "general meanings" be *part* of an account of something of which *no* general account can be given? Rhees's bewilderment also comes out in some other turns of phrase, e.g. in his speaking about word meaning and grammar as being general *in a way*, without really clarifying what it means for something to be "general in a way"; in his saying that the account of the matter is *difficult* – to which I should like to comment that the feeling that an issue in philosophy is difficult is a sign that we are thinking about it in the wrong way – as well as in the claim that it is *"undoubted"* that the relation of a remark to the rest of the conversation depends on the general meanings of the expressions; where the word "undoubted" is a close kin to the metaphysical "must" we spoke about before. These turns of phrase seem to suggest that Rhees is torn between a logical and an empirical reading of the dependence.[16]

In fact, in one of Davidson's later essays, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs"[17], a similar ambivalence comes very strongly to the fore. He has revised his earlier position, and now rejects the idea that our ability to interpret utterances is based on our having learnt a range of linguistic conventions. Davidson sums up his position as follows:

> … we have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around the world generally.
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>
> I conclude that there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed (p. 475).

According to Davidson, the interpreter of an utterance comes to the speech situation armed with what he calls a "prior theory"; this is expressive of his general cultural competence as well his previous acquaintance with the speaker and the situation at hand. In accordance with what happens

[16] It seems to me that this vacillation is not characteristic of Rhees's view. On the contrary, I believe his overall thinking about language is not very distant from the expressed in this essay. See, e.g., "Can there be a Private Language?", in his collection of essays *Discussions of Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970.)

[17] Originally published in 1985. Reprinted in A. P. Martinich (ed.), *The Philosophy of Language* (3rd ed., New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

in the situation, he adjusts his expectations and comes to form what Davidson calls a "passing theory", i.e. a theory adapted to the particular occasion of speaking. Communication succeeds when the listener employs the passing theory that the speaker intends him to employ.

The strength of this account lies in its acknowledging the particularity of what goes on when people communicate. At the same time, Davidson, like Rhees, wishes to retain an element of generality. He points in the direction of generality in claiming that "nothing should be allowed to obliterate or even blur the distinction between speaker's meaning and literal meaning" (p. 466). It is true that the notion of literal meaning – for which he prefers to use the term "first meaning" – is given an unusual twist: it does not have the generality of the linguistic notion of literal meaning, but rather (apparently) refers to what he takes to be the shared understanding of a word that a speaker is drawing on in trying to communicate.[18]

It is hard to follow Davidson's line of thought throughout the essay; however, it seems that on his account the two types of theory (prior and passing) are needed to form a bridge between the particularity of the listener's response and the generality that he thinks must be retained in any account of language. (The notion of first meaning, it appears, is closely connected with the passing theory the speaker intends for the listener to use.) The appeal to a "theory", he argues, is necessary "only because a description of the interpreter's competence requires a recursive account" (p. 471). I take him to mean that only a recursive account would make it possible for a limited number of principles to explain the virtually infinite range of responses of a competent speaker.[19] However, by retaining the idea that understanding an utterance is constituted by the application of a theory to it, Davidson's account seems to run up against the same conundrum that we encountered before: we have no way of knowing whether we have hit on the *right* theory unless we have independent

[18] The notion of first meaning, however, seems to presuppose that one may speak of "the understanding of a word" independently of its use in a sentence; an idea which was, in my view, effectively criticized by Cora Diamond in her essay, "What Nonsense Might Be", in *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: The M.I.T. Press, 1991). On this, see also my essay "The Sense is where you Find it", in Timothy McCarthy and Sean Stidd (eds.), *Wittgenstein in America* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), pp. 90-103.

[19] It is true that Davidson here speaks about the description rather than the explanation of the interpreter's competence. However, I am uncertain how this is to be understood. Throughout the essay, his argument seems to oscillate between description and explanation (cp. e.g. p. 469). Besides, it is hard to see why a purely descriptive account need be recursive; we can understand why it might be thought that an *explanatory* account of linguistic competence must be given in a finite set of principles, but why would one be inclined to suppose that a *descriptive* account must be, any more than, say, there would *have* to be a recursive account of the flight pattern of a flock of seagulls hovering above a fishing boat?

means of understanding what the speaker might be saying. On the other hand, if we have an independent understanding, we may ask what these theories are actually needed for.[20]

Davidson's idea that the success of communication is dependent on a matchup between the theories held by speaker and hearer is based on his taking it for granted that understanding utterances is a matter of reaching correct verdicts about meanings. The plausibility of this assumption is in turn dependent on the failure to take note of the different relations that hearers – addressees and bystanders – may have to what is said; significantly, Davidson refers to both kinds of hearer as "interpreters". In other words, his view of linguistic understanding remains addressee neutral. It is as though utterances just landed before our feet and it is our task to dissect and classify them. Once the problem is looked at in that way, however, it becomes insoluble. When communication succeeds it is rather because both speakers and addressees possess communicative skills; skills that they have developed through being immersed in a life with language; not through their having aquired a systematic grasp of the *structure* of language.[21]

8. Martin Gustafsson and David Cockburn, having read an earlier version of this essay, made some comments, in private correspondence, in which they defended the place of generality in an account of linguistic communication. Both thought I was going too far in my criticism of generality, throwing out the child with the bathwater. Their comments, while different, both offered important challenges to my position. I shall here restate their arguments and then try to defend myself against them, in the hope that this will help clarify my line of thought.

Martin Gustafsson argued that in my criticism of the standard view of sentence meaning, I fail to allow for the fact that "the way our words function in a particular situation is not an entirely 'particular' matter; the words *have a history of use – we have used them before* – and what we can do with them now is not independent of this earlier use". He went on to point out that this observation is logical, not just psychological. If there were no earlier use of one's words, "there would be no such thing as 'manifesting one's understanding' of those words. Language use, in that

[20] As does Martin Gustafsson in his illuminating critique of Davidson's essay, "Systematic Meaning and Linguistic Diversity: The Place of Meaning-Theories in Davidson's Later Philosophy", *Inquiry* 41 (435-53).
[21] A third philosopher who has expressed views analogous in these respects to those of Rhees and Davidson is Charles Travis (e.g. in *The Uses of Sense: Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Language*). His account is highly sophisticated and contains a number of important insights. For an illuminating discussion, see Martin Gustafsson, "Meaning, Saying, Truth", in Gustafsson & Hertzberg (eds), *The Practice of Language*.

case, would be a mere matter of causal interaction, and words would [simply] be a means for getting people to behave in certain ways."[22]

This sounds convincing. But what exactly is the nature of the generality (non-particularity) that comes into play here? Obviously, when we speak of generalities here, the word should not be understood as referring to the sort of thing that an outside observer who had no understanding of the language might be able to identify simply by observing the behaviour of language users. Generalities in that sense could hardly have a bearing on our understanding of words.[23]

In this connection we might consider a somewhat curious passage in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*:

> 206. --- Suppose you came as an explorer into an unknown country with a language quite strange to you. In what circumstances would you say that the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on? ---
>
> 207. Let us imagine that the people in that country carried on the usual human activities and in the course of them employed, apparently, an articulate language. If we watch their behaviour we find it intelligible, it seems 'logical'. But when we try to learn their language we find it impossible to do so. For there is no regular connexion between what they say, the sounds they make, and their actions; but still these sounds are not superfluous, for if we gag one of the people, it has the same consequences as with us; without the sounds their actions fall into confusion – as I feel like putting it.
>
> Are we to say that these people have a language: orders, reports, and the rest?
>
> There is not enough regularity for us to call it "language".

[22] Email of 31 January 2005. My translation from the Swedish.
[23] It is true that W. V. O. Quine thought that they could. I discuss his view in "Trying to Keep Philosophy Honest", in Alois Pichler & Simo Säätelä (eds.): *Wittgenstein: The Philosopher and his Works*. (Bergen: Working Papers from the Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen, No 17, 2005.)

Wittgenstein seems to overlook the point that, if we have no understanding of the language to begin with, we simply have no idea what the relevant regularities (generalities) might be. The most we could conclude, in this situation, is that the task of learning the language is beyond us.[24]

Obviously, for a generality to be relevant it would have to be the sort of generality speakers themselves would invoke in discussing the meaning of what someone said. Accordingly, it would be the sort of generality that gets articulated in comments of the form, "This word means…", "This is not called…", "You can't use that word here since…". We learn to make and respond to such remarks in learning to speak. There is no independent linguistic reality for them to be tested against (since that "reality" would have to be of the external kind that has no relevance for the meanings of utterances). The generality in question is one that manifests itself only in the making of particular remarks of this kind. They are "tested" against the agreement or disagreement of other speakers. And, if speakers fail to reach an agreement (as, say, on whether a certain shade is to be called green or blue), things will simply have to be left at that.

The fact that such remarks are part of our intercourse with words is undeniably important for the nature of that intercourse: the situation would be radically different if they did not exist. One might discuss to what extent we should still be dealing with a language in that case.[25] If this is Gustafsson's point, I would agree with him. But I do not believe that this gives a logical role to the sort of generality that Rhees and the later Davidson seem to be gesturing towards.

David Cockburn wrote, among other things,

> The tendency to say that there must be something right in the general picture you are criticizing flows from the idea that there must be an explanation of how, to put it crudely, the show stays on the road. You argue very convincingly that a certain kind of response to this puzzle cannot be right. But I'm not sure … that you say much to defuse the idea that *some* story, of this general form, must be correct if we are not to be left with a total mystery.[26]

[24] For instance, if someone tried to discover regularities in Chinese without being aware of the importance of tone, or regularities in Japanese without realizing the importance of levels of politeness, she might be tempted to shrug her shoulders and conclude that there was not enough regularity to call it language.
[25] This is analogous to the point made earlier that unless there were such a thing as bystanders' understanding, linguistic disagreement would boil down to a mere clash of wills.
[26] In an email of 17 January, 2005.

Whereas Gustafsson's comment was concerned with the logical issue of what we are to call linguistic communication, Cockburn is concerned with the empirical problem of how the linguistic communication we actually see taking place is possible. Cockburn's point, evidently, is that I fail to address the issue how linguistic communication is possible in the first place, if (as he agrees) it is not to be explained along the lines suggested by Davidson and Strawson,.

"How does the show stay on the road?" Well, *does* it stay on the road? Does language really work? How can we tell whether it does? For some aspects of what we communicate with words, it does not seem possible to raise the question. We ask and bestow forgiveness, give thanks, tell jokes and stories, give compliments and utter insults, write poetry, etc. What would it mean to suggest that our language might not be adequate for the doing of these things? Evidently, there is no standard for what it means to do them successfully apart from language. With regard to these aspects of language use, the whole question of its staying on the road does not even arise.

In other cases, of course, there are external standards. As the builders of the Tower of Babel found out, many complex projects will fail if the participants cannot use words to coordinate their activities. Language, clearly, is sometimes a powerful instrument, and it seems to be an urgent question how we are able to wield it. Of course, people do not always manage to achieve what they are hoping to achieve by using words, and that is not only because those they are addressing are distrustful or unwilling to cooperate. Misunderstandings, as well as complete failures to understand, are common. Nevertheless we do manage, at least much of the time, and this makes a huge difference.

However, I would claim that it is an illusion to suppose that there is a systematic explanation of how this is possible – it simply happens, except when it does not. There is no underlying generality here. Language is not what enables us to communicate; rather, since we are able to communicate, there is language. Or, differently put, language is not the reason we stay on the road; rather, language is what we *call* this staying-on-the-road.