Knowledge of Meaning in the First Person

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Prof. Dummett's article is divided into two main parts. The first part deals with Davidson's truth-theoretic account of meaning, the second part contains Dummett's own account of meaning in terms of justification. In the following comments, I shall dwell on an issue raised in the first part of Dummett's contribution.

One of Dummett's most important charges against Davidson is that his position appears to be unable to account for the specificity of knowledge of meaning in the first person. More precisely, Dummett submits that *if* Davidson adopts indeterminacy of interpretation in the *strong* sense, then «no one can be his own interpreter» (p. 5). I shall first try to briefly rehearse Dummett's line of argumentation – the way I understand it – in order to obtain a better focus on the scope of his charge. I shall then present what I take to be the central features of Davidson's conception of first-personal knowledge of meaning. I shall finally conclude with some remarks on the relation between Davidson's conception of first-personal knowledge of meaning and the indeterminacy of interpretation. It will appear that the relation between these two notions is less obvious than one might think.

1. Dummett's line of argument

We normally assume that the speaker knows what he means when he or she sincerely utters a sentence. We therefore take the knowledge that one has of the meaning of one's own utterances to set a standard for any interpretation of those same utterances by somebody else. Following a *weak* reading of the indeterminacy of interpretation, one might allow for differences with respect to the meaning of the single words occurring in the uttered sentence, but not with respect to its truth-conditions. If to know the meaning of an uttered

sentence means to know its truth-conditions, then the correct interpretation must determine the truth-conditions the speaker has in fact associated with the sentence that he has uttered. Charity, or any other clue the interpreter might choose to use in order to fix his interpretation, determines the *methodology* of the interpretation, and not the condition of its correctness.

On the other hand, under its strong reading, the indeterminacy of interpretation would imply not only the possibility of variations in the meaning of the words occurring within a statement, but also in the statement's truth-conditions. As Dummett puts it, «two interpretations of a given subject, equally correct by Davidson's lights, might nevertheless attach different truth-conditions to one and the same statement» (p. 3). The choice of clues one uses in order to interpret somebody else's utterances does not just constitute an appropriate methodology, it actually «*defines*», as Dummett says (p. 5), the conditions of correctness of the interpretation itself. In this case, first-personal knowledge of the meaning of one's own statements can hardly set a standard for interpretation. For if there is anything specific about first-personal knowledge of the meaning of one's own statements, then it is the fact that this knowledge does not go by the clues the interpreter normally needs to observe. If, however, the meaning of one's statement is *determined* by its correct interpretation – i.e. by the interpretation based on the correct methodology –, and if one is not one's own interpreter, then one cannot know, just simply on one's own lights, what one means by what one says. Assuming that by knowing the meaning of one's own statements one comes to know one's own beliefs, Dummett can safely conclude that «the beliefs held by a subject would always be relative to someone else's interpretation of him: it would take two – never more than two, but never only one – to make a belief» (p. 5). What seemed to be

the specifically authoritative knowledge one has of the meaning of one's own statements (and of the beliefs they express) appears to have faded away.

Dummett's argument is based on Davidson's article 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge'.[1] Dummett points out that the mentioned article gives room for both the weak and the strong readings of the indeterminacy of interpretation. At one point Dummett even wonders whether Davidson «perhaps never intended to endorse more than weak indeterminacy» (p. 7).

One might conclude at this point that in order to settle this issue, one ought to determine whether there is *independent* evidence in Davidson's writings for his preference for one of the two readings of the indeterminacy of interpretation. One might submit that there is room in Davidson's approach for a conception of the specificity of first-personal knowledge of meaning just in case it can be shown that he rejects, or that he could reject without major theoretical drawbacks, indeterminacy of interpretation in the strong sense.

I do not think, however, that this is the right path to take. It seems to me that on Davidson approach, first personal knowledge of meaning is compatible with both, strong and weak indeterminacy of interpretation. Whatever one might take Davidson's position to be on the latter point, this, I should argue, does not impinge on the question as to whether a speaker knows what he means by the words which he uses.

Let me then first try to present what I take to be the main features of Davidson's conception of first-personal knowledge of meaning. We should then be able to see at what price one could make Davidsonian knowledge of meaning in the first person and indeterminacy of interpretation in the strong sense compatible with each other.

2. Davidson's conception of first-personal knowledge of meaning

Consider the closing passage of Davidson's 'First Person Authority':

> There is a presumption – an unavoidable presumption built into the nature of interpretation – that the speaker usually *knows what he means*. (Davidson, 1984: 111)

Contrary to the conclusion we drew above, this passage strongly suggests that by its very nature interpreta-tion not only fails to jettison the fact that one knows what one means, it actually presupposes its very possibility.

Davidson has repeatedly rejected Burge's social externalism according to which the meaning of a person's words would be determined by the linguistic practices of the person's community. In one instance, criticising Burge, Davidson writes:

> We understand a speaker best when we interpret him *as he intended to be interpreted*. (Davidson, 1993: 75, my emphasis).

Again, this sounds as if Davidson admitted that there must be room for the notion of a subject intending to be interpreted in a certain way and thus setting, one would expect, the standard for any interpretation of his utterances.

As far as I can see, Davidson's main argument in order to make interpretationalism compatible with first personal semantic knowledge uses a version of externalism. Davidson's argument appears to rest on at least four important premises:

D1 The content of a mental state is partly determined by its cause (externalism).[2]

D2 The cause of a mental state is publicly accessible (distal stimulus-theory).[3]

D3 The speaker can know (normally) the content of his or her mental states without knowing what they were caused by.[4]

D4 The hearer cannot determine the content of the states of a speaker without formulating a hypothesis about what they were caused by.[5]

By virtue of D1 and D2 it should be possible for me, at least in principle, to attribute to myself in the first person the same content you would attribute to me on the basis of your interpretative skills: what determines (at least partly) the content of a mental state is publicly accessible and hence graspable by the third person just as well as by the first. Call this the possibility of a *semantic symmetry*. Because of D3 and D4, however, there is an *interpretative asymmetry*: from the first person perspective no interpretation is needed. I (normally) do not have to formulate any hypothesis about what caused my state in order to know what state I am in. Davidson writes:

> . . . where the interpreter must know, or correctly surmise, the events and situations that cause a verbal or other reaction in another person in order to fathom her thoughts, no such nomic knowledge is needed for the thinker to decide what she thinks.

Causal history partly determines what she is thinking, but this determination is independent of any knowledge of the causal history she may have (Davidson, 1989a: 195–196).

When speaking about the causes of one's verbal reactions one must pay attention. In the cases that Davidson has in mind, the relevant causes are *distal* causes[6] acting in the *learning situation*.[7] The meaning-determining stimuli are not located on our sensory surfaces, but in the outer public space. I am normally not mistaken about the content of my own beliefs, because what determines their identity corresponds exactly to what they were caused by in the original learning situation. Since these stimuli are located in the public space, you will – if your interpretative hypotheses are successful – determine the content of my beliefs precisely through what they were caused by in the original learning situation. What you refer to in order to determine the content of my beliefs corresponds to what they were originally caused by.

But we are now facing a new version of an old difficulty: I am normally not mistaken about my beliefs, although I generally don't know what determines their identity. An example of Davidson's makes this clear:

> I may not know the difference between an echidna and a porcupine; as a result I may call all echidnas I come across porcupines. Yet, because of the environment in which I learned the word 'porcupine', my word 'porcupine' refers to porcupines and not to echidnas; this is what I think it refers to, and what I believe I see before me when I honestly affairm 'That's a porcupine'. My ignorance of the circumstances that determine what I mean and think has no tendency to show that I don't know what I mean and think (Davidson, 1988: 168).

In other words: I know what I mean although I do not know how to determine what I mean.

3. Indeterminacy of interpretation and first personal knowledge of meaning

In a number of crucial passages Davidson appears to accept the very notion of a specific first-personal understanding of one's own language. It is clear, however, that this sort of understanding constitutes semantic knowledge *sui generis*. Since people are normally not interpreting themselves, their knowledge of the meanings of their own words cannot be interpretative. The fact that one is not interpreting oneself, however, does not imply that one doesn't know what one means.

It is not as if the subject *could not*, if she really wanted, interpret herself. After all, one *can* observe one's own verbal behaviour from the outside, as it were, and one might thus end up formulating a hypothesis about the learning situation where the uttered words were first acquired. But this of course is not the way one normally comes to know what one means. As Davidson says, «no such nomic knowledge is needed for the thinker to decide what she thinks» (1989a: 196).

Given the nature of Davidson's conception of first personal semantic knowledge, no conflict with strong indeterminacy of interpretation can emerge. According to strong indeterminacy of interpretation «two *interpretations* of a given subject might attach different truth-conditions to one and the same statement» (my italics). Since first-personal semantic knowledge does not rest on an interpretation, it simply doesn't qualify as a candidate for the indeterminacy under consideration.

One might respond that although on Davidson's conception first-personal semantic knowledge does not conflict as such with strong indeterminacy of interpretation, it does after all set a standard for the correct interpretation of somebody's words. To see this, consider again Davidson's example mentioned in the quote above. Suppose I utter the sentence 'This is a porcupine' when facing an echidna. On Davidson's view, given the way we are supposing I learned it, the word 'porcupine' refers to porcupines and not to echidnas, although I cannot distinguish an echidna from a porcupine. The fact that porcupines and not echidnas had the relevant causal effects on my verbal behaviour in the learning situation suffices to guarantee that my word "porcupine" refers to porcupines and not to echidnas. If you, however, were to interpret my words, you would have to determine whether porcupine or echidnas were causing my verbal behaviour in the learning situation. If you are like me, and you do not know how to distinguish porcupines from echidnas, then it appears, you cannot know what I mean by 'porcupine' and thus cannot determine the actual truth-conditions of my utterance. So, although neither of us knows the difference between an echidna and a porcupine, I know what I mean when I say 'this is a porcupine' and you do not. For your interpretation to be correct, whatever clues you may choose to use, it has to conform to what I know when I know what I mean.

Although first-personal semantic knowledge sets a standard for correct interpretation, it does it in a deflationary way. All I can say in order to express my knowl-

edge of what I mean when I say 'That's a porcupine' is that I mean that that's a porcupine. Since my knowledge is not interpretational, it is not going to be of much help for you in order to decide whether by 'porcupine' I mean porcupine or echidna (or even both).

First-personal semantic knowledge, in Davidson's conception, is compatible with the idea that «it takes two, never only one, to make a belief». Consider again the learning situation. In order to determine what public cause is carrying the burden of fixing the reference of a subject's words one needs to take into consideration the fact that the learning situation is a communicative one. The object to which an uttered word refers needs to be in the ken of both, the teacher and the pupil. Teacher, pupil and object are the vertices of a triangle which is *constitutive* of meaning. The fact that my word 'porcupine' refers to porcupines only if I acquired it in a situation where, say, my teacher and I where both observing a porcupine, does not imply, however, that for me to know what I mean by 'porcupine' is to remember, or to know by some other way, how the situation was when I learned how to use the word 'porcupine'.

There is no tension, in Davidson's philosophy, between first-personal knowledge of meaning and indeterminacy of interpretation. This, of course, is not to say that the way Davidson chooses to adopt in order to prevent such a tension is unproblematic. In fact, the notion of someone knowing what one means by what one says without needing to be able to ground that knowledge by some discriminatory capacity concerning the situation which determines the meaning of one's words can hardly be considered perfectly uncontentious.

Notes

[1] Cf. Davidson 1986.
[2] See Davidson 1989a, p. 195.

[3] See Davidson 1993b, pp. 70–71.
[4] See Davidson 1989a, pp. 195–196.
[5] See Davidson 1984, p. 110.
[6] See Davidson 1990, p. 73.
[7] See Davidson 1984, p. 110; Davidson 1989b, p. 12; Davidson 1993b, p. 71.

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