How Social Must Language Be?

CLAUDINE VERHEGGEN

City University of New York, City College and Graduate Center

1. Must language be social in the sense that having a (first) language essentially depends on meaning by one’s words what members of some community mean by them? Or must language be social only in the sense that having a (first) language essentially depends on having used (at least some of) one’s words, whatever one means by them, to communicate with others? Call the former the communitarian view and the latter the interpersonal view. The communitarian view is usually attributed to the later Wittgenstein, in so far, of course, as he is attributed a social view at all. The interpersonal view has been explicitly defended by Donald Davidson. Even though these views are importantly different, the arguments given for them—the interpretation argument in Wittgenstein’s case, the triangulation argument in Davidson’s—are interestingly similar. The similarities between their arguments have been broadly acknowledged, by Davidson to begin with. Meredith Williams has said that Wittgenstein would have accepted a version of the triangulation argument, though she also thinks that Wittgenstein’s own interpretation argument could be deployed against Davidson’s interpersonal view. More recently, Barry Stroud has noted the similarities between Davidson’s triangulation argument and Wittgenstein’s remarks about ostension. Like Williams, though, he maintains that both lead to a communitarian view.

I see the interpretation and triangulation arguments as complementary. But I believe that it is the interpersonal view that they warrant. What Wittgenstein and even Davidson fail to make crystal clear, and what most commentators on both, foes and allies alike, fail to appreciate, is the full significance of a claim which both argue for and hence definitely agree on, viz., the claim that linguistic meaning essentially depends on human practices. What this entails is that the existence of linguistic standards requires the recognition of linguistic standards. And this recognition is something that can be achieved, not individually, but only jointly. However, this does not in turn entail that the standards governing the applications of an individual’s linguistic expressions must be the very ones governing the applications of the same expressions used by another individual. Which is to say...
that the fact that the recognition of linguistic standards can only be a joint achievement does not entail the communitarian view but only the interpersonal view. I start by making clear the sense in which linguistic expressions are governed by standards of application.

2. To say that linguistic expressions are governed by standards of application is simply to say that there is an objective distinction to be drawn between the correctness and the incorrectness of their applications, objective in the sense that it is not dependent merely on language users’ opinion on the matter. Williams puts it this way: “rules distinguish between correct and incorrect applications” and “rules impose a constraint on the behaviour of the individual that is independent of his mere say-so.” (1999, p. 157) The idea here ought to be trivial and straightforward but, unfortunately, it is not. For the distinction between correct and incorrect applications of linguistic expressions can be construed in various ways which should be, but are not always, kept sharply separate. Williams’s writing is a case in point. She talks indiscriminately of the contrast between “correct and incorrect linguistic performance”, “correct and incorrect interpretations or continuations in linguistic usage”, “what is correct and what merely seems to be correct”, “going on in the same way and merely thinking one is going on in the same way”, “getting it right and getting it wrong” and proper speaking and “misspeaking”. But there are at least three kinds of contrast that should be distinguished here, two of which seem to me essential to meaning and one the relevance of which is precisely the issue between the communitarian view and the interpersonal view.

First there is the distinction between meaning something and thinking that one means something, a distinction Davidson accounts for in terms of one’s “intention to be taken to mean what one wants to be taken to mean”. This intention, Davidson says, “constitutes a norm against which speakers and others can measure the success of verbal behaviour.” (1994, p. 6) Thus one may think one means something but be mistaken about this in that one has not succeeded in making oneself understood as intended. As Davidson points out, distinguishing between meaning something and merely thinking that one is by appeal to one’s intention to be understood in a certain way “assumes the notion of meaning”. (1994, p. 6) It does not tell us what it is for an intention to have the content it has and so for an expression to mean what it does to begin with. Moreover, as Williams puts it, “the Gricean strategy cannot work to ground the normativity of language precisely because one cannot have the requisite intentions without being a speaker”. (2000, p. 305) But Williams is wrong in thinking that Davidson ever meant it to do that. Davidson does not think that the Gricean strategy captures all there is to say about meaning and its normativity. Communication, that is, mutual assignments of meanings, also depends on meaning being subject to norms in another sense. This is the sense suggested in what I said at the outset: if linguistic expressions are to be meaningful, they must have conditions of satisfaction—there must be an objective distinction between saying something true and saying something false, between obeying an order and disobeying it, etc.
This is the distinction both Wittgenstein and Davidson focus on and which, they argue, cannot be drawn—in which case there can be no linguistic meaning—unless linguistic standards rest on human practices. I shall reserve the phrase “linguistic standards” (or simply “standards”) to refer to the standards that govern this distinction. And I shall use the phrase “communal standards” to refer to the standards that govern a distinction of another kind, a distinction which some think is also essential to meaning, viz., the distinction according to which correct use is use that is in accord with communal or expert use and incorrect use is use that deviates from communal or expert use. Of course there is such a distinction as well. But it is an open question whether one could not use expressions meaningfully unless one spoke like others. That is, it is an open question whether the very existence of linguistic standards requires that of communal standards. As already hinted, and as we shall further see, the two kinds of standards are not always adequately kept apart by the advocates of the communitarian view. But whether the existence of the one kind depends on the existence of the other is precisely the issue that divides the communitarian camp from the interpersonal one; and that it does is certainly not something that can be assumed at the outset of an enquiry into linguistic meaning. I now turn to Wittgenstein’s argument for thinking that linguistic standards could only be based on human practices, i.e., Wittgenstein’s interpretation argument.

3. At the centre of the interpretation argument lies Wittgenstein’s famous paradox which, if unresolved, precludes the very possibility of linguistic standards and hence of linguistic meaning: “no course of action [no application of an expression] could be determined by a rule, because every course of action [every application] can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.” (1958, #201) It is pretty uncontroversial that, according to Wittgenstein, what leads to the paradox is the claim that interpretations are what determine the meanings of linguistic expressions. On the face of it, that this claim would lead to the paradox is itself uncontroversial. For an interpretation is itself a linguistic expression; and thus it too needs to be endowed with meaning and so to be given an interpretation. Therefore, at bottom, something other than interpretations must determine meaning. But one may well wonder who would make the claim that interpretations determine meaning in the first place or why anyone would bother denying it. It is here that Wittgenstein’s argument enters in full force. For it turns out that a large number of theories of meaning are in fact committed to the claim that interpretations determine meaning.

According to Wittgenstein, any theory that contends that linguistic standards are provided by items that stand in complete independence of people’s use of words is committed to that claim. In the discussion preceding the statement of the paradox, Wittgenstein focuses on internal items such as mental pictures coming before the mind and abstract entities grasped by the mind of language users.
To mean something by a word is, on the views he examines, somehow to associate it with an item of one or the other kind. Thus, to take some of Wittgenstein’s examples, it is to associate “cube” with a mental image of a cube or “add 2” with some mathematical formula. (1958, ##139,151) The main problem with these views, however, is that none of these items wears its meaning on its face, as it were, but each of them, taken on its own, could serve as an instance of a variety of things. And so each could serve as an instance of one kind rather than another, and provide the standard for the applications of the word it is connected with, only if it were interpreted in some way or other. Actually, the indeterminacy here goes both ways. Even if those internal items were semantically transparent, there would still be the question which of them is properly to be associated with any particular application of an expression. For this too is something which on the face of it is neutral and could be interpreted in a variety of ways. What these observations entail is that, on these views of meaning determination, it is always possible to interpret one’s words in such a way that, no matter how one applies them, the application will be correct, or incorrect, as the case may be. That is, what these observations entail is the above paradox. Moreover, as already mentioned, settling on an interpretation would be of no help, for the interpretation itself would need to be given meaning, presumably by being once again associated with some item that is either semantically ambiguous or, if transparent, capable of being associated with a variety of applications.

As I said, in the sections preceding the statement of the paradox, Wittgenstein focuses on internal items as candidates for determinants of meaning. But the same point can be made—indeed, Wittgenstein himself makes it—about external items, that is, physical objects and events in one’s environment. As Wittgenstein makes clear in his discussion of ostensive definition, external items too need to be seen under one aspect or another before they can serve as standards for the application of the words used to refer to them. (1958, ##28–30) In short, then, the conclusion of the interpretation argument is that linguistic standards are not waiting anywhere in any mental, abstract or physical realm to be somehow discovered by language users, but they are to be the result of what language users do, what Wittgenstein rather ambiguously called their practices. This much is pretty uncontroversial among commentators on Wittgenstein.1 What is less so is the answer to the question, what kind of practices is linguistic meaning based on? In particular, can they be the practices of a single individual? Or must they be the practices of a group? Here I turn to Davidson who unambiguously maintains that it is social linguistic practices, mutual understanding, which, as he puts it, “gives life to meaning”. (1994, p. 6)

4. Davidson’s triangulation argument is best understood as coming in two steps, the first of which can be seen as a variation on Wittgenstein’s interpretation argument, and thus as a diagnosis of the problem faced by certain theories of meaning rather than as the elaboration of a positive view.2 Unlike Wittgenstein’s, Davidson’s argument is applied exclusively to external items as candidates for
determinants of meaning. Davidson indeed starts by assuming what he calls “perceptual externalism”, the view that the meanings of one’s utterances are determined by their typical causes, thus, in the first instance, by objects and events in one’s environment. Now, given this externalism, it may look as if there is no need for there to be any genuine practice to establish linguistic standards; they just sit there, as it were, waiting to be connected to some words or others. And, if human practices are needed, it certainly may look as if the practices of a single individual will do. But this is precisely what Davidson maintains will not do.

Davidson argues that there could be no answer to the question what causes the utterances of a solitary person, that is, a person who has been socially isolated from birth, for the causes of her utterances are “doubly indeterminate” (1997, p. 129). Thus, there could be no saying not only which aspect of the items causing her utterances she is responding to—the Wittgensteinian problem; there could even be no saying whether the causes are distal, something a certain distance away, or proximal, something on the person’s skin. And of course, given the externalism, since there could be no saying what the causes of her utterances are, there could be no saying what they mean, and so a solitary person could not have a language. (1992, pp. 199–20) If, however, a person “triangulated” with another, that is, if she responded to an interlocutor as well as to features of her environment to which her interlocutor is also responding, then her utterances could be said to have definite causes, viz., the common causes of her interlocutor’s and her own responses, whatever is located at the intersection of the two lines drawn from each participant in the interaction. Thus, according to Davidson, a necessary condition for someone to have a language is that she triangulate with another in the way just sketched.

As Davidson insists, however, triangulation, as it is described so far, is not sufficient for language possession. Indeed, one may even wonder how the mere addition of another person’s responses, or of any number of them for that matter, is of any help in making the cause more determinate. Perhaps it helps in determining a distal cause rather than a proximal one. But how does it help in determining a specific aspect of the distal cause? Surely, the fact that responses are shared does not, by itself, make them responses of one specific kind rather than another. As Wittgenstein might have put it, shared responses can be variously interpreted just as much as individual ones and so they can always be interpreted in such a way that they can be said to be correct, or not. Thus shared responses may be no more meaningful than their individual counterparts. And this is true no matter how many times the responses may be produced. These points have been stressed by Stroud, who writes: “However many exactly similar occasions there might be on which the same sound is uttered in the presence of a cause fixed by the shared attention of the participants, what that sound means . . . is left indeterminate by those features of the ostensive situations alone. That is because whatever is present and causes the utterance will inevitably have many different properties; many different things will be true of it.” (2003, p. 672)
Thus, so far, there is no distinguishing the predicament of the solitary person from that of the socially situated one. This is why I think it is best to see what I am calling the first step of the triangulation argument, not as an attempt at solving the problem of meaning determination, thereby already establishing the essentially social character of language, but as the identification of the problem with the view that linguistic meaning rests on sheer associations between signs and items of some kind or other. Indeed, by revealing that both solitary and socially situated persons face the same predicament, the first step of the triangulation argument, like the interpretation argument, shows how deep the problem really is.

5. So far Wittgenstein and Davidson can be seen as arguing along the same lines, but what is their next step? In Wittgenstein’s case, this is not so clear. Stroud thinks he is following Wittgenstein in taking the above predicament to show the need for the “general practice of a linguistic community”, that is, a practice within which linguistic standards are already established, making both an individual’s and her community’s responses determinate and not open to interpretation. (2003, p. 673) Strictly speaking, this amounts to a rejection of the problem of meaning determination rather than a solution to it. For the question how communal linguistic standards are themselves established, which should be addressed next, is left standing. Though some would say that this is all Wittgenstein wanted to say on the topic, I doubt that this is the case. For he also seems to think that, for there to be a distinction between correct and incorrect applications of an individual’s words, it is not enough that she uses words in a way that conforms to some standards, she must also be aware of the distinction. This is suggested by his remarks about a private language, a language whose words could not, by definition, be subject to any public standards since they are supposedly understood and understandable by the language user alone. Wittgenstein argues that the would-be private language user could not succeed in endowing the sign for her sensation with meaning because she has “no criterion of correctness”, that is, no way to distinguish between what are the correct applications of her sign and what seem to her to be the correct applications. (1958, #258) This remark could be, and has been, read in a variety of ways. But one good way, it seems to me, is the literal one: the would-be private language user cannot establish a standard of correctness for the applications of her private sign because she herself cannot distinguish between correct and incorrect applications. There is no standard because she is not in a position to recognize anything as a standard. The worry with putting it this way, to which many have fallen prey, is that it is an easy step from this reading to the accusation of verificationism: it is only if a language user can check the applications of her words for correctness that these can in fact be governed by standards and thus have any meaning. But this is too quick a step. For there is no suggestion that any user of a language must be able to check her applications whenever she uses her words. The suggestion is only that the would-be private language user will not have a language unless she can recognize the standards that govern the applications of at least some of its expressions.
An analogous conclusion is suggested in another passage in which Wittgenstein imagines a teacher instructing her pupil how to continue a series of signs. There he argues that the pupil's regular production of signs would by itself give us no reason to believe that she was using signs meaningfully. What would be needed in addition is actual interaction between the pupil and her teacher, “the phenomenon of a kind of instruction, of showing how and of imitation, of lucky and misfiring attempts, of reward and punishment and the like” (1978, p. 345). This remark could again be read in a variety of ways, including a communitarian way. Thus it could be read as saying that individual regularities are not enough to establish linguistic standards. These—in our case, the standards governing the pupil's applications—must be provided by someone whose words are already governed by some, viz., her teacher. But the passage could again be read as suggesting that someone could not have a language, that is, use words in a standard-governed way, unless she could recognize at least some standards as such. For learning the distinction between correct and incorrect applications of her signs is certainly one difference which the interaction may produce. In any case, in both passages, we definitely get the sense that neither the would-be private nor the would-be solitary language user would be able to draw the relevant distinction and that this seriously jeopardizes their ability to have a language.

As I said at the outset, Williams does attribute to Wittgenstein a version of the triangulation argument. She writes: “For Wittgenstein, the individuation of the stimulus and response (and so what counts as the same or not) is a function (in part) of our shared reactions to stimuli in the environment and our shared response to training. Since “the same” and “different” can’t get a conceptual hold without the correlation in response, shared responses are required.” (2000, p. 312) It is not altogether clear, however, why she thinks shared responses are required and how exactly she thinks they can determine specific causes or stimuli where individual responses cannot. At any rate, she claims that Davidson misunderstands the role of triangulation in taking it to provide “evidence for interpretative hypotheses of the linguistic behaviour of others” rather than taking it to be, as Wittgenstein does, “a crucial part of the background against which moves within language games can be made.” (2000, p. 311) She further claims that Davidson’s view, as opposed to Wittgenstein’s, is really a reductivist one, where “judgments of similarity are . . . to be reduced to causal generalizations concerning our common reactions or sensitivities to the physical environment.” (2000, p. 313) But this really is a misunderstanding of Davidson’s triangulation argument. Williams focuses on the first step of the argument which, as we have seen, does deal with the localization of common causes of interlocutors’ responses. This, as Davidson stresses, is a necessary condition for language possession (one which may in fact be fulfilled by non-linguistic animals); but language is in no way to be reduced to these “causal generalizations”. Indeed, as I have argued, the first step of the triangulation argument is best understood as laying out the meaning determination problem rather than as providing part of its solution. After we have gone
through this step, the question remains, what is needed for people’s responses to their environment to determine specific causes? And the (as we shall see, resolutely non-reductivist) answer Davidson gives explicitly to this question is precisely the one suggested in the remarks by Wittgenstein I discussed above: those making the responses must be aware of the distinction between correct and incorrect ones. This, at last, leads us to the second step of Davidson’s triangulation argument.

6. Long before developing the triangulation argument, Davidson maintained that, in order to have a language, one must have the concept of objectivity, that is, the idea that things may be different from what they appear to be and that what they are is independent of what one thinks they are. (1975, p. 170) In the context of the triangulation argument this means, specifically, that in order for the typical causes of someone’s utterances to determine the meaning of these utterances it is not sufficient, as we have seen, that she interact with another person who is responding to the same causes as she is. She must also recognize these causes as such, that is, as providing the standards for the application of her words and thus as existing independently of her responding to them. That this recognition is required should come as no surprise to those who have appreciated the gravity of the predicament would-be language users are in, be they on their own or in company. Recall that, first, there is the realization that meanings, that is, the particular standards that govern the applications of words, are not ready-made but are, in part, the product of human activities. Second, there is the realization that these activities cannot be mere responses to features of the environment. For these responses, however regular they may appear to be and even though they may be shared, may always be of several different kinds. There is nothing about them or about what they are responses to which makes them responses of one specific kind rather than another. Rather, they are of a specific kind only when they have been recognized as being of that kind. This is to say that linguistic expressions can be governed by standards of correctness, and hence be meaningful, only when they have been used by people who have the concept of objectivity. Now, Davidson argues, it is only in a social setting that one could have the concept of objectivity—hence the essentially social character of language.

In fact, according to Davidson, it is only if one triangulates linguistically, that is, only if one communicates with another, that one could have the concept of objectivity. On the face of it, we seem to be confronted with a very small circle here: is Davidson not saying that one needs the concept of objectivity to have a language and then that one needs a language to have the concept of objectivity? Indeed we may have suspected the existence of the circle just by reflecting on the thought that presumably one needs some concepts of objects to have the concept of objectivity and wondering, then, how possession of the former could also require possession of the latter. And we may have suspected the existence of the circle simply when we realized that, for there to be causes determining the meaning of one’s utterances, one has to tell what these causes are, for we then had to
wonder how one could do this without already having a language. But the circle is less threatening than it appears to be. All that Davidson is saying is that possession of a language and possession of the concept of objectivity go hand in hand, that one cannot be in a position to have the one without having the other. In fact, on the basis of the argument so far, even this claim may be too strong. For, as I have reconstructed Davidson's argument, it is only when responses to the environment have been made by people who have the concept of objectivity that these responses can have determinate causes, hence be governed by standards, hence be meaningful. Strictly speaking, this leaves open the possibility that expressions used by someone who does not have the concept of objectivity are meaningful, insofar as they are governed by the standards given them by others who do have the concept and with whom that person interacts. Thus, all that follows from my reconstruction of Davidson's argument is that no one could possess a language unless someone (perhaps someone else) possesses the concept of objectivity.

There being a circle however means that no illuminating sufficient conditions can be given for the possibility of language. Indeed, there being a circle makes it clear, contra Williams, that Davidson is not attempting to give a reductivist account of linguistic meaning. Nevertheless, the account he is giving is more instructive than the communitarian one attributed by Stroud to Wittgenstein. And this, as we shall see, also has consequences for the kind of social view one takes Wittgenstein and Davidson to be defending. Recall that, for Stroud, after having diagnosed the problem faced by some theories of meaning, there is nothing left to do but to appeal to existing communal linguistic practices to explain what governs the applications of an individual's words. But Davidson does not leave it at that. Rather, as I understand him, he takes the problem faced by some theories of meaning to reveal not only the foolishness of seeking a reductivist account, but also the essential link between meaning and the concept of objectivity, which in turn reveals the essentially social character of language. This last piece of the account is what I consider next.

That grasp of the concept of objectivity requires interpersonal communication is also something Davidson believed already thirty years ago, as he wrote: “the contrast between truth and error . . . can emerge only in the context of interpretation, which alone forces us to the idea of an objective, public truth.” (1975, p. 170) Thus, it is not the case, as Williams contends, that Davidson needed the “pressure from Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations” to temper his “strong individualist intuitions about language”. (2000, p. 299) It is true, however, that he started referring to Wittgenstein only in 1991 and that he subsequently was more and more often explicitly taking his cue from Wittgenstein when he was trying to defend the necessarily social aspect of language. For instance:

Wittgenstein has suggested, or at least I take him to have suggested, that we would not have the concept of getting things right or wrong if it were not for our interactions with other people . . . [In triangulating] two . . . creatures each correlate their own reactions to external
phenomena with the reactions of the other. Once these correlations are set up, each creature is in a position to expect the external phenomenon when it perceives the associated reaction of the other. What introduces the possibility of error is the occasional failure of the expectation; the reactions do not correlate. Wittgenstein expresses this idea when . . . he says that following a rule (getting things right) is at bottom a matter of doing as others do. Of course the others may sometimes be wrong. The point isn’t that consensus defines the concept of truth but that it creates the space for its application. (1997, p. 129; see also 1994, p. 8)

A solitary person can obviously never be in a position to have her reactions to some feature of the environment be at odds with the reactions of another person. But could a solitary person not have expectations that turn out to be frustrated? And would this not introduce the possibility of error and create the space for the application of the concept of truth? Not quite. And this shows why it is interpersonal communication, full-blown linguistic triangulation, which is required for possession of the concept of objectivity.

Recall once more that we can of course not assume that the solitary person does have expectations that she could express to herself linguistically or conceptually. The whole point of the first step of the triangulation argument has been to show that she could not do this unless she could fix the causes of her utterances and that this in turn requires that she have the concept of objectivity.

To this, however, it may be replied that a solitary person could interact with herself in such a way that she would eventually communicate linguistically with herself and thus have the concept of objectivity. But this will not do either and the reason lies in a crucial difference between interpersonal communication and the solitary person’s alleged intrapersonal communication. For interpersonal communication to succeed, there must be genuine agreement on what the causes of the interlocutors’ utterances are—this is what may provide someone with the idea of perspectives genuinely different from her own and hence with the idea of an objective contrast between right and wrong. As Davidson says, this idea is forced on us in that context. But the solitary person’s intrapersonal “communication” succeeds no matter what, that is, no matter how the solitary person draws the line between agreement and disagreement with herself, between right and wrong responses to her environment. Whatever she says goes, whatever seems right to her is right. But then there is no way she could grasp the objective contrast between right and wrong and so no way she could by herself develop a language.

7. In what sense, then, is language essentially social?

If the Davidsonian argument I have presented is right, then the reason language is essentially social is that linguistic standards can be fixed only by those who have the concept of objectivity, which only those who communicate with others can have. This leaves room for the interpersonal view. For, even though at least some standards must be jointly fixed, through mutual understanding by interlocutors of what the causes of their respective responses are, it is not the case that, for any given response, each interlocutor must respond as the other does, as long as they agree on what their respective responses are responses to. Thus, it is
not the case that, for any given one of those standards, it must govern the applications of both the speaker’s and the interpreter’s words. All that joint fixing amounts to is the recognition by each of the standards governing the other’s words. This is actually all that is necessary for interpersonal communication, assigning to the speaker’s words the meanings she assigns to them. Granting this, one may nonetheless observe that people do not go around developing first languages by responding to each other and their shared environment. They learn their first language with those who already have one. Are they not, then, per force speaking the language of others? Indeed, as long as they do not have the concept of objectivity, they could not be in a position to recognize the standards governing the applications of their words. These standards would thus have to be the standards governing the words of those they got them from. Does this not show that language is essentially communitarian after all?

These reflections seem to be, at least in part, what prompts Williams to claim that it is. She seems to think that Wittgenstein’s focus on first language learning reveals the communitarian facet of his view. There are some judgments that must be shared, she argues. These are “bedrock judgments of the obvious—judgments like Moore’s ‘This is a hand’ or ‘This is red’ said of a fire engine.” Such judgments “constitute the norms by which objects are individuated and understanding the game can be assessed. Such judgments are bedrock judgments of similarity, of what is the same as what and of what it is to go on in the same way. Such judgments are made blindly; that is, they are not made from an application of a rule, concept or hypothesis.” (2000, p. 311) And presumably these are the judgments that the child is making when she first acquires a language. Thus, it looks as if she cannot but make the very bedrock judgments that her community makes.

Evidently, the child and her teacher, just as much as any other two interlocutors, must share judgments or beliefs about the world around them if they are to communicate with each other. Far from denying this, this is something which Davidson has always urged. He explicitly accepts Wittgenstein’s claim that “if language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions . . . but also in judgments.” (1958, #241) However, Davidson continues, “these theses . . . have nothing to do with . . . lexical norms. They tell us nothing about how people should or must speak to be understood.” (1993, p. 146) The sharing of beliefs that makes understanding of another possible at all does entail that communicators also share many linguistic standards and thus many meanings (though these may of course always be attached to different words). This is something which, admittedly, Davidson has rarely stressed, making it sound as if communication requires only the sharing of beliefs and not at all the sharing of language. But beliefs cannot be shared unless concepts are too and hence the meanings of the words that express them. Perhaps Davidson found this too trivial to deserve mentioning. But what he does emphasize is the much less trivial claim that there is no obligation that any particular beliefs or meanings be
shared nor any guarantee that shared ones will continue to be shared, including bedrock judgments of the obvious. For Davidson’s claim is the even more radical one that, precisely because meaning is the result of human practices, because it is created rather than discovered, the fact of language learning, far from lending support to the communitarian view, actually reinforces the interpersonal view.

He writes:

Someone who is consciously teaching a beginner the use of a word may think of herself as simply passing on a meaning that already attaches to the word. But from the learner’s point of view, the word—the sound—is being endowed with a meaning. This is why doubt [about an application] makes no sense at the start. The first examples, the first things ostended, must, from the learner’s point of view, belong to the application of the expression. This is so even if the teacher is at fault from society’s point of view. . . . The question what others besides the learner, even his teacher, mean by the sound is irrelevant . . . and we will misinterpret the learner if we assume that for him it has any meaning not connected with that process. (2001b, pp. 14–5)

This is not to deny that, at this basic level, it is likely that the child will end up meaning by her words what her teachers mean by them. Nor is it to deny that the first language learning process, in addition to the necessary sharing of beliefs, gives us all the more reason to think that people’s languages overlap a lot. But, again, there is no saying in advance which particular meanings will be shared because no particular ones must be. In short, it is not that language is not often communitarian; it is only that it does not have to be. And this is the case even though, initially, the standards governing the applications of the child’s words really are those imposed on them by her teacher. For the teacher does not have to interpret the child’s words in the way she does her own—this is the point of Davidson’s saying that the question what even the teacher means by the sound is irrelevant. Ultimately, the important part of the learning process lies not in the particular ways in which the child draws the distinction between correct and incorrect applications of her words but in her acquiring the very idea of the distinction.

We may conclude, then, contra Williams, that reflecting on the learning process yields no positive reason to think that language is essentially communitarian. But Williams also has worries about the interpersonal view, at least about Davidson’s version of it. She thinks that it can be made a target of Wittgenstein’s interpretation argument since, she says, Davidson pays no attention to Wittgenstein’s claim that there is “a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation” and instead maintains that “interpretation can go all the way down, that is, applies to everything that is said or presupposed by what is said.” (2000, p. 309) The problem here, as we know, is that, if this were so, everything that is said could always be interpreted in such a way that it is correct, or not—statements could always be said to be true, orders to be obeyed, etc.—making the distinction between correct and incorrect applications, and hence meaning, impossible. Williams’s worries are, however, unfounded.
To begin with, it is worth pointing out that, as Davidson himself has made clear, he does not construe the word “interpretation” in the way Wittgenstein does, viz., as the explanation of the meaning of an expression by means of other words. Rather, by an “interpretation”, he simply means an understanding of another’s words, which of course can only be described by using words. (1994, p. 2) So, trivially, interpretation does go all the way down, much as understanding obviously does. Now, Williams’s contention that Davidson ignores Wittgenstein’s claim that there is a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation is taken care of by Davidson’s stressing that the child, when acquiring a first language, is not grasping a meaning already attached to the word. Rather, the word is being endowed with meaning as she starts using it, hearing it and observing it used by others. From the child’s point of view, there is no rule there to be grasped. Indeed, even from the teacher’s point of view there may be no rule there to be grasped, if it turns out that the child is creating one different from that attached to the word by the teacher. Of course there is a difference here between the child and the teacher who alone, at this early stage, can tell what rule or meaning is being attached to the word. So Davidson can call these early judgments blind, just as much as the communitarian can, since there are no rules there from which the judgments proceed. There is indeed no reason to think that the shared judgments which, for Davidson, constitute the background for communication are any more the result of interpretation than Williams’s bedrock judgments. Such judgments, Williams reminds us, are made with right but without justification. All we can say in their defence is that we understand English. (2000, p. 311) In a similar vein, Davidson would say, all we can say in defence of our shared judgments is that we have successfully communicated by means of them.

There is, however, a further issue Williams has in mind when she claims that, for Davidson, interpretation can go all the way down. This is Davidson’s claim that, for any particular utterance a speaker may make, we may have to interpret it in a way different from that in which we were prepared to interpret it. This is due not only to the occurrence of malapropisms and other kinds of “misspeakings” but also to the fact that the acquisition of new evidence concerning the speaker’s beliefs together with the interdependence of meanings and beliefs may lead us to interpret her utterance differently from the way we had expected. Such reinterpretations, Williams thinks, would have to happen all the time, rendering language intolerably unstable, indeed, potentially preventing a speaker from having the same intention from one moment to the next, since her system of beliefs and hence the meanings of her expressions constantly change. According to Williams, this constant change is due to the necessary use by the interpreter of the principle of charity, which she understands as the maximization of true beliefs. (2000, pp. 305–6)

But this is a (rather common, unfortunately) caricature of Davidson’s views. The central command of the principle of charity is not “maximize true beliefs” but “maximize intelligibility”. As Davidson himself writes, “the aim of interpretation
is not agreement but understanding.” (1984, p. xix) It is this which requires the attribution of many true beliefs, many of which, as we noted, speaker and interpreter must share if interpretation is to be possible at all. Moreover, the demand that intelligibility be maximized requires that basic norms of rationality be respected. And it would be contrary to these norms to interpret someone in such a way that her intentions are totally unstable. Now, that we may sometimes reinterpret a speaker’s utterance so as to make it true, or in such a way that the speaker becomes intelligible, obviously does not entail that all her beliefs are true or that the applications of her words are not governed by standards of correctness, including the applications of the words we have reinterpreted. For instance, someone who declares, “There are allegories over there”, may correctly be interpreted as referring to alligators, yet be mistaken. Or someone whose word “arthritis” we reinterpret because he keeps saying, “I have arthritis in my thigh”, may well be wrong when he declares, “My uncle suffers from arthritis”. It is just that, to reiterate once more, for any particular utterance, there is no saying in advance what its standards of application might be and certainly no saying which standards are shared. Successful communication only guarantees that some standards or others are shared.

The point deserves emphasizing for I think that what we have here is a symptom of the confusion about the two types of standards and hence the two types of distinction between correct and incorrect applications I contrasted at the outset of this paper. Take Davidson’s example of Mrs. Malaprop who means epithet by “epitaph”. (1986, p. 443) Charity indeed dictates that we reinterpret her word in that way—if we did not, she would hardly be intelligible; at any rate, we would fail to understand her. Reinterpreting her does entail that she uses “epitaph” incorrectly, according to the standards of the English speaking community. But it does not entail that she could not use “epitaph”, meaning epithet, to make a false statement; it does not entail that she could not misapply “epitaph”, according to the standards she attaches, and is understood as attaching, to the word. In other words, that we always aim at a correct interpretation, that is, a correct assignment of meaning, does not entail that the application itself is always correct; it does not obliterate the distinction that is relevant to meaning. It is sticking with the other distinction that obliterates meaning, since it makes for unintelligibility or misunderstanding, i.e., failure of communication. What this shows is that what, at bottom, makes language essentially social, that meaning is based on human practices, also makes it essentially interpersonal and not communitarian.13

Claudine Verheggen
136 Shuter Street
Toronto, ON M5A 1V8
Canada
cverheggen@msn.com

© The Executive Management Committee/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2006
NOTES

1 In so far as they are willing to attribute any constructive view to Wittgenstein. I myself think that the interpersonal view can be found in his later writings. But exegesis is not the point of the present paper.

2 The triangulation argument, though at the center of Davidson’s philosophy, has been by and large misunderstood and, as a result, more often than not dismissed. See Verheggen (forthcoming) for a detailed presentation and defence against its critics. For discussion of further similarities between Wittgenstein and Davidson on interpretation, see Thornton 1998, chapter 6, and Hopkins 1999.

3 Davidson has propounded this view in numerous articles. See, e.g., 1987, pp. 29–30. The idea of triangulation was first introduced in 1982, p. 105.

4 This is not how Davidson himself has explicitly defended the necessary connection between language and the concept of objectivity. He has usually confined himself to saying that one could not have a concept, and thus mean something by a general term, without being aware of the possibility of misapplying it. (See, e.g., 1995, pp. 9–10.) However, both his acknowledgment that responses that are merely shared will not do to determine meaning (2001b, p. 8), and his insistence that adding possession of the concept of objectivity will do it, strongly suggest the defence I have offered.

5 Davidson does believe the stronger claim as well, and so am I inclined to, if only for the reason I mention in the above footnote—it is hard to understand the idea that someone could have a language if she has no clue that what she says, about the world around her and in response to others, could be mistaken. But these are highly controversial matters given the large number of linguistic beings—children under the age of four and some autistic speakers, we are told—who lack the concept of objectivity, in that they lack the ability to attribute false beliefs to others. Now, there is certainly no denying that these beings use language, the language that they are attributed by others who do have the concept of objectivity. But it seems to me that mere language use should be distinguished from full-blown language possession, and it is unclear just when the former becomes the latter. Perhaps awareness of mistakes does not require the ability to attribute false beliefs to others. Be that as it may, it does not affect the conclusion that language is essentially social, if the claims that possession (by some people) of the concept of objectivity is required for the very existence of standards and meaning and that a social setting is required for possession of the concept of objectivity are correct.

6 As he himself has made clear in, e.g., 2001c, p. 293.

7 Stroud even thinks that we can make sense of the idea of a solitary language user in so far as we can imagine her producing signs that we can interpret according to the standards of some community. She would have the language of whatever community is considering her. (See Stroud 2000 and Verheggen 2005 for a discussion of Stroud’s view; Kripke has made a similar claim in 1982, p. 111.)

8 As I have argued in Verheggen (forthcoming), it is a common, but fatal, mistake to separate the two tasks that triangulation is supposed to achieve: determining meaning and supplying the concept of objectivity.


10 For further discussion of Wittgenstein and Davidson on agreement, see Koethe 1996, afterward, and Gliyer 2001.

11 This is yet another charge levelled by Williams at Davidson. (2000, p. 307)

12 This is suggested here: “I know of no one who denies [that we could not understand someone with whom we did not share a large number of (fundamental) concepts], for how
could an interpreter grasp, much less formulate, the truth conditions of an utterance which she lacked the resources to conceive?” (1993, pp. 145–6)

13 Thanks, as always, to Robert Myers for commenting on earlier drafts of this paper.

REFERENCES


Davidson, D. 1987, “Knowing One’s Own Mind”, in Davidson 2001a.


Verheggen, C. Forthcoming, “Triangulating with Davidson”, *The Philosophical Quarterly*.
