

**Conventions, Idiolects, and Malapropisms:  
A Critical Evaluation of Davidson**

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March 31, 2023

Donald Davidson concludes his 1986 article, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs” by making a few seemingly sensational and ambitious claims:

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. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases. And we should try again to say how convention in any important sense is involved in language; or, as I think, we should give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions.<sup>1</sup>

This article (henceforth “Derangement”) addresses two goals. First, it sets out to explain how conversational partners interpret malapropisms (of which the title is one) then goes on to address the consequences of this process on more general questions about language. Davidson’s main opponent is Michael Dummett. The two authors published multiple responses to each other on the subjects at hand over the course of several years. Other philosophers have written responses on this subject with varying degrees of genuine contact to the overall discussion. Their mixed success in finding currency owes largely to struggles around clarity and agreement on the definitions of key concepts within the debate.

This paper is a critical discussion of Davidson’s argumentation, and it will seek to distill matters to two key points of genuine contention. First is the debate over the primacy of the idiolect (one’s inner notions of what words mean and how to use them, or a language with one speaker) in relation to publicly shared languages. The central issue there regards the utility of public conventions in conceptualizing linguistic communication as it actually takes place. This raises the question of whether prior knowledge by speaker and listener is either necessary or sufficient for successful communication. The other key point relates to pragmatic and metaphilosophical issues. Beyond determining which arguments stand up best to criticism, I will

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” in *Truth, Language, and History*., Philosophical Essays 5 (Oxford University Press, 2005), 107.

address how different views respond to higher-order concerns about which view of language is best.

This paper will be divided into three sections. In the first, I will describe Davidson's opposition to a particular view of language, which stems from his consideration of malapropisms as well as his own conceptualization of communication. In the second section, I will describe objections and reactions from other philosophers to Davidson's views. These relate both to Davidson's ability to justifiably reach his conclusions and the implications of taking his conclusions and recommendations seriously. In the final section, I will contextualize and evaluate the salient points of disagreement between Davidson and his opponents before establishing and discussing conclusions.

## **I. Davidson's Argument in "Derangement"**

### *Introducing Malapropisms*

Davidson introduces malapropisms as a problem for the concept of language, as he claims language has been understood by the "many philosophers and linguists" he refers to in his conclusion. This makes Davidson's project largely negative, aiming to explain the failures of a view he does not hold. Malapropisms and other convention-breaking uses of language motivate his project in "Derangement." The Oxford English Dictionary defines "malapropism" (or "malaprop") as "the ludicrous misuse of words, especially in mistaking a word for another resembling it."<sup>2</sup> Malapropisms occur when what would likely be considered the "standard" interpretation of a speaker's words cannot be the intended interpretation, because such an intended interpretation would be absurd. It describes an instance of linguistic communication in which, "through ignorance, inadvertence, or design," a term or phrase is used in a way that one

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<sup>2</sup> "Malapropism, n.," in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed March 31, 2023, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/112760>.

or more people involved might consider incorrect but communication still succeeds.<sup>3</sup> Successful communication can, for the purposes of elucidating Davidson's view, be understood (in a fairly pedestrian and non-philosophical way) as communication wherein the speaker's intended meanings of his words are understood as intended.

After losing to Lennox Lewis in a 2002 match, boxer Mike Tyson once famously used a malapropism by saying "I guess I'm gonna fade into Bolivian."<sup>4</sup> Aside from being quite humorous and surprisingly ranking among the more sensible things Tyson said in the aftermath of that fight, this statement provides an example of a malapropism where the word used ("Bolivian") actually *does* resemble the word one might typically expect in its place ("oblivion"). Most listeners could fairly easily recognize that he meant to express what one would typically express using "I guess I'm gonna fade into oblivion." In the "Derangement" essay, Davidson only provides examples that follow a sound-similarity model, but he clearly stipulates that neither similar sound nor orthography are necessary characteristics for a given linguistic usage to qualify as malapropic.<sup>5</sup>

An example of a malapropism where the word(s) of interest do *not* sound alike can be shown through the example of someone pushing off a problem to a later time saying, "We'll burn that bridge when we get to it." The common expression is actually "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it." In this instance, the speaker seems to have mistakenly conflated this common saying with the other popular euphemism of "burning bridges." Although Davidson only gives examples of specific malapropisms that involve one word being used in a non-standard way, they can involve more than just one word. In this way, the point of focus in "Derangement" expands

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<sup>3</sup> Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," 90.

<sup>4</sup> Alex Sherman, "March to the Sea: Did He Just Say That?," *The Harvard Crimson*, February 13, 2003, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2003/2/13/march-to-the-sea-did-he/>.

<sup>5</sup> Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs." 90

beyond the dictionary definition of a malaprop. For Davidson and for this paper, ‘malaprop’ could refer to an entire phrase or sentence, wherein some or all of the words are used in a way that fails to cohere with how a competent language user would generally conceive of them as being used. However, one word switched for another is the simplest and most common case, and this fact will be reflected in the coming discussion.

At this point, one may see malapropisms as an unremarkable and innocuous occurrence—a quirk of language and an unsurprising consequence of our error-prone humanity. So, what sorts of problems do malapropisms cause, according to Davidson, and for whom? Davidson claims that malaprops cause problems for a certain view of language because they cannot be interpreted or understood by recourse to the basic principles of linguistic competence he describes as accepted by many philosophers and linguists. Malapropisms produce expressions not covered by prior learning. They represent a unique case of communication wherein the set conventions and meanings that make up a language are either broken or ignored, and yet communication is still successful. As a result, Davidson identifies a point of focus as describing “what is involved in the idea of ‘having a language’ or being at home with the business of linguistic communication,” such that one may be able to account for malapropisms.<sup>6</sup> He seems to raise a reasonable question: If we have languages, should we not then be able to operationalize the necessary and sufficient conditions to reliably communicate successfully?

*Prior and Passing Theories as Necessary for Communication*

Before the question as to being “at home” in a language can be fully addressed, I wish to examine in more detail what Davidson takes to happen for a speaker and a listener during an instance of successful communication that occurs despite a malaprop. Davidson thinks this

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<sup>6</sup> Davidson, 100.

involves explaining two theories for each the speaker and the interpreter—a prior theory and a passing theory. For the hearer, the prior theory constitutes how the hearer is prepared beforehand to interpret a speaker’s utterance, and the hearer’s passing theory is how the hearer actually does interpret the speaker’s utterance. The speaker’s prior theory is comprised of whatever the speaker believes the interpreter’s prior theory to be, and the speaker’s passing theory is the theory the speaker wants for the interpreter to use to successfully interpret the speaker’s words as the speaker uses them.<sup>7</sup> I have organized prior and passing theories into a table for convenience.

<b>Hearer/Interpreter</b>	<b>Speaker</b>
<b>Prior Theory:</b> How the hearer is prepared beforehand to interpret a speaker’s utterance	<b>Prior Theory:</b> Whatever the speaker believes the interpreter’s prior theory to be
<b>Passing Theory:</b> how he actually <i>does</i> interpret the speaker’s utterance	<b>Passing Theory:</b> the theory the speaker wants the interpreter to use

In what I might call “standard communication” (not involving any deviant or malapropic usage), no need arises for the prior and passing theories to diverge for either speaker or hearer. When a speaker, S, utters “I guess I’m gonna fade oblivion,” S’s conversational partner (a hearer, H) would have no need to account for any of the words failing to cohere with how she’s heard them before. With nothing amiss, there exists no reason for the way the hearer is *prepared* to interpret a speaker’s utterance to differ in any way from the way in which she *does* interpret it. To account for malapropic communication, though, Davidson argues that we must accept a distinction between these prior and passing theories.

When Mike Tyson spoke of fading “into Bolivian,” those hearing him did not enter into that communication prepared to interpret “Bolivian” using the meaning typically connected to

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<sup>7</sup> Davidson, 101.

“oblivion.” But they still understood Tyson’s intended meaning. Their prior and passing theories needed to diverge because how they *actually* understood Tyson’s utterance differed from how they were *prepared* to do so. If the prior and passing theories could not come apart to accommodate Tyson’s malapropic usage of “Bolivian,” nobody who heard him would have been able to understand what he meant. Furthermore, one can easily imagine an instance in which a speaker’s prior theory and passing theories diverge then are immediately rectified. When S mistakenly says something like “We should defiantly go there for dinner,” then immediately catches himself and says, “I mean, we should definitely go there,” one can see the divergence and reconciliation of his prior and passing theories.

Davidson uses this distinction to make his key point: people’s prior theories do not *have* to overlap for communication to be successful; only passing theories must overlap. This can be illustrated by an example using the word ‘livid.’ We can imagine S, who knows ‘livid’ to mean furiously angry. This understanding of ‘livid’ exists in S’s prior theory for H, as S assumes H would understand and use ‘livid’ in generally the same way that S would. Contrary to S’s expectation, H, on the other hand, has never heard ‘livid.’ A meaning for it does not exist in H’s prior theory. Imagine S says to H, “Johnny was absolutely livid earlier—I’ve never seen someone so angry.” Despite a prior theory without a meaning for ‘livid,’ H can successfully understand S’s statement, giving over to ‘livid’ something like the meaning she would typically give to ‘angry’ by inferring from the rest of S’s statement and the larger situational context. In this way, the conversational partners’ prior theories did not overlap when it comes to the use of ‘livid.’ However, their passing theories did overlap, allowing their communication to be successful. By pointing this out, Davidson relativizes his understanding of linguistic communication not only to the single individual but all the way down to the level of the

utterance spoken by a given individual, at a given time, in a given place, and within a given set of relations to the other individual(s) with whom they converse.

*First Meaning, Conventions, and the View of MPL*

Davidson believes malapropisms cause problems for the notion of linguistic competence held by many philosophers and linguists (henceforth ‘MPL’), but properly understanding what he takes this notion of linguistic competence to entail requires defining, then reconsidering a few conceptions of meaning—first meaning and conventional meaning. For MPL, first meaning is characterized by three principles:

- (1) First, it is systematic; there must be systematic relationships between utterances’ meanings, so that a competent speaker or interpreter may understand utterances on the basis of the semantic aspects of the words.
- (2) Second, “first meanings are shared;” for successful communication between speaker and interpreter, there must exist a shared method for interpretation such as that discussed in the first principle.
- (3) Third, “first meanings are governed by learned conventions or regularities;” the speaker’s or interpreter’s systematic competence is conventional and learned in advance of the occasion of interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

Davidson aims to illustrate how the MPL view cannot account for malapropisms and that only his conception of prior and passing theories can. Doing this requires clarifying the MPL view that Davidson opposes. In their article “The Reality of Language,” Kirk Ludwig and Ernest Lepore concisely describe the notion of language Davidson attributes to MPL as...

...a conception of language as something essential to interpretation, because knowledge of a speaker’s first meanings is essential to interpretation, and such knowledge consists (by the identification of first with conventional meaning) in mastery of conventions

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<sup>8</sup> Davidson, 93.



determined by community practices, mastery of which must be acquired prior to interpretation. On this conception, a language is (a) a vocabulary and set of rules determined by conventions in a linguistic community which (b) is mastered by members of the community, and mastery of which is both (c) necessary and (d) sufficient for interpreting its speakers.<sup>9</sup>

So, the “language” that MPL believe people share in successful communication involves these (a)-(d) conditions, in adherence with the three principles of first meaning. Davidson defines the MPL view as always identifying first meaning with the sorts of conventional meanings one can find through dictionary definitions.<sup>10</sup> In this way, MPL’s understanding of what is represented by ‘convention’ is shown to be a set rule, shared by a community. But Davidson seeks to show that, if first meanings were indeed governed by shared conventions learned in advance, as the third principle of first meaning (in Davidson’s description of his opponent) and item (b) (in Ludwig and Lepore’s description of Davidson’s opponent) requires, then people communicating successfully despite a malapropism would not seem to be possible. And yet, as Davidson points out, we can easily dream up examples or draw them from our daily lives wherein communication *is* successful despite someone using a malaprop. The MPL view of language fails as a result of not having the flexibility to account for malapropisms, which utilize phrasing outside of any understood set conventions. If set conventions existed for interpreting malapropisms within a language, they simply would not be malapropisms.

Further, Davidson offers a contrast between the conception of first meaning and conventional meaning, taking conventional meaning to represent words’ dictionary definitions. Instead of looking to conventional definitions, he thinks first meanings are first in the order of interpretation intended by the speaker. Simply put, each word’s first meaning is what that word

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<sup>9</sup> Ernest LePore and Kirk Ludwig, “The Reality of Language,” in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, First (Blackwell, 1989), 263–97.

<sup>10</sup> LePore and Ludwig, 268.

means for the person using it when she uses it, such that if the person with whom she communicates were to understand that meaning, it would result in successful communication. Ludwig and Lepore describe this as “what a speaker intends his words to be understood to have so as to form the basis for subsequent effects achieved by using those words as he does.”<sup>11</sup> Using Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73, they support this notion by indicating how many nonliteral, unconventional meanings may be involved in the speaker’s intended meaning of a word in a given utterance:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold  
 When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
 Upon these boughs which shake against the cold,  
 Bare ruin’ d choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.<sup>12</sup>

Understanding the image Shakespeare seeks to evoke with these words requires multiple factors. The situational context in which Shakespeare intends them in order for the analogies and connections he employs to be properly made figures equally primary as the meanings conventionally conveyed by “boughs” and “choirs.” In other words, one cannot draw out all the literary richness that would entail a successful communication between Shakespeare and his readers simply by recourse to a dictionary for any one word in that sonnet.<sup>13</sup>

While this illustrates a qualitative difference between first and conventional meanings in describing communication, it remains to show how Davidson draws the conclusions he makes at the end of “Derangement.” Drawing from Lepore and Ludwig’s description of the language notion against which Davidson argues, Davidson targets (b), (c), and (d). These are the aspects

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<sup>11</sup> LePore and Ludwig, 266.

<sup>12</sup> As an aside, I recognize that typical communication and the type of communication Davidson seems to target (to whatever extent those overlap) are largely *not* poetic. Poetry is a strange and special sort of communication, but I draw from this example not to present poetry as archetypal but to illustrate and clarify the potential for many differences between first meaning and conventional meaning as Davidson sees them.

<sup>13</sup> LePore and Ludwig, “The Reality of Language,” 266.

that relate to *prior* linguistic competence as being totally adequate (both necessary and sufficient) to prepare someone for communication. The view of language held by MPL posits that knowing the requisite conventions of a language prepares one to communicate, necessarily and sufficiently. But Davidson shows through malapropic communication, an entire category of convention breaking (yet still successful) communication, that these conventions and rules of language clearly are neither necessary nor sufficient. Given the endless ways malapropisms can twist and temporarily alter our previous understandings, Davidson decides there is no way to modify the MPL view to allow for a satisfactory elucidation of what it means to be “at home in linguistic communication.”<sup>14</sup>

*Davidson Concludes*

Taking the distinction between prior and passing theories seriously undermines what Davidson views as the “commonly accepted account of linguistic competence and communication.”<sup>15</sup> What the speaker and interpreter share in successful communication therefore cannot be considered to be learned in advance, since it is shared fleetingly and what is shared is relativized to the individual instance. As a result, speaker and interpreter *do not share a language* governed by rules or conventions in the way that MPL have supposed. While Davidson acknowledges that utility requires that speaker and interpreter often do share much, the overlap of their prior theories does not prove ultimately necessary to the success of their communication. As to where that leaves Davidson, he sees himself as having established a distinction between prior and passing theories as the only necessary thing to account for successful communication that occurs despite malaprops.

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<sup>14</sup> Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs.” 95.

<sup>15</sup> Davidson. 102.

His argument progresses with the belief that neither of these theories (prior nor passing) can respectably be considered a theory of language.<sup>16</sup> First, passing theories fail to comprise a theory of language because they are relativized to individual instances of communication, making them ungeneralizable. We could never pull the sort of generally applicable rules that characterize the MPL view of language from single instances of communication. Since malapropisms break conventions on a circumstance-by-circumstance basis, seeking to establish completely or even widely applicable general conventions from them would not make sense. Prior theories, too, fail to comprise theories of language, because they, although more general, are still individual and subjective, and indexed to particular interactions between particular conversational partners. Davidson justifies this by saying that even when we know scarcely little about our interpreter, we still adjust our prior theories.<sup>17</sup> For Davidson, there is always some level of knowledge about an interpreter in mind when one goes to communicate. This provides the opportunity to make the clarification that prior theories, while general, are not people's holistic, general understanding of language. They adjust constantly, just as the passing theories do, but they represent more general prior expectations than the actual sharing of knowledge involved in passing theories. Not only distinguishable prior and passing theories represent the sole necessary concepts for Davidson, they actually comprise the *totality* of what he thinks we can confidently assert about any given instance of communication.

With that being the case for Davidson, he concludes there exists “no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Dummett, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking,” in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1986), 466.

<sup>17</sup> Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs.” 99.

supposed.”<sup>18</sup> With prior and passing theories as the sole absolutely necessary aspects, a more general, shared notion to which we could affix the label “language” falls away for Davidson. So, there exists “no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with.”<sup>19</sup> He sees nothing like the strict, convention-dictated MPL notion that Ludwig and Lepore describe in points (a)-(d) in how we actually communicate. From this, he argues that we should give up the attempt to explain how we communicate by appealing to conventions. Moving beyond the descriptive, this normative assertion urges us away from conventions, away from the rules and regulations of language whenever we try to establish the basic, general forces at play in interpersonal communication. Although some early groundwork of the view Davidson eventually develops in “Derangement” appears in an article titled “Communication and Convention,” Ian Hacking later quips that Davidson’s overall project distills to “communication without convention.”<sup>20</sup>

A reasonable question can be raised as to whether malapropisms cause a problem for Davidson’s view. His simplest answer to that question would be “no,” because the idiolects are primary. Davidson’s “Radical Interpretation” article (1973), which preceded “Derangement” (1986) by more than a decade, implies some ideas that provide a clearer image of what might populate the reverse side (the positive side) of Davidson’s argument. It describes constant interpretation and changing of one’s theories, both prior and passing, in the course of all of one’s communication. All one must do, and all one can do, to conceptualize communication as it actually happens is to allow for the distinction between prior and passing theories. Other attempts to nail down word meaning, reference, and other grammatical issues fail to account for that distinction, which Davidson believes to be absolutely necessary and for which the incidence

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<sup>18</sup> Davidson, 107.

<sup>19</sup> Davidson, 107.

<sup>20</sup> Ian Hacking, “The Parody of Conversation,” in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest Lepore (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1986), 449.

of malapropisms serves as evidence. As a result, Davidson's overarching question becomes how malapropisms work for the MPL, those who view shared conventions and rules as primary over idiolects. He thinks that when such a person comes upon a malapropism, their view cannot accurately describe it. However, they can still understand the speaker's intended meaning successfully. Communication should have failed because it breaks their rules, but it succeeds.

As close as Davidson comes to a theory of language may be considered "an empirical theory," not unlike a theory of gravity.<sup>21</sup> The litmus test for a view's success then becomes whether it can properly account for all sorts of successful communications—both those that follow the set rules one would associate with a given language and those that do not. Davidson's operant point is that malapropisms are truly no more problematic for him than anything else that might arise in the course of linguistic communication. Given that all he sees us as able to ascertain about language are the constantly changing and adapting idiolects of individual speakers, rules cease to matter as anything significant other than heuristics by which people communicate more efficiently than they might otherwise. Taking Davidson's view seriously, it could be said that each person has their own individual mental dictionary for how they use words, and recursively looking to the grammatical rules and publicly agreed upon definitions within a certain natural language, like English or French, will not allow one to account for some sorts of successful linguistic communication. So, linguistic rules are neither necessary nor sufficient, and malapropisms become an idiolectic usage of a word or phrase that differentiates between a prior theory and a passing theory for the speaker, hearer, or both. As a result, we "should give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Donald Davidson, "Truth and Meaning," in *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, UK ; New York, NY, USA: Clarendon Press, 1986), 24.

<sup>22</sup> Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs." 107.

## II. Criticism of Davidson's Arguments and Conclusions in "Derangement"

To initiate my discussion of criticism against Davidson's view, I will first introduce a helpful device that Ludwig and Lepore offer for the sake of clarity. This device helps to differentiate between 'language' as it is typically used and the specific definition of language that Davidson attributes to the MPL against whom he argues.

### *Clarifications, and the MPL View as Language*

In his initial response to Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking," Michael Dummett addresses the difficulty of signifying multiple distinct concepts using solely the word 'language.' Ludwig and Lepore seek to mitigate this confusion in "The Reality of Language." They use the stylized '*Language*,' with the italics and font change, to characterize the complex concept that they describe with steps (a)-(d)—essentially a specific, explicable set of syntactic rules and hard conventions whose before-the-fact mastery proves both necessary and sufficient for communication). '*Language*' represents the much stronger, more demanding concept that Davidson attributes to MPL.<sup>23</sup> Although the extent to which Davidson believes this remains unclear, we can consider natural 'language,' like English or Japanese, to represent a meaningful vocabulary and set of rules which determine the meanings of sentences formed using them, utilized by a certain group of people. For the remainder of this project, I will make use of this language- *Language* distinction.

Multiple clarifications and distinctions that authors publishing after Davidson illustrate are not necessarily distinctions Davidson explicitly draws in "Derangement," but they become necessary to a thorough understanding of what Davidson seeks to accomplish. In fact, Davidson

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<sup>23</sup> LePore and Ludwig, "The Reality of Language," 275.

failed to offer an acknowledgement of a concept akin to ‘*Language*’ as distinct from that signified by ‘language’ until multiple other authors had already reacted to “Derangement.” This led some authors to inquire about issues that end up not being particularly salient to the discussion, based chiefly on their confusion about the genuine force and conceptual geography of Davidson’s arguments.

For example, Dorit Bar-On and Mark Risjord charge that discarding a concept of language threatens to “undermine Davidson’s original program” because “in an important sense it robs the program of subject-matter and empirical content.” The original program they refer to is the “True-in-L” notion that characterizes a significant amount of Davidson’s work in philosophy of language preceding “Derangement.”<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, however, this criticism does not land. Ludwig and Lepore’s clarification of what *Language* is shows how “nothing in derangement undercuts the application of Davidson’s methods to the investigation of natural languages. All that they require is that we do not conceive of knowledge of the natural language as being either sufficient or necessary (in principle) for communication.”<sup>25</sup> Paul Pietroski, who wrote an essay called “A Defense of Derangement,” agrees with Ludwig and Lepore that the languages referenced by “True-in-L” are not the same as that against which Davidson concludes in “Derangement.”<sup>26</sup>

In “The Parody of Conversation” (1986), Ian Hacking offers some criticism of Davidson’s ideas and their presentation in “Derangement” that provides a lens through which to clarify two of the key concepts at play here, the prior and passing theories. Hacking sees Davidson’s way of describing interpersonal communication as entirely one-sided—entirely

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<sup>24</sup> Dorit Bar-On and Mark Risjord, “Is There Such a Thing as a Language?,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 22, no. 2 (June 1992): 164, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.1992.10717276>.

<sup>25</sup> Lepore and Ludwig, “The Reality of Language,” 288.

<sup>26</sup> 4/16/23 10:03:00 PM



interpreter sided.<sup>27</sup> Roles for speaker and interpreter seem to remain static for Davidson, somewhat resembling a monologue (a type of communication Hacking finds to encompass only a small portion of what would fall under the general umbrella of “linguistic communication”). Hacking sees Davidson’s attempts to modify the principles of first meaning as related exclusively to the linguistic competence of the interpreter, thus neglecting the speaker’s important perspective on the situation.<sup>28</sup> Hacking struggles with how Davidson writes about a hearer and a speaker as if all (or most) communications involve only two people. Additionally, Hacking expressing confusion as to why the goings-on of the hearer are the only relevant things. Would an assessment of communication, generally, not seem to necessitate more?

However, Davidson’s conceptualization can be made simpler by acknowledging that speakers and hearers often rotate roles quickly and continuously. Without tarnishing the spirit of Davidson’s line of thinking, one can simply describe the prior and passing theories as sets of previous understandings about words and grammar that inform expectations about a given listener or listeners; one of these sets of expectations (the prior) is more general than the other, but each remains active and changes constantly. Who occupies the speaker and hearer roles changes quickly, but this does nothing to affect the salient point that in Davidson’s diagnosis of communication, speaker and hearer passing theories are the *only* things that must overlap for communication to be successful. This remains the case no matter the way in which the speaker uses words in relation to existing conventions.

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<sup>27</sup> Hacking, “The Parody of Conversation,” 448.

<sup>28</sup> Hacking quite accurately points out the sometimes deeply frustrating lack of clarity on the part of Davidson’s presentation. As is perhaps apparent, my exegesis required access to several documents, written by Davidson and others, to establish a clear sense. Still, Hacking fails to substantially detract from Davidson’s general idea with his objection on one-sidedness.

Along a similar line of clarification, Michael Dummett tries to edit “long-range” and “short-range” in place of “prior” and “passing” theories, respectively, in his article “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking.” In doing so, he points out an important matter that actually accrues to the benefit of Davidson’s intent. This is the fact that the prior theory is also engaged throughout the act of communication. Speakers and hearers do not leave their prior theory at the door so to speak, when entering into communication with each other.<sup>29</sup> Both theories, prior and passing, remain active throughout the act of linguistic communication. Expectations and reality change constantly. Despite the fact that Dummett’s point helps us to see that the prior theories are not exclusively prior in the sense that they cease to figure into the communication once the communication has begun, his own nomenclature could fall victim to a similar criticism of being static and general. While a helpful point of clarity, I see no compelling reason to take on Dummett’s nomenclature over Davidson’s. Beyond this historical context, this essay seeks to identify and discuss the (sometimes elusive) points of genuine contention between Davidson and his critics.

Before proceeding with more actionable criticism, I will briefly address a threshold issue. Davidson’s point is that malapropisms, utterances that fail to adhere to conventions, ought not make sense for his opponents who hold the *Language* view. But experientially, they still do make sense. The absolute necessity and sufficiency of mastering these conventions as Davidson sees them begins to bring out a basic, but potentially quite impactful objection. Davidson’s imagined opponent may hold an absurdly rigid sense of language and risk being a straw man. In evaluation, the question will be raised as to whether *any* philosophers or linguists have viewed language rules as so rigid.

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<sup>29</sup> Dummett, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” 460.

*Ketches, Yawls, and the Extent of Radical Interpretation*

Hacking analyzes an example from a previous paper of Davidson's to point out another potential issue. Hacking speaks of the distinction between ketches and yawls (sailing ships which differ based solely on the fore or aft location of the rudder). Nautical jargon aside, the easily confusable nature of these two terms and what they represent make them worth considering. A sailor may incorrectly label a ketch as a yawl or vice versa in conversation with another sailor. The two words' referents (the two different ships) are very similar, which makes it easy to imagine circumstances in which they might be confused for one another. However, given the previously provided definition of a malapropism ("the ludicrous misuse of words, esp. in mistaking a word for another resembling it"), the mistake of confusing ketches for yawls, per Hacking, is not malapropic in nature.<sup>30</sup>

While this may initially appear to be an uninteresting instance of someone simply being wrong by failing to correctly label something, Hacking sees more. He argues that for malapropisms to exist, surely there must also exist facts about our language (or the conventions that populate it) against which either a malaprop or the yawl/ketch confusion are mistakes.<sup>31</sup> Without these rules as to what sort of boat 'ketch' references and 'yawls' references, how would these sailors reach an agreement? If they were to take Davidson to heart and truly eschew conventions, they would risk a) having no means of sorting out which sailor made a correct reference to a given ship and b) having no motivation to speak in a way that adheres to these conventional notions of correct and incorrect. Hacking asks whether this is the sort of world any sailor might want to live in. Being able to adjudicate collectively agreed-upon correct and incorrect uses is, for Hacking, utterly uncontroversial given language's goal to be a tool for

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<sup>30</sup> Hacking, "The Parody of Conversation," 449.

<sup>31</sup> Hacking, 449.

successful communication. With this example, Hacking criticizes Davidson's conclusions against conventions more so than his argumentation about their absolute necessity or sufficiency. In doing so, Hacking opens the door for a potentially attractive perspective to which I will give more consideration in the third section of this thesis. That is a view holding that conventions are not *absolutely* necessary for linguistic communication but are still necessary as a normative influence that encourages users to communicate in ways that facilitate their desire to be understood.

As stated above, mistaking the reference between the words 'ketch' and 'yaw!' from a meaning perspective is *not* ludicrous, whereas the malapropic use of 'derangement' in place of 'arrangement' (as in the title of Davidson's article) is ludicrous. This ludicrous-or-not distinction raises questions toward the possibility of establishing a clear scope of what Davidson is talking about—whether his target (what causes problems for those who subscribe to the *Language* view) really is just malapropisms or whether malapropisms are simply an example of the sort of problem Davidson targets. Looking at an instance of successful communication despite a mistake, does the speaker's mistake *have* to be ludicrous in order for it to cause a problem for the '*Language*' view? Muddling over the requisite ludicrousness of an utterance to determine whether it qualifies as a malapropism as opposed to being a pedestrian "mistake" would likely prove tedious and yield little profit. But the operant criticism against Davidson, which relates to the normative effect that conventional notions of correct and incorrect exert, remains. Could one even parse out whether a mistake counts as malapropic without appeal to shared conventions?

This leads into further discussion about interpretation. It will prove necessary to address both the extent to which interpretation actually, typically happens as well as the different forms it can take. Understanding interpretation to mean the (potentially conscious and effortful) process

of applying a certain meaning or reference to a certain usage of a word, different authors see interpretation as taking place to varying degrees in regular usage. Hacking suspects that Davidson, in trying to describe communication, speaks not of a radical *translation* from my language (my idiolect) to your language (your idiolect) in a manner that proceeds constantly back and forth as we communicate but instead speaks of radical *interpretation*. Hacking also believes that Davidson's view requires and explicitly acknowledges radical interpretation as necessary for domestic commerce as well as foreign.<sup>32</sup> By "radical interpretation," Hacking means that Davidson's view describes speakers who have to apply contextual information relativized to each individual utterance of a word in order to be able to understand it, regardless of whether they are conversing with someone who also speaks the same natural language as them. The counterintuitive implication for Davidson's view then becomes that, since radical interpretation is necessary for foreign *and* domestic commerce, it truly does not matter whether any two people seeking to communicate with each other consider themselves to be speaking the same natural language, like English or Japanese. But that implication, of course, results from the fact that Davidson does not seem to think that there exists anything like what MPL might believe English or Japanese to be.

The ketch/yawl confusion relates to this concern. The two sailors in question intuitively speak the same language, English, when talking to each other about which kind of ship they see. This fact could be ascertained by simply asking them what language they speak. Yet they must engage in explicit, effortful, interpretive thought as to who is right and what a person means by "ketch" or "yawl" in a given circumstance. Plus, real world facts and shared linguistic notions dictate whether one of them made an accurate reference. The problem here pertains to how well

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<sup>32</sup> Hacking, 449.

this truly describes typical experiences with language. Hacking first asserts that this effortful interpretation seems to go beyond our everyday experiences in the overwhelming majority of instances. Most words we take to have been used “correctly,” or used in line with the conventional rules of the English language that we take to be the case. Thinking back on typical conversations, do we recall a need to explicitly interpret? Even if we do, how frequently does this arise? Discerning how different views understand the role of interpretation (and how explicit the interpretation is) figures importantly in what follows, given the value of holding a view that actually coheres with typical language usage.

At this juncture, it seems necessary to closely examine what happens to or with the actual word or words used during communication, especially communication involving a malapropism. Davidson holds that in the case of a malapropic use, the word that fails to adhere to “standard” usage or that breaches one or both of the prior theories of those involved *takes on the full burden (meaning) of the term or terms it replaces*. Per Davidson, in an instance of successful communication despite a malapropism, hearer and speaker both give over the full meaning of one word or sound to a different word or sound.<sup>33</sup> A clear image of Davidson’s conceptualization becomes crucial in the forthcoming discussion of the potential qualitative difference between hearing and interpreting, as well as a consideration of the extent to which the speaker is aware regarding her own spoken words. This also factors into later discussion of the normative effects exerted by linguistic conventions, regardless of the extent to which people actually adhere to them or not. Hacking and Dummett remain convinced that we largely (if not almost exclusively) *hear* words without a need to explicitly and effortfully *interpret* them. We

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<sup>33</sup> Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs.” 103.

hear the words we are accustomed to hearing a certain way in that certain way, and no need typically arises to dwell on them further.

In contrast, if all that one can justifiably claim by way of theorizing about linguistic communication are idiolects, as Davidson argues, then people would ostensibly engage in some level of interpretation *every time* they hear any words or sounds that resemble words. Hacking's criticism targets how the passing and prior theories model may make any case in which the hearer actually understands what the speaker says, regardless of how "right" or "wrong" the usage of the words was, to involve an effortful act of interpretation on the part of the hearer. This is because the only knowledge necessarily being shared between the speaker and his counterpart are the understandings of the speaker's words in that particular context.<sup>34</sup> Each words' meanings in the passing theory may or may not cohere with their meanings in the prior theory, but the hearer must engage in some explicit process to resolve that potential difference. This reading of Davidson explains that the hearer must undertake this interpretive process for *all* the words in the communication, because all of the words involved could potentially be used in a way that causes someone's prior and passing theories to diverge.

In his initial response to Davidson and Hacking, Dummett agrees that Hacking is justified in criticizing "Davidson's extended use of 'interpretation'" in examining what the listener's side of linguistic communication does. Dummett sees Hacking as arguing that, contrary to Davidson, a process of interpretation is neither necessary nor actually takes place in cases of immediate recognition. He enriches Hacking's point by calling the non-interpretive hearing phenomenon, which he takes to characterize most acts of listening, "grasping" in a Wittgensteinian sense. Here, Dummett refers to Wittgenstein's notion of rule-following wherein Wittgenstein presents

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<sup>34</sup> Hacking, "The Parody of Conversation," 451.

the possibility of following a rule without actively interpreting the rule in the course of following it. He aligns this with Hacking's view that one can understand an utterance(s) without "putting an interpretation on it."<sup>35</sup>

The intuitive difficulty that Hacking and Dummett point out against Davidson's then becomes an empirical one. They ask how frequently the prior and passing theories actually must diverge. In doing so, they generate doubts as to whether such an outlier occurrence ought to cause so much controversy about how we consider language. Hacking and Dummett both see mistakes like malapropisms and the ketch/yawl distinction as aberrations in any general, aggregate estimation of linguistic communication. They believe that words are used in the conventional way the overwhelming majority of the time. Dummett argues that typically no prompt to apply any other meaning than a standard one emerges.<sup>36</sup> Davidson, conversely, views malapropisms and other nefarious uses as commonplace enough to prompt the elimination of the entire *Language* notion. One's perspective on the frequency of such problems seems to drive how dramatic their reaction becomes to malapropisms as a convention-breaking phenomenon.

The conceptual issue of the extent to which we regularly interpret bears on the accuracy of Davidson's diagnosis of communication in comparison with that of his critics. The question of the level to which we engage in interpretation in linguistic communication rises beyond the matter of whether the listening side of the linguistic communication ought to be referenced as a "hearer" or "interpreter." Frankly, the word-choice need not exert much weight on whose arguments prove ultimately preferable. Given the disparate understandings that the different thinkers apply to the terms "hearer" and "interpreter," it likely proves most profitable to ignore the specific terms and simply consider each writer's intent in using them. Davidson may use

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<sup>35</sup> Dummett, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," 464.

<sup>36</sup> Dummett, 464.



“hearer” or “interpreter” in a given instance, but the operant information is that his view seems to always require a level of radical interpretation. When speaking from Dummett’s or Hacking’s perspective, conscious interpretation seems largely unnecessary, emerging only in the case of a malapropism or other abused convention that might affect a communication’s success.

*Closely Examining Awareness in Communication*

This discussion of interpretation becomes important in determining which perspective on language responds best to pragmatic concerns. The accuracy with which one side describes linguistic communication *as it typically or always takes place* marks a key difference in determining which theory more accurately describes language, and thereby which theory might prove most useful. Were Davidson’s argument to treat *Language* as an ideal as opposed to what many people think language is, then such practical concerns would matter less. However, given Davidson’s stated goal to describe language (or prove that we cannot describe language as a shared system that is learned in advance), his ability to describe communication as it typically takes place becomes an impactful subject to discuss.

The existence of what I may call “easier cases,” or times in which little or no interpretive effort proves necessary to understand another’s utterances, may help in clarifying the criticism against Davidson. On the extended use of interpretation (or the “radical interpretation”) Dummett sees Davidson’s view as requiring, there would seem to be no normal or standard uses in linguistic communication. Communication either occurs successfully or it fails to some degree, simply as a result of how closely, and by whatever sundry means, the participants in the communication manage to align their passing theories. However, a notion of interpretation that does *not* occur in relation to some standard or conventional understanding seems incoherent. Conceptually, how might one even consider whether or not to attach a “standard” meaning to a

given usage unless that person knows what the standard meaning is? For that to happen, surely such standard meanings must exist in some shared sense among users of the same natural language. While perhaps not totally overturning Davidson's argument against conventions' necessity and sufficiency, this point lends significant credibility to the normative influence conventions assert on language users.

Returning to the Mike Tyson example allows me to illustrate a difference between two or more types of interpreters in a linguistic interaction. Most people likely heard Tyson's quote, "I might just fade into Bolivian," and *consciously* gave Tyson the benefit of the doubt. While those listeners afforded the meaning of "oblivion" to "Bolivian," the fact that "oblivion" was the correct word remained in their mind. Still, there exists the possibility of listeners who successfully understood Tyson without consciously giving him the benefit of the doubt, as a result of not noticing his malaprop. By giving over the meaning associated with "oblivion" to "Bolivian" without realizing it, it seems these listeners may have accounted for Tyson's error (or failed to notice it) in a meaningfully different way. These different levels of awareness despite successfully communicating may inform (or further cloud) the extent to which "interpretation" takes place among listeners in malapropic uses.

Dummett also offers some criticism toward the prior and passing theories model that opens a fuller discussion of speaker and listener awareness. Dummett thinks Hacking fails to gain meaningful traction in criticizing Davidson's prior and passing theory model as one-sided and interpreter-sided. Dummett thinks the prior theory is simply a theory about how a hearer, H, is prepared to understand the utterances of a speaker, S, at a given time. The passing theory, then, is taken by Dummett to contain understandings of specific utterances S makes when speaking to

H.<sup>37</sup> Under this conceptualization of prior and passing theories, H could accommodate S's non-standard usage of a word in a one-off sort of way (without any apparent intention to use that word in that non-standard way in the future). In doing so, H integrates that word usage into her passing theory (how she understands that particular utterance), without incorporating that non-standard usage into her general/prior theory of how she'll understand the speaker moving forward. H may also hear what she takes to be a malapropic usage of a word but accommodate this initially non-standard usage by including it in her passing theory but also, importantly, integrating it into her prior theory. This would seem more probable in a conversation wherein H considers herself to have a smaller vocabulary or less language expertise than S. One could imagine a student hearing a professor use a term in an unfamiliar way and jotting down a quick definition to remember that X word can indicate Y meaning (when Y meaning was previously unknown to the student). This differs from writing off the professor's usage as a malapropic mistake. Conversely, one might imagine that a parent would be much less likely to do anything other than a one-off accommodation for a malapropic usage they hear from their young child.

While I have been discussing the differences in awareness for the person hearing the speaker's utterances, a similar analysis can bring the speaker into the fold. Tyson did not, at least initially notice his mistake. For him, "Bolivian" meant "oblivion" in that moment, and he showed no evidence of a compulsion to correct or explain himself. This confidence and lack of awareness is not always the case. Examples of times when one has erred by uttering the incorrect word then immediately righted themselves are easy to conjure up. Take the previous example of someone saying, "We should defiantly go there for dinner." One might say this, then immediately correct themselves after hearing themselves say it, simply because something feels

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<sup>37</sup> Dummett, 463.

amiss. Our intuitive sense of our natural language (as we understand it ought to be) arises, and we restate ourselves in terms that we have more confidence our conversational partner(s) could understand. This point primes the coming discussion of how conventions clearly exert normative influence on communication. Taking this correct-or-incorrect awareness as absolute, four potentialities emerge for how to categorize a malapropic instance of communication with one speaker and one hearer, based on their awareness as to whether their usage was standard or non-standard.

1. Speaker aware, listener aware
2. Speaker unaware, listener aware
3. Speaker aware, listener unaware
4. Speaker unaware, listener unaware

Furthermore, this list of options takes awareness as absolute, when experience clearly illustrates that the sense of having erred (or not) is often subtle and nuanced. One may be unable to pinpoint an exact cause for this feeling. The sheer diversity of possibilities here illustrates the difficulty one faces in any attempt to conceptualize linguistic communication. Each person can draw on experiences when communication was smooth and effortless and other experiences when understanding their conversational counterpart(s) proved to be laborious. This makes the discussion of how often an effortful interpretive process actually occurs increasingly important, given that it remains difficult to determine the extent to which these points actually damage Davidson's view. His prior and passing theories perhaps provide some path to describe the interpretive process in the wake of a deviant usage like a malapropism, but, as alluded to, are outlier uses what ought to drive a wholistic consideration of linguistic communication?

What unites and underlies all of these criticisms is the fact that there is, as Hacking points out, a larger background of natural language against which these instances are or are not mistakes, regardless of whether communication succeeds. Discussion of whether a given mistake, like saying ‘ketch’ to describe a yawl, qualifies as malapropic requires a larger backdrop of English. Discussion of the extent to which speaker and hearer interpret, radically or not, on a given utterance also involves recourse to a larger backdrop of linguistic conventions and word meanings. One cannot interpret the way a word has been used in a given instance as in-accord-with or deviant-from the way it is typically used without some general sense of its typical use. Not only do we often recognize our mistakes as such, but we also typically apologize for them—providing further evidence to the normative effect linguistic rules and conventions play. The overarching comment on Davidson is that, if *all* we have is our idiolects, to what do we defer when we make the effort to correct linguistic communication, regardless of whether we are correcting ourselves or our conversational partners?<sup>38</sup>

Dummett contextualizes the project in “Derangement,” saying it would have been modest but valuable had it solely sought to investigate the means by which a hearer comes to understand non-standard uses of expressions and expressions unfamiliar to him.<sup>39</sup> As the foregoing discussion shows, this topic is fraught enough without taking its conclusions to contraindicate conventions and language generally. However, Dummett sees Davidson’s project as more ambitious in light of three points: first, the issue of radical interpretation, even in straightforward cases; second, Davidson’s provocative, sensational conclusion that there is no such thing as a language, if language is *anything like* what many philosophers and linguists have considered it to be; and finally, the problem of describing linguistic competence, or what is involved in “having a

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<sup>38</sup> Hacking, “The Parody of Conversation,” 450.

<sup>39</sup> Dummett, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” 463.

language.” As a result, Davidson “is not taking for granted the hearer's prior understanding of standard uses of expressions of the language, and seeking to explain in terms of it how he comes to understand non-standard uses. Rather, he is aiming, by extending the results of a study of the understanding of non-standard uses, to arrive at an account of the understanding of language in general.”<sup>40</sup> Whereas many might put the general, shared language first before considering how individuals use it, Davidson places the idiolect as primary. Hacking and Dummett suspect that Davidson has put the proverbial cart before the horse in doing so.

Davidson concludes with the provocative but descriptive claim that there exists no such thing as language. But then he goes further and asserts the normative claim that we ought to “give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions.”<sup>41</sup> The problem, then, is that the conventions that Davidson needs to a) describe malapropisms and then b) illustrate the differentiability of the prior and passing theories, are the same conventions that he says are of no value in describing communication. Davidson acknowledges that these conventions exist and even points to their frequent employment by language users for the sake of utility and ease. Yet simultaneously, he denigrates their value as a part of any attempt to conceptualize how we communicate with each other. This exposes some unresolved tension between the ideas that Davidson uses to reach his conclusions and the recommendations he advocates for in their aftermath. Dummett finds this dubious and thinks it risks making Davidson’s argument incoherent.

### **III. Evaluation, Conclusion, and Discussion**

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<sup>40</sup> Dummett, 460.

<sup>41</sup> Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” 107.

In this final section, I seek to accomplish a few goals. First, I will present the explicit replies that Dummett and Davidson offer each other in their work. Next, I will estimate the salient points of contention established thus far. Then, I will evaluate the objections and their responses while offering some argumentation of my own. Finally, I will offer a clarification and some concluding thoughts.

*Explicit Reply from Davidson*

Davidson's key responses to the objections raised thus far come from his 1994 follow-up titled "The Social Aspect of Language." Davidson understands Dummett to take issue with the fact that Davidson takes idiolects as primary. Relatedly, he identifies that Dummett sees no non-circular way of characterizing idiolects. Davidson, however, sees no problem stemming from his own failure to produce an alternative account of language that corresponds with common usage. Instead, Davidson says that "What bothers Michael is... my failure to appreciate that the concept of a speaker meaning something by what he says depends on the notion of a shared language and not the other way around."<sup>42</sup>

On the controversy surrounding his view and interpretation, Davidson does not think he ever conflated the empirical question of *how* one goes about understanding a speaker in a particular instance with the separate question of *which conditions* are necessary and sufficient to account for such an understanding. Davidson has focused on the latter question because he thinks such a focus most effectively brings out the philosophically important (not empirical, scientific, or psychological) aspects of communication. Davidson thinks that focusing on the *how*, as he accuses Dummett of doing, leads to conjecture about "arcane empirical matters that neither

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<sup>42</sup> Donald Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," in *Truth, Language, and History: Philosophical Essays Volume 5* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 111, <https://doi.org/10.1093/019823757X.003.0008>.

philosophers nor psychologists know much about.”<sup>43</sup> Davidson complains that Dummett saddles Davidson’s view with an unduly strong, restrictive conception of interpreting that fails to accurately describe Davidson’s argument. What makes the objections toward radical interpretation restrictive is their emphasis on the constant, effortful nature of the interpretive process to such a point that it describes translating back and forth against one’s expectations. Davidson thinks that the sort of radical interpretation one might reasonably attach to his theory actually allows for the largely effortless back and forth that characterizes typical communication, even if the speakers and hearers technically must exert some effort in the course of the interpretive process.

Recall that Hacking saw Davidson’s view as erring by going *beyond* radical translation into the stronger concept of radical interpretation. Counter to this claim, Davidson wishes to clarify that the interpretation his view describes *is* translation, but from idiolect to idiolect, not English to Spanish. The radical interpretation Hacking seems to be worried about as wildly above and beyond radical translation actually just *is* the translation about which Davidson speaks. In making this clarification, Davidson illustrates how Hacking’s objection may actually stem from misunderstanding what all Davidson intended by using the term “radical interpretation.” Despite claiming that ‘*Language*’ does not exist, Davidson does not think his own view fails to cohere with the typical way people talk to each other, which is characterized by people sharing ‘languages.’

Davidson repeatedly sees no reason, in theory at least, why speakers who understand each other ever need to speak or to have spoken as anyone else has spoken. This extends his point that linguistic conventions ought not be considered when describing communication. He

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<sup>43</sup> Davidson, 112.



thinks if we were to employ a translation manual between two idiolects to relate the two ways of speaking then define what might be meant by “speaking in the same way,” perhaps we could salvage something of the claim that communication requires a shared practice. However, Davidson points out, this operationalization would look nothing like what anyone would reasonably call sharing a language, nor would it be what anyone has meant by the common practices and shared rules and conventions of language. So, Davidson puts the onus on Dummett, saying that the discussion ought to become a question of how Dummett might specify, in a non-circular way, how speakers of the same language must resemble one another.

*Explicit Reply From Dummett*

Dummett’s main responses appear in his imaginatively titled 1994 essay, “Reply to Davidson.” He concedes Davidson is “quite right” that sharing a *Language* is neither necessary nor sufficient for communication. Dummett even says that Davidson is right for the right reasons.<sup>44</sup> However, Dummett does not consider his own views to fall under the purview of the “many philosophers and linguists” Davidson criticizes. Furthermore, Dummett wonders whether *any* philosophers or linguists have claimed *Language* exists. There may be philosophers or linguists who are searching for a perfect language whose advance mastery allows one to fully and freely understand all instances of successful communication using that language, but Dummett thinks both he and Davidson agree that natural language as people use it in their daily lives is nothing like that. In an initially counterintuitive move, Dummett concedes that Davidson is right to say that while communication is the primary function of language, there is no strict and absolute necessity that speakers communicate in the same *Language* or even the same

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<sup>44</sup> Michael Dummett, “Reply to Davidson,” in *The Philosophy of Michael Dummett*, ed. Brian McGuinness and Gianluigi Oliveri, Synthese Library (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1994), 257, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-8336-7\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-8336-7_13).

language, so long as they communicate successfully. But the likelihood of such an occurrence, one in which people communicate consistently and successfully despite not speaking in remotely the same way, is wildly infinitesimal—so small in fact that such outlier occurrences ought not exert any sort of strong impact on how we seek to conceptualize communication.<sup>45</sup>

Dummett responds on the metaphilosophical level by concluding that Davidson simply finds himself overimpressed by the unremarkable fact that not everyone uses language in the same way. Dummett holds that the primary unit of communication remains a shared language known to all participants in the communication. Dummett concedes that rules can change and that “Bolivian” can come to mean what “oblivion” means for certain people in certain contexts. But that need not disrupt that fact that to explain what meaning is, we ought to begin with the prototypical cases of conversation between people who speak the same language generally in the same way. As to the normative effect conventions play, Dummett argues that, if one fails to use words in the socially accepted ways, then she may or may not communicate, but if she fails to hold herself generally responsible to words’ socially accepted meanings (without giving some prior indication she is about to do so), nobody would be able to consistently understand her.

### *Evaluation*

Although issues inevitably overlap, I see the points of contention as separable under the headings of those that pertain primarily to Davidson’s argumentation in “Derangement” and those that relate to the consequences of his conclusions. For argumentation, I will first evaluate the issue of the extent to which Davidson’s view requires interpretation. This figures into a determination of whether Davidson’s view accurately describes communication as it characteristically occurs. From there, I will address the potential for incoherence in Davidson’s

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<sup>45</sup> Dummett, 263.

arguments. Then I will conclude whether Davidson's imagined opponent becomes an overly strict straw man. Considering the consequences of Davidson's conclusions will involve imagining a world in which language users take his recommendations seriously. An issue within this evaluation will be to determine the operant content of the prior and passing theories. This will allow me to contextualize Davidson's view in relation to the goal of language as a tool for communication.

Beginning with the practical matter of (potentially radical) interpretation, I find it worth considering an example from Dummett about the Yoruba language. Under Davidson's view, Dummett could not identify what the fact that Dummett does not speak Yoruba consisted in. Surely, he said, it would not consist solely in the fact that Dummett has no tendency to form the same passing theory as a Yoruba speaker. Instead, would it not be that Dummett does not have a/any long range (prior) theory for Yoruba speakers? Nothing would populate the prior theory of how Dummett would expect a known speaker of solely Yoruba to interpret Dummett. So, how could Davidson characterize this bit of seemingly factual information without appealing to the concept of a shared natural language? While the difference between a natural English speaker and natural Yoruba speaker is intuitively valuable when considering any potential communication between those people, Dummett accuses Davidson of failing to significantly distinguish this difference from the difference between any one English speaker and another English speaker, since Davidson's radical interpretation applies in the same way regardless of domestic or foreign commerce.<sup>46</sup>

This point would seem to fall to Dummett, who points out an apparent and impactful qualitative difference (that between a speaker of one language and a speaker of some other

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<sup>46</sup> Dummett, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," 464–65.

language). Yet Davidson does not seem concerned about this difference. Davidson's view regards individual idiolects as primary and requires radical interpretation (no matter the contentious point of how effortful that interpretation is). As a result, Davidson sees his idiolect-first view as more readily able to account for nonstandard usages like malapropisms. But I agree with Dummett in asking how valuable this malleability is when the view risks offering nothing concrete to account for the difference between Yoruba and English speakers. While both thinkers make an emphatic point of challenging the other to provide a non-circular account of language, I would ask whether the onus really falls to Dummett here, when Davidson's view is the negative one. Davidson's view is the one that concludes against language and makes normative, metaphilosophical assertions against the value recourse to shared conventions. Dummett, conversely, places himself on side of the popular, culturally salient notion of natural language.

Davidson could respond, however, that the differences in language he would identify between a Yoruba speaker and an English speaker are in degree, not kind. In that case, the degreed difference between someone taken to speak Yoruba and someone taken to speak English would simply be much greater than the difference between two people taken to speak English, even if there exists no in-kind distinction between Yoruba and English. English speakers would then simply comprise a population of people with overlapping similar idiolects. As I will further, I believe the normative influence of shared linguistic conventions paired with the relative ease and seeming accuracy of a natural-language related description of speakers work against Davidson here. Perhaps the problem is that while Davidson's description does provide *something* to differentiate between an English speaker and a Yoruba speaker, that mode of differentiation fails to cohere with popular usage. While Davidson's line of thinking may be conceptually

appealing, I find it pragmatically and therefore ultimately unsatisfying, given language's role as a tool for communication.

Hacking and Dummett struggle to marry what Davidson's view seems to imply with how people actually use language typically—the “easier cases” I have referenced wherein an effortful process of interpretation is not necessary. I believe Davidson's response from “The Social Aspect of Language” misses the mark. If one's conceptualization of language takes malapropisms to be a possibility for every word, then always checking for this possibility requires a level of vigilance concomitant with the radical interpretation that Dummett and Hacking criticize. If Davidson takes the incidence of malapropisms to be so prominent as to inspire him to advocate a shift in how philosophers and linguists understand language generally, which he does, then I see no way in which he could salvage a notion of radical interpretation that coheres with the typically effortless way in which we hear words used just as we typically understand them. The radical interpretation about which Hacking first complained does not seem to be a priori problematic as a result of its idiolect-to-idiolect nature; instead, it loses appeal because of the forces that actually seem to dictate and affect the knowledge that populates those idiolects—the normative force of shared conventions.

To examine the potential for incoherence, I wish to focus more specifically on Davidson's line of argument. Dummett objects to Davidson's argument against *Language*, given the appearance that it requires the existence of conventions only to then conclude by advocating against conventions' value. I want to further this line of thinking by exposing doubts about Davidson's validity. In premise-conclusion form, Davidson asserts the following in “Derangement”:

1. Many philosophers and linguists claim that communication is almost always carried out using *Language*, where the function of *Language* is explained by conventions, rules, word definitions, etc.
2. Sometimes (perhaps quite often), we succeed at communication *despite* the breakdown of or failure to properly employ conventions or even without conventions at all (e.g., when we communicate despite a malapropism)
3. THEREFORE, there is no such thing as *Language*.

It seems to me the only way that Davidson could reasonably proceed from the second premise to the conclusion would be to place as much emphasis as possible on conventions as both necessary to and sufficient for language and also, importantly, for communication. Davidson might want to assert, in his own defense, that linguistic conventions are simply a substrate of linguistic communication. While they make up the machinery that often help individuals make communication work, they are not sufficient (because a shared passing theory, non-linguistic cultural norms, and sufficient oxygen are often also necessary), nor are they necessary (e.g., successful communication despite a malapropism, pantomimed hand signals, etc.). It remains worth emphasizing, though, that communication and language are not the same thing. Davidson actually inadvertently illustrates this with an example he brings up himself toward the end of “Derangement.” He says, “Using a word in a nonstandard way out of ignorance may be a faux pas in the same way that using the wrong fork at a dinner party is, and it has as little to do with communication as using the wrong fork has to do with nourishing oneself, given that the word is understood and the fork works.”<sup>47</sup> The following argument, which runs analogously to the preceding one, brings Davidson’s conflation into focus.

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<sup>47</sup> Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” 117.

1. Most philosophers claim that human activity *Z* (communication, transportation, eating at a dinner party) is nearly always carried out using method *Y* (*Language*, bicycles, utensils), where the functioning of *Y* is explained by *X* (conventions, round wheels, social rules about utensil use)
2. Sometimes (perhaps quite often), we succeed at *Z* (communication, transportation, eating at a dinner party) *despite* a breakdown of or failure to properly employ *X* (conventions, pedals, using a salad fork to consume salad) or even without *X* (e.g., communication despite a malapropism, arriving despite a flat tire or broken chain, eating dinner with one's hands)
3. THEREFORE, there is no such thing, *Y* (*Languages*, bicycles, utensils)

This emphasizes the point of contention between Davidson and Dummett as to whether communication dictates how we should conceptualize language or whether language should dictate how we understand communication. I believe envisioning communication as analogous to other human activities, as the above argument does, damages Davidson's justifiability in taking outlier instances of linguistic communication (malaprops) and using them to decide that language does not figure into communication. It lays the groundwork for Dummett's point that I personally find most appealing—that Davidson was primarily overimpressed by the pedestrian fact that not everybody uses language in the same way.

In an interesting counter to Dummett's earlier diagnosis of Davidson's ambition, Paul Pietroski's "Defense of Derangement" argues that, although the project may be more modest than many might think it, remains valuable. In line with Davidson's writing subsequent to "Derangement," Pietroski sees the project as one hoping only to (a) show that sharing a language cannot by itself explain how successful communication is possible and (b) sketch an alternative

account of communication. The above consideration of his argument, though, seems to make it clear that Davidson actually sought to do much more in “Derangement.” And, even if *Language* is not absolutely necessary or sufficient to account for all communication, such a realization might not be so groundbreaking.

If we envision communication as encompassing a broad set of activities, and language (with shared conventions and norms) as one of the most common tools with which to achieve smooth, efficient, consistently successful communication, it should come as no surprise that communication sometimes succeeds even when those tools are misused or neglected. But why would that deliver us to a conclusion that the tools in question do not exist? This exposes the questionable nature of Davidson’s choice to use outlier cases to argue that language does not (descriptively) and should not (prescriptively) figure into our philosophical understanding of communication. Dummett is right, Davidson was primarily overimpressed by the reality that not everybody uses language in the same way.

I agree with Dummett that Davidson errs in defining language entirely too strongly (and initially *so* unclearly) that Ludwig and Lepore find themselves in the position of designating ‘*Language*’ stylistically to distinguish it from natural language. Davidson’s choice of opponent is not a priori problematic, but it becomes so when he heralds this view or anything akin to it as what many philosophers and linguists believe. I cannot imagine that anyone would claim something like what Davidson opposes. In this way, Davidson does not distinguish between two popular understandings of language but instead assigns a view that likely nobody holds to “many philosophers and linguists.” This is obviously problematic. However, Dummett agrees that Davidson is right and right for the right reasons about the fact that sharing a language is neither necessary nor sufficient for communication. So, the point of the objection then becomes the fact



that toppling a view nobody holds would not seem to be a valuable project. If Davidson could be thought of as burning down a house, did anyone actually live there?

Now, to move into discussion of Davidson's conclusions, I will return to the issues of incoherence that Dummett raised. I find myself strongly convinced that one cannot engage in a convention breaking communication such as a malapropism in a world where language users do not to treat conventions as real or give them any normative value. Taking Davidson's observation that he cannot see how conventions factor into language, as well as his advice that "we should give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions," to heart gives a language user *cart blanche* to eschew established patterns of communication entirely. Davidson does not see this as problematic, so long as one takes successful communication as their guide in how they form communication. Unfortunately for Davidson, I find it nearly impossible to imagine taking utility as one's guide for communication leading that person to do anything other than rely quite heavily, if not exclusively, on linguistic conventions.

Davidson's conclusions are so sensationally strong that he actually alleges that speakers who understand each other *never* need to speak or to have spoken as anyone else has. While this might, in principle, be true in the most outlandish of circumstances, such a speaker consistently finding currency with each other's words is almost impossible to imagine. Such instances only really seem imaginable in fluky circumstances, but to totally (whether in principle or not) reject a need to speak as others have spoken quickly risks bordering on the ridiculous. It strikes me as a slippery slope from using the wrong fork at a dinner party to instead attempting to ingest a side salad through one's nostrils. At some point, one passes communicating *despite* a malapropism and ends up in the territory of failing to communicate at all. Davidson admits that any obligation we owe to conformity in speaking hinges on the desire to be understood by others. This seems an

obvious statement. Someone seeking to rebut this could simply say that of course we are always beholden to the desire to be understood, unless we are using language in a way that fails to cohere with the axiomatic goal of a natural language to be a tool for successful communication. This again raises the question of why anyone would desire to do that and whether such a desire is reflected in common language usage. I see few reasons to desire to do that and do not believe it reflects common usage.

### *A Final Clarification and Examination*

I believe the most impactful analysis I can offer toward clearly navigating this difficult subject matter is to provide further distinctions of the language-*Language* ilk. In “Derangement,” Davidson argues against the existence of *Language*, with *Language* being made of conventions and rules whose advance mastery proves absolutely necessary and sufficient to make one “at home with language.” Although Ludwig and Lepore distinguish language from *Language*, I see benefits to undergoing a similar re-christening of linguistic conventions as *Conventions* for Davidson, to better distinguish them from other notions of convention that are likely much weaker but much more commonly held. For Davidson’s argument to work, he would have to mean *Conventions* to be able to reach his conclusions. Despite discussing the MPL view of *Language* as distinct from natural language, Davidson’s eventual devaluation of *Conventions* seems much more far-reaching when neglecting to distinguish them from mere conventions. So, this *Linguistic* understanding of *Conventions* seems to be the only thing that makes it such that, if a rule can be successfully broken, the whole system of which the rule is a part crumbles. Had Davidson really meant conventions in any widely-recognizable sense, he could not have reached his conclusion that there is no such thing as language. The fact that Davidson spoke in such recognizable (but ultimately

misrepresentative) terms as ‘language’ and ‘conventions’ likely contributed to the number and intensity of the critical responses other thinkers offered.

Returning briefly to Dummett’s notion that Davidson may have simply been overexcited and overimpressed at the discovery that people do not use language in exactly the same way, I believe this idea can help formulate another clarification of terms. While Davidson sees himself as having established that rules of *Language* are not always necessary or sufficient for communication, I instead claim that these rules of language are practically necessary but perhaps not *Necessary*. An understanding of the rules by which people formulate sentences and the ways they use words seems to be necessary in a general sense. Such understandings normatively influence us to use language in the same way as those we consider to share our natural language. These rules and conventions, while not *Necessary* in the sense that they can be found in every single possible communicative interaction, remain necessary in their reflection of efficient communication as the overarching goal of language. While we might not take linguistic conventions as *Necessary*, we could instead regard the knowledge provided by a general awareness of conventions and our status as users who are beholden to such conventions as necessary for consistent communicative success.

I want to continue to put pressure on Davidson’s view using the normative effect that linguistic conventions play on the average communicator. In fact, I see the influence of these conventions as one of the ultimately operant issues in concluding this project. I have made reference above to the ways in which our knowledge of shared conventions might cause us to correct ourselves. To clarify, here, I believe we need to re-examine what exactly Davidson implies for the content of his prior theories. Prior theories are indexed to particular speakers and hearers within particular contexts. As a result, they seem to only truly imply A’s understandings

and expectations regarding the ways in which B uses words. One could argue that if they include anything beyond that, Davidson would risk pinning himself into a corner wherein he must relegate idiolects to a secondary position and admit the primary influence of public conventions. Hacking initially points to this idea, saying that Davidson's idiolect-based view of communication could be "duetist."<sup>48</sup> As is clear based on most all the examples in this paper, Davidson seems focused on diads, instances of linguistic communication between one speaker and one hearer. As is shown above, considering an example like Mike Tyson's, with its millions of listeners tuned in, can make matters significantly more complicated.

Returning to the prior and passing theories and how they might allow us to better parse out the issue of interpretation, I think that in denigrating conventions, Davidson neglects to consider *where* people get their prior and passing theories. Along a similar line to Dummett, while it might be the case that passing theories are the only things that absolutely must overlap, the fact remains that passing theories are made more likely to overlap because of overlap in people's prior theories. Shared conventions tend to significantly align people's prior theories, which tend to align their passing theories. Obviously, this sometimes breaks down to varying degrees, but the conventions provide a hugely valuable resource for the hearer's effort to figure out what the speaker might have meant. Occasionally, the breakdown is so significant that communication fails.

This transitions well into practical issues that arise from taking Davidson seriously. Although it is not malapropic, I will return to the ketch/yawl example to illustrate this. Hacking helped to raise the question of whether the sort of sailor who took Davidson's view of language seriously would be a very good sailor. Given Davidson's rejection of conventions, a Davidsonian

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<sup>48</sup> Hacking, "The Parody of Conversation," 458.

sailor seems as though he would simply shrug his shoulders at an attempt to correct his mistaken labeling of a yawl as a ketch. As a result, I agree with Hacking that he would not be an effective sailor. In response to these charges about shared public norms and an inability to parse out correct from incorrect references, Davidson could say that all of this information is still found in the idiolects of the speakers and coheres with his concepts of prior and passing theories. The conventions, then, would simply be rules within our *own* idiolects to which we hold ourselves and those we listen to accountable. The counter-response to that move is to assert that considering something to exist publicly makes it pragmatically so. To have one's general understanding of English pervade each individual interaction she has, above and beyond the expectations that she has about a particular person with whom she communicates, the duetist aspect of Davidson's theory seems to fall apart.

Beyond that, I doubt that such a dialectical formulation of language reflects communication, generally. As an embodied, goal-based practice that manifests itself in wildly diverse ways, I do not think Davidson does enough to consider the many, many factors and participants that linguistic communication can involve. Even if solely considering verbal communication among speakers of the same natural language, I do not think Davidson's two-person focus covers enough ground. Language arises not in diads but in groups of people working together to accomplish goals, many of which pertain to the concrete world around us. The Great Wall of China was not built by two people communicating with each other at a time but by thousands of people, over generations—making Davidson's choice to value the diad even more suspect.

I wish to conclude by providing some positive response to Davidson's particular charge that one cannot conceive of a non-circular view of communication wherein language is primary.

Even if the rules of natural language are neither necessary nor sufficient, I see the task of providing a crude but adequate conceptualization of communication, one in which linguistic conventions are the primary but by no means the only substrate of communication, as a manageable one. Take conventions, many of which are strong but none of which are *Conventions*, as the main substrate of linguistic communication. They make up the machinery that facilitates a world in which communication works smoothly a considerably high amount of the time. They are not, however, sufficient for communication, given that such disparate factors as non-linguistic cultural norms and sufficient oxygen are also often quite necessary. Neither are these conventions necessary, because sometimes we communicate despite their misuse or without them entirely. Examples of this phenomenon, as Davidson would be the first to mention, include malapropisms. They could also include such tools as hand signals and pantomime. Under this conceptualization, a potentially malapropic usage of a word involves all parties seeking to listen first to understand the word by recourse to shared linguistic conventions. After that, they may defer to non-linguistic situational factors. Failing that still, they maintain the option to seek clarification, attempt to correct the speaker, or some combination of both. Each instance restarts the process that begins with deference to the shared linguistic norms, with these norms understood to apply for all those who share a given language.

With all this in mind, I see some value in Davidson's critical project to challenge some of the commonly held notions of language, even if Davidson's target was the much stronger notion of *Language*. Still, I see Dummett's and Hacking's points as providing impactful criticism, which Davidson's view struggles to withstand. Whether considering the argumentative path by which Davidson advances from premise to conclusion or considering the sort of degenerative effect that taking his conclusions seriously might have on communication, I see more reasons to

discredit Davidson's views than to promote them. Although I appreciate his skepticism, it seems clear that heralding linguistic conventions, as many have, as the key aspect of an account of communication remains the most effective method of proceeding.

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