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# **Belief, Truth, and the Enigma of Error**

Thesis submitted for the dr.art.-degree  
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The University of Tromsø  
February 2006



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## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to my advisor Jan Harald Alnes who has guided my work since midway in the period of the scholarship. All articles except article 2 have been written or rewritten under his supervision. His enduring demands for clarity and his uncompromising line of avoiding handy short cuts of criticism to the advantage of always taking on charitable readings have been very important for my work on the thesis. Jan Harald's competent and thorough response to my writing has always been instructive, and the related hour-long discussions have been great fun and invaluable for pointing out the direction of the work. I would like to thank Johan Arnt Myrstad, who was my advisor for the two first years of the scholarship. Arnt gave generously of his time and he inspired me to believe in my own thinking.

I thank The Norwegian Research Council and The University of Tromsø for rendering this thesis possible by their financial support. My thanks go also to Nordlandsforskning in Bodø for letting me borrow an office in the final stages of my work. Thanks to family and friends for encouragement, and patience with me while I have been working on this thesis. The Department of Philosophy at the University of Tromsø have been my professional environment since the years of undergraduate study, except one year that I spent as visiting scholar at The Department of Philosophy at The University of California at Berkeley. I thank faculty, staff and students at both institutions for good companionship, and The Norwegian Research Council for generous financial support of our stay in Berkeley.

While I was in Berkeley Donald Davidson took time for discussions, and for reading and commenting upon my written material on his philosophy. Fortunately, I had misunderstood quite a lot. In this way I learned a good deal about what he had *never said*, what he *never could have said* and what he anyhow had *never meant*. Eventually, I managed to write something about what he *had said and meant*, but by then I was of course also far into the project of defending different theses of his, rather than critically discussing them from the outside. It was a great experience. It is sad that I due to the unexpected passing of Donald on August 30. 2003 will not have the opportunity of receiving his comments upon this thesis. I am grateful that I had the opportunity to work with him.

*Belief, Truth, and the Enigma of Error*

One of my first philosophy teachers, Harald Johannessen, deserves thanks for trying to teach me the essentials of Gottlob Frege's philosophy by co-reading quite a few articles during weekly seminars for quite a long time. My pace and ways of reading philosophy came to be more or less settled by that experience. Many friends, teachers and colleagues have since taken part in shaping the thoughts and words of this thesis by reading and commenting upon drafts, by suggestions, by criticisms and questions related to presentations, by discussions of the problems involved, and by advice on composition. I am indebted to Roar Anfinsen, Rani Anjum, Maria Baghramian, Eivind Balsvik, Solveig Bøe, Steinar Bøyum, Elizabeth Camp, Eddie Cushman, Eyolfur Emilsson, Kjersti Fjørtoft, Olav Gjelsvik, Kathrin Glüer, Ånund Haga, Jon Hellesnes, Mikael Janvid, Hildur Kalman, Gayle Kenny, Arpy Khatchirian, Jonathan Knowles, Elin Kolsvik, Tarjei Mandt Larsen, Frode Sirnes Larsen, Trygve Lavik, Erik Lundestad, Jacob Meløe, Kevin Mulligan, Petter Nafstad, Stephen Neal, Elina Nurmi, Peter Pagin, Bjørn Ramberg, Richard Rorty, John Richard Sageng, Merethe Sollund, Øyvind Stokke, Barry Stroud, and Folke Tersman.

I thank my husband Arne for two decades of discussions on evolutionary epistemology. My elder son Martin took on the task of proofreading the articles. It has been fun to see his reactions to the research that I've been on to "for as long as he can remember", and I am thankful for his elaborate work on my thoughts and words. My younger sons, Jonas and Eivind made me rethink my beliefs about the nature of language, thought and intentionality more than once. But, most of all, I thank my family for making my life good.

I would like to express my appreciation to the editors and publishers concerned for the permission to reprint articles. These include Unipub for the permission to reprint "Davidson and the Role of Error" from *Non-Conceptual Aspects of Experience*, Unipub, Oslo 2003, pp 119-134, edited by Hallvard Fossheim, John Richard Sageng and Tarjei Mandt Larsen, here appearing as article 2, and Universitetsforlaget for the permission to reprint "Velvillighetsprinsippets epistemiske status" from *Norsk filosofisk tidsskrift*, nr 1-2, Universitetsforlaget 2004, pp. 61-76, here translated into English with the title "The status of the Principle of Charity", appearing as article 3.

*Acknowledgements*

At its best, doing philosophy means shaking the ground upon which to understand. The moments of “mind quake” makes it all worth the while.

Tromsø, february 2006

Manann Solberg





# Introduction

## 1. Davidson's overall project

Over the years, Donald Davidson's project has come to be centered around the question of the difference between dispositions to react on the one hand, and the ability to conceptualize and think, on the other. Or we could say that he has focused on the difference between having a disposition versus having a concept, and between having a reaction versus having a norm. According to Richard Rorty there need not be a difference. He holds the view that all there is to normativity is regularity of behavior. Why would Davidson, then, consider these differences so important?

The debate on intentionality and explanation of human action between logical empiricism, represented by Carl Hempel, on the one hand, and philosophers inspired by the late Wittgenstein, represented by Elizabeth Anscombe, on the other, seems to have been formative for Davidson's project. The former were taken to have the project of reducing human intentionality to physics, and thus of leaving intentional aspects out of the explanation of human behavior. The latter were taken to have the project of rescuing human intentionality at the expense of humans' material and causal conditions, considering them unimportant for the understanding of human behavior. I'm sure that each of these descriptions is rather unfair. Nonetheless, the point here is that Davidson took on the project of uniting the two presumed contradictory views. In his theory of action, he is attempting to do this by joining reasons and causes in the explanation of action, as expressed in the slogan "the reason for an action is its cause". This means that for Davidson, material monism is to be *settled* by his philosophical project, and it could therefore not be presupposed.

The aims of his anomalous monism thesis lie in showing that there is one reality, but it is also vital for Davidson to point out that we can reach it in two ways. We can reach it either by way of intentional concepts or by way of causal concepts. If regularity of behavior is all there is, as Rorty has suggested, the interpretational research program, initiated by Davidson, will have lost its subject matter. That would of course be sad, but except for that, why couldn't we settle for regularity of behavior only? Why insist that there is an autonomous area for intentionality and normativity? *My* main reason for resisting the

strategy of settling for regularity of behavior is that we no longer would be able to give an account of what it *is* to understand intentional and normative creatures. If we erase human interests, reasons, orientations, values, assessments, meanings and beliefs from the board, there will be no point in interpreting creatures in order to understand them. “Interpretation” of regularity of behavior, without assessment, would, if it were possible, have no point. It would give us what we do not want and need, and in a sense it would stand out as a category mistake. It would not give us an understanding of the actions and values and beliefs of individual speakers, it would not give us an understanding of what intentionality is, and it would not give us an understanding of what normativity is.

The explanation of intentionality is the project that unites Davidson’s philosophical reflections on language, mind, action and epistemology. According to my reading, his overriding question is: How can we explain intentionality and normativity in a physical world? His unified theory of action, mind and language is given in the form of a theory of radical interpretation. In these articles, however, I say almost nothing about Davidson’s *unified* theory of thought, meaning, belief and action. When I present his theory of radical interpretation, I refer mainly to articles on theory of interpretation, such as “Truth and Meaning” and “Radical Interpretation”, where the theory was still a theory of meaning and belief, or with a collective term, theory of language. The reason for this is clearly not that the perspectives of later articles, such as “A Unified Theory of Thought Meaning and Action” or “A new Basis for Decision Theory”, in which Davidson sketches how to unite decision theory with the earlier work on radical interpretation, are uninteresting or unimportant. However, to come to grips with the particular features of Davidson’s epistemology that I seek to clarify I have assumed that this particular extension of the theory is inessential. For the theory of interpretation, the most prominent change is that the radical interpreter (who was previously looking for the speaker’s hold-true-attitudes) now has to search for the speaker’s preferences among sentences. This is then a change from the attitude of “holding true” to the attitude of “preferring true”. This implies that the radical interpreter should note the speaker’s preference of the truth of a particular sentence over another. The final result of the extended theory is that in addition to developed views on what the speaker mean and believe, the interpreter will have views on what the speaker wants and what the speaker is doing in addition to developed views on the speaker’s meanings and beliefs. Where I find that the extension of the theory might have made a

difference, I mention it explicitly. In all other cases the assumption should remain that the results that I come to are indifferent to the restricted and extended version of the theory.

## 2. Davidson's epistemological project

I tentatively read Davidson's epistemological project as an attempt at warding off skepticism about knowledge of the external world, about other minds and about the contents of our own minds. According to Davidson there are three forms of propositional knowledge. There is subjective knowledge, which is knowledge of the contents of our own minds, or what we more often call first person knowledge. Then there is intersubjective knowledge, which is knowledge of the contents of other minds. Intersubjective knowledge is either second person knowledge, i.e. what another knows about the contents of my mind, or third person knowledge; what I know about the contents of another mind. Finally, there is objective knowledge, which is knowledge of the shared environment, or "knowledge of the rest of the world of nature".<sup>1</sup> These three varieties of knowledge differ from each other in various respects, but are, according to Davidson, all objective "in the sense that their truth is independent of their being believed to be true" and also "objective in the sense that it could for the most part be expressed by concepts which have a place in a publically shared scheme of things". According to Davidson, none of the three varieties of knowledge can be dealt with in isolation, and none of them can be reduced to the others.<sup>2</sup> They are mutually irreducible. This means that Davidson hampers the skeptic by refusing to let him take a stand in only one (or two) of these forms of knowledge. However, there are no knockdown arguments to be found against the skeptic in Davidson's thinking, and perhaps one cannot even claim that Davidson really *answer* the skeptic. Answers to epistemological questions are often indirectly given, and some epistemological questions are simply dismissed. My contention is not that Davidson was first and foremost an epistemologist, but rather that he has given interesting answers to certain epistemological worries, and quieted others.

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<sup>1</sup> See the first page of the Introduction, page xiii of Donald Davidson: *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001.

<sup>2</sup> See Davidson's "Three Varieties of Knowledge", p. 208 in his *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001.

### **3. My project**

These articles deal with different problems within Donald Davidson's philosophy on belief, truth and error. In the hands of Davidson the methodology of radical interpretation is a device to explain how we achieve belief, objective truth and thus knowledge. Through the thought experiment of radical interpretation, Davidson has been able to shed light on some of the conditions of knowledge, and of the nature of human thought in general. The articles of this collection are not studies in epistemology in the sense of clearing out what knowledge is or what it takes to have justified beliefs. Still, the problems discussed will be highly relevant for such questions.

According to Davidson, the source of human knowledge is to be found in the interaction between at least two interpreting minds and a world. He calls this model "triangulation", and a key point is that other linguistic minds are inevitable for propositional knowledge. A major aim in my work is to analyze certain factors of the epistemic rationale of the model of triangulation. I recover some of the epistemic problems solved by triangulation and point out some of the models more problematic characteristics, such as the phenomenological insensitivity towards non-conceptual experience.

One of the conditions for knowledge within Davidson's theory that I find particularly interesting is the principle of charity. In Davidson's thinking this principle has always been crucial. I analyze the principle's function within his theory and take a closer look at the epistemological function of the theory of radical interpretation itself. Highlighting the function of radical interpretation in an epistemological setting generates a new perspective on this core principle. The received reading of the epistemic status of the principle of charity has long been that it is an apriori and constitutive principle. I challenge this view, and find that the epistemic status of the principle of charity is a useful "acid test" for placing Davidson's epistemological enterprise in the philosophical terrain in the stretch between naturalizing and transcendental tendencies.

The principle of charity and the model of triangulation are two of the main philosophical devices focused in the present interpretation of Davidson's epistemology. Both of these devices originate in the philosophy of Willard van Orman Quine. The first article below therefore introduces the debate between Quine and Davidson, in particular on

epistemological questions, while the next two articles deal explicitly with triangulation and charity. Together the three articles give an account of the basic methodology of interpretation cum epistemology.

The next three articles discuss important factors for an evaluation of Davidson's contributions to epistemology: In the fourth article I discuss a specific problem related to triangulation, viz. the problem about normativity and how to explain the existence of error in the triangular situation. Unless we are able to distinguish between correct and incorrect belief, and correct and incorrect interpretation, there can be no talk of objective truth and knowledge. Whereas Davidson has given an explanation of the conditions of correct understanding and correct interpretation, accounting for error is a problem within the theory. Indeed, the problem of explaining how error is possible has over time come to seem close to an enigma. Davidson has taken it that if we can explain error, we can explain intentionality. An explanation of intentionality would also be an explanation of the phenomenon of normativity. A solution to the problem of error would therefore be of great interest and have rich consequences. Also the fifth article deals with error, and in specific the question of how a creature can obtain the idea that error is possible, and how we could be in position to know that another creature has an awareness of the possibility of error. The sixth article discusses the role of second-order beliefs in Davidsonian epistemology. Beliefs about beliefs is an interesting case for testing how far Davidson's theory can be pushed in the direction of naturalization.

The Synthesis brings together the overarching methodology of interpretation, through triangulation and charity, and the more specific problems of error and second-order belief. The big issue in the Synthesis is however the discussion of naturalism and naturalized epistemology in relation to the results of my investigations in the articles. Throughout my work, a reading of Davidson's enterprise as genuinely gradualist has come to the fore. There are few, if any, on-or-off positions that can be taken (or anyhow, consistently defended) within his theory. The Synthesis also discusses Davidson view on truth, and objective truth, in relation his otherwise fallibilist and gradualist views.

#### **4. An Internal and an External Perspective on Intentionality**

I distinguish between an internal and an external perspective on intentionality.<sup>3</sup> In an internal approach intentionality is given; one is explanatorily on the inside. An internal approach could for instance take the form of laying out relations between core concepts of intentionality, such as belief, second order belief, desire, and wish, truth, knowledge. In an external approach the non-intentional is given, and the task becomes to explain the emergence of the intentional based on the non-intentional. In triangulation an explanation of intentionality is approached from an external perspective. Triangulation gives a description of how intersubjective knowledge contributes to objective knowledge, and as such it deals first and foremost with how we come to have objective knowledge of the world.<sup>4</sup> According to triangulation, we come to have objective knowledge because of the interaction between two speaker-interpreters, and because they have a common world which each of them react to. When speakers assess each other's linguistic and other reactions to a common feature of the world, and when they share these assessments with each other, a condition for intentionality is in place. A question that I raise is whether triangulation can explain the transition from non-intentional to intentional.

An external approach is primarily described in article 2, 4 and 5, where I discuss triangulation and the problem of error. Article 6 takes an internal approach, and describes how some of our intentional concepts are interrelated.

#### **5. About each of the articles**

The articles 2, 4, and 5 all address the problem of error in one way or another. The order in which they stand indicates a radicalization of the treatment, as well as a narrowing of the problem. The chronological order in which they were written would however be 2, 5 and then 4. Article 1 has not been publically presented before, and has been in the making since 2001, and up to the present. Article 2 was written in 2000, during my stay in Berkeley. It was written as a paper for the International Philosophy-Symposium "Non-Conceptual Aspects of Experience" arranged by the Nordland Academy of Arts and Sciences in association with a committee of Norwegian research fellows in philosophy in

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<sup>3</sup> See e.g. article 4.

<sup>4</sup> Intentional creatures and the contents of their mind are also included in the concept of 'world'.

Melbu in July of 2000. It was published in an anthology in 2003, and I have made only a few minor phrasing changes and technicalities that have little or no effects on its content. Article 3 was written in 2003 as an invited essay to a special edition on Donald Davidson of *Norsk filosofisk tidsskrift*, and was presented at the Dr. art. / Research-seminar at the Department of Philosophy, The University of Tromsø in March 2004. The first draft for article 4 was made during 2004, and it was finished in 2005. It has not been published before. An early version of article 5 was written in 2001 and presented under the title “Error and Triangulation” in the International Workshop “Davidson and Triangulation”, arranged by Professor Bjørn Ramberg at the University of Oslo in March the same year. Article 6 has been in the making since 2000, and it was finished in 2005. Some of the material for the article was presented in my paper “Intensjonalitet og naturalisme”, (“Intentionality and Naturalism”) which I read in the dr. art. / Research-seminar at the Department of Philosophy at The University of Tromsø, November 2000. The Synthesis was written in 2005 and finished in 2006, but some of the material is taken from a paper titled “Davidson, Naturalism and Constitutivity”, presented at an International Philosophy Seminar “Contemporary Issues in Metaphilosophy” at the University of Tromsø in December 2001.





# 1. Radical Translation and Radical Interpretation<sup>1</sup>

It has been commonplace to say that Davidson's radical interpretation is an adoption of Quine's radical translation, with a Tarskian truth-theory added in order to make it into a compositional theory of meaning. Davidson's radical interpretation is clearly built upon Quine's radical translation, and, according to Davidson, one of the differences is marked by "a greater emphasis on the explicitly semantical [in radical interpretation]".<sup>2</sup> My aim is not to dispute this understanding. However, I argue that, in the assumed insignificant differences between radical translation and radical interpretation, we find reasons for the epistemologically significant differences between Quine and Davidson on a macro-level. Quantification structure is one of the most perspicuous "details" in this respect. I argue that the choice of ways of quantification is the background for the debate on whether we acquire our beliefs by sharing and building upon proximal *or* distal stimuli. I hold that the importance of these "insignificant details" is due to the degrees of indeterminacy in the two approaches and to the degree of elbowroom for the skeptic. Furthermore, these details affect the question of *the basis of* intersubjectivity. While Quine either cannot guarantee intersubjectivity (in epistemology) or base it in a pre-established harmony (in semantics and language-learning), Davidson bases intersubjectivity partly on dispositions and partly on the employment and exchange of language, described as the process of triangulation. In section 1 through 4, I give an account of characteristics of radical translation and radical interpretation, where I pinpoint the most relevant differences. In section 5, I thoroughly discuss the question of quantification. In section 6, I present Quine's issuant "discomfort" with his own solution as concerns proximal stimuli, as it originally was presented in his *Word and Object*. My concern is to show that (and how) Davidson's epistemology grows out of his work on semantics and intentionality, and I consider Quine's radical translation a necessary backdrop for understanding what kind of project radical interpretation is. I argue that when Davidson expanded Quine's theory of radical translation into his own theory of radical interpretation, the reason was that Davidson wanted to give a theory of meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a product of five years of discussions with Jan Harald Alnes on Quine, Davidson and the relation between them. This does not mean that he agrees with the conclusions here drawn. However, I have to a large extent benefited from Jan Harald's insistence on charitable readings (especially of Quine) when dogmatic categorizations came easy.

<sup>2</sup> See Donald Davidson: "Radical Interpretation", p. 126 in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1984.

This expansion, and the steps required to give a compositional theory of meaning, however, made Davidson grow out of and divert from Quine's epistemology.

### **1. Radical Translation**

The "radicalism" in Quine's radical translation is that the language to be translated is the language of a hitherto unknown people. This means that there are no given similarities, no previous translations or information about the people and their language. The situation of Quinean translation, described in chapter two of his *Word and Object*, is that of a field-linguist going out into the jungle aiming to prepare a dictionary (or, rather, a manual) for translations between the language spoken in the jungle and English. The language of a "hitherto untouched people"<sup>3</sup> is chosen because it avoids any assumptions about the ontology and meanings of their language. One of the advantages of this situation is that it puts us in a position to get a picture of linguistic meanings solely based on people's linguistic behavior and their interaction with their surroundings. Systematic correlations of linguistic behavior and changes in the immediate surroundings are thus what we face in radical translation. The advantage of a behavioral study, according to a Quinean view, is that it does not have to deal with entities (or notions) such as meanings, beliefs, desires, intentions and the like. In such a study we can do better, we can take an extensional stand instead and concentrate on "...men's dispositions to respond overtly to socially observable stimulations"<sup>4</sup>, and forget about meanings, at the least in the form of reified entities or in the form of "museum pieces". In this way, methodological considerations determine the ontology, and if a serious and modest methodology can make do without intentions and meanings in the form of reified entities, there is no need for such entities.<sup>5</sup> This is expressed in the Quinean slogan "No entity without identity". In order to meaningfully speak of an entity, we have to be able to individuate it, and not the least, we have to be able to re-identify it. A consequence hereof is that if we have no way of identifying and re-identifying the presumed entity in question, there simply cannot be an entity. In line with this view, the motivation for radical translation is that Quine wants to strip away metaphysical notions of meaning from the study of meaning and reference, in order to

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<sup>3</sup> Willard Van Orman Quine: *Word and Object*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1960, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>5</sup> Davidson continues the battle against reification, but he will not as easily as Quine let go of the classical notions of meaning, belief, intentionality and normativity.

clarify “how much of language can be made sense of in terms of its stimulus conditions...”<sup>6</sup> This means that empirical acquaintance with a specific spoken language has to be our basis for the theory. Quine wants to show that there is every reason to be suspicious about language-transcendent meaning. The purpose of the thought experiment of radical translation is to clarify the evidential basis for linguistic meaning, and one of the central conclusions of the investigation is that “the enterprise of translation is found to be involved in a certain systematic indeterminacy...”<sup>7</sup>

Seen from an epistemological point of view, the situation of radical translation opens the possibility of studying the relations between input (stimulus-conditions) and output (conceptual scheme), or as Quine puts it: “how surface irritations generate, through language, one’s knowledge of the world”.<sup>8</sup> In radical translation we do not avail ourselves with theories and preconceptions of which we have no entitlement, and the situation will in this sense be an ideal basis for a serious and unprejudiced study of human intentionality, be it linguistic meanings or acquirement of beliefs and knowledge. Radical translation is Quine’s “method” of studying semantics as well as epistemology. We should note that Quine seems to recommend a focus on both “socially observable stimulations”, and “surface irritations”. “Socially observable stimulations” would initially be ordinary middle-sized objects, since objects as these are the stimulations that we would relate to first in a situation of radical translation and also in language learning. On the other hand, it all seems to be about “surface irritations”, and the surfaces spoken of are the sensory surfaces of individual human bodies. For Quine, as could be read in his *Word and Object* (1960), both the proximal (surface irritation) and the distal stimulations (objects in particular) are of interest.

The confined aim of the radical translator - to prepare a manual that enables translation between the jungle-language and English - is not identical to the confined aim of Davidson’s radical interpreter, who aims to prepare a truth-theory for the speaker, or, in Davidson’s words, to prepare “...a Tarski-style characterization of truth for the speaker’s

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<sup>6</sup> Willard Van Orman Quine: *Word and Object*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1960, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. ix. This “systematic indeterminacy” is called “the thesis of the indeterminacy of translation”, and it has consequences for possible meanings as well as for references.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 26

language, and a theory of his beliefs.”<sup>9</sup> This means that the aim for the radical interpreter is to confirm a theory of truth for the language of the speaker under conditions that ensure that the theory can be employed in an interpretation of the sentences of the speaker. A radical interpreter will try to interpret the speaker based on what the speaker holds to be true, and the interpreter has to be able to recognize the attitude of ‘holding true’ or, in other words, the by Davidson assumed identical attitude; the attitude of believing. By means of the recognition of this attitude, the radical interpreter develops a theory of the speaker’s beliefs and at the same time, the meanings of the speaker’s sentences. We shall soon see how this is supposed to be accomplished.

But first, why doesn’t Davidson just say: “What an interpreter needs to know to be able to interpret the speaker is the meanings of all the meaningful expressions of the speaker”? In line with Quine, Davidson holds that “Appeal to meanings leaves us stranded further than we started from the non-linguistic goings-on that must supply the evidential base for interpretation...”<sup>10</sup> So we cannot rely on some kind of linguistic concept, such as meaning or synonymy; our evidence has to be accumulated without previous knowledge and essential use of such concepts. This is most clearly an adoption of the empirical and methodologically restricted line that we find in Quine’s *Radical Translation*. This line has the implication that rich notions of meaning are not an essential part of our observational apparatus for taking in the world. The kind of evidence we need “...must be of a sort that would be available to someone who does not already know how to interpret utterances the theory is designed to cover...”<sup>11</sup> This is to say that we are not to start out with any preliminary attributions of actual particular meanings, and that empirical acquaintance with a specific language is necessary. We are supposed to start out with something non-semantic and end with something semantic and with intentional attributions. It is also presupposed that all relevant facts for a theory of the speaker’s meanings are already present in the material complexity. However, it is important to note that the interpreter’s given information is both non-linguistic and linguistic, even if he has no initial semantic preconceptions.

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<sup>9</sup> Donald Davidson: “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge” (1983) pp 307-319 in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. E. LePore, Blackwell, Oxford 1986, p. 315.

<sup>10</sup> Donald Davidson: “Radical Interpretation” (1973) pp 125-139 in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1984, p. 126-7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p 128.

There are different objectives, though, for each of the two experiments. In Quine's radical translation we find an overall emphasis on the input-output-relation of stimuli and knowledge and an engagement with the question of justification. In radical interpretation, Davidson focuses on finding a truth theory for the language of the speaker - thereby establishing a theory of meaning for his language - and at the same time finding a theory of his beliefs.

## 2. **Radical Interpretation**

Now, radical interpretation is not a universal method of interpretation of any utterance in any language, or of any kind of creature for that matter. The radical interpreter starts out with some regularity in behavior, some regularity in some physical being, and an aim to end up with complex semantic ascriptions, we might expect that any creature with a certain behavior would do. Jane Heal, in her article "Radical Interpretation," holds: "A theory of radical interpretation should be applicable to giant octopuses or superbeings emerging from their spaceships as well as to newly encountered human beings."<sup>12</sup> That Davidson's theory of interpretation is applicable to only human beings is here considered a serious lack of generality. According to Heal's view, the specific orientation towards humans is a flaw in Davidson's theory of interpretation. Heal holds that the project of radical interpretation is far from radical unless it could be applied to any being. Davidson's starting point is the attitude of holding true and on this point Heal criticizes Davidson for not taking the totality of physical facts as his base instead. She holds that this "would be a much less tendentious place to start."<sup>13</sup> I would say that her criticisms rest on a serious misunderstanding of Davidson's thinking. When she criticizes the radical interpreter's starting point in the recognition of the attitude of holding true, she makes certain assumptions about Davidson's ways of doing philosophy. She assumes that Davidson is seeking a starting position in radical interpretation where any creature could be radically interpreted, which would amount to a universal theory of interpretation. Her comments suggest that only then will the interpretational approach be truly radical. But, as I will argue more substantially later, Davidson's thinking is generally not a specimen of universalism and absolutism. In

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<sup>12</sup> Jane Heal: "Radical Interpretation", in Bob Hale and Crispin Wright: *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, Blackwell, Oxford 1997, p. 184.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 185.

addition, the self-imposed restriction that is being laid upon the starting point of radical interpretation, namely to start out with something non-semantic *is* fulfilled.

The project of radical interpretation rests entirely on *belief*, and the possibility of identifying particular beliefs in the creature subject to interpretation. The notion of belief is crucial to the project of Radical Interpretation (and to Davidson's thinking in general). The importance of *belief* can hardly be exaggerated, and the role that this attitude plays is often overlooked in comments on Davidson.<sup>14</sup> The important point here is, however, that the creature in question has to have a whole lot of beliefs (and other attitudes) in order for us to be able to locate and identify one single belief. Davidson maintains that a belief can only be identified due to its relation to other beliefs in the same set of beliefs, and for a creature to have such a complex and interwoven set of attitudes, and for us to be able to discover it on a normal empirical basis, amounts to that the creature has a developed language. In other words, Davidson holds that we do not know quite what it takes to have such a complex set of attitudes, but fully developed linguistic abilities would do. Hence it is obvious that human beings are the kind of creature that the theory is applicable to, and the attitude of holding true (or sentences held true) is not a tendentious place to start.

Further, Davidson holds that the method of radical interpretation can give an exhaustive account of the meanings of a particular language L (which is also called an idiolect). "What a fully informed interpreter could learn about what a speaker means is all there is to learn; the same goes for what the speaker believes."<sup>15</sup> As we have noted, the basic features of radical interpretation are not very different from the features of radical translation, and Davidson says that radical interpretation "...adds little to Quine's program of translation, since translation of the speaker's language into one's own plus a theory of truth for one's own language adds up to a theory of truth for the speaker."<sup>16</sup> The issue of a theory of truth for either speaker or interpreter is not of particular interest to Quine's project, though. But Davidson adds that "...the shift to the semantic notion of truth from the syntactic notion of translation puts the formal restrictions of a theory of truth in the foreground, and

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<sup>14</sup> See article 6 for more on this.

<sup>15</sup> Donald Davidson: "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" (1983) pp 307-319 in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. E. LePore, Blackwell, Oxford 1986, p. 315

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

emphasizes one aspect of the close relation between truth and meaning.”<sup>17</sup> What seems clear is that Davidson’s more semantic interests is the focus of radical interpretation, while the Quinean epistemological interests are the ones first of all to be taken care of in the method of radical translation. However, this is not to say that epistemological interests are *in general* left behind in Davidson’s theory.

According to Davidson, “...the point of language is communication”.<sup>18</sup> Apart from this, he maintains it is possible to find out about the linguistic meanings of other people’s sentences only by observing overtly responses to “socially observable stimulations”<sup>19</sup> But how do we really go from overtly responses to socially observable stimulations to understanding and smooth communication between speakers? Quine does not seek normal communication and understanding; he focuses on the relation between input and output in single individuals, and the scene *is* social, as the investigation is done from a third person perspective. But the model of radical translation is not reciprocal, and Quine is not trying to answer the question of how we go from overtly responses to smooth communication, interaction and understanding. Davidson is, however, and he starts off where Quine leaves. From a Davidsonian point of view, a problem with the experiment of radical translation is that it does not deal with understanding and communication explicitly. It does not explain how we could come to understand each other, and how it comes about that we actually manage to communicate. This interest in understanding is closely connected to the aim of providing the semantics of the language to be interpreted, or rather; it is the other way around.

In order to take care of semantic interests, the theory has to solve the problem of exposure of the semantic structure of sentences. Davidson says “A theory of translation must read some sort of structure into sentences, but there is no reason to expect that it will provide any insight into how the meanings of sentences depend on their structure”<sup>20</sup> A theory of interpretation will, on the other hand, have to reveal “...significant semantic structure...”<sup>21</sup>, if the theory is to be satisfactory. We must, for instance, be able to show that (and how) the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Comment in seminar, UCB, April 31. 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Willard Van Orman Quine: *Word and Object*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1960, p. ix.

<sup>20</sup> Donald Davidson: “Radical Interpretation” (1973) pp 125-139 in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1984, p. 130.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

interpretation of complex sentences depends on the interpretation of words and phrases. Quine's radical translation was not into this business. Davidson obviously had to add something to radical translation in order to fulfill the mentioned aim, and it was here that he found that he needed Tarski's theory of truth for formal languages. A theory of truth in Tarski's style is, according to Davidson, "...a structurally revealing theory of interpretation for the object language..." Such a theory "...entails, for every sentence *s* of the object language, a sentence of the form: *S* is true if and only if *p*. Instances of the form (T-sentences) are obtained by replacing '*S*' by a canonical description of *S*, and '*p*' by a translation of *S*."<sup>22</sup> An example of an instantiation: *Schnee ist weiß* is true if and only if snow is white. With this extension Davidson was definitely closing in on the aim of providing a theory of interpretation for particular languages with a semantically revealing structure. The theory is (but not only due to this, of course) an example of a compositional theory of meaning.

One of the important differences in the transition from radical translation to radical interpretation was that Davidson's semantic theory had the form of a theory of truth. Davidson considers truth basic in the sense that it is primitive. He holds that "Truth is a single property which attaches, or fails to attach, to utterances, while each utterance has its own interpretation; and truth is more apt to connect with fairly simple attitudes of speakers."<sup>23</sup> He says he wants to "extract" an account of interpretation from truth. He thinks that the attitude of holding a sentence true is a good place to start as it enables interpretation to rest on evidence that does not presuppose knowledge of meanings and detailed knowledge of belief. The holding true of a sentence is itself, according to Davidson, a belief, but it is a single attitude that is "applicable to all sentences", and Davidson argues that we may, as interpreters, be able to identify this attitude before we can further interpret a speaker. Radical interpretation does not only seek the meaning of sentences, but also psychological states, such as beliefs, and this means the pair of truth and meaning is married without parole and of equal standing. The one could not be found without the other. Psychological states are in this way also brought in.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 134.

<sup>24</sup> This was new with Davidson's article "Radical Interpretation" (1973). In his "Truth and Meaning" (1967) printed as pp 17-36 in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1984, it was still all about linguistic items.



As to the matter of Quine's interest in the question of truth, Quine would say that agreement (conformity to verbal dispositions), simplicity, maximizing truth, and psychological plausibility are all "...virtues that we can seek and agree on, in devising a manual of translation..."<sup>25</sup> It seems that "maximizing truth" is one among several virtues, but of no special or particular concern to Quine's project, as it is to Davidson's project. Quine's solution here would not do for Davidson, because translation and a matching of sentences, holophrastically, is not what Davidson seeks to accomplish. Davidson's project is interpretation of a speaker or of his language, and he therefore seeks an understanding of the speaker, and, specifically, he wants to find a detailed compositional semantic theory for the speaker. A translation-manual, which sets up the synonymy-relations between sentences in the two languages, deals with, or, anyhow, could potentially deal with, another topic. In translation we are after the relation between two languages, while in interpretation we seek an understanding of another person, and, in a theory of interpretation, we want to focus on *what it takes* to understand another person, in the sense of understanding his particular meanings and beliefs.<sup>26</sup> In radical translation, we could, if we push things, say that we can know that this particular sentence translates with another particular sentence, without knowing what any of the sentences means, because the manual can be given in two, for us, unknown languages. In Radical interpretation, our own language (the interpreters language) has to be both the meta-language and the language to which we translate or interpret the sentence in the object language. Hence, it is only the object language that could be unknown to us (but it certainly does not have to be unknown). The consequence of bringing in truth theory and truth conditions is that we have to deal with the *use* of the sentences; we cannot be satisfied by a sheer correlation of sentences.

### 3. Stimulus meaning versus truth

There is a long way to go from the Quinean stripped behaviorist scene of radical translation to Davidson's (also behavioristically based) ascription of psychological states and attitudes, as well as sentence meanings. Both Quine and Davidson reject meanings as fixed and language-transcendent, and Quine's minimal notion of stimulus meaning is never

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<sup>25</sup> In Lewis Edwin Hahn (Ed.): *The Philosophy of W. V. Quine*, in the series The Library of Living Philosophers, Open Court, La Salle 1986, reprinted 1988, p. 155.

<sup>26</sup> In Davidson's later unified theory of action, mind and language, where a theory of action is fused with the truth-theory for a person, he is also after a person's desires, evaluations and general motivation.

close to anything like it. The basis of stimulus meaning on the one hand and the basis for ascription of meaning and belief in Davidson on the other are surely different. Stimulus meaning has an empirically unproblematic objective basis, as it is the ordered pair of assenting and dissenting stimulus meaning for a sentence of a subject. The stimulus meaning for the sentence of a subject is, in short, his disposition to agree or disagree that a given sentence can be a response to a given stimulation that is present. Affirmative stimulus meaning of a sentence for a speaker is then “the class of all the stimulations that would prompt his assent.”<sup>27</sup> The negative stimulus meaning may be similarly defined with ‘assent’ and ‘dissent’ interchanged. However, we should note that the notion of stimulus meaning is subjective in the sense that the stimuli and the stimulation of the speaker’s receptors are private. Stimuli are not common. It relates directly to one single speaker, and is therefore not intersubjective. But Quine notices that somehow there must be some similarity somewhere, since our outputs and standards of stimulus meanings tend to be quite alike within languages such as English. In *Word and Object* he ascribes this to the rough uniformity of our neural receptors. This means that the similarity in output is assumed to have its cause in our input apparatus, and not in the world.<sup>28</sup>

Davidson’s use of a recursive truth theory with quantification in collating the meanings and beliefs of a speaker enables the interpreter to go much further into the intentions of the speaker. But, it is important to note that this could not be done unless the principle of charity enabled me as an interpreter to assume that the speaker’s beliefs are more or less like mine, and unless I could assume that the logical structure of his language is more or less like mine. Davidson describes his own method of radical translation and interpretation as a “...process of devising a theory of truth for an unknown native tongue...” We start by trying to find the best way of reading our own logic (which may mean “the logical

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<sup>27</sup> Willard Van Orman Quine: *Word and Object*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1960, p. 32.

<sup>28</sup> In 1990, we hear that Davidson was unsatisfied with the solution he had taken to be Quine’s solution at that time. He points out the problems that Quine later has described as a riddle. (In Davidson: “Pursuit of the Concept of Truth”, p. 20, in Leonardi, P. and M. Santambrogio (eds.): *On Quine*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1995.) Davidson is taking up Quine’s solution to the question of when a cause or situation is counted to be the same or relevantly similar. He finds that Quine’s answer is “when the patterns of sensory stimulation are the same, nearly enough, from speaker to interpreter.” Davidson points out several problematic traits of this solution. “One is the difficulty in being clear how to map one person’s nerve endings onto another’s. A second is that people do not always share operative sense organs. Another is that variations in what one person takes to be evidence of the truth of an observation sentence may not be what another takes to be evidence. It is also a question how similarity of patterns of stimulation could serve as the basis of translation and language learning when such similarities are so evidently unavailable to learner or teacher.” *Ibid.*

structure of first-order quantification theory (plus identity)”)”<sup>29</sup> into the unknown language, and this is being done in one instance, not by taking the constants one by one. Further, his description goes: “The evidence here is classes of sentences always held true or always held false by almost everyone almost all of the time (potential logical truths) and patterns of inference. The first step identifies predicates, singular terms, quantifiers, connectives, and identity; in theory, it settles matters of logical form. The second step concentrates on sentences with indexicals; those sentences sometimes held true and sometimes false according to discoverable changes in the world. This step in conjunction with the first limits the possibilities for interpreting individual predicates. The last step deals with the remaining sentences, those on which there is no uniform agreement, or who’s held truth value does not depend systematically on changes in the environment.”<sup>30</sup>

In this extract from Davidson’s text we get a glimpse into the process of radical interpretation; we see how the interpreter starts off on his task, using the structure of his home language (which is also his own system of beliefs) to throw himself, so to speak, into the process of interpretation. At the outset the interpreter’s only ‘tools’ are the familiar logical structure of his own language and the speaker’s reactions to the common environment. If successful, the result of the process will be a theory of truth for the other language, by which we will have an interpretation of each of the sentences of the speaker’s language, and in which it is displayed how the meanings of parts of the sentences contributes to the meanings of the sentences as a whole. But we cannot go directly from truth to understanding and we need to add that we are assigning truth to the sentences of the speaker when we find it plausible that he is right. By this assignment, we also get a theory of what the speaker means by his sentences, as long as we are willing to concede that knowing the truth conditions of a sentence is vital for knowing its meaning. An assignment of truth is according to this view really an assignment of a particular belief to the speaker, and so we are also ascribing a particular propositional attitude to the speaker. This is done on basis of intersubjectively accessible objects and events. Davidson’s notion of meaning, however, is still neither fixed nor language-transcendent. Meanings of utterances vary with speaker, interpreter, and the time of interpretation.

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<sup>29</sup> In Donald Davidson: “Radical Interpretation” (1973) pp 125-139 in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1984, p. 136.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

In the sense that the translator does not have to go into the sentences and their semantic structure, Quine's notion of stimulus meaning demands little of the translator. Neither does the translator have to go into the logical structure as concerns quantification over objects; the truth functional constants will do. But just as stimulus meaning demands little, it also gives little when it comes to an understanding of the speaker. A truth theory for the language of the speaker, on the other hand, demands more involvement from the interpreter's side, and he has to use more of his own belief system and logic in order to reach his aims. But then it also gives more in terms of understanding, and the result is a theory of the meanings and beliefs of the speaker.

#### **4. Meaning, belief and indeterminacy**

There is the process of finding out what the speaker means and there is the process of finding out what the speaker believes, and they seem to coincide. Could we separate the two processes here? On the use of the principle of charity in radical interpretation Davidson says "...This method is intended to solve the problem of the interdependence of belief and meaning by holding belief constant as far as possible while solving for meaning."<sup>31</sup> So it seems that the assignment of truth is basic in this regard, as "holding true" is a belief-attitude, and therefore makes it possible for us to "read off" the meanings of the speaker's sentences. We assume that the speaker is mostly right, unless it is in some way implausible, and this enables us to work on determining the meaning of the sentence.<sup>32</sup> But this is not to say that it is in fact possible to separate meaning from belief as two different «entities» in the method of radical interpretation. Rather, Davidson holds that "Meaning and belief play interlocking and complementary roles in the interpretation of speech."<sup>33</sup> This suggests that we only analytically, and not as a matter of fact, can separate the two. As an interpreter, I will not always be able to find out whether I disagree with the speaker or if he only uses words differently from me. In real interpretation, especially with speakers we know well, we can sometimes go quite a long way towards finding this out by discussing things further. In radical interpretation it is in principle impossible to get rid of the indeterminacy due to the thesis of the indeterminacy of interpretation. An interesting

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 137.

<sup>32</sup> See my article 3 for more on this subject.

<sup>33</sup> In Donald Davidson: "Radical Interpretation" (1973) pp 125-139 in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1984, p. 141.

question here is, of course, whether or not this is a possibility in “ordinary” or “real” interpretation. My suggestion is that, as interpreters, we reach a point that we consider “close enough” or “sufficiently close” to a determined meaning and a determined belief of the speaker; that is, close enough to find it useless to proceed with the process of interpretation. This means that this particular point will vary from interpreter to interpreter, and that it will vary dependent on the situation as well as the speaker subject to interpretation. We could speak of this in terms of “diminishing returns”, a concept from economy, which means that the utility, for the interpreter, of asking further questions to the speaker will diminish gradually, so that the value of the first questions posed, and answers given, will be of more value than the later ones. In this sense “sufficient” is neither a matter of an on-or-of-value (a “yes, it is” or a “no, it isn’t), nor something that could be listed in an exact number of criteria, but a value that will vary dependent on the interpreter, the situation and the speaker.

Therefore, part of this problem relates to a general problem of indeterminacy of translation and interpretation. The point is stated in a general form in Davidson’s thesis of the indeterminacy of interpretation, which states that if there is one successful interpretation, there will be alternative successful interpretations. In this scenario we have (as a minimum) two different theories of interpretation, both of which can explain the speaker’s sentences in relation to the circumstances of their uttering. This has the consequence that one cannot rule out divergent interpretations, or more precisely, divergent theories. This situation is also characterized a situation of “underdeterminacy” of theory by the empirical data. The given empirical data does not then give a clue to which theory to choose. But there is also another possible scenario of indeterminacy in which I operate with one and the same theory of interpretation. In a first case within this second scenario I adjust *my theory* when I find a discrepancy, assuming that my previous beliefs were wrong, or that I have misplaced words and phrases, on account of my system. In a second case I make adjustments in *the meanings ascribed to his sentences*, on the assumption that I had previously misinterpreted his beliefs, or that I had misinterpreted his use of words or phrases, on account of his system. In yet a third case I make adjustments in *the beliefs ascribed to the speaker*, finding that he, in some sense or another, is irrational, or alternatively, is deliberately trying to deceive me, on account of either his system or my system. Either way, the indeterminacy in radical interpretation goes all the way down, and

as I have suggested above, this could also be the case in “real” interpretation.<sup>34</sup> The indeterminacy implies that we as interpreters are in a situation where we face an equation with loads of unknown variables. We can thus never rest assured that our theory is “the correct theory of a speaker’s meanings and beliefs”. We can never proclaim that we, once and for all, know the contents of linguistically uttered thoughts. But the thesis of the indeterminacy of interpretation is not as radical in form in Davidson’s theory as in Quine’s, because of the more extensive use of our own familiar logical structure in radical interpretation, and because of the social founding of the evidential base in the form of objects and events. Davidson’s version of the principle of charity is hence also applied more extensively, given more weight in the interpretational process, and is more substantial than was Quine’s.<sup>35</sup>

## **5. Quantification structure**

The scene that Davidson paints in his description of radical interpretation’s basic elements is an account that shares many of the characteristic features of Quine’s account of radical translation. In “Radical Interpretation” Davidson mentions in a footnote three features that he considers different in the two accounts: “...the semantic constraint in my method forces quantification structure on the language to be interpreted, which probably does not leave room for indeterminacy of logical form; the notion of stimulus meaning plays no role in my method, but its place is taken by reference to the objective features of the world which alters in conjunction with changes in attitudes towards the truth of sentences; the principle of charity, which Quine emphasizes only in connection with the identification of the (pure) sentential connectives, I apply across the board.”

To begin with the first difference mentioned; Davidson’s interpreter will apply quantification-theory with identity, and not only the logical connectives, in his interpretational procedure. Quine’s reason for sticking to a more modest involvement of logical structure is that “Of what we think of as logic, the truth-functional part is the only part the recognition of which, in a foreign language, we seem to be able to pin down to

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<sup>34</sup> The indeterminacy is stated in a weaker form in the thesis of the inscrutability of reference, which says that the assignment of reference to the constituents of a sentence may vary, while the truth conditions (and thus the truth value of the sentence) may be constant.

<sup>35</sup> I describe the differences more in detail in article 3 below.

behavioral criteria.”<sup>36</sup> He says that “The categoricals [or, to put it into our previously employed vocabulary; the sentences with quantifiers] depend for their truth on the objects, however external and however inferential, of which the component terms are true; and what those objects are is not uniquely determined by stimulus meanings.”<sup>37</sup> For instance, we are unable to uniquely determine whether we are dealing with rabbits or rabbit stages, and as long as we admit to this, it seems reasonable to withdraw from the employment of quantification-theory. It should be kept in mind that Quine’s premise of employing subjective stimulus meaning is the basis for the withdrawal. So, we can easily see the connection between the first and the second out of Davidson’s mentioned differences; the radical interpreter *can* force quantificational structure on the speaker’s language, because he also lets go of stimulus meanings. Instead of proximal stimulus meanings, the distal objects and the speaker’s reaction to them are the stimuli that the interpreter builds upon.<sup>38</sup> This is an important move, and a move that has been vital for the development of Davidson’s theory. The third difference mentioned is that the principle of charity is more extensively applied in radical interpretation than in radical translation. This last difference is, in a way, no more than a consequence of the enforcement of quantification structure on the language to be interpreted. But also this move has far reaching consequences.

It is, however, possible to approach the discussion over quantificational structure the other way around. Since objects and events are vital in Davidson’s philosophy, there has to be some quantificational structure in the interpretational process. According to Davidson, objects and events in our common world are required for any interpretational process ever to start. This is also the reason why he doesn’t want, or need, stimulus meaning. Surely, it is not *necessary* for Davidson to have stimulus meaning, and as long as patterns of stimulation is not what he relies on; it is not *possible* to have it. Quine is right that on purely behavioral criteria, no objects of sentences can be directly ascribed. In radical interpretation we therefore have to use much more of our own logic and linguistic “machinery” to get started compared to what was available in radical translation. For radical interpretation it is vital to operate with quantification over objects since we do ascribe objects of sentences. However, despite this possibility to turn it all the other way

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<sup>36</sup> In Willard Van Orman Quine: *Word and Object*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1960, p. 61.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> However, in order for the radical interpreter to be able to build upon the distal objects and the speaker’s reactions to them, he must be able to certify to himself that he and the speaker focus on the same object. Davidson’s notion of triangulation was partly designed to account for the determination of common object.

around, my contention is that Davidson's paramount objective was to give a compositional theory of meaning. Hence, in order to make the semantic structure of sentences visible, he had to make sure that the radical interpreter was able to quantify over objects and events.<sup>39</sup> My claim is that *this* is how it came about that object and events became, and had to become, ontological entities in Davidson's theory.

The difference between Quine and Davidson concerning what to pick as causes for governing the translational or interpretational process, is obviously a difference of huge epistemological significance.<sup>40</sup> In Quine's view, we depend on patterns of sensory stimulation, while Davidson holds that we depend on the publicly available objects and events that the sentences are interpreted as being about. However, when into questions of meaning and language learning, Quine take it that we do well to deal with intersubjectively available stimulations in the form of objects. The significance of the introduction of quantificational structure, which seems to be such a neutral and philosophically insignificant move, even if vital for giving a compositional theory of meaning, is that Davidson introduced objects and events as the cause of beliefs. In radical interpretation, objects and events cause beliefs whether we see it from a semantic perspective or from an epistemological perspective.

I uphold that the driving force behind the introduction of quantification structure is the possibility for construing a compositional theory of meaning. But this interest of Davidson's was, or came, in the course of time, to be, linked to other and more paramount objectives. "Understanding" is a key word for a comprehension of Davidson's concerns. Human understanding of the world (its people included) is the "wonder" he seeks to explain, and the fact that we can grasp an objective world is due to our ability to share this world with others. Without language, sharing couldn't come about. He says that "...not only is it the case that the aim of conversation is "shared understanding"; we must also acknowledge that without sharing there is no understanding."<sup>41</sup> Hence, according to

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<sup>39</sup> This is the same as saying that he had to introduce quantification in order to give a compositional theory of meaning, a theory of meaning that can display both syntactic and semantic structure.

<sup>40</sup> Though Davidson does not explicitly mention this difference in his "Radical Interpretation".

<sup>41</sup> In "Gadamer and Plato's *Philebus*", pp 421-32 in L. Hahn (ed): *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Open Court, Chicago and La Salle 1997, p. 431.



Davidson, our shared relation to the world is the source of objectivity of thought. Davidson describes the sharing of the world as the process of triangulation.<sup>42</sup>

This is not to say that triangulation in radical interpretation is sufficient for reaching an understanding of another human being, but it means that triangulation is a necessary, even though “thin”, condition for understanding. Without a shared world, there would be no understanding of other human beings. There could surely be contact and some form of communication. But understanding of what some other person tries to say to us, when this is presumed to be something that can be objectively true or false, is hardly thinkable without going through some third «part». This third part is some aspect of the world, something we are genetically disposed to discriminate as *one* aspect, i.e. some object or some event, or perhaps a situation. So, my contention is that for Davidson, it soon became obvious that the sharing of the world, and thereby, the intersubjectively accessible parts of the world, had to be accounted for in the theory of interpretation. Objects and events are dispositionally and socially constituted, and are in this sense already common and under public control. However, it seems to me that Davidson only later realized the epistemological importance of his own introduction of quantification in radical interpretation. Anyhow, I have not been able to find reasons for suggesting that the driving force behind this development were epistemological at the outset.

This far I have examined the major differences and similarities between Quine’s radical translation and Davidson’s radical interpretation over a somewhat long time-span. We started with Quine’s *Word and Object* dating from 1960, and continued with Davidson’s “Radical Interpretation” from 1973 and further up to the mid-eighties. Now we will take a look at the most recent developments in the relation between Quine and Davidson.

## 6. Quine’s discomfort

Around 1994-1996 Quine changed his view on the importance of taking nerve receptors into consideration for the theory of meaning. According to Davidson, this was not due to

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<sup>42</sup> See article 2 for a general account of triangulation.

his criticisms of Quine on this point, but because of Darwin.<sup>43</sup> Quine had come to realize that our capacity for categorization in relatively similar ways is a result of natural selection. We are disposed to categorize the world into objects and events as “a gift of nature”.<sup>44</sup> According to Davidson, Quine had “wanted to explain what makes it possible for people to understand each other, given the apparent chaos of unconceptualized experience.” Davidson holds that the reason why Quine had wanted to take nerve receptors into consideration was that Quine had thought “it took a lot of training for people to come to focus on the same aspects of the world, and he had thought the only way to explain this was by starting with sensory stimulations.” According to Quine himself, he had always wanted to analyze reification.<sup>45</sup>

In “Autobiography (continued)” Quine tells about the 1986 Stanford colloquium of him, Davidson, Dreben and Føllesdal: “We agreed with the opening pages of *Word and Object* [1960] that what people share and build upon are not sensation, but the external scene itself. But in *Word and Object* I made a problem of this, and lamely conjectured an approximate intersubjective homology of neural receptors and of networks and hence of stimulations. But the conjecture was untenable, as I had recognized by 1974; [] hence my discomfort. Davidson’s line was to settle for the external scene as ultimate, and this is indeed the reasonable line if one is concerned with translation or interpretation – hence semantics – and not with neurology or epistemology.”<sup>46</sup> Here we can see that Quine maintains it is Davidson’s semantic interests that led him to consider the distal stimulus basic, and that Quine for this reason accepts this line. Quine continues: “I came away cleansed of any lingering thoughts of shared stimulus meanings, but unrelieved of my discomfort over our shared reference *in distans*. Eight more years [i.e. around 1994-1995] were to pass before I saw the matter whole and clear, with its causal explanation in innate perceptual similarity and natural selection.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Davidson, Donald: “Quines epistemologier”, in *Norsk filosofisk tidsskrift*, nr 1-2, 2004, translated by Eivind Balsvik from the English version; “Quine’s epistemologies”, p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Willard Van Orman Quine: “Reply to John Woods”, in Lewis Edwin Hahn (Ed.): *The Philosophy of W. V. Quine*, in the series The Library of Living Philosophers, Open Court, La Salle 1986, reprinted 1988, extended version of 1998, p. 727.

<sup>46</sup> Willard Van Orman Quine: “Autobiography (continued)”, in Lewis Edwin Hahn (Ed.): *The Philosophy of W. V. Quine*, in the series The Library of Living Philosophers, Open Court, La Salle 1986, reprinted 1988, extended version of 1998, p. 737.

<sup>47</sup> In Willard Van Orman Quine: *From Stimulus to Science*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1995, Quine give an account of this point. “Global stimuli are private: each is a temporally ordered set of

But Davidson holds the reason for his insistence that Quine thoroughly should have taken the distal view is that only in the distal view is there “an indissoluble connection between words and what they are about – the objects and events in the world.”<sup>48</sup> This is the reason why Davidson would take an epistemological interest in the distal stimuli, and this is why he had urged Quine to take the distal view not only in the theory of meaning but also in epistemology. According to Davidson’s view, it is exactly when there is such an indissoluble connection that the skeptic cannot find room for maneuvering. So, from Davidson’s perspective, the reason for sticking with the distal stimulus was far from restricted to his semantic interests, though to me it is pretty clear that semantic interests was his initial motivation for introducing objects and events.

In 1998, as Quine focuses on preestablished harmony yet again, this is, according to him, due to “a widespread failure to sense the problem that it solves.”<sup>49</sup> He goes on: “Two normal observers of a scene naturally see the same thing (we say), up to differences of perspective, and cameras similarly situated agree correspondingly. Our subject matter is distal. [] We can go on from there, one supposes, skipping any talk of light rays, sensory receptors, and neural processing. If the cameras can do it, why shouldn’t we?”

He continues by explaining that unlike the cameras, people have not been “designed and manufactured” alike, we vary widely in the number and arrangement of our sensory receptors and in the topology of our nervous systems. “How can our shared distant subject matter activate us so harmoniously through such disparate intervening mechanisms?” Quine asks. Further, he notes that the camera analogy confers false comfort, and that there is no parallel assurance regarding the observers. “Their verbal reports agree, but their words were likewise learned on the basis of similarly shared observations of distant events,

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some one individual’s receptors. Their perceptual similarity, in part innate and in part molded by experience, is private as well. Whence this coordination of behavior across the tribe? It requires that if two individuals jointly witness one scene, and subsequently jointly witness another scene, and the one witness’s global stimulations on the two occasions qualify for him as perceptually similar, usually the other witness’s stimulations will so qualify for the other witness. The same is required of the signal. Recurrence of it must activate, in each individual, global stimuli that are perceptually similar for that individual. So we see a preestablished harmony of perceptual similarity standards. If two scenes trigger perceptually similar global stimuli in one witness, they are apt to do likewise in another. This public harmony of private standards of perceptual similarity is accounted for by natural selection.” Ibid, p. 20f.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 16

<sup>49</sup> In Quine’s “Reply to Roger F. Gibson, Jr.” in Lewis Edwin Hahn (Ed.): *The Philosophy of W. V. Quine*, in the series *The Library of Living Philosophers*, Open Court, La Salle 1986, reprinted 1988, extended version of 1998, p. 685.

simply pushing the problem back.” So Quine’s point is that similarity in verbal behavior does not explain what he wants to explain. Similarity in observation can neither explain “his” problem. What is, then, the problem that is solved by the assumption of preestablished harmony? He is seeking an understanding of similarity, or the “rough intersubjective harmony of private standards of similarity”. The reason is that communication has its roots in this harmony. Quine mentions language learning, in which it is important that the child achieves the required response from his mother for affirming the similarity that the child has a natural tendency to perceive. But it is the disposition, or what Quine calls the “shared structure of subjective similarity standards”, that is being accounted for by natural selection.<sup>50</sup> Perceptual similarity standards are therefore following Quine “in part innate and are in preestablished harmony”.<sup>51</sup>

In his “Response to George”,<sup>52</sup> Quine talks about “the gap between the privacy of our neural intake and the publicity of our testimony” as a riddle. Or, rather, this had been a thirty-year riddle, which was now (in 1995/2000) “solved by preestablished harmony”. Hence, the gap had disappeared. Subjective stimulus meanings that are private (as opposed to the earlier envisaged *shared* stimulus meanings) are presumably now, by means of preestablished harmony, in accordance with the “distal meeting of minds”.

The causes of belief are still, according to Quine’s epistemology, the irritations on the sensory surfaces of the speaker. This counts as evidence for the belief. On the other hand, Quine also, as we have seen, operates with “socially observable stimulations”, in addition to “effects at our sensory surfaces”. This means that he is also talking about objects. Objects are those to which “words apply first and foremost.”<sup>53</sup> In semantic matters Quine is content to operate with objects, while, as an epistemologist, his interests are in stimulations at the sensory surfaces. And epistemological concerns have always been the underlying motivation for Quine’s “speculations on radical translation”.<sup>54</sup> This means that

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> In Willard Van Orman Quine: “I, you, and it: an epistemological triangle” in Orenstein, Alex and Petr Kotatko (Eds.): *Knowledge, Language and Logic*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht / Boston / London 2000, p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> In Willard Van Orman Quine: “Response to George” in Orenstein, Alex and Petr Kotatko (Eds.): *Knowledge, Language and Logic*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht / Boston / London 2000, p. 409.

<sup>53</sup> Willard Van Orman Quine: *Word and Object*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1960, p. 1.

<sup>54</sup> In Willard Van Orman Quine: “Three Indeterminacies” in R. Barrett and R. Gibson (eds.): *Perspectives on Quine*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1990, p. 3.

the reliance on “effects on our sensory surfaces” still has a priority over objects in Quine’s investigation. The reason for this is that he takes the proximal stimuli to provide evidence for theory. Should the proximal stimuli be left behind we would no longer be able to study the relation between meager input and torrential output. From a Quinean point of view, the study of this relation is what epistemology is all about, and therefore the study of this relation is of the highest interest. We should keep in mind that, in Quine’s view, objects are posits, and posits can never count as evidence in a theory about the world. According to Quine: “The subject’s reification of rabbits and the like is for me decidedly a part of the plot not to be passed over as part of the setting.”<sup>55</sup>

Davidson accepts the Quinean behavior-based methodology, but, unlike Quine, he does not accept empiricism. The difference lies in the *epistemological significance* attributed to the point that all our knowledge of the world stems from our senses. If this means that our knowledge of the world apart from ourselves depends on the functioning of our senses, then Davidson would agree. If this means that our knowledge of the world can be, and has to be, *justified* by an appeal to our sensation of the world, Davidson would not agree. Our beliefs and our knowledge are propositionally structured, but, following Davidson, the world is not. Only something with propositional structure can justify beliefs. Quine’s empiricism had, according to Davidson, the form of “insistence on locating the stimulus relevant to determining both meaning and knowledge at the neural input”.<sup>56</sup> As we have seen, however, Quine changed his view about which stimuli are relevant to the determination of meaning, but not about which stimuli are relevant to determination of knowledge. In Quine’s view, the neural input remained the relevant stimulus for determination of knowledge, and the reason why is that only in this way can the world function as *evidence* for theory.

But we could ask, it is a characteristically empiricist thesis to hold that the neural input is the relevant stimulus, and not characteristically empiricist to maintain that the object is the relevant stimulus? If one assumes, as Quine, that objects are products of subjectivity, one must consider the neural input (and not the object) primary, given that one wants to be an

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> In an unpublished manuscript of Donald Davidson: “Quine’s Epistemologies” translated into Norwegian by Eivind Balsvik as “Quines epistemologier”, in *Norsk filosofisk tidsskrift*, nr 1-2, pp 9-20, Universitetsforlaget 2004, p. 8.

empiricist and not an idealist. So the question of the *basis* for the truism that different people find parts of the world (objects, situations, causes, situations) similar is obviously important for such categorizations into “isms”. Quine had assumed that it was the “approximate intersubjective homology of neural receptors and of networks and *hence of stimulations*”<sup>57</sup> (my emphasis) that could explain why people seem to have roughly similar private standards of similarity. This secured his position as an empiricist, while also explaining the similarity. But the assumption of similarity on the side of stimulations (shared stimulus meaning) was otherwise (also according to Quine), as we have seen, a very problematic solution to the problem. Now, what about his new solution of “preestablished harmony”, which is so surprisingly metaphysical for a presumed empiricist and naturalist, like Quine? The idea of preestablished harmony is even an archetypically rationalist thesis. Quine’s use of the term of ‘preestablished harmony’ could be read as a way of pointing out the thesis’ lack of philosophical substance.<sup>58</sup> Either way, in Quine’s version it means no more than that we tend to perceive similarities in a similar way across the human tribe.

In accepting the object as the relevant stimulus for determination of meaning, and also that it is the relevant stimulus for language learning, Quine suggests (probably ironically) that we can accept this solution as non-subjective due to the presence of parallelism, a preestablished harmony among human standards of perceptual similarity.<sup>59</sup> According to Quine’s most recent expressed views, perceptual similarity is partly innate and partly in preestablished harmony, and he argues that natural selection can account for both traits.

## **7. Concluding remarks**

Quine and Davidson agree that our biological capacity to discriminate is crucial for the possibility of linguistic communication and they agree that a shared environment is necessary for any learning of a language. But where Quine would claim that we cannot

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<sup>57</sup> Willard Van Orman Quine: “Autobiography (continued)”, in Lewis Edwin Hahn (Ed.): *The Philosophy of W. V. Quine*, in the series *The Library of Living Philosophers*, Open Court, La Salle 1986, reprinted 1988, extended version of 1998, p. 737.

<sup>58</sup> This has been suggested to me by Jan Harald Alnes, and he assumes it to be something of an irony from Quine, and that this is Quine’s way of playing a trick on the rationalist.

<sup>59</sup> Willard Van Orman Quine: “I, You and It: An Epistemological Triangle” in Alex Orenstein and Petr Kotatko (eds.): *Knowledge, Language and Logic*, pp 1-6, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht 2000, p. 2.

possibly know for certain that what we react to in the external world is the same, Davidson holds that "...triangulation helps sharpen, by locating, the source of the relevant reactions, for it is a shared source." This means that, in the simplest and most basic cases, we observe an object and the other person's reactions to the object, as well as our own reactions to the object. This is, following Davidson, possible only when we can talk about what we perceive. When we are competent speakers we have already got the concept of objective truth and independent reality, and with it, an awareness of the possibility of error. Instead of Quine's "irritations of our sensory surface", Davidson hold that objects and events in the physical world are what causally affect us. Object and events are socially established entities, and they cause our beliefs; however, according to Davidson, they are still the entities they are due to human dispositions for categorization and due to human interests. Quine's method of radical translation does not presuppose triangulation and partly common establishment of objects and events. For language learning and semantic purposes he holds that we perceive similarities similarly, and the basis for perceiving the same things as objects are parallelism. For epistemological purposes this is however not satisfactory for Quine. It is *the relation* between input and output itself that is to be the object of epistemological investigation.

The dispute over what is to be the data for interpreted empirical sentences is the most prominent "purely" epistemological dispute between Quine and Davidson. Davidson's reasons for adopting Quine's method as well as his focus on the public nature of language, is that he insists on the externalist basis of meaning and other intentional phenomena. Davidson still holds that Quine's epistemological basis in surface irritations is a basis in something private, and something pre-conceptualized.<sup>60</sup>

On the face of it, the difference between Quine's radical translation and Davidson's radical interpretation is that Quine is doing epistemology and Davidson is doing semantics. But this philosophically neutral way of describing the difference between them also serves to cover up the significantly distinctive projects and outlooks that have developed over time in Quine and Davidson. We have seen that the reason why Quine is an empiricist, while

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<sup>60</sup> See e.g. Donald Davidson: «Reply to Dagfinn Føllesdal» in Lewis Edwin Hahn (Ed.): *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, in the series The Library of Living Philosophers, Open Court, Chicago and La Salle 1999.

Davidson is not, is found in the (in terms of epistemology) innocent “detail” of operating with or without quantificational structure in the process of translation or interpretation.

Unlike Quine, Davidson is eager to meet the skeptical challenge. But the extent to which this eagerness has *governed* his different detailed moves in the development of his theory of radical interpretation is harder, if not impossible, to pinpoint. In Davidson’s own description of the ways of development and change in radical interpretation, it looks as though different local problems and challenges did lead the way, and as though the question of skepticism were non-prominent. As I see the matter, the overall goal of giving a compositional semantic theory led the way. I don’t think that Davidson’s moves which came to narrow the space for the skeptic and decrease indeterminacy were calculated consequences. Anyhow, it came to be increasingly more important for Davidson to give an account of objective truth and objective knowledge, and the epistemological consequences of his introduction of quantification theory was a good start in this direction.

The result of Davidson’s choice of the distal stimulus has paved the way for an approach that is thoroughly intersubjective, and thus social, in the sense that the distal stimulus is picked out in coordination between two speakers, in a triangular interpretational process. The distal stimulus does then, according to this analysis, lead to idealism. The social determination of the stimulus is, however, based in human nature in the form of human dispositions for discrimination and in human interests. Intersubjectivity of knowledge is therefore, following Davidson, both part of the set-up (via dispositions) and something that has to be followed up by social interaction in order to be fulfilled. Dispositions and innateness cannot alone see to it that we are intersubjectively coordinated in our linguistic dealings with the world. It is important to notice that the beliefs about the world that in this way are based upon social and perceptual externalism cannot be *reduced to* dispositions. Davidson’s approach is social, and it is a non-reductive version of naturalism.