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# Conventions' Revenge: Davidson, Derangement, and Dormativity<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** *Davidson advocates a radical and powerful form of anti-conventionalism, on which the scope of a semantic theory is restricted to the most local of contexts: a particular utterance by a particular speaker. I argue that this hyper-localism undercuts the explanatory grounds for his assumption that semantic meaning is systematic, which is central, among other things, to his holism. More importantly, it threatens to undercut the distinction between word meaning and speaker's meaning, which he takes to be essential to semantics. I argue that a moderate form of conventionalism can restore systematicity and the word/speaker distinction while accommodating Davidson's insights about the complexities and contextual variability of language use.*

## Introduction

### 1. Davidson's rigorous radical contextualism

Contextualism—the view that semantic or word meaning is pervasively a function of ad hoc features of the context of utterance, rather than being systematically determined by conventional rules for use—is an increasingly popular position in the philosophy of language. Philosophers and linguists have traditionally assumed a model of language closely allied to formal logic, on which arbitrary symbols are assigned stable individual values and combined into larger units by determinate rules, and contextual variation is minimal and highly regimented. Such a model palpably ignores the massive actual variation in usage among populations of speakers. Given this pervasive variability, assigning a robust theoretical role to conventional meaning can seem like a

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typical philosophers' fantasy: a dream of a clean, tidy way that things should work, floating free of how things actually do work. 'Semantic skeptics' like Noam Chomsky<sup>2</sup> and 'truth-conditional pragmaticists' like François Recanati<sup>3</sup> and Robyn Carston<sup>4</sup> urge us to acknowledge, even celebrate, these vagaries, and to abandon the attempt to lodge stable and substantive contents within semantic or linguistic meaning. Similarly, in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', Donald Davidson concludes 'that there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed'.<sup>5</sup>

In Sections 2 and 3, I will defend conventionalism against Davidson's contextualist challenge, focusing on his desire to maintain the contrast between speaker and word meaning. First, though, I want contrast his view with that of the semantic skeptics, and to argue that his view is at once more radical and more plausible. Unlike Chomsky, Davidson does not propose to relocate language out of the social realm by redefining it as an innate, internalistic biological faculty. Rather, he shares the commonplace assumption that language is a representational system designed and deployed for communication. More importantly, Davidson is not concerned to argue that semantics withers away on closer inspection, leaving only syntax plus general processes of rationality. He does speak of 'erasing the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally'.<sup>6</sup> But far from taking the failure of conventionalism to entail the elimination of semantics, he thinks we must reject conventionalism precisely in order to preserve a robust role for semantic meaning.

More specifically, Davidson differs from many other contextualists in emphasizing that 'nothing should be allowed to obliterate or even blur the distinction between speaker's meaning and literal meaning', where literal meaning is understood as 'what words, when spoken in context, mean'.<sup>7</sup> Davidson's claim is not just the usual contextualist complaint that appeal to conventions becomes an idle wheel once the machinery of linguistics is brought to bear on the complexities of actual usage. Rather, he takes conventionalism to actively threaten the distinction between speaker's meaning and word meaning. Thus, where many contextualists equate semantic meaning with conventional meaning, and take the facts of contextual variation to undermine its existence or at least relevance, Davidson endorses anti-conventionalism as a way of saving semantics:

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<sup>2</sup>Chomsky, 'Language as a Natural Object'.

<sup>3</sup>Recanati, *Literal Meaning*.

<sup>4</sup>Carston, *Thoughts and Utterances*.

<sup>5</sup>Davidson, 'Derangement', 265.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 252.

In order to preserve the distinction [between speaker and word meaning] we must, I shall argue, modify certain commonly accepted views about what it is to 'know a language', or about what a natural language is. In particular, we must pry apart what is literal in language from what is conventional or established.<sup>8</sup>

Why does he think this?

Contextualists usually proceed by pointing, first, to the diversity of criteria operative in determining an expression's extension across contexts of utterance; and second, to the frequency and diversity of ways that speakers loosen and tighten those criteria across contexts. When we consider this wide range of uses, they claim, we find that the posited conventional meaning rarely, if ever, predicts actual use. Nor is there any straightforward rule we could apply to pairs of those posited conventional meanings plus contexts to deliver the intuitive meaning, in the way we can with an expression like 'I'; instead, the effect on context is messy and ad hoc. Further, these points apply to a wide range of expressions, perhaps all 'open class' terms. Thus, they conclude, it's not possible to account in a principled way for the actual range of intuitive uses within a semantic theory.

Although these arguments raise an important explanatory challenge for conventionalism, they are vulnerable to the response that semantic theory alone shouldn't be expected to predict the operative meanings of all, or even most, utterances of sentences because overall interpretation is always a function of syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Davidson goes beyond these usual examples and arguments for the insufficiency of conventional meaning to argue that conventional meaning is also not *necessary* for word meaning. To this end, he appeals, first, to cases of ignorance. These can occur either on the speaker's side, as when Mrs. Malaprop utters 'If I reprehend anything in this world, it is a nice derangement of epitaphs!' to describe a nice arrangement of epithets;<sup>9</sup> or on the hearer's side, as when Davidson himself wrongly assumed that 'malaprop' is not a common noun variant on 'malapropism'.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, as Davidson says, error on both sides is possible: 'We could both have been wrong and things would have gone as smoothly'.<sup>11</sup> Given that speaker and hearer still converge on a common interpretation despite their ignorance, conventional meaning appears to be irrelevant to successful communication. Second, Davidson appeals to cases of 'sheer invention',<sup>12</sup> such as by authors like James Joyce and Lewis Carroll: since words like 'mimsy' and 'aventried' lack any conventional meaning, it seems obvious that convention can be neither sufficient nor necessary for determining the meaning they do have.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 252.

<sup>9</sup>Sheridan, 'The Rivals'.

<sup>10</sup>Davidson, 'Derangement', 252.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 252.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 259.

Davidson claims that in all these cases, just as in the more standard contextualist examples, the word's or sentence's 'literal' or 'first' meaning departs from its conventional meaning, which he equates with the value (if any) that would be assigned to it by 'normal' or 'standard' interpreters.<sup>13</sup> This contextual 'first' meaning is 'first in the order of interpretation', which he construes in Gricean terms, as the order of means to the speaker's communicative ends.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Davidson suggests, this 'first' meaning is identified in a basically Gricean way: the hearer encounters an utterance for which his default interpretation (if any) fails to support the basic assumption that the speaker is attempting to contribute something relevant and true to the conversation. To restore the assumption of rationality and cooperativeness, the hearer adjusts his interpretation, based on whatever cues and clues he can glean, including the sounds produced,<sup>15</sup> but also such factors as his 'knowledge of the character, dress, role, sex, of the speaker'.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, in terms of their basic interpretive mechanism, Davidson takes malapropisms and neologisms to be akin to conversational and conventional implicatures. However, he also insists that they differ in a fundamental way, insofar as implicatures do take conventional meaning as their 'first' meaning, which the speaker's overall communicative intentions then build on or modify.<sup>17</sup> Given this reliance on conventional meaning, Davidson thinks, implicatures—including or alongside 'explicatures'<sup>18</sup> or otherwise 'enriched' meaning—pose no substantial threat to conventionalism, although they may raise interesting questions about where to draw the boundary between semantics and pragmatics. By contrast, he claims, malapropisms and neologisms establish the theoretical irrelevance of conventional meaning.

It's not just that Davidson takes an appeal to convention to be otiose; as he says above, we 'must' allow that first meaning is non-conventional in order to explain these cases. Although he doesn't explicitly articulate why, the basic line of thought seems clear enough. It is only if we understand that Mrs Malaprop means by 'precede' what I (and presumably you) mean by 'proceed' that she can successfully use the sentence 'Lead the way and we'll precede' to implicate her main point—in this case, that we must go to the fields immediately to prevent mischief. Without appealing to this idiosyncratic 'first meaning', we can't explain her overall speech act. If we insist on equating word meaning with conventional meaning and opposing both to speaker's meaning, then Mrs Malaprop's utterance become inexplicable because we have no way to explain how the hearer gets from 'precede' to the implicated content in one fell interpretive swoop.

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 252.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 253.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 252.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 260.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 255.

<sup>18</sup>Carston, *Thoughts and Utterances*.

Davidson doesn't deny that assumptions about ordinary usage are a relevant part of an interpreter's background knowledge; he simply denies that they constitute words' meanings, or belong to the semantic theory that generally governs actual interpretive contexts. Instead, he suggests, speakers and hearers come to conversations armed with 'prior' semantic theories. A prior theory, like conventional meaning, is external to the particular context of interpretation at hand. However, it is not 'established' across any community;<sup>19</sup> it is merely the theory held by a particular individual, possibly quite idiosyncratically. Nor need it have any robust stability for that individual across contexts. Our interpretive assumptions and expectations are in constant flux in response to the various situations we confront: 'there is no such thing as how we expect, in the abstract, to be interpreted'.<sup>20</sup> Nor, given this, does the prior theory have any robust normative force. It of course determines conditions for the truth or correctness of sentences, but it cannot itself be characterized as 'correct' or incorrect in any philosophically interesting sense: it is just the theory the individual employs.

As speakers and hearers talk and interpret one another, they adjust their respective prior theories to produce a context-local 'passing' theory. This is a theory of what words mean in that context: of the 'first' meaning which functions as input to the Gricean 'order of interpretation'. Although speaker and hearer fully understand each other only if they share a passing theory of the current speaker's words (and of the speaker's own meaning), there is no requirement that they have a common passing theory for the conversational context as a whole. Thus, a passing theory is still highly individualized, in the sense that different passing theories may govern different speakers within a single context.<sup>21</sup> Finally, the prior theory plays a merely causal role in the production of these passing theories. If conventions for word use exist at all, they are of at most sociological interest. Nor are there any rules for getting from either prior theory or conventional meaning to passing theory, just 'rough maxims and methodological generalities'.<sup>22</sup>

## 2. Systematicity and conventionalism

So far, we've identified a passing theory as the context-local theory of interpretation that assigns a 'first' meaning to an individual speaker's words, and seen why Davidson thinks such a theory will at most incidentally coincide with the 'conventional', 'ordinary', or 'established' use of those words. However, none of this yet explains why a passing theory of first meaning is a semantic theory; as Davidson says, it 'is (roughly) Grice's non-natural meaning, which applies

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<sup>19</sup>Davidson, 'Derangement', 252.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 262.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 257.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 265.

to any sign or signal with an intended interpretation'.<sup>23</sup> In what sense, then, is Davidson a semantic savior rather than a semantic skeptic? What more do we need to add to a passing theory for it to become a recognizably semantic one?

Davidson's answer is that the operative theory of interpretation must be *systematic*, in the familiar compositional sense:

in the case of language the hearer shares a complex system or theory with the speaker, a system which makes possible the articulation of logical relations between utterances, and explains the ability to interpret novel utterances in an organized way.<sup>24</sup>

Given Davidson's motivating examples and emphasis on contextual flux, we might wonder why he cares so much about systematicity for semantics. Systematicity is usually invoked to explain our ability to produce and interpret an indefinitely large range of utterances; but a passing theory is by definition restricted to an extremely narrow range of cases. Why not go all the way with Chomsky, and conclude that only syntax is governed by organized rules, thereby providing an uninterpreted skeleton upon which our general 'heuristics' and 'strategies' of pragmatic interpretation hang their context-specific flesh? Indeed, given Davidson's provocative conclusion that 'there is no such thing as a language', it might seem natural to conclude that his question, 'What should be added if we want to restrict first meaning to linguistic meaning?' is not well-formed.<sup>25</sup>

The need for semantic systematicity arises, I think, from Davidson's more basic commitment to holism. A Davidsonian semantic theory identifies meaning through the specification of T-sentences, of the form "'Snow is white" is true in English if and only if snow is white'. These T-sentences constitute the fundamental unit of analysis; there is no independent role for meanings, or reference, understood as metaphysical entities or relations. However, because this list of sentences is infinite, the semantic theory must generate them by means of a compositional system that assigns meanings to expressions derivatively, in terms of their contributions to the truth-conditions of those whole sentences.

The compositional system thereby reveals what speakers' knowledge of the language involves. It also constrains which T-sentences are theoretically relevant: although "'Snow is white" is true in English if and only if grass is green' is also true, it won't be generated as a T-sentence by any plausible

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 254.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 254.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 254. Note further that merely invoking 'systematicity' is not sufficient to isolate linguistic meaning since many other representational systems, such as diagrams and maps, are also governed by systematic principles of construction and interpretation. Linguistic systems are distinguished from these other formats by their use of representational and combinatorial principles that are highly abstract and general (Camp, 'Logical Concepts', 'A Language of Baboon Thought?', 'Thinking With Maps').

compositional theory. Thus, apparently trivial, possibly homophonic T-sentences gain theoretical traction not in isolation but as a whole, as theorems to be generated by an adequate compositional semantic theory. More importantly for our purposes, this means that the meaning of an individual word is constituted by its contribution to the truth-conditions specified by all of the T-sentences whose quoted sentences contain it. Applied to Mrs Malaprop, this entails that when we interpret her as meaning by 'epitaph' what most of us mean by 'epithet', we 'must give "epitaph" all the powers "epithet" has for many other people';<sup>26</sup> that is, as Davidson says, 'the entire burden of that role, with all its implications for logical relations to other words, phrases, and sentences, must be carried along by the passing theory'.<sup>27</sup> This, then, is why even a passing theory whose 'expected field of application is vanishingly small'<sup>28</sup> requires rich systematicity: 'Only a full recursive theory can do justice to the[] powers' that constitute a word's meaning.<sup>29</sup>

The key question, then, is whether Davidson can satisfy the requirement of systematicity in a way that differentiates linguistic meaning from other cases of 'first' (non-natural) meaning without appealing to convention. Because Davidson is an interpretationist about mental states as well as languages, many of his same points about semantic holism also apply to belief and action. In particular, his holist interpretivism entails that for him, even a one-off, entirely non-conventional gesture, of the sort Grice takes to be basic for understanding non-natural meaning, gets its meaning through the implicit ascription of a host of other potential gestures which the interpreter would interpret in certain ways if the agent were to produce them. These potential utterances are 'systematically related', in terms of their potential circumstances of generation and conditions of satisfaction or appropriateness. But by hypothesis, such a gesture lacks any discernable internal structure.

There are at least two distinct reasons—beyond bare intuition—why we don't want to say that a one-off Gricean gesture has parts in the way sentential utterances do.<sup>30</sup> First, in the case of the gesture, interpretationism's holistic requirements can be satisfied by positing a finite (indeed, fairly limited) set of alternative potential gestures: the gesture's significance can be anchored by its place within a closed web of other potential gestures. Given this, our theory of meaning in this case only needs to appeal to complete 'T-sentences', of the form 'Gesture B is true if and only if there is a jaguar in the tree' 'Gesture C is true if and only if there is an eagle flying above', etc. Without the need to generate an

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<sup>26</sup>Davidson, 'Derangement', 262. (Typo corrected, reversing 'epitaph' and 'epithet').

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 261.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 261.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 262.

<sup>30</sup>Although it might be tempting to understand parthood here in physical terms, as for instance Fodor (e.g. 'Why There Still Has to be a Language of Thought') often seems to, the operative notion of parthood must ultimately be functional: we only treat physical properties as relevant to individuation because they track functionally (and thus, ultimately, semantically) relevant roles.

infinite of T-sentences, we don't need to discern a finite base of expressions with stable meanings which can be recombined according to stable rules.

Second, these additional gestures that we appeal to explaining our interpretation are entirely counterfactual. We posit them merely to justify our interpretation of the gesture the agent actually performed, along the lines of 'If he'd been talking about something in the sky instead of in the tree, he would have pointed more directly upward, like this'. By contrast, on a standard semantic theory of a natural language, the case for discerning stable recurrent parts is much stronger, because we have an obvious, independent way to get a grip on the truth-conditions for an indefinitely large set of sentences: by appealing to community-wide patterns of usage. These actual pairings of sentences and truth-conditions—or at least, independently testable claims by theorists about what pairings speakers and hearers would assign under what circumstances—provide a comparatively robust analytical starting point, from which we can work our way into identifying those sentences' functionally operative parts.

This is a point Davidson was strongly alive to in 'What Metaphors Mean', where one of his main objections to positing metaphorical 'meaning' is that it lacks any cross-contextual application. As he says, 'Literal meaning and literal truth conditions can be assigned to words and sentences apart from particular contexts of use. This is why adverting to them has genuine explanatory power'. In the absence of such a cross-contextual basis, talking about 'meaning' 'is like explaining why a pill puts you to sleep by saying it has a dormative power'.<sup>31</sup> By definition, however, the passing theories that constitute semantic theories in 'Derangement' are restricted to the particular context of utterance, understood in the most immediate possible terms as applying only to a single speaker at a single time. Davidson's central aim in 'Derangement' is, after all, to undercut explanatory appeal to any actual tokenings of sentences outside that context. Moreover, in contrast to Chomsky (with respect to syntax), Davidson is skeptical of positing biological or cognitive structures as the causal grounds of speakers' interpretive dispositions. Thus, it appears that in principle, Davidson's only resource for satisfying the holistic interpretive requirement that undergirds semantic systematicity is an appeal to purely counterfactual possibilities—precisely as in the case of the one-off gesture. This is an uncomfortably flimsy basis on which to rest one's semantic theory, especially for someone like Davidson, whose philosophical methodology is so metaphysically minimalist, and so who should be leery of positing such ungrounded counterfactuals.

So far, I've argued that Davidson's commitment to holism puts him under theoretical pressure to broaden the evidential base of his semantic theory beyond the extreme localism of a passing theory. At the same time, there is also significant practical pressure for the gap between prior and passing theories to

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<sup>31</sup>Davidson, 'Metaphors', 33.

remain relatively small. Although every context of interpretation is potentially an instance of radical interpretation, in practical terms successful communication depends on massive antecedent overlap in prior semantic theories. This is especially true, given the diversity of speakers we encounter, and the paucity of our knowledge of their beliefs and desires. Davidson is correct to point to malapropisms as demonstrating the non-necessity of complete overlap in prior theory for successful communication, and to neologisms as demonstrating the non-sufficiency of such an overlap. He is also correct that the value of any expression can be—and frequently is—modified in context, either intentionally or not. But in practical terms, smooth communication happens only when the difference between prior and passing theories involves relatively isolated tweaks to particular expressions or classes of related expressions.

Finally, practical considerations also strongly suggest that complete coincidence of speakers' and hearer's passing theories is overly stringent as a criterion for successful communication, as Davidson himself acknowledges.<sup>32</sup> Even more common than successful coordination involving malapropisms and neologisms are cases where speaker and hearer assign the same truth-conditions to an uttered string, and the same or very similar inferential roles for contextually relevant inferences, but diverge in their assignments for parts of the semantic theory outside the bounds of contextual relevance. Given the paucity of semantic evidence provided by any single utterance, it is highly likely that a hearer's adjustment from prior to passing theory in light of the speaker's actual utterance will fail to produce complete convergence in passing theories.

Thus, given the ubiquity of merely partial overlap in passing semantic theories, and the practical irrelevance of differences outside the focal area, there is considerable pressure to temper a requirement of fully shared systematicity to one of mere massive overlap. This is, of course, a familiar holist response to worries about shared content. But then, if the gap between a hearer's prior and passing theories cannot be too large, if speaker and hearer must share quite similar prior theories, and if relevantly similar passing theories suffice for successful linguistic communication, then in purely practical terms it starts to seem as if the divergence between prior and passing theories will typically be less dramatic than Davidson often makes it sound. Moreover, if all that is needed, and all that can be secured, for successful linguistic communication is largely overlapping assumptions about what values to assign to words, then it becomes less obvious that widespread communal expectations about usage don't in fact exist, which fit this bill. Combining these practical considerations with our earlier, theoretically driven need to identify a more than merely counterfactual basis, external to the immediate context of interpretation, to underwrite the assignment of stable values to expressions, it starts to appear that Davidson should not just acknowledge, but may actually need, something close to what conventions can deliver.

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<sup>32</sup>Davidson, 'Derangement', 261.

### 3. 'First' meaning and word meaning

In Section 2, I argued that Davidson has good reasons to hold that a semantic theory is systematic and shared, but that these reasons also push him toward granting a significant role to patterns of usage outside the immediate context of utterance to satisfy the requirement of systematicity, and toward granting that merely largely relevantly overlapping semantic theories satisfy the requirement of sharing. These two points limit the force of his arguments against conventional meaning. Nonetheless, they are compatible with insisting that within a given conversational context, word meaning is fully determined by the operative passing theory of 'first' meaning; it's just that the passing theory would itself involve an indirect appeal to cross-contextual patterns of usage. In this Section, I argue that conventional meaning plays a significant practical and normative role even within local contexts, and even when words are used in ways that depart from convention. Davidson is right to draw attention to local word meaning, as distinct from both conventional meaning and conversational implicature. But he is wrong to simply replace conventional meaning with local meaning. Conventional meaning is almost always 'first' in the order of interpretation, with context-local word meaning(s) following in its wake.

To see why this might be, and its implications for anti-conventionalism, we need to dig deeper into how Davidson understands 'first' meaning, and in particular how he distinguishes it from speaker's meaning. To this end, I want to focus on a *prima facie* puzzling difference in Davidson's analyses of two cases that Keith Donnellan uses to argue for the difference between the (putatively) semantic values of expressions and speakers' uses of them.<sup>33</sup>

The first case is Donnellan's classic example of 'Smith's murderer':<sup>34</sup> Jones utters 'Smith's murderer is insane' to talk about someone (say, George) who Jones falsely believes to have murdered Smith. Davidson agrees with Donnellan that Jones successfully refers to George; but he insists that Jones's *words* refer to the actual murderer:

the reference is none the less achieved by way of the normal meanings of the words. The words therefore must have their usual reference. All that is needed, if we are to accept this way of describing the situation, is a firm sense of the difference between what *words* mean or refer to and what *speakers* mean or refer to ... Jones has said something true by using a sentence that is false. This is done intentionally all the time, for example in irony or metaphor. A coherent theory could not allow that under the circumstances Jones' sentence was true; nor would Jones think so if he knew the facts. Jones' belief about who murdered Smith cannot change

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<sup>33</sup>My discussion here elaborates a point I articulated in 'Metaphor and Varieties of Meaning'.

<sup>34</sup>Donnellan, 'Reference and Definite Descriptions'.

the truth of the sentence he uses (and for the same reason cannot change the reference of the words in the sentence).<sup>35</sup>

We can see Davidson's reasoning here as an instance of his generalizing the familiar Gricean machinery, in which a hearer calculates the speaker's meaning by appeal to what effect she could plausibly be intending to produce in him in this context, in two ways. First, the example involves interpretive adjustment in the light of speaker error, rather than intentional flouting of the maxims. Second, in contrast to the paradigmatic Gricean case of a propositional implicature calculated on the basis of the entire proposition which the speaker 'said', here the adjustment focuses on a specific phrase within the uttered sentence. In both respects, the case of Jones parallels Mrs Malaprop's utterance of 'epitaph'. However, Davidson insists that there is a crucial difference: where Mrs Malaprop's ignorance concerns the normal usage of a word, Jones is mistaken about an empirical fact. As a result, Davidson thinks, the appropriate interpretive adjustment for Mrs Malaprop concerns the operative semantic theory, while in the case of Jones the adjustment is merely pragmatic: it concerns what the words, *with* their normal meaning, are being used to refer to. Thus, he treats Mrs. Malaprop's, but not Jones's utterance, as a case of non-conventional 'first' meaning.

In this sense, where Donnellan is often read as a proto-contextualist anti-conventionalist who blurs and possibly obliterates the distinction between word and speaker's meaning, Davidson takes 'Smith's murderer' to exemplify the importance, and robustness, of that distinction. The difference between Donnellan and Davidson becomes even clearer with Donnellan's second case, of 'glory'. Alfred MacKay took Donnellan's discussion of the referential/attributive distinction to commit him to HumptyDumptyism: to the view that, as Humpty Dumpty said, 'When I use a word...it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less'. In particular, MacKay accused Donnellan of holding that it was just fine for Humpty to use 'glory' to mean 'a nice knock-down argument'. In response to MacKay's accusation, Donnellan argued that while Humpty Dumpty cannot mean *a nice knockdown argument* by 'glory' because he knows that his hearer, Alice, lacks the requisite interpretive background, in circumstances where that background is in place, it *is* possible to mean the one by the other:

If I were to end this reply to MacKay with the sentence 'There's glory for you' I would be guilty of arrogance and, no doubt, of overestimating the strength of what I have said, but given the background I do not think I could be accused of saying something unintelligible. I would be understood, and would I not have meant by 'glory' 'a nice knockdown argument'?<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Davidson, 'Derangement', 258.

<sup>36</sup>Donnellan, 'Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again', 213.

Donnellan takes his ‘glory’ case to be just like ‘Smith’s murderer’ because in both cases, the speaker succeeds in meaning or talking about something despite departing from semantic convention. This is the feature Donnellan cares about; in general, he is silent or unclear about whether the words themselves alter their meaning.

By contrast, because Davidson’s central aim is to preserve the distinction between word and speaker’s meaning in the face of context-local modulation, he treats the two cases very differently. In the case of ‘glory’, he thinks that because Donnellan, unlike Humpty, produces his utterance within a context with the appropriate common ground,

not only he, but his words, are correctly interpreted as meaning ‘There’s a nice knock-down argument for you’. That’s how he intends us to interpret his words, and we know this, since we have, and he knows we have, and we know he knows we have (etc.), the background needed to provide the interpretation.<sup>37</sup>

For Davidson, ‘glory’ is just an intentional version of Mrs Malaprop’s ‘nice derangement of epitaphs’ or Goodman Ace’s ‘baffle of wits’. In all these cases, a ‘normal’ hearer comes to the conversation with prior expectations but discovers that the speaker, whether intentionally or not, is using her words in a different way. He therefore adjusts his interpretive expectations, and the conversation can proceed without difficulty. Thus, for instance, someone in Donnellan’s audience might reply smoothly to Donnellan with an utterance like ‘Chomsky’s review of Skinner was glory for sure, but I’m still not convinced by your attack on Russell’.

If Davidson can sustain his distinct interpretations of Donnellan’s two cases, then, it seems he can legitimately claim to have articulated a form of hyper-local contextualism that preserves the distinction between word and speaker’s meaning, and that thus leaves room for the possibility of a robust semantic theory. If he can also show, not just that conventionalism is theoretically otiose, but that it threatens the distinction between word and speaker’s meaning, then given the ubiquity of context-local word meanings like malapropisms and neologisms, he would be justified in concluding that a coherent semantic theory must be anti-conventionalist. In the remainder of this Section, however, I’ll argue that Davidson lacks the resources to sustain such a strong differentiation between ‘glory’ and ‘Smith’s murderer’. In particular, his argument for treating ‘glory’ as a case of ‘first’ meaning overgeneralizes, and forces him to ignore the explanatory relevance that conventional meaning actually has.

In the quote about ‘Smith’s murderer’ above, Davidson claims that Jones ‘intentionally’ ‘said something true by using a sentence that is false’, and

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<sup>37</sup>Davidson, ‘Derangement’, 260.

analogizes this to the more familiar, straightforward cases of irony and metaphor. Although the analogy will be jarring for readers of 'What Metaphors Mean', where he held that metaphors are in an altogether different line of business from meaning, here Davidson clearly does assume that metaphor and irony can communicate truth-evaluable claims, which he counts as cases of speaker's, rather than 'first', meaning. Intuitively, this seems right: the speaker of a metaphor exploits the usual meanings of her words to mean something different. Thus, when we hear Romeo's utterance of 'Juliet is the sun', we rely on the fact that 'the sun' refers to the *sun*—that it's playing its usual disquotational role—to guide our thinking about Juliet. Further, we take Romeo to be intentionally exploiting this fact in order to communicate that Juliet is more beautiful than the other girls in Verona, that she brings warmth, light, and joy to his life, and so on. If anything, the intuition is even more straightforward with irony: the sarcastic speaker of 'George sure is a fine friend' implicates that George is emphatically not the way a fine friend should be, where we understand 'fine friend' in its usual terms.<sup>38</sup>

The continued relevance of the uttered words' usual meaning to metaphor was one central reason that Davidson rejected metaphorical meanings in 'What Metaphors Mean': if we take metaphor to imbue words with a new, context-local meaning, he thinks, 'most of what is thought to be interesting about metaphor is lost'.<sup>39</sup> He illustrates this with a parable about teaching a visitor from Saturn to use the word 'floor': as he is transporting you to his planet, you look back at earth and say to him, 'floor', nodding at the earth. Suppose, Davidson suggests, you intended thereby to evoke Dante's description of the earth as 'the small round floor that makes us passionate'. In that case, the Saturnian would have missed your point had he treated your utterance as a continuation of the linguistic lesson. But a theory of metaphor that simply 'lodges' a new meaning in the words can't explain this difference between learning a new literal meaning (or updating the existing meaning) and playing with the use of a word that is already understood. Explaining that difference requires acknowledging the sense in which the literal meaning 'lingers' within the current context.<sup>40</sup>

The question is whether Davidson can combine these intuitions about the preservation of literal meaning, plausible as they are, with the hyper-local contextualism of 'Derangement'. In particular, the same considerations that motivate assigning a *nice knock-down argument* as the semantic value of 'glory' in Donnellan's response to MacKay also apply to at least many cases of metaphor and some cases of irony. That is, there is a clear sense in which with a metaphor, just as Davidson says about 'glory', 'that's how he intends us to interpret

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<sup>38</sup>See Camp, 'Sarcasm, Pretense, and the Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction'.

<sup>39</sup>Davidson, 'Metaphors', 37.

<sup>40</sup>Carston introduces the language of 'lingering' in 'Metaphor: Ad Hoc Concepts, Literal Meaning and Mental Images'.

his words, and we know this'. To mitigate worries about the open-endedness and indeterminacy of what exactly Romeo says about Juliet, consider more prosaic metaphors like 'John is a bulldozer', or 'George Bush is a primate'.<sup>41</sup> In such cases, the speaker clearly intends some of the words she utters to be assigned a context-local meaning, which contributes to the compositional determination of a claim.<sup>42</sup> This meaning thereby becomes the default value assigned to other utterances of that word in that context, including in embedded contexts like 'If John is a bulldozer, then he'll make a good chair'; 'Because Bush is such a primate, he'll invade first and ask questions later'; and 'I disagree; that's not at all what John/Bush is like'. The proposition determined by this compositional machinery can be reported by echoic indirect speech and attitude reports, and can serve as the input to implicature. Similar points also apply for some types of sarcasm, as exemplified by 'If you come out with one more of your brilliant insights at the next faculty meeting, I'm going to remove you from the committee'.<sup>43</sup>

In all these respects, metaphor and (the relevant class of) sarcasm differ sharply from most implicatures. They also differ, even if not as sharply, from 'Smith's murderer'. More importantly, in all these respects, metaphor and the relevant class of sarcasm pattern *with* intentional twists and neologisms. Indeed, it is precisely this sort of systematic implication within the operative compositional and conversational machinery that motivates Davidson to treat cases like 'glory' and 'epithet' as instances of context-local semantic meaning. If anything, the motivation should be even stronger for metaphor, given that the metaphorical interpretations of specific words easily extend to other related expressions, in virtue of their patterns of collocation and associated inferential networks. For instance, given the characteristics ascribed to John by an utterance of 'John is a bulldozer', it might be natural to describe Joan as an excavator and George as a skid steer. This suggests that the passing theory's modification to the words' 'normal' meaning is systematic, in a way that we've seen is especially important for Davidson, given his holism.

Davidson introduces his notion of 'first' meaning to replace that of 'literal' meaning, which he takes to be 'too incrustated with philosophical and other extras to do much work'.<sup>44</sup> But he also wants 'first' meaning to shoulder most of the functional role of literal meaning:

Every deviation from ordinary usage, as long as it is agreed on for the moment (knowingly deviant, or not, on one, or both, sides), is in the

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<sup>41</sup>Camp, 'Showing'.

<sup>42</sup>For defenses of the view that metaphorical utterances undertake truth-evaluable commitments see, *inter alia*, Searle, 'Metaphor'; Martinich, 'A Theory for Metaphor'; Bergmann, 'Metaphorical Assertions'; Bezuidenhout, 'Metaphor and What is Said'; Camp, 'Contextualism', 'Prudent Semantics', 'Showing, Telling, and Seeing'; Stern, *Metaphor in Context*.

<sup>43</sup>Camp, 'Sarcasm'.

<sup>44</sup>Davidson, 'Derangement', 252.

passing theory as a feature of what the words mean on that occasion. Such meanings, transient though they may be, are literal; they are what I have called first meanings.<sup>45</sup>

The problem is that figurative meaning is a transient, agreed-on 'deviation from ordinary usage', but it is not literal. The standard way to distinguish literal from non-literal meaning is by appeal to conventionality; but this is the central feature of literal meaning that Davidson proposes to discard as an unwarranted theoretical 'incrustation'. At the same time, given the extensive parallels between figurative speech and his core cases of neologism, it would be question-begging for Davidson to stipulate that 'first' meaning simply excludes figurative meaning.

What non-conventionalist grounds might Davidson deploy to distinguish figurative from first meaning? The most plausible basis is the independently plausible intuition, enunciated to different ends in both 'What Metaphors Mean' and 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', that in figurative talk the literal meaning 'lingers', in the sense that the relevant expressions' ordinary meanings play a crucial role in the intended order of interpretation. However, it is far from obvious that this does underwrite a substantive contrast with most of Davidson's core cases. The contrast might appear robust enough when it comes to 'glory', given that the ordinary meaning is largely irrelevant to the example. After all, the point of Lewis Carroll's vignette is that Humpty Dumpty could not reasonably have expected Alice to understand *a nice knock-down argument* by 'glory' because there is no interesting connection between the two; and Donnellan himself succeeds in meaning the one by the other only by exploiting that pre-existing allusion. However, 'glory' is the limiting case. In general, there must be a connection of *some* sort between what the speaker expects the hearer's prior theory to be and what she intends for his passing theory to become. And in most instances of intentional twisting and invention, conventional meaning at least partially underwrites this connection. Even a fake malaprop like Ace Goodman's 'baffle of wits' is witty because it discerns an interesting connection between the extensions of 'battle' and 'baffle' on their ordinary interpretations. Likewise, sheer invention, as opposed to modulation, is extremely rare: most of Joyce's neologisms are portmanteaus, onomatopoeias, or partial puns; while many of the neologisms in 'Jabberwocky' rely heavily on context for what determinate meaning they do have. In the absence of any connection to conventional meaning, and without something like Donnellan's allusion stepping in to fill the void, there would be no reason for the speaker to employ *this* word or sound rather than any other; and she could have no hope of the hearer working out the 'passing' value she intended for the word to take on. As we have seen, the intended connection is rarely algorithmic, and often involves highly context-local factors. But because

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 261.

conventional meaning constitutes such a salient candidate for what the speaker might have meant, it will often play a key role within the overall order of interpretation.

Thus, if the contextual relevance of ordinary or ‘established’ meaning is supposed to justify treating metaphorical (and ironic) meaning as a case of speaker’s meaning rather than ‘first’ word meaning, then very many of Davidson’s cases of intentional invention and modulation will also count as speaker’s rather than word meaning. This worry does not apply to genuine malaprops, where the speaker’s divergence from ordinary usage is unintentional. In these cases, there may well be no substantial connection in denotation or connotation, merely a phonological similarity, between ordinary usage and the speaker’s intended application; and by definition, the speaker does not intend her hearer to use any such connection to guide his adjustment from passing to prior theory. The lack of an intended connection to conventional meaning in malaprops is of little use to Davidson, though, because it is important for him to treat the intentional and non-intentional cases on a par—and not just because he discerns the same fundamental interpretive mechanisms at play in both cases. The parallelism is crucial for establishing his claim that ‘error or mistake of this kind, with its associated notion of correct usage, is not philosophically interesting’,<sup>46</sup> and so that the conventions that purportedly underwrite such ‘correct usage’ should be excised from a coherent semantic framework.

Against this, I want to argue that ‘correct usage’ is indeed relevant, both theoretically and practically, in interpreting malaprops. It is true that alert, sympathetic hearers are typically willing and able to figure out a speaker’s intended usage in the face of unintended twists—whether these arise from ignorance, as in Mrs Malaprop’s substitution of ‘epitaph’ for ‘epithet’, or from inattention, as in my own recent substitution of ‘monomaniacal’ for ‘megalomaniacal’. Our nuanced ability to ‘read minds’ in this way, even in the absence of rich antecedent information about the speaker’s specific interests and intentions, is inherently impressive, and crucial for underwriting social interaction in general and linguistic interpretation in particular. But it is also true that in practice, hearers are often reluctant to fully indulge unintended divergences from convention.

Thus, most hearers would hesitate to adopt Mrs Malaprop’s semantic theory as the passing theory for their own speech. For instance, it would be extremely natural to respond to her utterance of ‘What a nice derangement of epitaphs!’ with something like ‘My dear lady, you must be under a misapprehension. An epitaph is an inscription on a gravestone, and a derangement is a form of madness; but you appear to be referring to pretty patterns of speech’. Even a hearer who wants to avoid embarrassing Mrs Malaprop or derailing the conversation is unlikely to happily echo her words; rather, he is more likely to respond with an indirect form of agreement like ‘Well-wrought speech is indeed a great pleasure’.

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 252.

Such an unwillingness to echo need not directly undermine Davidson's claim that Mrs Malaprop's *words* mean *a nice arrangement of epithets*, given that he says explicitly that adopting a passing theory of interpretation for a given speaker does not entail that the interpreter must apply the same theory to himself.<sup>47</sup> However, a hearer's reticence to employ a theory of interpretation for himself within that very conversational context does seem like evidence that the operative theory is not genuinely shared. More specifically, the fact that it does not govern the assignment of truth-conditions to sentences in that context per se, only to sentences as uttered by one speaker, strongly suggests that the meaning which is assigned belongs to the speaker rather than to the sentence.

Moreover, if a hearer were to respond to Mrs Malaprop by pointing out her deviation from ordinary usage, it seems likely that Mrs Malaprop would attempt to adjust her use accordingly. Indeed, it seems plausible that just as Jones would not hold that the sentence he uttered was true 'if he knew the facts',<sup>48</sup> so too would Mrs. Malaprop retract her commitment to the truth of the sentence she uttered if *she* were fully appraised of the facts. Intuitively, we want to distinguish Mrs. Malaprop's ignorance from Jones' by pointing out that her ignorance concerns language, while his is directed at the world. But this reinstates a 'boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world' which Davidson takes his arguments to 'erase',<sup>49</sup> and which resurrects linguistic error as theoretically relevant. While such a restoration is borne out by ordinary conversational practice, it conflicts with Davidson's extreme localism.

Let us take stock. So far, I have argued that figurative speech, which Davidson in 'Derangement' takes to be obviously a form of speaker's meaning, patterns with intentional twists to conventional meaning which he wants to treat as 'first' meaning. With nearly all intentional twists, as with figurative speech, conventional meaning plays a key role in explaining how the speaker intended to mean *this* by saying *that*. Conceding that intentional twists are cases of 'second' (and in that sense, speaker's) meaning would both severely restrict the range of exceptions to conventional meaning as the operative first meaning, and threaten to reinstate the theoretical relevance of linguistic error.

I now want to consider an important class of cases in which speaker's and hearer's semantic theories diverge but communication typically succeeds, one that leads many theorists to be skeptical of straightforward appeals to linguistic convention: dialectical variation.<sup>50</sup> In these cases, the speaker's departure from the hearer's prior theory is often unintentional, but there may be no legitimate sense in which she is in error, insofar as the speaker's use of her words does

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 256.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 258.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 265.

<sup>50</sup>For instance, Begby ('Semantic Minimalism') invokes dialectical variation to argue against semantic minimalists, who posit conventional meaning as a stable 'least common factor' in explaining communication across contextual variations.

conform to the semantic theory operative for her community. Although differences in socioeconomic and political power between the two communities may lead to one usage being deemed ‘correct’, I agree with Davidson (and Chomsky) in dismissing this prescriptive norm as of more sociological than linguistic interest. A member of the disadvantaged group may have strategic reasons to comport with the dominant group’s usage, and may be more prone to being bullied into doing so. But unlike Mrs Malaprop, she also has good reasons (again, possibly including sociopolitical ones) to stick with her current way of speaking.

Dialectical variation is real and theoretically interesting, but it doesn’t support anti-conventionalism. On the contrary, it demonstrates the importance of speakers’ embeddedness within broader speech communities, and specifically the way in which what we mean and how we speak depends on social factors beyond our individual control. Slurs offer a particularly charged case. Relative to distinct speech communities at different times and social milieus, the same expression—‘negro’, ‘colored’, or ‘black’; ‘Oriental’ or ‘Asian’—may function as a (relatively) neutral mode of reference or to express a denigrating perspective on the denoted group.<sup>51</sup> The boundaries between these communities can be quite fluid, and individual speakers may have difficulty determining which community they currently inhabit. But relative to a given community, certain expressions really are slurs. In a conversation within such a community, a speaker’s insistence that her personal semantic theory does not commit her to endorsing a denigrating perspective on the targeted group is at best mildly mitigating and often additionally offensive. The appropriate response for a speaker in such a case is to retract her use of the word and modify her semantic theory accordingly.

Dialects are not monolithic, exclusive entities. They overlap, both in the straightforward sense that any one individual may be a regular participant in multiple speech communities, and in the more complex sense that multiple dialects may be in play within a single conversation, with interlocutors engaging in nuanced, sometimes rapid-fire code-switching. Davidson, like Chomsky, seems to take the pervasiveness and complexity of dialectical variation to effectively reduce dialects to idiolects, since any given individual is likely to occupy a unique point in the Venn diagram of dialectical variation. But the interactions among a single speaker’s various dialects are more complex, and more thoroughly social, than this: rather than mere intersection, they often involving layering, partial affiliation, appropriation, and resistance.

Consideration of dialects, then, not only fails to secure a broad range of cases where the context-local ‘first’ meaning departs from ‘normal’ or ‘conventional’ meaning without being in error in any theoretically relevant sense. In positive terms, it reveals the theoretical and practical difference that conventions do make. Conventions are (at least) warranted mutual expectations used

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<sup>51</sup>Camp, ‘Slurring Perspectives’, ‘Slurs as Dual-Act Expressions’.

to coordinate behavior in the face of alternatives.<sup>52</sup> In the case of linguistic communication, such mutual expectations play an especially important role because the range of signals that a speaker might want to send, and the range of ways in which she could send them, are so enormous. Speakers and hearers can indeed arrive at a common understanding of the speaker's words in the absence of antecedent coordination; in this sense Davidson is right that it is merely a 'convenience that many people speak in similar ways, and therefore can be interpreted in more or less the same way'.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, there is a sense in which each of us retains, as Locke puts it, the same 'inviolable liberty' as Adam to assign values to our words.<sup>54</sup> Thus, Mrs Malaprop can doggedly insist on meaning by 'epitaph' what the rest of us mean by 'epithet', refusing to allow the conversation to advance unless her hearer acquiesces to her preferred semantics. Or, if her hearer is sufficiently charitable, he may accommodate right off the bat. But in the ordinary run of things, that is not how either Mrs Malaprop or her hearer are most likely to proceed, and for good reason.

As Davidson in 'Derangement' emphasizes, linguistic communication is a pervasively Gricean business. Speakers form their utterances in the ways they do in order to get their hearers to recognize what signal they might reasonably be trying to send by making that utterance. Hearers interpret utterances correlatively, by identifying what signal the speaker might reasonably be sending. (Of course, most of the time we just talk and comprehend, immediately and intuitively, without explicit calculation on either side. But a criterion of automaticity or phenomenological immediacy is obviously too coarse-grained to underwrite a robust distinction between 'first' and 'speaker's' meaning, or between semantics and pragmatics.<sup>55</sup>)

Communication can succeed without convention. Perhaps it is even possible for distinctively linguistic communication to occur entirely in the absence of convention—although the considerations about systematicity from §2 combined with the arbitrariness of word meaning call this into question. However, given that warranted communal expectations about word-meaning pairings *do* exist—something Davidson never denies—it would be irrational for interlocutors on either interpretive side to ignore them. A rational hearer must at least consider established usage as a factor in determining what a speaker might reasonably mean by her words. Given this, a rational speaker must also at least consider established usage in determining how her words are likely to be interpreted. As Lewis puts it,<sup>56</sup> previous usage provides a precedent that renders a particular word-meaning pairing salient, which in turn gives interlocutors a reason to employ that same pairing going forward.

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<sup>52</sup>Lewis, *Convention*, 'Languages and Language'.

<sup>53</sup>Davidson, 'Derangement', 257.

<sup>54</sup>Locke, *Essay*, 3.2.8.

<sup>55</sup>Camp, 'Contextualism'.

<sup>56</sup>Lewis, *Convention*.

There are, as Davidson stresses, plenty of mismatches in people's assumptions about particular conventional meanings. When such mismatches occur, alert, charitable hearers can usually recognize and adjust accordingly. Davidson is also right that the means of recognition are structurally parallel across the cases of speaker and hearer ignorance, dialectical variation, and intentional twists. But *pace* Davidson, the resulting modes of adjustment typically differ. In particular, because recognizing speaker ignorance doesn't usually lead a hearer to revise his own semantic theory, such a hearer is more likely to avoid echoing that speaker's usage; while recognizing his own ignorance will usually lead a hearer to update his semantic theory, and hence also to echo the speaker. With dialectical variation, the two parties may engage in implicit (or explicit) negotiation about which speech community they are in, with varying results for their respective semantic theories. And with intentional twists, there is a choice: the hearer may well play along with, and even extend, the speaker's proposed modulation. But he can also play the pedant, insisting on hewing to conventional use and/or feigning incomprehension.<sup>57</sup>

It is not just that speaker and hearer ignorance of conventional meaning produce different post-conversation update procedures, or even just that they tend to generate different patterns of echoic uptake within the conversation. As the case of slurs makes palpable, ignorance does not liberate a speaker from governance by a word's established usage. If a reasonable hearer would assign a certain meaning to the speaker's words, given the social, linguistic, and cultural patterns that actually exist within the context in which the interlocutors are currently located, then that speaker can reasonably be held responsible for her words having that meaning. This standard remains operative even if the actual hearer recognizes that the speaker is ignorant of those conventions. In short, ordinary speakers and hearers treat *accommodation* to non-conventional use<sup>58</sup>—especially in the case of ignorance, but even in the case of intentional modulation—as a voluntary matter, with insistence on conventional meaning, however annoying, trumping idiosyncratic contextual interpretation. As Grice says, a speaker who departs from or goes beyond conventionally encoded meaning, speaks “‘under license’ from other participants’ – a license they can refuse to issue.”<sup>59</sup>

The data here are undeniably complex. The phenomenon of dialectical variation reminds us how nuanced and multi-layered these social, linguistic, and cultural patterns can be. Individual pairs of speakers and hearers can also build up their own shared patterns within and across conversations, constituting miniature dialects. Repeated use of a metaphor, and extension of a metaphorical trope to new expressions, provide especially rich precedents for establishing such micro-dialects, which then become ripe for wider and deeper conventionalization. More generally, once a hearer *has* accommodated a speaker's

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<sup>57</sup>Camp, 'Contextualism', 'Prudent Semantics', 'Sarcasm', 'Working to Conversational Rule'.

<sup>58</sup>Lewis, 'Scorekeeping'.

<sup>59</sup>Grice, *Studies*, 45.

idiosyncratic use, this accommodation itself becomes a precedent which warrants interpretive consideration.

Given all this, what constitutes a reasonable hearer, what meaning she would assign to the words uttered, and hence what counts as conventional meaning, may be quite context specific. We need a notion of 'conventional meaning' that is flexible and refined enough to do justice to these complexities. But this is a refinement we need anyway, to deal with other sorts of social norms.<sup>60</sup> More importantly, it does not eliminate the gap between conventional meaning and passing, 'first' meaning as Davidson understands it. Here, it is important to remember just how radically contextualist Davidson's proposal is. 'First' meaning is the meaning assigned to the words (in combination) in a particular utterance; it need not apply to other utterances of that very same word or sentence by other speakers or the same speaker later in that same conversation. In his view, any role for precedence, even within a conversation, is merely causal, helping to explain the ease with which interpreters adjust from prior to passing theory. By contrast, conventions are in their nature cross-contextual, at least in the weak sense of involving the reapplication of one solution to a coordination problem to a new problem. Most of the time, they are cross-contextual in a much more robust sense, appealing to massively reiterated applications of that solution.

I've argued that in the vast majority of both intentional and ignorant departures from conventional usage, a word's conventional meaning is at least a relevant factor to consider in the order of interpretation. In this sense, most of the time, conventional meaning just *is* 'first' meaning. Of course, as Davidson also emphasizes, none of this entails that the speaker herself must mean what her words mean. Putting aside the obvious case of conversational implicature, a speaker's meaning may depart from conventional meaning unintentionally, as in Jones's utterance of 'Smith's murderer is insane'. It may depart from it intentionally, as in Donnellan's utterance of 'There's a nice knockdown argument for you', Alice's metaphorical utterance of 'John is a bulldozer', or Jane's sarcastic utterance of 'George sure is a fine friend'. As contextualists like to point out, much, perhaps most, of our speech involves narrowed, broadened, or otherwise modulated meaning. In this sense, conventional meaning does not serve as a communicative norm. It does not determine how we should use our words: we are free to, and often have good reasons to, twist convention to our own ends. But in nearly all cases of intentional modulation, and in many cases of unintentional divergence, conventional meaning still functions as the first meaning in the order of rational interpretation.

The role that conventional meaning plays in the Gricean calculation of non-conventional speaker's meaning returns us the considerations about systematicity from §2. There, I argued that in the absence of convention, Davidson is left with merely potential assignments of meanings to sentences, with little or no

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<sup>60</sup>Cf. e.g. Bicchieri, *The Grammar of Society*.

independent basis in actuality, to ground the compositional machinery of semantics. But this accusation itself echoes a familiar contextualist complaint against conventionalism: that conventional meanings are mere posits, unobserved in actual conversational practice. That is, if conventional meaning rarely predicts words' operative meanings, how can conventions provide the cross-contextually stable basis which I argued is required to imbue talk of semantic meaning with genuinely explanatory, as opposed to merely 'dormative', power?

The points we've just developed about ignorance and normativity help allay this worry, by showing that explanatory power can be genuine by serving a justificatory role rather than a directly predictive one. Conventional meaning constitutes a body of warranted mutual expectations about the contributions that expressions would make to the speech act that a speaker would undertake *if* she meant what she said. As such, conventional meaning is one important input to interpretation, even if it only rarely emerges as its output. Obviously, the notion of which speech act a speaker would undertake if she meant what she said is itself a theoretical, counterfactually loaded one, which needs considerable refinement to serve as a tractable, empirically grounded basis for semantic theorizing. But such refinement is possible; in particular, I have argued elsewhere for attending to contexts where the interlocutors' conversational aims conflict, so that speakers and hearers are not prepared to be maximally interpretively charitable and cooperative.<sup>61</sup> An analysis of these contexts will still rely heavily on counterfactual claims about the conversational behavior of ordinary speakers and hearers. But such claims are empirically testable, both by analyzing existing conversational corpora and by designing targeted experiments to elicit new data.

The second implication of ignorance and normativity for systematicity connects more directly to Davidson's holism. Davidson wants to dismiss the sense in which Mrs Malaprop is in error as 'not philosophically interesting', at best sociological. But if she is anything like the rest of us, Mrs Malaprop is more sophisticated than this description indicates. She doesn't just want to fit in socially; she also willingly defers in matters of meaning to those around her.<sup>62</sup> A theorist who relies exclusively on causal connections to secure reference might be able to fix semantic content in entirely individualistic terms. But Davidson's robust holism and interpretationism place an especially heavy burden on inferential role in constituting a semantic theory. And this is a burden that a speaker's semantic theory, construed individualistically, is unlikely to be able to discharge.

As Davidson says, for Mrs Malaprop to mean by 'epitaph' what most of us mean by 'epithet', we 'must give 'epitaph' [in her mouth] all the powers 'epithet' has for many other people'.<sup>63</sup> But Mrs Malaprop, like most of us, cannot

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<sup>61</sup>Camp, 'Contextualism', 'Sarcasm', 'Working to Conversational Rule'.

<sup>62</sup>Putnam, 'Meaning of "Meaning"'; Burge, 'Individualism and the Mental'.

<sup>63</sup>Davidson, 'Derangement', 262.

fully articulate these powers by herself. Thus, her tokens of 'epitaph' depend on what we mean by 'epithet' in two distinct ways: first, if Davidsonian interpretivism is right, insofar as we attribute to them the inferential powers that we associate with 'epithet'; and second, given deference, insofar as she herself identifies the inferential role that she assigns to 'epitaph' by relying on us (or rather, on those around her). When Mrs Malaprop utters 'epitaph', she intends to commit to the applicability of a certain set of inferences. She is wrong about which sound is normally paired with that inferential role. But she is also prepared to subject herself to correction about what the inferential role itself is. She presumably already takes it not to include being an inscription on a gravestone, or else she would indeed mean by 'epitaph' something close to what we do (but her utterance would be contextually quite bizarre). Given that she deploys it as a term of praise, it seems to include the attribution of positive qualities. If it turned out that her community's established usage restricts 'epithet' to terms of abuse, as it arguably does for many contemporary Americans, then her semantic theory would require a deeper sort of revision: not just a remapping of phonology to meaning, but a reworking of inference and extension. Nonetheless, this revision is still one she is likely to undertake if the divergence is brought to her attention. In this sense, again, the meaning of her current token of 'epitaph' depends on counterfactuals whose truth is grounded by actual usage beyond the immediate context of utterance.

## Conclusion

The vagaries of linguistic use are real. Speakers almost always intend to communicate more than what their words alone mean, and often mean something different from what their words would mean if taken literally. Given this, a semantic theory should not aim to directly predict 'what is said', understood as the content the speaker intuitively committed herself to by making her utterance, as Jason Stanley for instance maintains.<sup>64</sup> But this does not entail, as Chomsky takes it to,<sup>65</sup> that semantic theory withers away as a useless theoretical posit, an idle wheel spinning outside the causally engaged machinery of syntax and pragmatics. Nor does it entail, as Davidson takes it to, that semantic theory can preserve its relevance only by abandoning conventionalism, transforming into the hyper-local theory of a single speaker at a single time. Instead, it shows that we need a more refined account of semantic content, one that teases it apart from pragmatic intrusion using a variety of tests, including especially consideration of which contents even antagonistic interlocutors would agree a speaker would have committed herself to if she meant the words she uttered.

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<sup>64</sup>Stanley, 'Context and Logical Form'.

<sup>65</sup>Chomsky, 'Language as a Natural Object'.

Ordinary speakers and hearers do believe in, and are committed to the relevance of, linguistic conventions with normative implications for use, and they regularly invoke these conventions in conversational exchanges. It is often appropriate to criticize flat-footed linguistic prescriptivism, whether aimed at grammatical constructions (e.g. split infinitives or the absence of copular 'be'), or idiomatic expressions (e.g. 'begs the question' or 'could care less'), as resulting from a conflation of linguistics with sociopolitical dynamics. People are generally prone to imposing normative force on mere regularities, and to retrospectively confabulating reasons for things they just do. Thus, we should be wary of unreflective appeals to convention. Beyond this, the rich complexities of actual sociolinguistic dynamics mean that identifying conventions for linguistic use requires robust, sensitive engagement with actual discourse.

But none of this shows that linguistic conventions are not real, or semantically relevant. In practical terms, the huge range of messages that speakers might want to communicate in a given context, the huge range of signs they might use to communicate them, and the sheer arbitrariness of the linguistic connection between sign and significance entails that if speakers and hearers are to have any realistic hope of coordinating on the sorts of contents we often want to share, they must come to communicative encounters armed with a fairly rich set of mutual expectations about sign-meaning pairings. In theoretical terms, the fact that such expectations do exist within a speech community provides hearers with warranted grounds for expecting speakers to exploit those expectations in framing their utterances. Reasonable hearers will take these expectations into account when calculating what speakers could mean; and this in turn makes speakers responsible for taking these expectations into account when they speak.

Linguistic utterances are not free-standing entities; they are caught up in a network of distinct possible utterances constructed out of the same parts. The project of identifying and assigning stable values to those recurrent, interacting parts gains empirical traction by being grounded in a body of actual utterances by the same and other speakers within that speech community. Moreover, because so many of the things we talk about are highly abstract and disconnected from the immediate context of utterance, the values assigned to those parts are often significantly constituted through a network of inferences, rather than just by direct reference. Finally, because we talk about so many different things, many of which we know relatively little about, we regularly rely on others within our linguistic and epistemic community to fill out those inferential networks for us. In all these ways, the meaning of any one utterance depends in systematic ways on utterances outside the immediate context of utterance, and on patterns of use within a broader community.

We should not minimize the complexity and delicacy of linguistic conventions. They cannot be directly read off from actual utterances, but must be abstracted through analysis of what ordinary speakers and hearers are disposed to take each other to be committed to across a range of conversational

contexts. What those commitments are depend in subtle ways on which communities the speakers and hearers are currently affiliating themselves with. The overlap in mutual expectations about default word use is unlikely ever to be complete, or exact. Significant overlap is all we can hope for. But it is also all we need, and something that we do expect of, and get from, each other.

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