The Problem of Sharing Language

Davidson in a Gadamerian Perspective

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the possible convergences between Gadamer and Davidson regarding the problem of common language needed for mutual understanding by reassessing the source of their difference. It begins with Davidson's estimation, according to which he agrees largely with Gadamer's views on language, understanding and communication except for his thesis that communication presupposes sharing language. My analysis of this observation results with the conclusion that the main difference between these two philosophers lies in their understanding of language in general: for Gadamer language is not only a way of communicating meanings as in Davidson's work, but also it is a bearer of tradition. This text shows how serious appreciation of this dimension of having–language influences the conditions for a dialogue that according to Gadamer are to be found also in the tradition, which is disclosed in language that we learn by learning about world. But the main contribution of the present text consists of its attempt to specify Gadamer's idea of tradition's agency through language by means of Davidson's terms of "prior" and "passing" theories by offering a new account on their relation.

KEYWORDS: common (sharing) language, prior/passing theories, dialogue, tradition, world–disclosing.

1. Introduction

In the concluding passage of his "Gadamer and Plato's *Philebus*", Davidson asserts that he shares many of Gadamer's views on the problems of language, understanding and conversation, except for the following: "conversation presupposes a common language", arriving at an "agreement concerning an object demands a common language first be worked out" (Davidson 2005: 275) and that what is occurring in a dialogue is the creation of a common language. According to Davidson, conversation does not presuppose, nor even require a common language; agreement depends on shared objects and not on a common language; understanding is what is created in a dialogue, not a common language.

Both Gadamer and Davidson said much more on understanding and shared language and obviously developed their discussions in different contexts. In this paper I will examine their divergences and show that their positions are not as different as they seem at first glance. To this end I will initially reconstruct Davidson's critique of the concept of "common language", subsequently I will give an account of Gadamer's point and I will conclude by presenting my own assessment.

2. Davidson on "common language"

In "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs", Davidson describes what is involved in the idea of conducting communication successfully, since that is what is going on with having a language. His first premise is that speakers communicate their intended meanings. The second one is that they want to be understood since that is why they got involved in a conversation in the first place. Communication is accomplished when the listener understands the speaker's intended meaning, which is the third premise. How does he do that? What does the listener do, or what kind of capacities should he employ, so that he understands what the speaker says? Since the speaker wants to be understood he uses words, which he assumes the listener to be able to interpret correctly. So he engages in the conversation with certain expectations about the listener's interpretative faculty. This is the starting theory[1] of interpretation the speaker has about his interpreter according to the standard conception of communication, which Davidson temporarily considers in order to later rebut its necessity. Much like the speaker's starting theory, there is also a prior theory on the listener's side. The listener — who is also an interpreter — has at each moment of speech, a theory, which he adjusts gradually depending on the available pieces of evidence. A variety of things can count as evidence: "knowledge of the character, dress, role, sex, of the speaker, and whatever else has been gained by observing the speaker's behavior, linguistic and otherwise" (Davidson 2005: 100 (*sic*!)). This prior theory, however, is permanently revised, by "entering hypotheses about new names, altering interpretation of familiar predicates, and revising past interpretations of particular utterances in the light of new evidence" (*ibid.*).

The fact that the speaker's view of the listener's prior theory is relevant to what he says and what he means by his words is a key aspect in this standard picture. "It is an important part of what he has to go on if he wants

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1. Davidson uses the word "theory" only because the description of the communicative situation on both sides [of the speaker and listener] is susceptible of a recursive account. That means that neither the speaker nor the listener need to know they are using theories or beliefs during their conversation.

to be understood" (Davidson 2005: 101). In my own words, this means that both speaker and listener are operating with expectations towards one another. Those expectations concern both external and internal features and both linguistic and nonlinguistic behaviour of the interlocutors. These expectations depend not only on what the interlocutors see or hear from each other, but essentially on their skills, beliefs, interests, etc. that they bring into the conversation. Those expectations are not solely linguistic items, but they concern the world, which people live in and care for. My contention is that some of these expectations should be shared among the interlocutors so that they could open a dialogue in the first place. Otherwise, there is no reason for this particular communication with this particular person. Of course this is not the only condition for the possibility of a dialogue: the intention of arriving at the goal — which is mutual understanding — is another. But engaging in a dialogue simply to reach an agreement, as Davidson assumes, would reduce the language to being purely an instrument for communication. In my picture, however, dialogue is a typical way of life for people who take care of their surroundings. Thus, the idea of a human being as a rational animal who has something to say because she or he believes in its truth is confronted with the idea of human beings who engage in a conversation because that is their way of disclosing their minds and the world to each other.

Although Davidson would not disagree with this last comment, he still draws his conclusion against "common language". In order to make his point against the "common language" thesis, Davidson distinguishes as we already saw between prior and passing theories of the interpreters (both speaker and listener are interpreters) and in a second move he contends that what we need for successful communication are shared passing theories and not prior theories. Sharing prior theories would correspond to the standard thesis, according to which communication needs a common language. Common language here is identified with prior theories, which "constitute his (interpreter's, S.B.) basic linguistic competence, and which he shares with those with whom he communicates. [This] knowledge or abilities that constitute the theory may be called conventions" (Davidson 2005: 102). We see how prior theories change their content here. Previously, I compared them with expectations and contended their importance for communication and this was only a reinterpretation of Davidson's point of view. Now, however, prior theories obtain different content. Here, they are understood as a set of rules and conventions and precisely that does not match the general requirement for successful communication according to Davidson. Prior theories in this sense are rather an accidental facilitator than a necessary condition for agreement. We do not need to share them in order to come to an agreement.

Passing theories, on the other hand, are essential for communication because herein exists the greatest agreement. The important aspect of the passing theory is the impossibility of having previous knowledge of it. Davidson writes: " 'Mastery' of such a language would be useless, since knowing a passing theory is only knowing how to interpret a particular utterance on a particular occasion. Nor could such a language, if we want to call it that, be said to have been learned, or to be governed by conventions" (Davidson 2005: 102). Still, how can an interpreter interpret even a particular situation without engaging his or her general abilities? This is not a question of applying theoretical knowledge in a particular situation. Rather it is a matter of being a historically and culturally conditioned person: an interpreter interprets a language situation as a being in the world, as *Dasein*. The circularity forces one to question the quality of the connection between the prior and the passing theory. According to Davidson past understandings are in some kind of relation with current ones. He writes: "Of course things previously learned were essential to arriving at passing theory, but what was learned could not have been the passing theory" (Davidson 2005: 103). Thus the main problem appears to be understanding the relation between prior and passing theory in Davidson's terminology or between *Auslegung* and *Interpretierung*[2] in Heidegger's terminology, or between sharing language and developing mutual understanding in Gadamer's terminology.

It seems that even for Davidson the common language is not irrelevant at all, for the passage above could be read so that it allows for the essential role of "previously learned" as a condition for carrying on with the understanding by means of creating passing theories. Still, Davidson obviously feels very uncomfortable with the notion of "common language". Therefore it looks as if we have to turn the question to the very meaning of this notion, which is not a question about its significance anymore. I suggest that Davidson's difficulty with accepting the notion of "common language" is to be found rather in the standard idea of language and less in the expression "common". This is also the reason for his radical inference at the end of this text, which brought him a great deal of attention. That famous conclusion is: "there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like many philosophers and linguists have supposed" (Dostal 2011: 107). The

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2. David Hoy argues for a convergence between Gadamer and Davidson also *via* Heidegger's distinction between *Auslegung* and *Interpretierung*. While he tries to build a connection between Davidson's radical interpretation and Gadamer's claim on universality of hermeneutic, I try to consider the much more modest question about the role of prior theories in Davidson's work and the role of common language in Gadamer's work in order to understand Davidson's claim that the problem of "common language" is where he disagrees with Gadamer (Hoy 1997: 112). In doing so I am following Dostal's appreciation of Gadamer and Davidson's different understandings of language as a source for their disagreement with respect to the problem of common language (Dostal 2011: 168).

question *a fortiori* is: what do philosophers and linguists think a language is? Plenty of instances in the works of Davidson indicate what he thinks the answer to be. In his opinion philosophers and linguists conceived language as something like a system of rules and vocabulary determined by conventions, which could be learned and mastered by the members of a linguistic community and which are necessary and sufficient for interpretation of language situations. So speaking would be "being able to operate on the basis of shared conventions, rules, or regularities" (*ibid*.). The task of the theory of meaning would be to find out what methods we use for communicating or interpreting meanings and what methods we use for understanding them. Since we do not find them but nevertheless continue to communicate successfully, it follows that there is "no such thing to be learned, mastered and born with" (*ibid*.).

This inference says a lot. I will try to discern three possible views of language, which I think it refers to. Obviously Davidson is opposed to what I would call with Gadamer an instrumental view of language. This is a view according to which we can master the language as if it were an instrument for gaining knowledge, a view very akin to the philosophers with logical interests. In this case, language is an instrument, which we can put to its use as we do with a hammer. An instrument is something like a thing, entity, tool or even organ, which we inherit or acquire and then apply to actual situations. Secondly in Davidson's assessment there is a critique of the view that language can be learned, which could be regarded as a critique to the behaviourist theory according to which language acquisition is central for humans to have language. Language acquisition is the very slow process of acquiring habits by learning through conditioning. Therefore, in this case language is a set of habits. Third and last is the view of Chomsky who introduced the idea of innate linguistic capacity (language acquisition device), which was very often interpreted as a theory that neglects the production of meaning in every concrete situation and led to the conclusion that all we need for an understanding of language is to be found by exploring the neural basis of language. In this case language is something like an organ we are born with.

All of these three possible targets of Davidson's final critical remark have a common aspect in that they presuppose that language is a finished set of conventions, rules or habits, which we apply in new situations. Consequently, what is essential to language is not its production, since it is only the application of a previously mastered device. And indeed we have a problem here, which is how to save the creativity of language as its essential dimension, in other words: how do we save the novelty and still explain that we are nevertheless capable of understanding it? Under the assumption that language is essentially speaking, these are obviously very important

questions. At the core of something being a language is the communication of meanings, which we are able to interpret. But what is significant in communication is not the application of previously learned meanings and their being correctly recognized by the interlocutor. On the contrary, both speaker and listener are always in new language situations. No previous knowledge of anything (rules, words, habits etc.) can help them deal with what is going on in the communicative process, which is understanding. So how do we happen to understand meanings for which we do not have recipes? For although the words appear familiar, they receive their meanings in sentences, which, when pronounced in new situations, are always new sentences.

For Davidson, the answer lies in a steady creation of passing theories as we have seen. Creativity is a way of dealing with novel language situations that we do not have any method for reaching an understanding for.

No one would be happier to subscribe to such a conclusion than Gadamer. His hermeneutical project shows him as clearly critical of positions connecting the concepts of understanding, language and even truth with the concept of method.

3. Gadamer on "common language"

In order to correctly understand what Gadamer means when he says that *"jedes Gespräch setzt eine gemeinsame Sprache voraus, oder besser: es bildet eine gemeinsame Sprache heraus"* (Gadamer 1990: 384), which is exactly the thesis Davidson criticizes, the most important assumption to make is Gadamer's critique of the instrumental view of language. This is also an appropriate starting point since that is something that these philosophers obviously share.

a) Instrumental View of Language

The instrumental view of language, firstly assumes that language is a tool for designating things in the world or for communicating thoughts and secondly says that meanings lie in those things or thoughts. However, Gadamer questioned this view for a variety of reasons, which are not only relevant to the philosophy of language, but also to the self–understanding of a human being. For that instrumental view of language basically implies the modern attitude of people being able to take absolute control over the world and everything they find in it including themselves. This lends support to the thesis that people can transcend their historical finality as

well as their connectedness to tradition, which they are born into and raised with. Gadamer could not leave such a position unchallenged.

He finds the origin of the instrumental theory of language in the classical picture, which Plato discussed in *Cratylus* (Gadamer 1990: 410ff). The final result of the dilemma whether language's origin is to be found in the convention or in the nature of things led the direction the reflection on language took for many centuries to follow. The outcome of Plato's radical critique of the rightness or trueness of names gave shape to the philosophical tradition at the end of which we find the instrumental theory of language with the ideal of a sign system (Gadamer 1990: 422).

This instrumental theory of language is characterized by some features, which are difficult to rebut, because they seem to correspond to common-sense logic. Those are for instance conventionalism and sign–character, which reduce the language to merely designative functions thus denying it any epistemologically constitutive role for generating knowledge and having an experience of the world. The only epistemological relevance of language is reduced to it being a means for describing things and communicating truths to which our mind came in a nonlinguistic manner. Both finding true knowledge and describing the true order of things in the world are independent from language. For these reasons language does not hold any significant position in philosophy for a very long time.

However, our everyday experience with language also facilitates the impression of language use as a use of means. It seems as if we learn to speak as we learn to manipulate or to handle certain situations e.g. swimming or calculating. We can seemingly choose arbitrarily which words we are going to use for communicating previously well–ordered truths and meanings. In fact our words seem to be interchangeable and available whenever we need them.

Such an impression of our experience with language as an instrument, which we can manipulate, is not self–deception. It is rather in the nature of language, which Gadamer described as self–forgetfulness of language (*Selbstvergessenheit der Sprache*) in his paper "Mensch und Sprache" (Gadamer 1990: 150). This does not only mean we do not think of grammatical rules when we speak a language we feel comfortable with, but it also means we do not think of speaking a language when we act in the world towards other people, objects, subject matters etc. The self–forgetfulness of language means that although everything we do is absorbed by the language, we do not "see" that language interlacement. In its immediate absorption it remains absolutely transparent. Thus, when I order an ice–cream and want to relax after my hard working day, I do not expect to get the word "ice–cream" although all I do is use the words: "I would like some ice–cream". When saying these words I expect to enjoy the tasty dessert

and in doing this, I do not mean that I was exchanging words for ice–creams. This self–forgetfulness of the language points to the close ties of language, thinking and world. Such an observation does not support treating language as an instrument, which merely exists to signify something whenever I need it. It doesn't matter whether I think of language as an instrument for describing matters or as a means of communicating believes and feelings etc. They both are reductionist since what matters in the classical picture of language is that I disregard my being partially absorbed by the language, so that language is not only a limit of my world, but it is a possibility for me having a world in the first place.

Philosophical hermeneutics argues for a comprehensive non–reductionist approach to the world–language relation. Its alternative answers to this relation are introduced by the conceptions of world disclosing and by the tradition–bearing dimensions of language.

b) Language as World Disclosure

Gadamer develops his position in *Wahrheit und Methode* drawing on Humboldt's considerations of language, especially on the thesis that language bears a worldview (Gadamer 1990: 443–446). *Die Verschiedenheit der Sprachen ist Verschiedenheit der Weltanschauungen*. Humboldt formulated this thesis to state that learning a language means socializing in a speech community. Gadamer builds on it and simultaneously argues for the interdependence of world and language. This means that language is not to be conceived as a form (as Gadamer thought Humboldt did) that we fill with meanings, chosen from our world–experiences. It rather is constitutive for our ability to meaningfully have a world. So the hermeneutically formulated thesis on world disclosure involves understanding of oneself, of other subjects and of the world as a whole, which has its own logic. The language dependency is thereby manifold: language is the medium of those understandings, their content and their nature of being something, which could be understood. This dimension is fundamental in Heidegger's sense of *aletheia* and ontological in both Heidegger's and Gadamer's sense of an antireductionist view of language. A reductionist position of language considers language solely in its role as a signifying being, disconnected from the dimension of meaning. While in the representationalist view, language is a kind of order of signposts, which we attach to the entities of a separate order of things or order of meanings, in the hermeneutic view on the other hand, language order does not have an independent reality from the order of meanings and from the order of things. On the contrary, for Gadamer, Humboldt's dictum that language bears a worldview says not only that having a world depends on having language. It claims *prima facie* that having language is dependent on

having a world. This is a non–reductionist thesis. *"Wichtiger aber ist, was dieser Aussage zugrunde liegt: dass die Sprache ihrerseits gegenüber der Welt, die in ihr zur Sprache kommt, kein selbstständiges Dasein behauptet"* (Gadamer 1990: 447). It stands for a conceptual multi–directional dependency among human thinking and experiencing, speaking and indeed *world having*.

So, contrary to mainstream instrumental opinion and complying with Humboldt's thesis, Gadamer underlines the world disclosing character of language. *"Nicht nur ist die Welt nur Welt, sofern sie zur Sprache kommt — die Sprache hat ihr eigentliches Dasein nur darin, daß sich in ihr die Welt darstellt"* (Gadamer 1990: (*sic!*)). Since a human being is necessarily a being that lives in a world, this thesis has a fundamental status.

c) World Disclosure and Scheme–Content Dualism

For many philosophers — especially those coming from the analytic tradition — this view of language as world disclosing leads to some idealistic and — after Davidson's critique of scheme–content–dualism — also relativistic consequences. In taking language as world disclosing, so the argument goes, these philosophers want to see nothing more than a scheme by which we organize the world and our experience. In this perspective it seems as if Gadamer and Davidson differ in the thesis that language has a world disclosing dimension. Nevertheless, this conclusion would be incorrect. Davidson has indeed shown that we cannot make such a picture intelligible. However, what this picture does not share with the hermeneutical view of language as world disclosing, are the notions of language and of the world, taken solely. In the hermeneutic view, language is not a set of rules, conventions and words with fixed meanings. It is not even a sensory organ with (or "through") which we perceive the world. Language is not something of a third kind, independent from the speaking persons. Language lives in speaking. It is not out there as the natural objects are. It is something, which we can sufficiently describe as a syntactic–semantic system. After all, both Davidson, and also Gadamer hold that talking to someone about something is an essential constituent of language. Similar to Davidson's triangulation, Gadamer's idea of language presupposes a relation between subjects trying to arrive at an understanding of something. Following Humboldt's analysis of *Dualis*, Gadamer proclaims irreducibility of subjectivity, inter–subjectivity and objectivity, which is also similar to Davidson's view. According to this argument, it is possible to see the world with language while not regarding language as a scheme. It seems that Davidson would agree with the last remark. In "Seeing Through Language" he writes "we perceive the world through language, that is through having language" (Davidson 2005: 141). Therefore and despite the readings, according to which

the thesis of language as world disclosure reintroduces the scheme–content dualism, Dostal classifies Gadamer's rejection of the world–worldview distinction and Davidson's rejection of the scheme–content distinction as one of the basic agreements between these two philosophers (Dostal 2011: 167).

d) Dialogue and Language as Bearer of Tradition

So the problem must lie somewhere else. My suggestion as to where that could be is similar to that of McDowell's[3], with the difference that I make a stronger distinction between the world disclosure moment and the tradition–bearing moment and claim that it is in the latter instance where Gadamer and Davidson mostly differ.

Even though in Gadamer's view speaking is essential to language, it is not the only significant truth to say about language. As I have already pointed out above, one can ascribe a philosophy of language to Gadamer only if the subject is understood in a non–reductionist manner. This means not merely language is speaking to someone about something and it is not only disclosing a world, but also, that language is a bearer of tradition. This is the source of disagreement between Davidson and Gadamer. Davidson does not consider the theory that states the essentially historical tradition which people live in has the capacity to speak to us and shape us. We adopt it partially consciously through learning language, because that tradition is provided through written and oral languages. Acquiring those traditions is not an irrational act since one can reasonably state they are productive only if cultivated i.e. a rational act of acceptance occurs. Even if Davidson agreed that we acquire traditions and ways of world–orders when we acquire our native languages, he would doubt that this is essential for communication, since successful communication is always a new situation for which we do not have recipes.

For Gadamer on the other hand it is important to ask: what is the structure of communication? If the genuine structure of a dialogue is its question–answer model, as Gadamer believes, then we should try to find out what is involved in asking questions and giving answers.

The strong emphasis on the question–part of the dialogue is the reason for opposing Gadamer's dialectics of question to Plato's dialectics of answer. Gadamer's premise states everything can be understood as an answer to a question. The significant role of the question in the philosophical hermeneutic is firmly connected to the picture of a human being whose lifestyle is

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3. John McDowell argues against Davidson's critique of "common language" as a condition of understanding from Gadamer's own standpoint, according to which language is world disclosive (McDowell 2002).

a permanent search for sense and orientation, which explains Gadamer's conviction that true dialogue as mode of life has power to transform the very personalities of the individual dialogue–partners.

It is intelligible that posing questions does not arise from nothing, but rather that it is rooted in a perspective. If you do not know anything about a topic you cannot even ask a question. Questions can be asked given certain — even though not always clearly known — backgrounds. The relation between this background and its question is not causal. The background continues to be present in the question. But not only do questions come from a perspective, they also shape a perspective for possible answers. Not everything counts as an answer to a certain question. This "coming from some background" and this "shaping openness for possible answers" is something Gadamer referred to as horizon of the question. Every question is situated in a horizon.

Thus, when speaker and listener are talking with each other about something, they are trying to find proper questions, because not every question relates to what people are talking about. They both try to find answers because the novelty of language situations does not allow for preparing answers in advance. So far Davidson would agree. Hence, the fact that these interlocutors engage their histories in dialogue is an indispensable condition for that dialogue to take place. I think Davidson would not go that far, since this coincides exactly with the description of how passing and prior theories are related, which allows prior theories to be essential for communication.

There is, however, another respect, in which it is possible to make sense of sharing language. Gadamer and Davidson would probably reach an agreement here. The fact that our interlocutors talk to each other has its reason in common circumstances. Even if they do not agree on something, they share a minimum of inter–subjectivity, which is irreducible to subjectivity and objectivity, since all of them are in mutually constitutive relations. It is this minimum level of interaction that, according to Gadamer, we can identify as a presupposed common language for the dialogue[4]. The common language that is going to be worked out is an advanced form of interaction. The former is interaction as a condition, the latter one is interaction as a result. If I read Malpas correctly, he makes a similar distinction between "commonality that resides in the possibility of common engagement" and

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4. My reading of Gadamer here is more orthodox (see my citation above: Gadamer 1990: 384) than Braver's, for whom Gadamer as Davidson are philosopher who work on the "problem how to understand others in the absence of common language" (Braver 2011: 149), which assumes that both of them are criticizing the theory of common language as a condition for mutual understanding. However I agree with Braver that Davidson misinterprets Gadamer's terms such as "language", "dialogue", "world" etc. which I find to be grounds for assessing his thesis of working out a common language, and not having it in advance, as essential for mutual understanding.

"commonality that depends on such common engagement but is articulated in those modes of determinate agreement that take the form of a shared language..." (Malpas 2011: 269).

I want to pay attention to two results of my previous discussion, before I continue with my concluding remarks. Since for Gadamer "to have world" is "to have language", it does not make any difference if you say, as Davidson does, that what we share is the world and not the language when we start a conversation. Secondly, since for Gadamer the medium, the content and the way of understanding are all of a linguistic character, it does not make a major difference whether he says common language or understanding of a common concern is what we are working out in a dialogue. To understand something and to put it in words are not independent activities.

4. Conclusion

Is there any scenario in which Davidson would accept such alternative argumentation for a common language? Is there any sense in which the theory of common language can be kept and which Davidson did not consider? I think there are some indications for this.

In "The Social Aspect of Language" Davidson points to one more possible, though for him irrelevant, understanding of "common language":

"I assume that two speakers couldn't understand each other if each couldn't (pretty well) say in his way what the other says in his. If we employ the translation manual relating the two ways of speaking to define what we mean by speaking in the same way, we can after all salvage something of the claim that communication requires a shared practice. But this is not what anyone would call sharing language, nor what anyone has meant by a common practice or a shared set of rules or conventions" (Davidson 2005: 151f).

This passage shows Davidson's restricted sense of "shared language". I hope to have shown that there are other intelligible senses of conceiving a common language. Some of them actually match with what Davidson states in the first sentence of this passage. Indeed, I would not be able to communicate, if I had no understanding at all of what the words and sentences my interlocutor is using mean. We experience such situations, when we try to be supportive of friends who are defending their PhD in molecular physics or computer sciences. I should therefore be somehow socialized in the practices and language uses, which enable me to understand meanings my interlocutor communicates. You do not suspend the novelty of language production by endorsing shared language and practices as a condition for successful communication. If the theory of sharing language contains something intelligible, it is — also according to Davidson — the idea of mutual

understanding between the speakers with regards to the content of their conversation. The fact that no one speaks of sharing language as the sharing of elementary understanding of linguistic and nonlinguistic practices in the contexts familiar to Davidson, does not mean that those possible senses are unintelligible.

Davidson makes another observation, which is crucial to his argument. He points out that we understand malapropisms and slips of tongue and other false language usages despite the fact that we start with correct yet in such cases misleading prior theories. I believe an interpretation with similar logic to the one above is also applicable to this observation. He concludes: nothing we know in advance does really facilitate the proper understanding of these cases. I argue for the contrary. The wrong direction, which in such cases is caused by correct expectations, is merely superficial and deceptive, because we can imagine situations when malapropisms occur and one of the speakers does not understand the words at all. Such cases would not end with mutual understanding. We understand a malapropism exactly because we have some, even misleading, expectations or, as Gadamer calls it, *Sinnerwartungen*. We do not apply expectations as we apply systems or theories to new situations. Their role consists of determining possibilities or shaping a horizon. For instance, if Mrs. Malaprop by "nice derangement of epitaphs" actually means a nice arrangement of epithets and I happen to understand this, it is because my horizon has already excluded possibilities like "gun rampage at the cemetery" or "stressful vacation" or "high school prom". It is because we already have expectations that we do not lose our minds trying to figure out what our interlocutors meant. Instead, both in normal as in deviate language uses, we are able to carry on. The large number of possible interpretations we can apply to speakers, is characteristic for the standard cases too. Having a horizon, which enables us to recognize what is near and what is far away, what is important and what is not and so on, enables us to have an understanding at all. Is this a notion of shared language in the standard and strict sense, in which Davidson criticizes the concept? Certainly not, assuming "language" is a system of rules and conventions plus vocabulary. But if language is a bearer of tradition and if a tradition is not only a form but a synthesis of form and content, than language is — among other things — also a repository of expectations of meanings.

When Davidson says that all we need for successful communication are passing theories, it is like Gadamer saying tradition is not something fixed, which imposes on speakers, but something, which has its life in its being lived. Tradition lives in speaking. It would be a pure misconception if we saw traditions as systems of beliefs that we can list and specify. Nevertheless it is the background, which enables us to move on with the passing theories. Talking of language as a carrier of tradition in Gadamer's dynamic sense

of this concept is trying to understand the connection of prior and passing theories in a non–standard manner.

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