

# Proto Sociology

*An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*

Volume 20, 2004

World-System Analysis:

Contemporary Research and Directions

*Edited by Richard E. Lee and Gerhard Preyer*

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Erste Auflage / first published 2004  
ISSN – 1611-1281

Bibliografische Information Der Deutschen Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.ddb.de> abrufbar.

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Bibliographic information published by Die Deutsche Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.ddb.de>.

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## UNCONVENTIONAL UTTERANCES? DAVIDSON'S REJECTION OF CONVENTIONS IN LANGUAGE USE

*Mason Cash*

### *Abstract*

*Since people can often successfully interpret utterances that flout or ignore conventions, Davidson concludes that shared conventions are neither necessary nor sufficient for linguistic interpretation. This conclusion is based on an overly narrow conception of what it is to know, and to share, a language. Rather than, as Davidson argues, simply interpreting the meaning the speaker intends their words to be interpreted as having (and their words' truth conditions), successful interpretation requires interpreting the illocutionary act the speaker intends to be interpreted as performing (and the act's felicity conditions). This change in focus highlights the need for many types of shared conventions, beyond the conventional meanings of words that Davidson considers and dismisses as unnecessary. When any one convention is ignored or flouted, interpretation is possible because the apparently unconventional utterance nonetheless conforms to a host of other shared conventions. Conventions are necessary for linguistic interpretation.*

In "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs", Donald Davidson (1986, henceforth "NDE") draws the rather incendiary conclusion that "there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed" (NDE, 446). What these philosophers and linguists have allegedly supposed, in brief, is that sharing a language is sharing syntactic and semantic conventions governing the construction of sentences and the meanings of words. Even Davidson notes that this conclusion "is the sort of remark for which one expects to get pilloried." (SAL, 1) Many commentators have indeed done so.<sup>1</sup> There

<sup>1</sup> As Rysiew (2000) notes, some implausibly accuse Davidson of conflating speaker meaning and linguistic meaning (e.g. Bar-On and Risjord 1992, 185-6). He also reports accusations that Davidson confuses sufficient and necessary conditions (Rysiew (2000, 78 n9) cites Bennett (1985, 603) Bar-On and Risjord (1992, 186 n30) and Ramberg (1989, 106) as examples). The problem Rysiew (2000, 79-80) identifies is Davidson's concentration on the wrong kind of convention; conventions of the

is a common intuition among many philosophers, and perhaps some linguists, that there has to be something wrong with this “remarkable,” “startling” and “downright astonishing”<sup>2</sup> conclusion. I’m surprised to find myself agreeing with Davidson: a language cannot be anything like what he claims “many philosophers and linguists” have supposed. However, I want to take his conclusion even further. A language also cannot be anything like Davidson’s proposed alternative.

My principal objections are to Davidson’s denial that shared conventions are necessary for successful communication, and his claim that his alternative account (which he claims does not depend on conventions) is sufficient for successful communication. Davidson concludes:

We should try again to say how convention in any important sense is involved in language; or, as I think, we should give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate with one another by appeal to conventions (NDE 446).

In “The Social Aspect of Language” Davidson (1994; henceforth “SAL”) amplifies this conclusion that “shared ways of speaking” are not essential for sharing a language. “The same doubts” he argues, “apply to the notion of following a rule, engaging in a practice, or conforming to conventions, *if these are taken to imply such sharing*. (Please note the proviso.)” (SAL, 6; italics in original). Shared conventions, Davidson argues, are neither necessary nor sufficient for communication.

His account of what is necessary and sufficient for communication focusses on the ability to interpret what he calls “first meaning”: the meaning a speaker intends their words to be interpreted as having (NDE, 435). Davidson argues that “a speaker necessarily intends first meaning to be grasped by his audience, and it is grasped if communication succeeds” (NDE, 436). As I’ll show, getting the audience to interpret “first meanings”, is not necessarily the speaker’s intention. Neither is this a good

meanings of words are not the only relevant conventions. Rysiew proposes that a convention of truthfulness and trust; that it is a convention that speakers do not say “X” unless they believe X is true. In spite of the objections Davidson would have to this being a convention (which I’ll discuss presently), I think Rysiew comes closest to seeing the problem accurately. However, I think there is good reason to look far more widely than this convention of truthfulness to find the conventions that uphold our linguistic abilities.

2 Ramberg (1989, 1); Bar-On and Risjord (1992, 163); Hacking (1986, 447).

criterion for successful interpretation. The ability to interpret first meaning is certainly not a good description of the abilities that enable us to understand one another. Rather than focussing narrowly, as Davidson does, on uttering words with intended “first meanings”, I advocate focussing on the wider phenomenon of people interacting socially, and on speakers performing illocutionary acts as part of ongoing social interactions. Successful interpretation, I argue here, depends on the audience interpreting the *illocutionary act* the speaker intends to be interpreted as performing (and the act’s *felicity conditions*) rather than their interpreting the *meaning* the speaker intends their words to be interpreted as having (and their words’ *truth conditions*). This wider focus has the advantage of enabling us to make sense – much more sense than Davidson’s account affords – of people’s interpretive abilities.

The keystone of Davidson’s argument is people’s ability to successfully interpret utterances when speakers make slips of the tongue, malapropisms, use unfamiliar jargon and use familiar words in unfamiliar ways. Davidson takes successful interpretation of such “unconventional utterances” (as I’ll call them) to be a counterexample to the thesis that shared conventions of word meanings can undergird communication. The fact that his account requires interpreters to construct ad hoc theories of interpretation – for interpreting one utterance only, of one speaker only, possibly on one occasion only – is problematic. His claim that the ability to construct correct “passing theories,” as he calls them, does not depend on shared conventions is particularly outrageous. It appears to make successful interpretation require a near telepathic ability to figure out speakers’ intended meaning without appeal to any shared conformity to or awareness of conventions.

The approach I offer here, based in interpreting speakers’ actions rather than their words’ meanings, firmly grounds our ability to interpret unconventional utterances in shared practices and conventions. To see these necessary conventions, I argue, we have to look more widely than at conventions of the meanings of words. The principal focus of this paper, then, is to “try again to say” how shared conventions (also shared practices and ways of following rules), are involved in language use.<sup>3</sup> I

3 Rysiew (2000, 82) concludes that we should take neither of Davidson’s alternatives, neither giving up on conventions, nor trying to find something new to say about the role of conventions in language. Rysiew (2000, 79) looks slightly more widely than Davidson, arguing that we simply need to correct a misreading of Lewis’s account of

argue that if we consider *pragmatic* conventions, in addition to the *semantic* conventions that Davidson considers and dismisses, we find a very wide variety of shared conventions that are necessary for our successful communication, especially in cases of unconventional utterances.

## Standard Theories and Davidson's Alternative

As a shallow first cut, we might say that the necessary and sufficient conditions for successful communication would include *sharing a language*. But what is it to share a language? Davidson argues that “many philosophers and linguists,” including his earlier self (NDE, 437), hold the following conception of what it is to know and share a language:

in learning a language, a person acquires the ability to operate in accord with a precise and specifiable set of syntactic and semantic rules; verbal communication depends on speaker and hearer sharing this ability, and it requires no more than this (SAL, 2).

These “standard descriptions of linguistic competence” (NDE, 437), hold three principles about the meanings of utterances as foundational. First, the meaning of an utterance is *systematic*, in that it is given by the meaning of the parts of the sentence uttered and the ways these parts are put together. Second, meanings are *shared* by all speakers of that language. Third, meanings are governed by *pre-learned* rules and regularities; we learn the rules and then subsequently apply them to utterances we interpret. According to these “standard” conceptions of language, before conversing with someone I have a “theory” about which meanings this person will assign to particular expressions,<sup>4</sup> which referents they will

conventions. He argues that the conventional underpinning of successful communication is the convention that people generally intend to conform to the convention of saying what they believe. This tactic of looking at other conventions, I argue here, is a step in the right direction. However, as I will show, this convention is only a minor aspect of the large network of conventions necessary for successful communication.

4 I use “expressions” here to cover both sides of a distinction that I do not feel a need to rule on: the distinction between whether it is a word or a sentence that is the fundamental meaningful unit of speech. As will presently become clear, I hold the fundamental unit of “meaningful” speech to be, as Austin puts it, the total speech act in the total speech situation. Accordingly, I use “expressions” to refer generally to either a single word or a group of words, or a sentence.

assign to nouns, the colloquialisms with which they will be familiar, and so on. Davidson calls this my *prior theory* of interpretation for this person (NDE, 442). Having this theory enables me to interpret this person's utterances, and enables me to produce utterances that I expect this person will be able to interpret. This is the conception of a shared language with which Davidson disagrees.

Davidson's disagreement is prompted by linguistic phenomena that he takes as counterexamples to standard views: the fact that interpreters can understand speakers' slips of the tongue, malapropisms, uses of expressions they have never heard before and uses of familiar expressions in unfamiliar or ungrammatical ways.<sup>5</sup> Consider the following examples: (A) My grandmother once countered my grandfather's rather convoluted route directions, saying “But there's a simpler way to get there; if you go his way there's too many turners to corn.” We all knew she'd meant that there are too many corners to turn, and the conversation flowed on without any need for clarification. (B) My wife and I made pizza for dinner recently. While she was sliding the pizza onto the cutting board to slice it, she said, “Can you grab the doohickey from the drawer?” I knew that she was talking about the sharp-bladed wheel for slicing pizza, kept in the drawer in front of me. I also knew that she was not inquiring about my ability to grab the pizza-slicing wheel, but that she wanted me to get it, and to hand it to her. (C) I once worked as an electrician's assistant at a hydroelectric power station. Before the electrician I worked with and I re-wired a cabinet, a supervisor recommended, “The cabinet's pretty close to the wall on the right. You'll have to get behind the cabinet from the left and screw the wires into place with your left hand.” The electrician replied “Yeah, I'm ambiguous enough to do that”. In spite of his using “ambiguous,” the supervisor and I both knew that he was asserting that he was ambidextrous enough to accomplish the task with his left hand.

5 Austin (1962, 17) calls this kind of infelicity a “flaw.” It is interesting to note at the outset that Austin remarks on the trouble a theory of language (like Davidson's) that explains linguistic phenomena in terms of meanings can have in accounting for such utterances:

“Somebody ‘says something he really did not mean’ – uses the wrong word – says ‘the cat is on the mat’ when he really meant to say ‘bat’. Other similar trivialities arise – or rather not entirely trivialities; because it is possible to discuss such utterances in terms of meaning as equivalent to sense and reference and get so confused about them, though they really are easy to understand” (1962, 137-8).

Davidson argues (NDE, 445) that interpretation of linguistic phenomena like these unconventional utterances force us to revise our analysis of the necessary and sufficient conditions for successful communication. A shared prior theory is not necessary because we often get by without it. When the supervisor and I interpreted the electrician's utterance successfully, we interpreted the word "ambiguous" without using any theory of interpretation shared with the electrician prior to interpreting that utterance, according to which "ambiguous" means "able to do things with either hand". Nor did we use a theory of interpretation that was learned prior to this occasion of interpretation. Similarly, no shared, prior theory of interpretation was used to interpret "doohickey" as referring to the pizza-slicing-wheel. Thus, argues Davidson, a *shared, pre-learned* prior theory is not necessary. It is also not sufficient for successful communication, since in cases like these we need more than our prior theory of interpretation. Thus we have reason to reject the standard theories' account of the necessary and sufficient conditions for successful communication.<sup>6</sup>

Davidson's alternative account details conditions he thinks are necessary and sufficient for successful communication. To interpret unconventional utterances as the speaker expected and intended them to be interpreted, the interpreter must temporarily amend their prior theory, since only an amended theory could serve to correctly interpret such utterances. Thus, the interpreter must have the ability to construct what Davidson calls a *passing theory* of interpretation (NDE, 442). A passing theory of interpretation is the interpreter's prior theory, custom tailored to interpret this utterance, of this speaker, on this occasion. For instance, in the passing theory I constructed to interpret the electrician, the phrase "ambiguous" was given all the powers, roles and relations that "ambidex-

6 There is some reason to doubt that anyone has actually held the above to be necessary and sufficient for successful communication. Davidson implies (as I'll soon show) that these "precise and specifiable rules" must allow of no exceptions. However, he argues, we are able to successfully communicate in exceptional cases (where the rules don't guide the interpreter to interpret a flaw as the speaker intended to be interpreted). This undermines the standard view of what it is to know a language. But this appears an attack on a straw person. Has anyone actually argued that this strong conception of exceptionless, precise, comprehensive rules is necessary and sufficient for actual human communication? Dummett (1994, 258-61) is right to question the target here. It is far from clear that anyone has held precisely the view that Davidson alleges is held by "many philosophers and linguists".

trous" had in my prior theory for speech transactions with him. To Davidson, all language interpretation situations call for the construction of a passing theory of interpretation for the speaker's utterance. Even on occasions when the speaker uses speech interpretable using the prior theory, our passing theory is just the theory that the unamended prior theory applies in this case.<sup>7</sup>

Davidson concludes (NDE, 435) from this that "linguistic ability is the ability to converge on a passing theory". Thus speakers and interpreters "having the same language" is their having the ability to construct correct, that is convergent, passing theories of interpretation for speech transactions with one another (NDE, 445). The degree of convergence indicates the degree of similarity of their languages. This ability, he argues, does not rely on shared conventions, rules or regularities (NDE, 442, 446). An interpreter constructs a passing theory, says Davidson,

by wit, luck and wisdom, from a private vocabulary and grammar, knowledge of the ways people get their points across, and rules of thumb for figuring out what deviations from the dictionary are most likely (NDE, 446).

There are no rules to follow in constructing correct passing theories, he says, "no rules in any strict sense, as opposed to rough maxims and methodical generalities" (NDE, 446). There is also no way of regularizing the process of constructing a successful passing theory, nor is there any chance of teaching someone how to do so. To Davidson, a passing theory of interpretation is for use on this occasion only, to interpret this utterance only, of this speaker only (NDE, 443-4).

The need for such ad hoc theories, constructed by "wit, luck and wisdom", counts heavily against the overall approach to language to which Davidson's theory and the "standard" theories belong. In this overall approach, speakers and interpreters employ a (pre-learned or not, shared or not) theory of the words' meanings and knowledge of the systematic ways that these word-meanings combine to form sentence-meanings. The need for such temporary, special purpose, ad hoc, modifications of prior theories of meaning, appears to be an attempt to "add epicycles" to what Lakatos (1974) would call a degenerating research program, in order to accommodate the apparent falsifications of standard theories evi-

7 See Simpson (1998, 107, note 4).

dent in our ability to successfully interpret unconventional utterances. If an ad hoc explanation like Davidson's apparatus of constructing passing theories is the best way to explain people's linguistic abilities from within a theory-of-expression-meaning approach, then this seems a good reason to abandon the attempt to explain people's linguistic abilities in terms of the production and interpretation of expressions' meanings.

The approach I advocate here accounts for the ability to successfully communicate with one another by drawing attention to the many conventional social practices within which linguistic moves are made. Many different skills and practices (not just separably "linguistic" skills as Davidson maintains<sup>8</sup>) underlie the ability to communicate successfully, especially in the face of unconventional utterances. Only a few of these are separably "linguistic". Almost all of them are dependent on a shared familiarity with a large corpus of (explicit and implicit) conventions. I will outline this approach, and highlight its advantages and the necessary role of conventions in linguistic interactions, by contrasting it with Davidson's argument against the necessity of conventions in language use.

8 Davidson believes that people's linguistic skills and knowledge are separable from their other skills and knowledge. He attempts to make just such a separation. He notes at one point that "first meaning" is not limited to language; according to everything he's said so far, "first meaning" applies to any sign or signal with an intended interpretation. So, he asks, "what should be added [to what he's already said] if we want to restrict first meaning to linguistic meaning?" (NDE, 436). His aim is to make just such a restriction. Davidson aims to account for linguistic meaning, not for meaning in general. Part of the burden of his paper, says Davidson, is "that there is much that they [that is, interpreters] can do that ought not to count as part of their basic linguistic competence" (NDE, 437, his emphasis). His aim is to analyze people's specifically linguistic skills and competencies, and to delineate these from other competencies people might have. Thus Davidson appears troubled by his conclusion that linguistic ability amounts to the ability to converge on passing theories, since in proposing this account "we have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally" (NDE 445-6). Davidson appears uncomfortable at this prospect. I, on the other hand, welcome it. A significant portion of the skills and knowledge that enable us to interact linguistically with one another are not separably linguistic, but are indeed part of our abilities to "get about" in the social world.

## Davidson's Argument Against Conventions

I follow Lewis (e.g. 1969, 1972) in defining a convention as a regularity (R) of behaviour (or of belief and behaviour) to which everyone conforms and mutually believes that everyone else conforms. This mutual belief in others' conformity gives everyone a reason to also conform to R. (Lewis also adds the conditions that there is a general preference for conformity to R, and that there are alternative regularities to R; these are less important for present purposes.)<sup>9</sup>

Overall, Davidson's argument that conventions are not part of the necessary and sufficient conditions for linguistic communication, is of the following form:<sup>10</sup> If there are conventions operative in language use, they must be conventions associating expressions (or expression types) with one of three candidates for, or types of, meaning:

- (a) A *conventional illocutionary force*; e.g. declarative sentences conventionally having the force of an assertion, imperative sentences having the force of an instruction or order (C&C 266-71).<sup>11</sup>

- 9 In most of what follows, I do not make a distinction between conventions and norms. The distinction could be made as follows: a convention is a regularity of behaviour to which it is reasonable for people to conform (because other people conform). Norms, however, are a subset of conventions: those in which the regularities of behaviour are regularities to which people should conform (because other people expect them to conform). Some kind of (perceived) potential enforcement or sanction applies to norms. My own belief (one I have not the space to defend here) is that in language many of the conventions have a stronger, normative flavor. In what follows, however, I argue about the role of conventions (rather than norms) in language most of the time, principally because this is the more general form. Norms are a subset of conventions, so if there are no conventions, there are no norms either, but if there are no norms, there still might be conventions. I also do this because this is the terminology that Davidson uses.
- 10 The argument is most explicitly presented in Davidson's "Communication and Convention" (1984, henceforth "C&C"), but is endorsed and echoed in NDE and SAL.
- 11 I should take a moment here to distinguish the concept of a type of illocutionary act the speaker performs from the concept of the illocutionary force of an utterance. The concept of separable illocutionary force is principally due to John Searle (1968, 1969). Searle analyzes all illocutionary acts into two parts, the illocutionary force and the propositional content. Thus sincere utterances of "Did Cinderella go to the ball?", "Cinderella, go to the ball!" and "Cinderella went to the ball" share a common propositional content, but have a different illocutionary force. The motivation for this separation is to isolate the part that is susceptible to analysis in terms of

- (b) A *conventional purpose*; e.g. the non-linguistic “Gricean” ulterior motive the speaker has for making the utterance (C&C, 271-75), such as the perlocutionary effects (Austin 1962, 101 ff.) or the response the speaker intends to produce in the hearer (Grice 1989, Ch. 5 and Ch. 14).
- (c) A *conventional meaning*; a conventional tie to either an extension or an intension (C&C, 276-78; NDE).

For each of these possibilities, either it is not possible that conventions could do the job required, or conventions are not necessary to do that job. For (a) and (b), no convention could do the job of relating expressions to illocutionary forces or to speakers’ purposes. A convention of type (a), according to which an expression or grammatical mood has a conventional illocutionary force, he argues, could be made explicit and manifest in the symbolism (C&C, 269). But then it could be regularly defied, since it would be available to liars, actors and others whose utterances do not have that illocutionary force (C&C, 270). A conventional symbol, he argues, cannot make an insincere utterance into a sincere one. A convention of type (b), assigning to an expression a conventional purpose, also cannot be derived from what the expression is used to do, since many expressions can be used for several different purposes, and most purposes can be achieved using a multitude of different expressions. Furthermore, expressions are often used to achieve effects in the hearer that are the opposite of what they literally mean (e.g. sarcasm, lying) (C&C, 274). Against conventions of type (c), Davidson argues that such conventions can be transgressed and communication will still be success-

felicity conditions from the part that is to be analyzed in terms of truth and falsity. I am strongly opposed to this notion of separable illocutionary force. My (forthcoming) “Austin and Searle on Locutionary Acts and Illocutionary Acts” argues that Austin’s analysis has all the richness we need, and that Searle attempts to draw us back into the conceptually hazardous territory that Austin tries to guide us away from.

When I discuss the type of illocutionary act the speaker intends to be interpreted as performing, I do not use this to refer to any such thing as a separable illocutionary force, but to an entire, undecomposed illocutionary act with all of its contextual setting, which includes what Searle would call the “content”. I make a fairly fine-grained distinction between types of illocutionary act, such that an invitation to meet me for dinner at 6:00 pm is a token of a different type of illocutionary act from an order that you meet me for dinner at 6:00 pm, and from an invitation to meet me for a drink at 6:00 pm.

ful (his argument in NDE expands this objection). Therefore, he concludes, it is not possible that conventions of type (a) and (b) could uphold successful communication, and those of type (c) are not necessary for successful communication. He concludes:

I want to urge that linguistic communication does not require, though it very often makes use of, rule governed repetition; and in that case, convention does not help explain what is basic to linguistic communication, though it may describe a usual, though contingent, feature (C&C, 279-80).

In his (1986) NDE, he expands this point, arguing that all a speaker and hearer need to share is the ability to converge on passing theories. Davidson explicitly denies that this ability to converge on passing theories is based on sharing the rules, regulations or conventions of a language. The ad hoc passing theory an interpreter actually uses to interpret a speaker, he says (NDE, 445), “is not learned, so is not a language governed by rules or conventions known to speaker and interpreter in advance”. Furthermore “what the speaker and interpreter know in advance [that is, their prior theories] is not (necessarily) shared, and so is not a language governed by shared rules and conventions” (NDE, 445). Thus shared and pre-learned conventions are not necessary for successful communication.

There are at least five important ways in which this argument against conventions in language is problematic:<sup>12</sup>

- (1) Language-use is not simply about the interpretation of people’s *words*, but the interpretation of people’s *actions* (including actions employing words). Many of the relevant conventions are conventions of the use of expressions to perform illocutionary acts (and so “use” is used in a wider sense than in (b) above), rather than conventions of meaning.
- (2) Davidson’s conclusion that conventions are not necessary is an attack on a straw person. He takes a limited conception of the relevant conventions, and (arguably) shows that these are not necessary to linguistic communication. However, there are

12 Each of his objections to the three candidates for the role of conventions can be objected to individually, but here I’m interested in the overall picture of the role of conventions that Davidson dismisses, and in the overall conclusion that conventions in general are not necessary.

more conventions involved than conventions about expressions' meanings, and these other conventions are necessary for successful communication.

- (3) Davidson's objections to conventions of types (a) and (b), showing that many regularities admit of exceptions, is not an argument against their being conventions. Regularities do not have to be exceptionless in order to be conventions that uphold successful interpretation. Davidson's arguments that these regularities can be excepted does not undermine their being conventions, as he claims.
- (4) The interpretation of unconventional utterances especially requires conventions. When any one convention is not followed, interpretation is only possible because of the large number of other conventions that are still followed.
- (5) Illocutionary acts in which conventions are deliberately flouted (for instance, Gricean implicatures), depend for their successful interpretation upon mutual familiarity with the very convention that is flouted.

The following sections address, in order, these five problems with Davidson's argument, at the same time illustrating an alternative view, in which conventions (but not necessarily conventions of expressions' meanings) are completely necessary for successful linguistic interactions.

### We Interpret the Intentions Behind Actions, not just the Meanings Behind Words

The first problem arises from Davidson's assumption that analysis of interpretation should focus on how hearers interpret the *meanings* of people's *words*, rather than their interpreting people's *actions*. This narrow focus is evident throughout Davidson's papers. For instance, he argues that successful interpretation requires that the speaker and hearer assign "the same *meaning* to the speaker's *words*" (C&C, 277) and about how "one must always intend to produce some non-linguistic effect through having one's *words* interpreted" (C&C 272). In NDE he explains that his concept of first meaning "applies to *words and sentences* as uttered by a particular speaker on a particular occasion" (NDE, 434). In

SAL he focuses on "how the speaker intended his *words* to be understood" (SAL, 12) (all italics in the above are mine). Davidson takes interpreting the meaning of the speaker's words as central to an analysis of people's linguistic interactions. These conceptual blinkers are a consequence of his focus on assertions as the primary form of illocutionary act, and on a theory of truth as the basis for a theory of meaning. Interpreting the meaning the speaker intended their words to be interpreted as having, to Davidson, depends on the hearer determining the *truth conditions* of the speaker's utterance. This focus on truth as specifying first meaning is evident in Davidson's (NDE 435) analysis of Diogenes' reply to Alexander the Great, when Alexander asked him if there is anything he can do for him. Diogenes replies with the Greek equivalent of, "I would have you stand from between me and the Sun." To Davidson, Diogenes utters this, "with the intention of uttering *words* that will be interpreted by Alexander as *true* if and only if Diogenes would have him stand from between Diogenes and the Sun" (NDE, 435, my emphasis). The truth condition of the statement is Diogenes' mental state; this sentence would be true if he does in fact want Alexander to move. This mental state specifies Diogenes' first meaning. This first meaning is the first intention in the string of means to ends in the following sequence: intending to be interpreted as uttering words that *mean* that he would have Alexander move, as a means of *asking* Alexander to move, as a means of *getting* Alexander to move (NDE 435).

One of my aims here is to broaden this narrow focus on first meaning, truth and assertion, to take the performance of an illocutionary act, and securing what Austin (1962, 22, 138) calls "illocutionary uptake" – recognizing which illocutionary act the speaker intends their utterance to constitute, and responding appropriately – as the primary focus for speakers and interpreters. Austin went to great lengths to show (1962, 140-47) that truth and falsity are but one dimension among many along which we can assess the felicity of illocutionary acts. The sentence asserted "corresponding to the facts" is a prominent dimension of felicity, especially for assertions. But even assertions are subject to many other felicity conditions in addition to assessment in terms of truth (see Austin 1962, 136 ff.). For other illocutionary acts, such as asking offering an apology or making a promise, fitting the facts is a less prominent dimension of felicity. For many types of illocutionary act ("How do you do?"), the truth conditions are rather irrelevant.

This focus on truth conditions, and on interpreting the meanings behind speakers' words, blinds Davidson to the crucial role of convention in enabling hearers to interpret the whole illocutionary act the speaker performs. Davidson's initial premise – that if conventions have a role in successful communication, it is linking *expressions* with their *meanings* – is false. We can see a clear necessity for conventions if we focus instead on the speaker's intention to do something that will count for the hearer as the performance of a particular type of illocutionary act. The ability to interpret one another's actions – including but not limited to their illocutionary acts – is at the centre of the conventional relationships that underlie all linguistic interactions. When I speak to you, it's not just the words I utter that you need to interpret. Rather, you need to interpret the total speech act in the total speech situation (as Austin puts it<sup>13</sup>): my act of uttering these words, to you, in this physical and social situation, with this tone and inflection, with this history of interactions between us, with such and so facts taken as mutual knowledge, in this physical, linguistic and cultural context. It's this complex of features that helps the hearer identify the intentions behind the speaker's illocutionary act.

The success of any illocutionary act, then, is contingent on the hearer's ability to recognize the type of illocutionary act the speaker intends their utterance to constitute. Securing such illocutionary "uptake" (Austin 1962, 22, 138) is one of the more important of Austin's felicity conditions on any illocutionary act.<sup>14</sup> If the hearer can't recognize the illocutionary act the speaker intends to be interpreted as performing, then the illocutionary act is infelicitous; by Austin's classification of infelicities, it will be "void" (22). For instance, when I try to apologize to a friend for

13 Austin actually says: "we see that in order to explain what can go wrong with statements we cannot just concentrate on the proposition involved (whatever that is) as has been done traditionally. We must consider the total situation in which the utterance is issued – the total speech-act – if we are to see the parallel between statements and performative utterances and how each can go wrong" (Austin 1962, 52).

14 Of course, securing uptake is necessary but not sufficient for complete success. There are cases "where the act is achieved" says Austin (1969, 16), but it is professed, or hollow. Insincere promises and lies are prominent examples. Austin classifies such infelicities as "abuses". This is still a case of interpreting the speaker as they intend to be interpreted, however. The problem lies with the speaker lacking the intention to live up to the commitments entailed by the act they intended to be interpreted as performing.

not meeting her as we arranged, she must recognize that an apology (and not, for example, an excuse or a taunt) is being offered. She must also recognize that I'm apologizing for not meeting her, not apologizing for arranging the meeting. If what I do is not recognizable to her as the act of offering an apology for not meeting her, then I haven't successfully apologized for not meeting her. This felicity condition of securing illocutionary uptake applies similarly to invitations to meet for coffee, promises that I will be there next time, assertions that I failed to show up because I had a flat tire, and all other illocutionary acts.

In order to secure illocutionary uptake, speakers need to make it the case that the hearer appreciates that the speaker's action is intended to count, for the hearer, as the performance of a particular illocutionary act. Davidson doesn't disagree. He simply denies that this is the speaker's primary intention; their primary intention is to get the hearer to interpret their words' first meaning. He also denies that conventions are necessary for successful uptake:

There is no known, agreed upon, publicly recognizable convention for making assertions. Or for that matter, giving orders, asking questions, or making promises. These are all things we do, often successfully, and our success depends in part on our having made public our intention to do them. But it was not thanks to a convention that we succeeded. (C&C, 270).

With this, I couldn't disagree more. There are many ways to make which illocutionary act we intend to perform easy to interpret. All the ways I can identify rely upon shared conventions. The aforementioned felicity conditions (discussed in detail presently) are clearly conventional. The relationships either between types of illocutionary act and particular expressions (or grammatical moods) conventionally used to perform them are conventional. So are the relationships between types of illocutionary acts and the perlocutionary effects they are conventional means of achieving. Interpretation also relies upon conventions of use of particular expressions; for example, to draw the hearer's attention to particular types of event or object.

Speakers' and hearers' expectation of conformity to conventions such as these, enables speakers to produce recognizable illocutionary acts and enables hearers to recognize what illocutionary act the speaker intends their utterance to count as. What I mean by this, why it is so, and how this is a serious departure from Davidson's approach, will become clearer

as I discuss the other problems with Davidson's argument against a necessary role for conventions.

### Conventions of words' meanings are not the only relevant conventions

The second problem with Davidson's argument is that he has a very limited conception of the kinds of conventions that could be relevant to interpreting illocutionary acts – especially to interpreting the kinds of unconventional utterances he takes as counterexamples to the necessity of shared, pre-learned conventions. In objecting to any necessary role for convention, Davidson considers, and argues against, only three kinds of candidate for a role for conventions: conventions associating expressions with (a) illocutionary forces, (b) ulterior motives (i.e. intended perlocutionary effects), or (c) propositional contents. However, many other conventional linguistic and social practices are necessary underpinnings of the performance of a successful illocutionary act. These conventional underpinnings are not, as I'll show Davidson assumes, reducible to conventional meanings of words. It follows that Davidson's rejection only of the above three roles for conventions is a rejection of a straw person.

Davidson reveals the limited nature of his conception of what could be "conventionally required" for an utterance of a declarative sentence to count as an assertion when he objects to the notion that declarative sentences could be related to assertions by convention (or interrogatives to requests, etc.). First, we should note that here Davidson expects convention to attach a type of proposition or grammatical form either to (a) a particular illocutionary *force*, or to (b) the intention to achieve a particular perlocutionary effect. Many of the limitations of his argument stem from this conception of an illocutionary act as expressing a proposition (either true or false) with an associated illocutionary force. He states clearly that his target is "the idea that convention can link what our words mean – their literal semantic properties, including truth – and our purposes in using them, for example, to speak the truth" (C&C, 271).

Davidson's argument against this idea is based on the premise that "if there is a convention, it must be further conventional trappings of the utterance that make it an assertion" (C&C, 269). Endorsing Frege's principle that these conventional trappings could be made explicit and mani-

fest in the symbolism,<sup>15</sup> Davidson objects that adding a symbol (such as Frege's turnstile '⊢'), whose conventional meaning is to make a declarative sentence into an assertion, is not possible. Such a convention would be abused by liars and would be invoked by actors who did not believe the propositions they asserted (269-70). Thus in many cases, the use of this symbol would not suffice to make the illocutionary act in which it features a felicitous assertion.

The problem with this argument is generated by the assumption that whatever is conventional about assertion can be attached to a symbol that has this as its meaning. Davidson shows that adding such a symbol (like Frege's turnstile) wouldn't make an utterance an assertion. He is right. It won't do that. However, this is not because convention cannot do the job, but because not everything conventional about an illocutionary act can be made into the conventional *meaning* of a symbol. Robert Stainton's (1995, 192-4) reconstruction of Davidson's argument highlights this part of the problem. Two premises are introduced: (1) "Where conventionally specified conditions *C* obtain, the class of declaratives is identical with the class of assertions" and (2) "Whatever is conventional about assertion can be put into words". A contradiction is then derived, since a symbol that had as its conventional meaning that the conventional conditions obtain, would be used when those conventional conditions do not obtain (e.g. abused by liars and actors). Davidson (C&C, 270) and Stainton (1995, 194) use this *reductio ad absurdum* to deduce the falsity of (1). However, the problem is not with (1) but with (2): not everything conventional about assertion can be put into words. The shortsightedness here is a result of seeing illocutionary acts as propositions with illocutionary force attached. Davidson's objection is that the meanings of the proposition cannot ensure that the utterance has a particular force. He is right. But what makes an utterance a felicitous assertion (or any

15 This is somewhat similar to Searle's (1969, 19-21) "Principle of Expressability": whatever can be meant can be said. A consequence of this principle, argues Searle, is that to study speech acts of promising or asserting we only need to study sentences whose literal and correct utterance would constitute the performance of that speech act (1969, p21). Thus we get back to studying not actions in their full physical, social and cultural context, but expressions and what they mean. With Davidson, this attitude takes the form: whatever is conventional about an illocutionary act can be said explicitly. Davidson and Searle thus presume (incorrectly) that the expressions are all that is important, that the "further conventional trappings" of the utterance can be captured by expressions and their literal meanings.

other type of illocutionary act) is not simply convention that attaches a particular force to the words uttered. It is a wide range of conventionally required circumstances, which cannot be made to apply by the use of an extra symbol.

Austin's (1962, Chs. II-IV) felicity conditions detail many of these conventionally required circumstances for successful, felicitous assertion (as well as for other illocutionary acts). They include the speaker's having certain beliefs and intentions, the presence or existence of certain objects, and certain physical relations obtaining between people and objects. Convention also relates the illocutionary act performed to the interactive end the speaker intends this act as a means of achieving (e.g. inviting the hearer for tea on Thursday, is a means of getting them to come to tea on Thursday). Convention also licenses expectations of the speaker's future behaviour, by virtue of commitments undertaken by the performance of the illocutionary act, and the norm that one should live up to one's commitments. (This applies to assertions as well as to promises: an assertion entails a commitment to defend that assertion, if challenged, and to act consistently as someone who believes what I asserted. If the King walks into the room just after I assert that the King is dead, this convention entails that others are licensed to expect me to be surprised, and to expect me to either retract my assertion or explain my reasons for asserting that the King is dead.) The social relationship between speaker and audience and the immediate and long-term history of their interactions is also relevant (only certain people can felicitously give me orders, for instance). Breaching any of a number of such (often only tacitly recognized) conventions would make the illocutionary act infelicitous. Few, if any, of these conventionally required circumstances – such as, to use Davidson's examples, the speaker having the requisite intentions (e.g. being sincere), and the situation being appropriate (e.g. not play-acting) – can simply be made to apply by adding an extra symbol.

Responding to a similar objection by Dummett (1973, 298), that it is a convention that speakers are understood to believe what they assert, Davidson appeals to a false analogy. He argues that even if we all agreed to an explicit and clear analysis of exactly what contextual conditions make an utterance an assertion,

it would not follow that the conditions were conventional. We all agree that horses have four legs, but it is not a convention that horses have four legs (C&C, 269).

Granting that Davidson's claim about horses is true, this claim depends on a question-begging analogy between assertions and horses. It assumes that neither for horses nor for assertions, do conventions make them what they are. The important difference, however, between assertions and horses is that horses are not constituted by the norms of a particular practice; norms that depend upon (often tacit) agreement among practitioners of that practice. Linguistic practices and their norms and conventions however, do constitute people's illocutionary acts, such as acts of asserting. Assertions are not like natural objects that would be the way they are if humans and their practices did not exist. Assertions are more like moves in a game of chess than they are like horses; they depend upon the normative human practices within which their existence is constituted. Players agree about the rules of chess, such that chess pieces move in particular ways and so on. It is precisely because of these constitutive conventions, that a certain move counts as placing one's opponent in check. And it is precisely because of the speaker's conformity to similar constitutive conventions that a certain utterance counts as an assertion.

Few of the wide variety of felicity conditions can be made to apply to such an utterance by simply saying more. To use the analogy with games further, chess has a symbolic accompaniment to a checking move: the player utters "check" when moving. However, it is not the case that this symbol could be applied to any move to make it a checking move. A move only counts as a checking move when a large number of – conventionally specified – contextual conditions apply (for example, that one is playing chess, that the board is set up in the regulation way, that it's the player's turn to move, that the opponent's king is placed under threat, and so on). Uttering "check" cannot make these conditions apply, but this does not mean that the conditions are not *conventionally specified*. Similarly, we could adopt the custom of adding "I hereby assert..." to utterances, but this would not make any utterance a felicitous assertion; only the satisfaction of the many felicity conditions (constitutive conventions) could do that.

The many conventional felicity conditions that have to be satisfied before an utterance counts as an assertion (or a question, promise, order, and so on) are one particularly crucial role that conventions play in underpinning successful communication. As we will see, in addition to being crucially important for the speaker's ability to successfully per-

form the illocutionary act, these conventional aspects are crucial for the hearer's ability to successfully interpret the speaker's illocutionary act. These conventions, I will show, are especially vital to interpreting unconventional utterances like those Davidson highlights.

### Regularities do not have to be Perfectly Regular to be Conventions

In addition to only considering a limited role for conventions, a third problem with Davidson's argument is his reasons for rejecting, as not being conventions regularities of types (a) and (b). Davidson explicitly denies that conventions can perform (a) the function of making speakers' intentions to perform a particular illocutionary act recognizable to hearers, on the grounds that there will not be perfect conformity with the convention. Davidson objects that if it was "thanks to a convention" (C&C, 270) that speakers succeed in making their intentions public, then liars and actors would use those same conventions, when they do not have the conventionally specified intentions. Furthermore, Davidson (1979, 110) decries the notion that a sentence can have a "standard" use (C&C, 271). For instance, by varying the circumstances and intonation the expression "It's raining" can be used to issue a warning (e.g. not to wear the silk dress), make a complaint (about having to walk), issue a prediction (before looking out), ask a question, and to perform several other illocutionary acts in addition to simple assertion. The lack of perfect regularity in the use of an expression, for Davidson, is reason to reject the suggestion that a particular expression could be conventionally associated with the intention to perform a particular type of illocutionary act.

For similar reasons, Davidson also objects to (b) a conventional association between an expression and the speaker's intention to bring about a particular perlocutionary effect:

... even if, contrary to what I have argued, some convention governs the illocutionary force of the utterance, the connection with the intention that the request or order be carried out would require that the speaker be *sincere* – that what he represents himself as wanting or trying to do he in fact wants or is trying to do. But nothing is more obvious than that there cannot be a convention that signals sincerity (C&C, 274)

Davidson rejects such conventions because he incorrectly expects that perfect regularity, without exception, is required for conventions to associate expressions with types of illocutionary act, or with perlocutionary purposes, or even with conventional uses (e.g. referents).

Perfect regularity is not needed. We can see this by considering Ruth Millikan's (1984, 1989) argument that a type of object can have a proper function<sup>16</sup> in spite of the fact that sometimes particular tokens of that type fail to perform this function. It simply has to be the case that the function is performed often enough by tokens of that type, that the tokens are reproduced because they perform that function.. Hearts have the proper function of pumping blood, even if a particular heart with a broken valve or a clogged artery fails to pump, because of the numerous times that hearts are reproduced because of the need for something to pump blood. Similarly, sperm have the proper function of fertilizing an egg, in spite of the fact that those that succeed are outnumbered millions, perhaps billions, of times over by sperm that fail to perform the function. In this case, very few successes are enough to ensure that entities that perform the proper function continue to be reproduced. Tools like chisels also have proper functions. Tool designers make them for chipping precise pieces of wood and stone, and carvers select chisels because of a need for something that can be used to perform this function. They continue to be made and selected because of a recurring need for tools of this kind. A blunt chisel still has this function because of the way it was created and selected, in spite of the fact that it is no longer particularly good for chipping wood.

Likewise, linguistic expressions, argues Millikan (1998, 36 ff.), have "cooperative proper functions," fulfilled via a convention of eliciting a cooperating response in the hearer. Expressions have proper functions derived from the cooperative purposes to which speakers conventionally

<sup>16</sup> An item has a proper function, for Millikan, if it belongs to a type of items that are reproduced, one as a copy of the other, because of the function such items serve. The heart's proper function, for instance, is to pump the blood. It has this proper function because of natural selection in favor of creatures with an organ that pumped blood efficiently. Having something that pumped blood efficiently led to the reproduction of the creature, and thus of the item that performed the function of pumping blood. Similarly, a chisel's proper function is to chip precise bits of wood or stone; toolmakers design them, and carpenters and sculptors select them, for use to achieve this purpose. People continue to produce and acquire this kind of tool because of a recurring need for a tool that can be used to perform this function.

employ the word and the purposes towards which hearers recognize the expressions are conventionally employed. The expression is reproduced (that is, continues to be used) because it serves this cooperative function. For example, a particular expression can have the proper function of drawing the hearer's attention to a particular type of circumstance or object. The expression "the door," for instance, has acquired the function of directing people's attention to doors through a long history of people using tokens of this expression (and its etymological ancestors) for that kind of purpose. It continues to be reproduced because both speakers and interpreters recognize that it serves this cooperative proper function.<sup>17</sup> Human cooperative ends like these are met *often enough* by employing such expressions, that speakers can assist others in interpreting their intentions by conforming to this regularity. And hearers rely on conformity to the regularity to interpret speakers' illocutionary acts and to recognize the further (cooperative, perlocutionary) ends for which speakers perform such illocutionary acts.

The point against Davidson is that an expression or action can have a conventional function, and the convention can be sustained and relied upon, *even though the convention is occasionally flouted, abused or transgressed*. All that is required for a behavioural regularity to be a part of a body of conventions, is that the regularity is followed often enough to be relied upon with success in enough cases that the behaviour continues to be reproduced. Admittedly, linguistic conventions are occasionally abused by liars and they are turned to parasitic ends by actors (C&C, 270, 274). Expressions, furthermore, can be used to perform illocutio-

17 Likewise, the expression "Can you tell me the correct time?" is conventionally used to perform the illocutionary act of asking someone to tell the speaker what time it is. Interpreters, furthermore, know that speakers perform that illocutionary act because it conventionally serves the end of getting the interpreter to tell them the time (rather than eliciting "Yes, I do know how to tell the time"). Grammatical moods also have cooperative proper functions. For instance, tokens of a particular grammatical mood (interrogative, imperative, etc.) are conventionally used to perform particular types of illocutionary act (asking a question, giving an instruction), because that grammatical mood is conventionally associated with the intention to perform that type of illocutionary act. Furthermore, that type of illocutionary act is conventionally associated with the intention to elicit a particular kind of response in the interpreter. "The proper function of the imperative mood is to induce the action designated, and a proper function of the indicative mood is to induce belief in the proposition expressed" (Millikan 1998, 37; see also 1984, 53-4).

nary acts they are not conventionally used to perform, and illocutionary acts can be performed using locutionary means not conventionally used to perform them. In spite of these exceptions, the hearer's responding in the conventional way to a conventional use is the recurrence of a pattern of actions that recurs *often enough* to be sustained. Asking a question using the interrogative mood often does elicit an answer. Speakers often conform to the convention of asserting things they believe, and hearers often take such conformity as a reason to believe the propositions they hear (trusted) speakers assert.<sup>18</sup> Speakers can use particular expressions to perform the illocutionary acts one conventionally uses them to perform, and can direct hearers' attention to situations or objects using expressions conventionally used to refer to those situations or objects. As long as these associations between intention, action, and uptake occur frequently enough they will be maintained. Speakers and interpreters will find it reasonable to rely on these patterns: speakers can use them to make their intentions in acting interpretable and to secure uptake in interpreters, and interpreters can use them to interpret the intentions behind speakers' actions and to demonstrate their "uptake" in the way they respond to speakers' actions.

Thus particular expressions can have conventional uses even though they can be used, in cases of unconventional utterances, for other purposes (just as chisels can be used to turn screws, but are conventionally used for chipping precise pieces of wood). A pilot's utterance of "the plane will be landing momentarily", Dummett (1994, 265-6) argues,

18 This is the convention that undergirds successful communication according to Rysiew (2000): the convention that "speakers (regularly) intend to conform to the (further, target) regularity of only saying 'S' when they believe 'S' is true" (2000, 79). While Rysiew expands Davidson's conception of the relevant conventions to include conventions wider than conventions about the meanings of words, Rysiew's approach still takes speakers' meanings and truth as central concepts. Many, many other conventions come into view when we move away from taking assertions as the paradigm illocutionary act and from taking meanings as the focus of speakers' and interpreters' activities. Rysiew, furthermore, still owes us an account of how interpretation of unconventional utterances is possible. He argues that "people try not [to] say, for example 'That's a nice derangement of epitaphs' unless they take it that the object in question is a nice arrangement of epithets." This, however, does little to illuminate how the hearer knows to interpret the speaker this way. (Well, it illuminates at least as little as Davidson's claim that hearers "construct a convergent passing theory".)

shows that “momentarily” *can* be used to mean “in a moment” rather than as it is conventionally used, to mean “for a moment”. Davidson, as Dummett argues, is overly impressed by the fact that we can understand the pilot. The fact that we can understand a non-conventional use, however, does not entail a rejection of the notion that conventions are essential for such understanding. In fact, it emphasizes the conventionality, by highlighting what happens when the pilot’s aberrant use becomes common: it undermines the convention (the equivalent of “blunting” the chisel by using it to turn screws too many times), by undermining interpreters’ confidence that speakers follow the regularity. It becomes less reasonable to rely upon others’ conformity, causing uncertainty when the doctor says “you will feel a momentary pain” (is that a pain soon, or a brief pain?).

These regularities precisely fit Lewis’s (e.g. 1972, 5-6) definition of a convention: a regularity of behavior to which people conform, because everyone conforms, this conformity perpetuated because of a common interest that such general conformity serves. The “everyone” here does not need to entail perfect, exceptionless conformity, however. A few exceptions can be tolerated, as Lewis notes (1972, 5), as long as it remains reasonable to expect that any particular performance conforms to the regularity. All of the above conventions are perpetuated because speakers *often* follow them in order to make their intentions recognizable to hearers, and because hearers are *often* successful in interpreting speakers’ intentions by presupposing conformity with these conventions. Thus *in conventional cases* it is still thanks to these conventions that a speaker can utter a particular expression and expect to be interpreted as they intend to be interpreted. The unconventional cases especially trouble Davidson, however. As I just noted, Davidson is especially impressed by our ability to deal with unconventional utterances. It remains to be explained how we are able to do this, and whether this ability relies indispensably on conventions. As I’m about to show, conventions are especially necessary for these cases.

## Conventions that Enable Interpretation of Unconventional Utterances

The fourth (and possibly the most serious) problem with Davidson’s argument is the particularly serious error of generalization he commits in moving from the (true) premise that it is possible that successful interpretation can happen when *a particular convention* is absent, contravened, ignored or abused, to the conclusion that successful communication is possible *without any conventions at all*.<sup>19, 20</sup>

Let us charitably extend Davidson’s claim further than he has established, and grant for the sake of argument that for *any* particular convention, it is possible to ignore, break, or flout that convention, while communication is still successful. Even if this were the case (and it may well be), this would not establish his further conclusion that successful communication could happen in the absence of any conventions at all. My point here is that communication can happen when one convention is flouted, contravened, or is not known by both parties, only because *the unconventional illocutionary act nonetheless conforms to a host of other shared conventions*. It is by expecting, and finding, conformity to these other conventions that the hearer can interpret the utterance successfully.

I now want to briefly catalogue some of these other shared conventions, and to highlight their role in enabling successful interpretation, especially of unconventional utterances. One essential kind of convention relates illocutionary acts to others’ illocutionary acts, as part of ongoing interactions. As Winograd and Flores (1986, 64) point out, the

19 This move is very explicit in C&C (e.g. 279) and repeated in NDE (445-6), and in SAL (e.g. 6), where he denies that sharing practices, rules or conventions are necessary for successful communication.

20 Rysiew (2000, 78) points out that many commentators – he cites Bennett (1985, 603), Bar-On and Risjord (1992, 186 n30) and Ramberg (1989, 106) – have accused Davidson of failing to distinguish between sufficient and necessary conditions in arguing that conventions are not necessary. They argue that while conventions might not suffice for linguistic communication, this does not mean that they are not necessary. Rysiew is correct in arguing that Davidson is “doing more than making the banal point that linguistic communication is more than a matter of conventional meanings of words” (2000, 78). He is, in part, arguing that communication is not at all a matter of conventional meanings of words. His initial premise is that no convention of the meaning of words is necessary for correct interpretation of unconventional utterances.

regularities in language use are not regularities of coupling between a language user and an external world, but regularities of coupling between language users. Most interactions that involve the performance of illocutionary acts take the form of mutual leading-and-following patterns of action, response, and further response, very much like a cooperative conversational “dance”.<sup>21</sup> I do something, intending that your “uptake” involve your recognizing what I did and “following my lead” by responding to the move I made. When you do so, I, in turn, follow your lead, responding to the move you make. Examples of such conversational “dances” include the sequence of action and response initiated by actions such as asking someone to do something, asking for an explanation of how to do something (and clarifying misunderstandings), suggesting a meeting (and negotiating a time and place convenient to all parties), and debating a controversial topic. When we look at such ongoing interactions between language users, conventions can be seen in the types of illocutionary acts that regularly follow one another. These conventions<sup>22</sup> structure the kinds of actions – including but not limited to illocutionary acts – that are legitimate or appropriate responses to our partner’s moves, just as conventions about appropriate steps structure our interaction while waltzing, two stepping, or tangoing. Participants’ expectations are informed by familiarity with these conventions. These expectations guide interpretation of one another’s actions. The practice initiated by person A making a request of person B, that B do something is a good example of such a conventionally structured sequence of actions. Winograd and Flores (1986, 65) give this map (fig 1) of each of the linguistic<sup>23</sup> moves in this practice, showing how each move opens up a limited number of expectable linguistic responses. For instance, after A’s REQUEST that B do a particular thing (at stage 2), A can expect that B’s next illocutionary act will be one of the “open” moves: B will either PROMISE to do it, COUNTER with an alternative to the act requested, or REJECT the request. Other possibilities include B’s questioning the intelligibility of A’s

21 For more on this metaphor of conversational “dances”, see Winograd and Flores (1986, 64-5).

22 Many of these conventions are probably better seen as norms that specify appropriate (not just effective) responses to others’ actions. At stake is not just successful communication, but social appropriateness. Someone who uttered true statements that have nothing to do with their fellow conversationalists’ actions, could well be “sanctioned” by being shunned, gossiped about, or committed to an asylum.

initial illocutionary act (“I didn’t hear you”), or rejecting the practice itself (“you can’t ask me to do that”). If A’s REQUEST is for something B can do verbally (e.g. provide information or make an evaluation) B’s utterance could simply be B’s performing the act requested. At stage 3, after B has PROMISED to perform the action, a subsequent utterance by B is likely to be one of only two appropriate moves. B is likely to either ASSERT that the action has been performed or RENEGE on the promise. This latter move itself initiates a different practice, whereby B can be expected to offer explanations or excuses, etc.

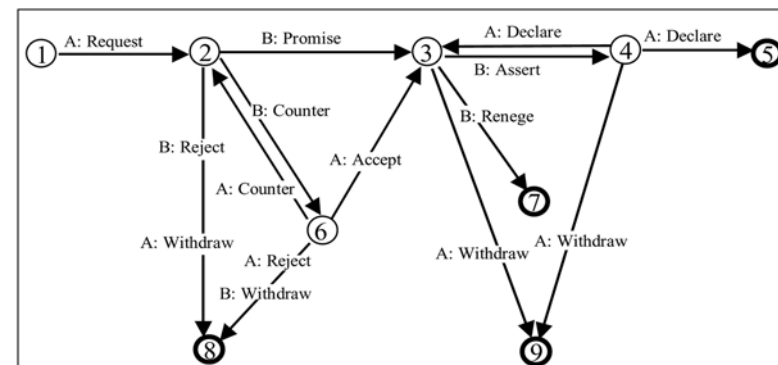


Fig. 1. *The illocutionary acts involved in the practice of A asking B to do something. Adapted from Winograd and Flores (1986, 65).*

These conventions governing what kind of move appropriately follows other moves within a certain practice, can play a crucial role in enabling hearers to interpret a speaker’s utterance. This ability to interpret an illocutionary act as the speaker making a conventional linguistic move in a practice, is one of the reasons that we are able to cope, occasionally rather smoothly, with the kinds of unconventional utterances that

23 Note that Winograd and Flores (1986) do not include the non-linguistic moves, such as B’s performing the act requested. Since an appropriate response to the illocutionary act of requesting someone to do something is to just do it (and not even need to DECLARE it done), it would be appropriate to include these moves in the diagram as well, if we wanted to give the structure of the overall practice. However, as a guide to interpreting utterances, a map of the linguistic moves makes explicit the conventions that help one participant disambiguate the type of illocutionary act the other performs at a particular juncture in the interaction.

Davidson brings to our attention. But the process often works in the opposite way to the apparatus of “passing theories” that Davidson proposes (see his Diogenes example; NDE, 335). The hearer’s ability to construct such a passing theory for interpreting a particular utterance, in a large number of cases, will depend on their first having successfully interpreted the whole illocutionary act within which the unconventional expression is employed. And this ability often depends on conventions like those that Winograd and Flores map. Conventions of what moves are open following other conversationalists’ moves, structure the expectations of each participant, and so enable them to interpret an utterance as the performance of an appropriate “next move”. The supervisor and I could interpret the electrician’s utterance of “Yeah, I’m ambiguous enough to do that,” by recognizing that he performed one of the open moves in the practice initiated by the supervisor’s RECOMMENDATION. Recognizing he that was ACCEPTING the recommendation that he use his left hand enabled us to deduce that he used “ambiguous” to do the job that “ambidextrous” would conventionally be used to do.

These kinds of conventions of illocutionary means to perlocutionary ends can play a crucial role in enabling successful uptake of unconventional utterances, by working in reverse. For instance, they can help interpret an utterance as initiating or “keying”<sup>24</sup> a practice, by depending on mutual knowledge that a particular practice is one that people are likely to initiate in the present situation. For example, I could understand that my wife’s uttering “Can you grab the doohickey?” was keying the practice of asking me to do something: get and hand her the pizza-slicing wheel. I could do this because I recognized that the wheel was needed, and that asking me to pass the needed tool is a conventional move to make in a situation where she has her hands full and I, being closer to the drawer, am better able to do what needs to be done. Sometimes it is by noticing an end the speaker is likely to want to achieve in the present situation that a hearer can interpret their illocutionary act, as employing a means of achieving that conventional end. And in some situations the speaker can employ rather unconventional means of achieving that con-

24 Zillian (1989, 111-14) discusses in detail such “keys” to the nature of a social situation. For example “The End” on the screen at a movie is part of the illocutionary act that “keys” a change of social situation by declaring the film over. Such keys, Zillian argues, “are either conventional or sufficiently similar to a conventional key to be intelligible”.

ventional end, trusting that the end is conventional enough to enable the hearer to figure out why you made that utterance. For instance, as you walk away from the open door that is letting the cool air in from outside, and which I think you should know I prefer to be closed, I can ask you to close the door by exclaiming “Put t’wood int’ hole!” (a colloquialism used by a childhood friend’s English mother). I expect that you could interpret my act of uttering this unconventional locution in this situation principally because you can recognize that I’m annoyed about something, and can figure out that it’s probably the door you have left open. Thus you can recognize that my utterance is intended to constitute the illocutionary act of asking you to close the door, because that’s a conventional aim to have in this situation, conventional enough that I can employ a somewhat unconventional means of achieving this further end. Conventions of means to ends like this are an important source of clues as to which illocutionary act a speaker intended their utterance to constitute.

Conventions of intonation and body language can also help hearers recognize the type of move being made by an utterance. A rising intonation, for example, could be enough to indicate that “it’s raining” is intended as a question. Uttering this expression with a curt staccato intonation and a raised eyebrow can conventionally indicate skepticism, as a request for confirmation perhaps. Uttered with a groan conventionally indicates that the utterance is a complaint. Speakers can often rely on these conventions of body language and intonation to enable the hearer to interpret the kind of move made by their utterance. The conventions here are almost independent of the particular words used. (As an experiment, try saying “Hah” in several different tones of voice and intonation contours – pensive, protesting, laughing, accusatory, and so on. This syllable alone could be used to perform any number of illocutionary acts, depending on how it is used, by whom, in response to what, in what situation.) The success of these different illocutionary acts will depend on many subtle, often tacit, conventions of tone and body language, in addition to the conventions of action and appropriate response, appropriate actions in particular circumstances, and so on.

In all the above cases, contrary to Davidson’s claim (NDE, 446; SAL, 6) that shared conventions are not involved in the construction of “passing theories”, such shared conventions are vital. Interpretation is enabled

by these conventions, along with many others, with which the illocutionary act does conform and with which the hearer expects conformity.

It's interesting to note that the above considerations of how conventions enable interpretation entail a rejection of "standard" theories' first principle (NDE, 436) that the meanings of sentences are *systematic*, in being derived from the meanings of the parts of the sentence uttered and the ways these parts are assembled. Davidson takes it for granted that we interpret speakers' words, and use the words' meanings to then interpret the whole utterance's meaning, and then interpret the speaker's illocutionary purpose (e.g. NDE, 334). It is no accident that Davidson believes this systematicity principle survives his consideration of unconventional utterances; though it needs to be "understood in [a] rather unusual way" (NDE, 446). Both the "standard" theories and Davidson's apparatus of passing theories share a belief that human beings' ability to interpret a potentially infinite number of sentences requires such systematicity. However, they ignore the fact that these sentences are available for performing a finite number of moves in language games. The conventions of what linguistic moves are "open" or expectable in a situation enable the process to work in reverse in many cases. It is only after first interpreting the whole illocutionary act, that interpreters can then assign particular functions (or "meanings", if one insists on referring to such entities as meanings) to parts of the sentence uttered. From an interpretation of that whole illocutionary act as the making of a particular move (accepting the recommendation, rejecting a set of route directions as too complicated, asking me to pass something), the hearer can then determine the contributions of the parts ("ambiguous" is doing what "ambidextrous" would conventionally be used to do"; "turners to corn" is doing what "corners to turn" would conventionally do; "doohickey" is used to refer to the tool obviously needed right now, sufficing in this context to perform a linguistic function that "pizza-slicing wheel" would conventionally perform).

This reversal<sup>25</sup> is part of my reason for disagreeing with Davidson's (NDE, 436) concentration on interpreting first meaning, as that which "a speaker necessarily intends" the audience grasp, and with his claim (NDE, 435) that interpreting the utterance's "first meaning" is always the interpreter's means of determining the speaker's illocutionary act. Conversationalists' ability to interpret utterances by first appreciating the illocutionary act the speaker performs (and perhaps not even bothering

to figure out the utterance's "first meaning"), enables our linguistic interactions to be peppered with expressions like "thingamabob" "doohickey" and "whatchamacallit". We can felicitously and effectively use such general "stand ins" when the overall illocutionary act performed is conventional enough, and so recognizable enough, that using these unspecific nouns is not a barrier to successfully eliciting the intended response from the hearer.

### Mutual Knowledge of a Flouted Convention is Often Necessary for Interpretation

A further counterexample to Davidson's argument that conventions are not necessary for communication, is that in many cases where a convention is flouted or transgressed, *mutual familiarity with the very convention that is flouted* is essential to the hearer's ability to successfully interpret an illocutionary act. When conversational implicatures (Grice 1975, 1989, ch. 2, esp. 30-37) are successful, it is only because of mutual reliance upon a convention and the speaker's intentional flouting of that convention. The speaker can make a conversational implicature by flouting a convention (e.g. of quantity of information), expecting that the hearer can recognize that this convention is being deliberately flouted. This kind of case is a serious counterexample to Davidson's argument that if a convention can be transgressed or flouted and successful communication is still possible, then that shared convention is not necessary for successful communication. Here the very convention that is flouted is a convention that the speaker and hearer *both rely upon* in order for the hearer to interpret the speaker as they intend to be interpreted. Mutual knowledge of the convention that is flouted is essential to successful communication using a conversational implicature. If this convention were not one that is gen-

25 The relationship between the correct interpretation of whole illocutionary acts and the particular jobs being done by expressions used is somewhat dialectic. Each level of interpretation can be used as a clue to interpreting the other. However, in terms of analyzing people's conversational abilities and the conventions that support them, the interpretation of people's illocutionary acts are of primary importance. Of secondary importance is the theoretical and analytical purpose of analyzing "the language" as a formal system, perhaps by determining what types of illocutionary acts particular expressions are well suited (conventionally) for performing.

erally conformed to and essential for communication, this type of communication would not be possible.

### Conventions are Necessary for Successful Linguistic Interaction

Davidson's argument that conventions are not necessary for language use, then, ignores the large raft of conventions that are essential for our ability to interpret people's illocutionary acts. Davidson expects that if we are going to find shared rules, practices or conventions anywhere, we should find them *governing candidates for the meanings of words*. The candidates that Davidson identifies, however, he shows to be exceptionable; there are particular occasions of successful communication for which each is not necessary. Thus, he concludes, shared, pre-learned rules and conventions are not necessary for successful communication.

However, the fact that a regularity is not perfectly regular does not mean, as Davidson supposes, that it cannot be a convention. Conventions do not demand perfect regularity. They simply require enough regularity that people can expect that others conform to them, and that such expectations are met *often enough* to encourage continued conformity to the convention.

Furthermore, Davidson is incorrect when he denies (NDE, 445) that the ability to construct a convergent passing theory depends upon shared, pre-learned, conventions. Davidson argues that people construct passing theories, by employing "wisdom", "knowledge of the ways people get their points across" and general "rules of thumb" (NDE, 446). However, he seriously underestimates the degree to which that knowledge and wisdom, and those rules of thumb are dependent on shared rules, practices and conventions. An extensive web of shared social and linguistic conventions in addition to conventions for the meanings of words provides essential support for our linguistic interactions. In particular, many conventions govern moves made in linguistic interactions and the linguistic means employed to make them. Interpreters can appeal to shared conventions relating particular expression types and grammatical forms to types of illocutionary acts they are conventionally used to perform. They can also appeal to shared conventions relating illocutionary acts to perlocutionary ends those acts are conventional

means of achieving. Conventions also relate social situations to practices people conventionally initiate in such situations, and to illocutionary acts that are conventionally performed in such situations to initiate these practices. Interpreters are also able to use conventions of action and appropriate response structuring practices the speaker and interpreter are already engaged in. The above examples, I'm sure, comprise a far from complete list of the conventions that speakers and interpreters rely upon in performing interpretable illocutionary acts, and in interpreting them. They do, however, significantly undermine Davidson's claim that conventions are not necessary for successful interpretation. Especially in cases of unconventional utterances, when a particular convention is flouted, is transgressed against, or is unknown to the hearer, the hearer's ability to successfully interpret the speaker's illocutionary act depends upon the many other linguistic and social conventions to which this act still conforms. In such situations, interpretation is possible only because the illocutionary act conforms to many other conventions familiar to both speaker and hearer.

It therefore is certainly not the case, as Davidson argues, that knowledge of the conventions of language is "a crutch which, under optimum conditions for communication, we can in the end throw away, and could in theory have done without from the start" (C&C, 279).<sup>26</sup> An utterance that flouts, transgresses or ignores a linguistic convention is not evidence that shared conventions, rules and practices are not necessary to successful communication. In fact, such utterances highlight the ways that people depend upon such shared conventions, rules and practices to communicate with one another. In each case where a convention is flouted or transgressed, the illocutionary act performed conforms to a great number of other conventions. Many conventions (often including the one that was flouted or broken) are necessary to guide the interpreter's theory about what the speaker meant to say, or should have said. Davidson's contention that the conventions of language are merely a practical aid, but are not necessary, is highly questionable. We cannot do without them, and certainly could not have done without them from the start.

<sup>26</sup> If this were the case, then these "optimal conditions" would have to involve some kind of telepathy, by which hearers can recognize speaker's intentions directly, rather than needing to appeal to conventional clues as to their nature.

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*Edited by Raimo Tuomela, Gerhard Preyer, and Georg Peter*

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*An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*

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**PROTOSOCIOLOGY.** Editor: Gerhard Preyer, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main FB 3: Department of Social Sciences.  
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