

## Idiolect and context

### ABSTRACT

In this paper I will compare some of Dummett and Davidson's claims on the problem of communication and idiolects: how can we understand each other if we use different idiolects? First I define the problem, giving the alternative theses of (I) the priority of language over idiolects and (II) the priority of idiolects over language. I then present Dummett's claims supporting (I) and Davidson's claims supporting (II).

In the first three paragraphs, I will provide a reconstruction of the debate between Dummett and Davidson, showing some weaknesses in both programs. In the remaining two paragraphs, I will work on the concept of "convergence". I will try to show that the process of convergence, which is basic in Davidson's theory, needs a level of (formal) analysis of what I call "contextual competence".

The main point of the paper is to show a blindspot in Davidson and Dummett, and to fill the gap. In short, to explain communication, Dummett asks for too much sharing among speakers, and Davidson asks for too little. Even if proposed, for the sake of argument, as a possible supplementation of Davidson's idea of convergence, the suggestion of contextual competence may be used as an extension of Dummett's molecularism.<sup>1</sup>

### I. THE IDIOLECT PROBLEM

According to Frege, in everyday language people often attach different senses to the same expression:

"In the case of an actual proper name such as 'Aristotle' opinions as to the sense may differ. It might, for instance, be taken to be the following: the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great. Anybody who does this will attach another sense to the sentence 'Aristotle was born in Stagira' than will someone who takes as the sense of the name: the teacher of Alexander the Great who was born Stagira. So long as the reference remains the same, such variations of sense may be tolerated, although they are to be avoided in the theoretical structure of a demonstrative science, and ought not to occur in a perfect language"<sup>2</sup>

We may call this problem "*the idiolect problem*": How can we understand each other if we attach different senses<sup>3</sup> to the same words, as if each of us had his own idiolect? By "idiolect" we normally intend "a person's individual speech patterns"<sup>4</sup>, but when we look for a better clarification of the term we encounter a difficulty, given the alternative of two claims about the relation between idiolects and language:

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Cesare Cozzo, Marco Santambrogio and Stefano Predelli for comments on an earlier version of the paper. I have given different versions of the paper at University of Genoa, at Columbia University, at King's College (London) and at the ESAP meeting in Lund. Additional thanks to the audience for their comments; thanks to Marcello Frixione, Gurpreet Rattan, Achille Varzi, Mary Margaret McCabe and Alberto Voltolini for particular comments. Other suggestions came from Cristina Amoretti, Claudia Bianchi, Paolo Bouquet, Mario De Caro and Massimiliano Vignolo on various points of the paper. Last but not least, I thank Diego Marconi and Mark Sainsbury for very useful comments on one of the last versions of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> Frege 1892, footnote B.

<sup>3</sup> The problem can be reframed in a direct reference setting: how can people understand each other if, even using the same causal chain, they give different criteria of identification to the same name? The problem apparently becomes even more puzzling when predicates are concerned.

<sup>4</sup> Definition from *Webster's College Dictionary*. If we take a naturalistic point of view, we may consider idiolects, like human faces or bodies, individual variations on a structure. Each speaker has its own unique idiolect, made up by her vocabulary, rules for sentence formation, accepted inferences. For a confrontation between Chomsky's view of idiolects and Dummett's idea of language as a social entity see Green 2001, p.150ff.

- (i) idiolects are defined as deviations from a common standard, deviations from a language intended as a social institution or convention (thesis of the *priority of language over idiolects*)
- (ii) a language is defined as the result of the way individuals use linguistic expressions in different contexts (thesis of the *priority of idiolects over language*).

Michael Dummett<sup>5</sup> assumes thesis (I) from the start, while Donald Davidson<sup>6</sup> assumes thesis (II). Let us begin with Dummett's position. The first step he takes towards a solution of the idiolect problem is to criticize Frege's conception of everyday language. According to Dummett, Frege reduces everyday language to an overlapping of idiolects.<sup>7</sup> On the contrary language is basically a social institution, and an idiolect is constituted by "the partial and imperfect grasp that a speaker has of a language."<sup>8</sup> Two claims implicitly or explicitly support thesis (I):

(a) Frege is wrong, at least because an overlapping of idiolects is possibly empty (if we think of the intersection of all idiolects of a community) or probably inconsistent (if we think of the union of all idiolects)<sup>9</sup>. Given that the Fregean picture of reducing language to an overlapping of idiolects does not work, Dummett claims that we should enrich the picture with the idea of the division of linguistic labour<sup>10</sup> (DLL). Language is a social enterprise, and the correct use of words is checked against the information and knowledge mastered by the disseminated authorities (dictionaries, experts, and so on)<sup>11</sup>. DLL is a claim about the determination of meaning and about understanding: on the one hand, the content of the linguistic expressions used by individuals is socially determined (determined by the experts); on the other hand, individuals typically grasp stereotypical representations of the meaning. DLL may therefore be compatible with molecularism, which claims that meanings do not depend on the totality of language, but are constituted by determined fragments of language. These fragments may be either parts of language mastered by the relevant experts or sets of canonical or stereotypical representations conventionally defined.

(b) To give a fundamental role to idiolects in the definition of natural language derives from putting too great an emphasis on language as a tool of communication, disregarding language as the expression of thought<sup>12</sup>. However, the idea itself of language as idiolect (which is strictly connected with a holistic view) brings about a kind of reduction ad absurdum concerning the process of communication: actually it reduces communication to a mystery. This last claim is put forward by

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<sup>5</sup> From the start, but also in 1994, p.205: "...the primary unit is still a *shared* language, known to all participants in a conversation; and the prototypical case is that in which they all use that language in the same way"

<sup>6</sup> I refer to Davidson's well known proposal of relativizing language to a speaker, a time and a hearer (see for instance Davidson 1982 and Davidson 1986). Davidson (1999 p. 307) has expressed very clearly the idea of language as overlapping of idiolects: "people differ greatly in the scope of their vocabularies and in their conceptual resources. This does not prevent them from communicating in the area of overlap, nor it does stop them from increasing the overlap."

<sup>7</sup> Dummett 1974, p.424: "on Frege's theory, the basic notion really is that of an idiolect, and a language can only be explained as the common overlap of many idiolects."

<sup>8</sup> Dummett 1992, p.87: "language is not to be characterized as a set of overlapping idiolects. Rather, an idiolect is constituted by the partial and imperfect grasp that a speaker has of a language."

<sup>9</sup> See for instance Marconi (1997, p. 56), who elaborates this criticism against the idea of "capturing 'communitarian' inferential competence, or the common core of all individual competences."

<sup>10</sup> See Dummett 1974, p.427ff. and Dummett 1981, p. 190 where he says that Frege's neglect of the social aspect of language (reference to authorities, and so on) is a "serious defect" in his treatment of language.

<sup>11</sup> Even if dictionaries are not absolute standards, they give useful information a "socially adequate use of the language" (Marconi 1997, p. 56). In an analogous vein, after having discussed the importance of dictionaries as authorities in the standard use of language Dummett 1992, p. 85 remarks on this paradoxical aspect of language: "while its practice must be subject to standard of correctness, there is no ultimate authority to impose those standards from without".

<sup>12</sup> Dummett 1991, p. 103 avoids the alternative of which aspect is primary; actually the point about language in this respect is that "acquired by interaction with others, it cannot serve for further successful communication unless it has been made a vehicle of thought." Dummett 1986 (pp.470-471) is even willing to take communication as the primary role of language ("language is a vehicle of thought because it is an instrument of communication and not conversely"); yet insists on warning about the error "to concentrate too exclusively on communication."

Dummett in an argument concerning the consequences of the holistic stance held by Quine in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”. We may call it the “Master Argument” (MA):

(MA) Assume that the meaning of a word depends holistically on the entire system of a speaker’s idiolect. Then, no two speakers may reasonably give exactly the same meanings to the same expressions, given that there are no analytic definitions and meaning and belief are inextricable. If speakers cannot give the same meanings to the same words, there will be neither agreement nor disagreement and communication will become impossible<sup>13</sup>.

In a later paper<sup>14</sup> Dummett specifies that denouncing the disastrous consequences of holism does not constitute a knock down argument against it, but it is at least strong evidence in favor of a methodological stance against holism. Before considering Davidson's alternative against this evidence, in the next paragraph I will show some weak points of the two claims supporting thesis (I).

## II. ARGUMENTS AGAINST DEFENDING THESIS (I).

### *Argument against the use of DLL to solve the problem of idiolect*

Dummett speaks of “unhappy cases” where the words of a speaker are understood as in common language, while the speaker means them in an idiolectic use of his own. In these cases, the appeal to “authorities” in language is fundamental for checking a deviant idiolect with respect to socially shared meanings<sup>15</sup>. Therefore Dummett seems to assume the thesis of the social determination of the meanings of a word, a claim much discussed in the literature since Burge 1979.

In a strong version of the social determination of meaning, the content of our belief is fixed by the expressions used, whose meaning is socially determined.<sup>16</sup> This may explain the success of communication grounded in the same contents (following the desiderata of Dummett’s master argument), but we explain communication at a high price: counter-intuitiveness. In fact, strong social externalism contradicts our intuitions concerning semantic deviance because it makes the mental content of the individual speaker independent of his or her intentions<sup>17</sup>. Dummett’s thought cannot be assimilated to this strong version of social externalism, because, contrary to Burge, he rejects the appeal to the socially defined meaning to justify ascribing a belief to a speaker<sup>18</sup>. However, his weaker form of social determination of meaning cannot obtain the same result given by the stronger form, which assumes the sharing of the same socially determined contents. In fact, if we cannot appeal to socially defined meaning to justify an ascription of belief, how could we describe how communication works when it happens that we do not share the same contents? It seems that in Dummett’s perspective, if two people do not share the same contents, either communication does not succeed or it becomes a mystery. But do we really have to assume that to have successful communication we need a previous sharing of meanings or mental contents? There is at least one way to weaken this attitude strongly held by molecularism. Instead of claiming that there is a set of shared meanings that people must share, we might claim that there must be some meaning shared among two speakers, without having to define it in advance. Is this weakening

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<sup>13</sup> Taking the terminology from Tennant 1987 we may say that the Master Argument concerns both constitutive holism and holism from inextricability. *Constitutive holism* can be defined as the claim that the meaning of a word is its role in the linguistic system; *holism from inextricability* can be defined as the claim that meaning and belief are inextricable).

<sup>14</sup> Dummett 1975, p.121; see also 1993, p.21

<sup>15</sup> Dummett 1992, p.85

<sup>16</sup> Burge 1979 claims that “the expressions the subject uses sometimes provide the content of his mental states or events even though he only partially understands, or even misunderstands, some of them” (p.114)

<sup>17</sup> See for instance Marconi 1997, p. 98, also discussing the problem of the reference a word has for the individual speaker.

<sup>18</sup> see Dummett 1987, pp.239-240

enough to save the molecularist project?<sup>19</sup> I will not develop this strategy; I am simply remarking on the difficulty of a classic molecularist position (even if supplemented with the idea of (weak) social determination of meaning) in explaining the actual success of communication.

Besides, DLL is compatible not only with a molecularist position, but also with holism. Meanings within language as a social enterprise governed by the division of linguistic labour may be conceived of as depending on the entire system. Actual speakers may not know to what extent the meaning of a word or sentence depends on all the other meanings; but the ideal speaker, or a god, should know the whole system and master the interconnections. The social division of linguistic labour is probably necessary to justify a molecularist stance on language, but it is not sufficient to avoid even a strong form of holism<sup>20</sup>. This may be a problem for Dummett, though not necessarily for thesis (I). In principle, we might accept (I) in a holistic vision where we define language as what is given by the competence of an ideal speaker. This perspective is not free of problems: first, even experts disagree, thus there might be different ideal competencies; second, actual speakers will never have access to the ideal competence(s), and they will once again be forced into their own idiolects (with some occasional sharing of stereotypes).

DLL does not help Dummett in explaining actual communication in a classical molecularist view, and it is compatible with holism. The main burden of proof is therefore the sustainability of a holistic position, and the relevance of Dummett's master argument, which claims that holism reduces communication to a mystery.

#### *Argument against Dummett's Master Argument*

Dummett's Master Argument claims that the holistic view, connected with the idea of language as idiolect, makes communication impossible. The criticism is mainly devoted to the problem of holism; Dummett might then give up holism and have another vision of idiolects, considered as molecularistic or atomistic. However, this step would not resolve the problem of priority, because taking a molecularist or an atomistic idiolect as prior to common language seems to assume either a strictly naturalistic view of language or a reductio of idiolects to private languages, against Wittgenstein's argument on the publicity of rule-following. Therefore, we are back to the main point of Dummett's criticism, which claims that in order to properly communicate, speakers have to share the same meanings, or at least the same basic or constitutive meanings. The molecularist stance should account for the level of shared meaning grounded in social practice. This is the basic assumption of Dummett's view of communication, and deserves further clarification.

Dummett's idea of communication cannot be identified with a simple pattern such as "in order to communicate you have to share a mental reality." As Dummett remarks, the idea that communication is sharing the same thing (for instance, the sense of an expression) in the mind is reinforced by the Fregean heritage<sup>21</sup>. However, this heritage was challenged by Wittgenstein who denounced the tendency to consider the whole point of communication as bringing the sense of the

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<sup>19</sup> See Marconi 1997, Perry 1994. They criticize the strong form of molecularism denounced by Fodor and Lepore and accept a weaker form, which passes the test against holism posed by Fodor and Lepore. Shortly they do not accept that there is some property which speakers necessarily share in communication  $\forall p \exists q (q \neq p \ \& \ \Box (p \text{ is shared} \rightarrow q \text{ is shared}))$ .

However they accept that it is necessary to communicate that some semantic property is shared (without having decided it a priori or in advance), that is:  $(\forall p \Box (p \text{ is shared} \rightarrow \exists q (q \neq p \ \& \ q \text{ is shared}))$ .

<sup>20</sup> Certainly there are different forms of holism, and it is possible to find places for different forms of weak holism, like different forms of molecularism. I have treated this aspect in Penco 2001 and 2002 and I will not discuss this issue here.

<sup>21</sup> This picture of Frege given by Dummett should be partially revised. In fact, even if we may have access to the same sense, sharing them is not a precondition of communication. The quotation given at the beginning of this paper shows that, for communication to work, Frege considered as sufficient condition to refer to the same objects, even if we do not share the same senses. It is however true that the Fregean tradition did not develop this aspect of Frege, relying more on the idea of grasping the same senses in the mind.

words from one mind to another<sup>22</sup>. We may single out two aspects in Wittgenstein's criticism. The first is against the idea of senses or concepts as something pre-existing language, and to which language gives just a practical way to be transmitted from one mind to the other; the second is against the idea of communication as *sharing* the same things - meanings or inferences or beliefs.

Dummett follows, up to a point, the Wittgensteinian path. He rejects the idea of communication as mental coordination: besides mental coordination, we need an outward and public manifestation showing understanding, consisting of "a complex interplay between linguistic exchange and related actions". The outward manifestation is necessary in order for communication not to rest on faith.<sup>23</sup> This view hinges upon the first aspect of Wittgenstein's criticism; but Dummett seems not to consider the second aspect of Wittgenstein's criticism, at least if we assume that the outward manifestation requires the recognition of canonical inferences shared among speakers. Dummett's view appears to consolidate a picture of communication that presupposes a sharing of meanings - with the *caveat* that it is not just sharing in the heads but a sharing checked in the actual practice of linguistic exchange.

To communicate, you have to understand the sentence the interlocutor pronounces. To understand a sentence, you need to show some abilities verifiable in social practice. First of all, you need to know the sentence's meaning - which can be considered in a *molecularist* view as an intended or canonical or stereotypical set of inferences. In a molecularist view, you need to share the practice to recognize the intended or canonical inferences (or justifications). Hence you need to share in advance these canonical inferences, as meanings of the sentences.

Certainly, if holism holds, we could find it difficult to explain communication within a picture where sharing meanings is a presupposition of communication. But there is a point at which this picture begs the question. In fact Dummett's master argument can be read either as evidence against holism or as evidence against this vision of communication. We then have two possible answers to the so-called "disastrous consequence" of holism: either to reject holism and develop an alternative theory of meaning, or to accept holism and develop an alternative view of communication. Dummett chooses the first horn of the dilemma, but - as we hinted at in the previous paragraphs - his molecularist stance seems not to be enough to explain actual communication practice; Davidson chooses the second. If this alternative is viable, Dummett's master argument loses most of its weight. Is the alternative given by Davidson enough to avoid the reduction of communication to a mystery?

### III. IDIOLECTS AND COMMUNICATION

Davidson has explicitly attempted an alternative picture of communication. Criticizing Davidson, Dummett has implicitly suggested that insisting on the problem of communication, Davidson's picture of natural language is the most adherent to the Fregean one. In fact, Davidson's theory of communication is an attempt to develop in detail and justify the Fregean attitude towards natural language as an overlapping of idiolects. Communication is explained as the converging of different idiolects toward the same meanings, without making any assumptions about previously shared conventional meanings, concepts or beliefs<sup>24</sup>. Davidson denies that some "basic" or conventional meanings<sup>25</sup> have to be shared in order for communication to start. However, the final *result* of successful communication must still be a kind of sharing, where speaker and hearer assign the same meaning to the speaker's word<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> Wittgenstein PU p.363

<sup>23</sup> Dummett 1989 (p.187). Communication would rest on faith if we accepted the idea that the representative power of language that connects language with sense and thought can be isolated from other features of language.

<sup>24</sup> See Davidson 1974, p.195.

<sup>25</sup> Davidson 1986 considers three tenets concerning "first" or "basic" meanings, as (1) systematic (2) shared (3) governed by conventions of regularities. The point is the connection between (1) and (2) with (3).

<sup>26</sup> This is a basic aim of communication for Davidson, since his 1982 essay (p.277) where he says that "if communication succeeds, speaker and hearer must assign the same meaning to the speaker's word" (Davidson 1982,

The central aspect of Davidson's approach is the idea of idiolects converging to a common goal. A clear (even if a bit cumbersome) way to put it, is to speak of a "prior" and a "passing theory." The *prior theory* is a theory that a speaker builds up on his provisional assumptions and expectations on what the other speaker accepts as meanings of the words. The *passing theory* is the one derived by his checking the reactions of the other speaker and individuating the possible differences and lack of consonance with his own inferences<sup>27</sup>. The resulting picture sees communication as a process of *converging* toward the same passing theory, and therefore converging toward the same meanings. There are at least two relevant aspects in this picture: (i) successful communication does not depend on previously shared meanings; (ii) the aim of communication is not the *complete* overlapping of idiolects, but a local one.

In (i) we may interpret Davidson's claim that much successful communication does not depend on previously shared contents as a suggestion for language learning: learning a language might be viewed as extending the limited idiolect of a child by a larger and larger overlapping with adult language. And we might interpret adult language as a continuous attempt at finding agreement about the use of words, an infinite work of convergence and partial overlappings.

In (ii) Davidson insists that there is no language, if language is intended as a set of conventions. We have to abandon a wrong ideal of a language system, and start with the successful communication realized by convergence of (at least two) idiolects. The two interlocutors will converge toward the same meanings and will eventually end up with a common theory. Taking this process of convergence seriously, the common theory will be local to the dialogue or conversation and the convergence is a gradual process located in specific settings. The ideal of a *complete* overlapping of idiolects is not to be considered a proper aim of communication.<sup>28</sup>

These two tenets are coherent with the basic step assumed by Davidson in relativizing language to a speaker, a hearer and a time. Davidson's view of the use of language as local overlappings of idiolects sounds very Fregean in spirit and seems to be an alternative reconstruction of the Fregean attitude regarding the idiolect problem. Moreover, the relativization to speaker, hearer and time is coherent with the Fregean need to contextualize sentences in order to understand what thought is expressed. In everyday language, not only with indexicals, but also with most of our sentences, we need the context of utterance to understand the thought expressed.

Davidson gives his picture of communication assuming that the speakers already know a language.<sup>29</sup> This step is challenged by Dummett, who claims that giving priority to idiolects, Davidson leaves unanswered the question of how speakers get their knowledge of their own idiolects. The shared meanings of the passing theory<sup>30</sup> which is the result of the interaction cannot

p.277). Davidson 1986 (p.438) accepts the idea that "what must be shared is the interpreter's and the speaker's understanding of the speaker's words".

<sup>27</sup> See the discussion in Davidson 1986. The holistic part is the following: in the passing theory the role temporarily or locally attributed to an expression should have all the (inferential) "power", given by a recursive (holistic) theory. When I interpret "epitaph" as "epithet", I will use all the "inferences to other words, phrases and sentences" connected with "epithet" in my idiolect to interpret "epitaph" in Ms Malaprop's idiolect. I wonder whether in Ms Malaprop's idiolect there will be - *salva translation* - the same inferences with other words, phrases and sentences!

<sup>28</sup> As Davidson 1999 remarks, apparently a speaker would not be interested in a complete overlapping with the idiolect of all other speakers. It is not clear how much there will be in common after the process of convergence, except occasional overlaps of meanings and beliefs; Davidson (1999 pp.307-8) abandons the "ideal" interpreter, who would have access to *all* meanings and beliefs. It seems to me that in this way we run the risk to think of each interpreter as bound to her *solypstic* idiolect, with some occasional overlapping with other speakers during dialogues, and the *presumption* of sharing a lot of beliefs.

<sup>29</sup> "I want to know how people who already have a language (whatever exactly this means) manage to apply their skill of knowledge to actual cases of interpretation"(Davidson 1986, p.441).

<sup>30</sup> A Davidsonian passing theory is a "second order theory" (i.e. a theory of an interlocutor's theory of meaning) and must be grounded on a more basic theory of meaning which gives a theoretical expression to the social phenomenon of language. According to Dummett 1986 (p. 470) also the prior theory should have the role of second order theory, putting Davidson in an infinite regress. But it seems to me that the point is not so clearly decided here. In fact Davidson's prior theory is bound to play two roles at a time: on the one hand it is the theory of the speaker, on the other

be the *source* of the knowledge of the idiolects, being a work of convergence of two previously given idiolects (or prior theories). We would have here an infinite regress. To understand how idiolects or prior theories have been developed in us, it is sensible to assert, against Davidson's assumption, that we rely on some previously accepted customs (or basic language games), on some previous practice of rule-following, which are the foundation of a common language. Certainly the practice of rule-following is learned during social interaction and language acquisition, but the ability to develop a passing *theory* cannot found rule-following, but presupposes it.

Davidson's answer in later papers is to weaken his picture of the prior and passing theory and describe the development of a dialogue on more general grounds. In an answer to Rorty he says that the basic idea is that a dialogue is based on expectations, which may be thwarted and, in that case, require accommodation<sup>31</sup>. This accommodation may be explained following the very general idea of triangulation. We need to be three in order to have concepts and language: we need two speakers whose lines converge to the same object, which cause the same response in them, who react to their own interaction. The idea of triangulation shows that, in order to converge in language, we do not need any shared routine or rule-following, but just the interaction of at least two speakers/interpreters in front of an object or part of speech.<sup>32</sup> You just need the intention to be understood and the test of the objectivity of meaning is "the success of the speakers' intention to be understood in a certain way."<sup>33</sup>

However, it is not at all clear how this success is confirmed, if based on intention alone: Wittgenstein's argument of rule-following was devised exactly with the purpose of going beyond the explanation of meaning in terms of intentions alone. Success of the intentions can become mysterious if not grounded in some solid, public core where rules are not only *interpreted as* successfully followed, but are *actually followed* in the same way. Triangulation and intention do not seem to be enough to build a theory of meaning that gives a theoretical expression to the social phenomenon of language. We run the risk of reducing understanding to the claim that the meaning of a word is what we expect other people understand and what we believe or decide they understand. But intention or decision cannot be a criterion of success. I may be happy thinking that the other person has understood me because she behaves in a certain way, but I have no criterion but the provisional happiness of what may be a casual coincidence of action or a simple regularity.<sup>34</sup>

The conclusion given by Dummett discussing the paper on "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" seems therefore still valid: the alternative proposed by Davidson leaves out the social and conventional aspect of language and just mimics the attitude toward language taken by Humpty Dumpty in *Alice in Wonderland*. Davidson is wrong and thesis (I) is the only viable explanation of language.

hand it is the theory the speaker projects on the interlocutor. Only because it is the (first level) theory of the speaker it can work as a second level theory about the interlocutor.

<sup>31</sup> Davidson 1999, pp.598-99.

<sup>32</sup> See Davidson 1992, p. 121 where he attempts, via triangulation an alternative argument against the private language, which bypasses the rule following argument given by Kripke or Wittgenstein.

<sup>33</sup> Davidson 1992, p.117.

<sup>34</sup> If I ask you to "open the window" and you open the window I think my intention to be understood has been successful. However you might have understood "open the door", and – being angry with me – voluntarily disobey my order and open the window instead. In this case, my intention to be understood has not been properly fulfilled; I have a chance: I may ask you "Did you open the window because I told you that?" If you answer "yes" I would be satisfied enough to think my intention has been really understood. However you may answer "yes" because you mean by "that" your own interpretation of my utterance, that is "open the door." We may go on as we can. We cannot fill the gap between *succeeding* to making my intention properly understood and *thinking* to succeed in making my intention properly understood. Rule-following considerations seem to be necessary just to fill this gap. Basing communication and linguistic interaction on rule-following consideration does not mean that communication is always granted (just grounded). On the other hand, accepting defeasibility in principle does not imply accepting a picture of communication as resting on faith, a result that seems to be unavoidable if we ground communication on intention alone.

#### 4. INTERLUDE IN DEFENSE OF HUMPTY DUMPTY

Dummett's accusation is a little unfair. In fact, the Davidsonian Humpty Dumpty should use the meaning of words according to what he thinks Alice thinks them to be, and not according to his own ideas. He should make himself understood trying to guess Alice's theory of meaning. Therefore, from a Davidsonian viewpoint, he does not behave correctly in Chapter VI of *Through the Looking Glass*, when, after having calculated 364 days in which there is no birthday, he says to Alice, who likes birthday presents instead of unbirthday presents:

"And only one for birthday presents, you know. There is glory for you!"

Alice answers:

"I don't know what you mean by glory"

H.D. replies: "of course you don't - till I tell you. I mean "there's a nice knock-down argument for you"!"

Alice objects: "But 'glory' doesn't mean "a nice knockdown argument". "

H.D. "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less. "

A. "The question is whether you can make words mean so many different things."

H.D. gives now his famous statement:

"The question is which is to be master - that's all."

Still we may find some reasonable aspects in the attitude of Humpty Dumpty, as already hinted at by Donnellan when he suggested he could end an argument against his opponent saying just "There's glory for you!" Given the background, Donnellan argues he would have been understood<sup>35</sup>. To have a knockdown argument certainly corresponds to having glory in some restricted contexts of intellectuals, especially university professors, who have so little glory in life that they find it in giving knockdown arguments. To Humpty Dumpty, the calculation that there are 364 days for non-birthday presents is a knockdown argument against the idea of preferring birthday presents. And therefore, if we were in an academic environment, he would be justified in using the term "glory".

Is this attitude a really totally unpredictable change in the meaning of "glory"? It does not appear to be completely so. It is an application of the meaning of "glory" in a restricted context, where Humpty Dumpty would have some right to be the master if we were in an academic situation. The problem is how far he is allowed to "force" the meaning of the words, picking a peculiar set of inferences from a typical academic context and using it in a less restricted situation of dialogue. The problem is therefore which is the reference community. If Humpty Dumpty wanted to introduce Alice to the reference community of academics, he would be within his right to do so, and he would be the master of the use of the word as a representative of that restricted community.

Referring to the development of the Echelon system<sup>36</sup> (the system for "monitoring" all communication in European countries), a member of the project, Fred Stock, describes his dismay when, after having spied on Fidel Castro, he began to understand that the Echelon system was spying on the Vatican and generally on Europe. Fred Stock, an American patriot, was at the time very much convinced of the fact that Western countries were allies against the Communist countries, which were the enemies. In '90, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was announced that all the countries of the European Community should have been classified as "enemy". Fred Stock reports that, having asked for clarification from his chief about considering European countries as "enemies", he was answered with something like "You should update the meaning of the word". He

<sup>35</sup> Donnellan 1968, quoted in Davidson 1986.

<sup>36</sup> News about the following exchange appeared in European newspapers in 2001, and have been discussed in the European Community. Apparently I am not interested in the historical truth of the matter here. Therefore I report news taken from newspapers without assuming their truth; their verisimilitude is enough for the case. The name "Fred Stock" is also a name of a famous investigator in the literature. Let us assume that the entire matter is a matter of fiction.

found himself in the position of Alice with Humpty Dumpty, where the relevant inferences connected with a word are changed and extended to unpredictable examples or applications. The contemporary Humpty Dumpty, the leader of the Echelon Project, has some right to use the term “enemy” as applied to European countries, including connections with economic competition. A member of the opposite party in economic competition becomes a typical case of enemy and we may correctly use the term “enemy”, just like, if a knockdown argument is considered a typical case of glory, we may use the term “glory” for it.

In the reference community of the Echelon program, it is reasonable to accept a new use of the term “enemy.” The problem, like with Alice, is when the meaning of the word has to be accepted by a larger reference community. Meaning depends on who the master is, and normally the master is considered the reference community<sup>37</sup> in which the word is used (this might be considered a way to exemplify the idea that “use” is the master). Which community? What is disturbing in the case of Echelon is different communities coming into contact using apparently contrasting meanings (given that there is not only a difference of beliefs). A difference in meaning is always disturbing for communication. When this difference strikes us, we are disturbed by the realization that other people use an expression in a way that differs from ours<sup>38</sup>. However, once the difference is made explicit, we are faced with two possibilities. Either the stronger community (or individual) imposes its meaning (Humpty Dumpty’s arrogant position)<sup>39</sup>, or the more intelligent individual, for the sake of conversation, accepts the use of the interlocutor (Davidson’s interpreter always makes the other speaker win). But we have another alternative: we might converge through some kind of semantic bargaining.<sup>40</sup> How can this convergence be realized?

Davidson seems to have no answer to that, as if he did not need it. He is content when a speaker individuates a difference in meaning in the interlocutor; then he will use the word as the interlocutor does. But what if both interlocutors behave in the same way? What if they both simultaneously change the meaning of the words, intending to interpret what the other speaker means? What if, when Davidson begins to use “epitaph” as “epithet”, Ms. Malaprop begins to use “epitaph” again as Davidson is supposed to intend (that is, the “right” way)? The process of adjustment or theory building may undergo some restriction given by the interaction of two interlocutors. Davidson gives an example of semantic coordination, but avoids treating more complex cases, where both speakers realize the difference in the use of their words and begin a real process of bargaining.

Restricting his example to semantic coordination, Davidson says that there is something *ineffable* which permits the converging of idiolects. Literally speaking, he says that there is a “mysterious process by which a speaker or hearer uses what he knows in advance plus present data to produce a passing theory”<sup>41</sup>. The idea of a mysterious process is reminiscent of the Fregean definition of understanding or grasping a thought: “the most mysterious process”, in which the mind, through a subjective process, gets in touch with something objective, a thought or *Gedanke*.

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<sup>37</sup> Humpty Dumpty might be seen either as a metaphor of use, or as a metaphor of the influence of media over use. In this second case, we apparently have to fight Humpty Dumpty, like any fight against bad uses of language imposed by bad masters.

<sup>38</sup> A peculiar aspect here is that the smaller community uses its jargon against what is officially shared in public speech and official institutional acts - the (provisional) official view of friendship between the USA and Europe. We might think that the difference is a difference in belief and not in meaning. However the answer given in the Echelon project (“update your *meaning*”) has some right, given that the problem is not only to enlarge the range of application of the term “enemy”, but also the kind of relevant inferences linked to the term.

<sup>39</sup> Shall the larger community accept the meaning as defined by the smaller one? This problem is normally considered a typical case in the development of the terminology of science. What is defined and used in small groups of researchers may become the standard use in the future. It might be that Echelon project developed enough, and persuaded normal newspapers and the Government to accept this use of “enemy.” We would need a complex updating of the meaning of the semantic field constituted by terms like “war”, “enemy”, “fight”, “competition”, and so on.

<sup>40</sup> On an aspect of semantic bargaining (on the domain on quantification or on the reference of indexicals) see Penco forth.

<sup>41</sup> Davidson 1986, p.445

The mystery in Frege's assessment is a result of thinking of languages as idiolects, where individuals cannot properly share anything but have only subjective individual ways to access the *Gedanke*. In the case of communication, there is no common rule, but only the arbitrariness of a speaker, who tries to grasp the thought grasped by the other speaker. Another interpretation of the Davidsonian call to mystery is to refer to Chomsky<sup>42</sup>, who distinguishes between *problems* (like the architecture of our cognitive structure) and *mysteries* (like the use humans make of cognitive structures). The second cannot be the object of scientific inquiry, but only of intuition and insight<sup>43</sup>.

Davidson's conclusion seems to reduce communication to a mystery, which is exactly what Dummett denounced in his master argument. However the point is different. The appeal to mystery, in Frege as in Davidson, is a rejection of the need to formalize a level of inquiry; the strategy of convergence is a question of practical agreement, which has no real need of conceptual clarification. At most we might try some psychological or sociological inquiry of this natural ability to converge we possess since we belong to the human race. However, given the abundant recent theorization on the problem of context dependence of meanings, it seems to me that the appeal to mystery is more similar to the warning about a new conceptual territory. Here it is still difficult to give clear distinctions: as the ancient geographers used to say, "hic sunt leones." However, we are not beginning to explore a completely new territory: it is not difficult to find different attempts at a descriptions of it, even if they are not yet uniform and well accepted. If we are looking for a theory of meaning which is also a theory of understanding, we need to look for this level of (formal) analysis, we need to give the rules governing the process starting from different premises and still arriving at a (partially) common ground.

## V. MYSTERY AND RULES ACROSS CONTEXTS

Attempting a solution to the idiolect problem, Davidson and Dummett impinge upon different aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy. Dummett insists on social practice, rule-following and the need to have grounds for defining what is correct and incorrect. Davidson's picture matches the Wittgensteinian view, which denies that there is an essence of language and leaves us with a non-ordered open set of a great variety of language games. Both views have their rationale, but both have a blindspot. Dummett finds it difficult to explain communication without previously shared contents; Davidson cannot avoid resorting to mystery to explain communication. Dummett presupposes too much sharing, and Davidson presupposes too little. What is needed to solve the problem is a third way in between Dummett's requirement of presupposing conventional meaning sharing for communication and Davidson's requirement of not presupposing any previous sharing of conventions to explain communication.

A suggestion for an answer comes from Bilgrami 1992 (11ff), who claims that we normally share contents at a local level because we do not import in that local level all we know about the relevant content. It is true that we do not import all we know about, let us say, "water" while asking for a glass of water. It is reasonable to assume that we share some typical contents in advance in special local settings, where we are expected to do exactly what we do (to ask for a glass of wine in a bar, for a pint of beer in a pub). This is what grounds most studies about the use of frames and scripts in cognitive sciences. However, in many cases we are not completely guided by the local setting, and we have to build it piece by piece, through bargaining with our interlocutor and converging toward a locally shared meaning. If we want to generalize this line of thought, we need to look at which abilities are necessary to work out this process of convergence.

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<sup>42</sup> I take this suggestion from Gurpreet Rattan

<sup>43</sup> Chomsky 1976, p. 138: "Roughly, where we deal with cognitive structures, either in a mature state of knowledge and belief or in the initial state, we face problems, but not mysteries. When we ask how humans make use of these cognitive structures, how and why they make the choices and behave as they do, although there is much that we can say as human beings with intuition and insight, there is little, I believe, that we can say as scientists" (p.138)

Speaking about the necessity of sharing some manifestable abilities, Dummett implicitly points toward the problem raised and not solved by the Davidsonian view of communication as converging: what must we share in order to converge? Dummett does not enlighten us about the *kind* of abilities we should share. Certainly in our introduction to our first language games, we learn *inferential* and *referential* abilities. But being introduced to language use, we learn at the same time some *reflexive or contextual* abilities. With this term I mean linguistically shaped abilities we form in language learning to individuate conceptual or cognitive spaces or contexts and work on them. An example is the mastery of narrative modes and the ability to enter and exit narrative modes and fiction, from the early stages of language learning.<sup>44</sup> We soon acquire reflexive abilities of treating our descriptions or representations of what is going on (“what is she saying?” or “what does he think?”). These abilities, not necessarily conscious, help us to move across different conceptual spaces, and permit us to follow the essential contextual dependence of meaning. If we want a theoretical representation of our mastery of language in communication, we should also give proper space, besides inferential and referential abilities, to contextual ones. These abilities can be theoretically represented as rules on conceptual spaces, and we need to define which kinds of rules are required in our theoretical representation.

It might be objected that we couldn't use higher order rules to fill the gap of the infinite regress of passing theories: we would put a higher order theory to block the infinite regress of lower order theories (passing theories). The problem, however, is not about the *source* of our basic theories, but about what we share in communication. We learn to use our inferential and referential abilities *in specific contexts*. Then, even if we do not share the same contexts, we have learned some shared and recognized basic inferential abilities (logical constants).<sup>45</sup> However, learning inferential and referential abilities, we realize that the inferences we use depend on contextual restrictions, on different cognitive situations. We need to master a new kind of ability which govern contextual restrictions (in a novel monkeys are allowed to fly) . Even if we do not share the same contents, we share the same abilities, which we may use to bargain the meaning (and the reference) of the linguistic expressions we use.

The main source of difficulty of communication is the difficulty to individuate the kind of context we are working in. What comes at the end of the process of language learning may come first in the process of understanding and explanation. That's why the contextual abilities we learn at the end of our basic linguistic training are the first tool we use to converge with other people towards the same (kinds of) meanings and contexts.

We may describe these contextual abilities using the idea of cognitive contexts. Here with “cognitive context” I mean the state of mind or the set of beliefs of an individual about a situation<sup>46</sup>. In our description of how communication works we need to describe the interaction of different cognitive contexts, the way in which they are compatible with one another, and the rules used to converge or to tune towards the same inferences and the same domains of interpretation. We may call these rules “rules of contextual dependence”. Anticipating his idea of mystery held in “A Nice

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<sup>44</sup> In psychology much research has been done on the importance of abilities concerning narration: ability to enter a narration with identification with a character, ability to detach from the narration, to enter and exit the context of narration, and so on. A relevant author in this setting is Bruner, who has given much attention to the importance of mastering narrative abilities and semantic bargaining for the development of intelligence. To check some literature see for instance Campart 2000.

<sup>45</sup> This amounts to saying that to communicate we need to share the meanings of the logical constants (sharing inferential abilities), but we do not necessarily share a common set of inferences linked to the lexical entries.

<sup>46</sup> I refer mainly to Benerecetti et alia 2001, which rely on a wide literature in artificial intelligence, starting with the works of McCarthy, Giunchiglia, Dinsmore, Fauconnier, Sperber and Wilson. Most of these theories seem to converge toward some common lines in describing which rules are necessary for a good description of our abilities to deal with context. Certainly there is still some intuitive aspect and the definition of these rules is still a work in progress; yet these results are a novelty which the traditional philosophy of language should take care of. Examples in this direction are also the works of Gauker on the idea of multi-contexts systems and the logical works of Thomason on a type theory about multiagent. Another relevant work in this direction is Bouquet-Serafini forth.

Derangement of Epitaphs", Davidson 1982 (p.279) said that "what we cannot expect, however, is that we can formalize the considerations that lead us to adjust our theory to fit the inflow of new information." The formalization of rules governing contextual dependence seems to fill exactly this unexpected gap.

Contextual dependence gives fundamental restrictions to our interactions, and our contextual abilities can be (even formally) described as rules which work *on* contexts and permit us to make explicit the kind of inferences we attach to the linguistic expressions we use. We may define these rules as different kinds of shifting or moving in the space of cognitive contexts. Following a definition of three dimensions of contextual dependence (partiality, approximation and perspective),<sup>47</sup> we may speak of shifting *inside* contexts, shifting *on* contexts and shifting *through* contexts:

(i) a main way of shifting *inside* contexts is the ability to expand or contract the amount of information needed. In any conversation or problem solving, you need to individuate the right set of information, the language and the rules used in such a context. You take a flight and you only need to know departure time and place (it would be impossible to consider *all* information about any possible difficulty, from strikes to accidents). But if you lose the ticket you need to enlarge the amount of information needed, still remaining inside the intended cognitive context. To say "I lost the ticket" at the help desk of the airlines is in fact normally intended inside a restricted set of assumptions, and you will certainly be correctly understood. As Bilgrami suggested, meaning or inferences are shared *locally*. The cognitive context needed to face any situation is always partial; still it may always be expanded or specialized when new facts occur.

(ii) Shifting *on* context means *reflecting* or moving the balance of parameters like time, location and speaker; they can be expressed explicitly inside the context or left implicit as taken for granted. One of the main features of shifting on contexts is given by the ability to pass from explicit to implicit representations of parameters and vice versa. This aspect has been abundantly shown by Perry, while he describes the relevance of passing from a description where indexicals are "out of the picture", as unarticulated constituents, and when they are explicitly considered. Saying "it rains" and "it rains here and now" may express the same content, but they are different ways of expressing it, and the difference makes a relevant contribution to the cognitive aspect of our thoughts. In short, I may always *de-contextualize* or re-contextualize what I am speaking about, making a parameter explicit or leaving it implicit. Among the parameters we may have the context itself, if we decide to "enter" a context (like entering a novel) and asserting what is valid, forgetting to give explicit reference to the context. Eventually we may "exit" the context and assert something valid with explicit reference to the context. This reflective ability is a basic tool to disambiguate misunderstandings in communication, when people assume different implicit parameters. Also, bargaining on the domain of quantifiers or on the reference of demonstratives used in a dialogue ("that, what? Shape or color?") belongs to this kind of reflexive rules.

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<sup>47</sup> Following Benerecetti-Bouquet-Ghidini 2000, the fundamental dimensions of contextual dependence may be described as partiality, approximation and perspective (i) *Partiality*: any assertion or use of language is relative to the minimal amount of information needed to understand it according to the relevant goals. When new information is required, we may import it or shift context to get it. (ii) *Approximation*: any representation of a situation, as Barwise and Perry 1983 have insisted, is approximate. Parameters, which can always be expressed if we want more detail in the discourse, are often left unexpressed. A relevant aspect is the granularity of the description: the kind of representation may always shift to different levels of description. (iii) *Perspective*: as Brandom 1994 has abundantly stressed, we need to recognize the interplay of different perspectives; and any representation is perspectival because it is always given from a point of view, either cognitive or pragmatic. Benerecetti, Bouquet and Ghidini suggest that different kinds of rules should be appropriate for these dimensions. In short, we might put it in the following way: First, we have to realize "where" we are in the space of discourse, which conceptual space we have access to or what we are speaking about. Second, we have to give the right granularity, making explicit for the audience what is needed and avoiding making explicit what is or should be presupposed. Third, we have to decide which perspective has to be taken, or which shift of perspective is needed to make our assertions compatible with other people's assertions.

(iii) *Shifting through contexts or shifting points of view*: we may change parameters and still have compatibility among our assertion. For instance “I am here” said by me can be shifted to “he is there” said by her. “Yesterday was sunny” said today, can be shifted to “today is sunny” said yesterday. “The book is in front of me” said by me, placed behind you, can be shifted to “the book is behind me” said by you, or “the book is behind you” said by me. “I have seen an enemy” said by the soldier of faction A can be shifted to “he has seen a friend” said by a soldier of faction B. “Epithet” said by you can be shifted in “epitaph” said by me. And so on. I may shift to your point of view using the word (I suppose) you are using. This kind of shifting is essential to semantic coordination, and it is the first step for semantic bargaining.

Semantic bargaining needs something more than understanding the use of the interlocutor and speaking as we think she would. We need a further step, making explicit the points of divergence between the two speakers. The ability to follow and pick the points of divergence of anaphoric chains may be a central pattern of this kind of ability<sup>48</sup>. Basically, the ability to shift contexts is basic for disambiguating the intentions that guide our assertions and keep communication going. Think of the example given by Sperber-Wilson: "Would you like some coffee?" Answer: "It will keep me awake". The answer amounts to "Yes" or "No" depending on intended context. Here we have to decide which context to take into consideration, and the interlocutors have to bargain the meaning (it may still be undecided yet!). Bargaining may be done either in an explicit way or in an implicit way, but the two interlocutors are on the same level, while the example given by Davidson always makes the interpreter a conscious onlooker in a practice. Differently from the Malaprop case, we may also shift context together in order to understand what is really going on in the dialogue.

Davidson’s examples of convergence are just one case of a more complex and general kind of shifting. Is it beyond any kind of theoretical analysis or formalization? The answer may be: convergence is guided by contextual abilities, which are basic in helping us to see the compatibility of our assertions, and eventually help us to go toward the same meanings. Different kinds of contextual abilities give the necessary condition of successful communication. We may think of them as an extension of abilities to move in physical surroundings; without these abilities we would be lost. Without contextual abilities, it would be impossible to participate in a conversation, because we wouldn’t know where we were, in which kind of cognitive context we were. The particular format given above is widely discussed in many sectors of artificial intelligence and cognitive sciences; it has produced many formalizations competing with one another. If there is not yet a common and defined theoretical setting, there is clearly the need for a general theory which pictures the space where the prerequisites of linguistic communication can be localized.<sup>49</sup>

Speaking of cognitive contexts, we do not assume that we share exactly the same contexts or the same theories; sometimes we rely on similarities, and all the time we are guided to check compatibility relations. Our abilities to move through different contexts are however something we share, and they help us to check the differences in the others’ speech and need to be studied and described as rules defining the work of convergence through which we arrive at sharing contents at a local level.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

We started with the problem of idiolects posed by Frege: how can we understand each other if we use different idiolects? We described two alternative theses: Dummett, in favor of the thesis that idiolects are defined after language, claims that we need division of linguistic labor and molecularism against holism. Davidson, supporting the thesis that language is defined after idiolect, claims that communication requires no previous sharing of meaning, but is a work of convergence.

<sup>48</sup> I have expanded on this aspect of semantic bargaining in the use of demonstratives in Penco forth.

<sup>49</sup> See Benerecetti *et alia* 2000 and Bouquet-Serafici forthcoming.

Both positions have serious flaws. Against Dummett we may say that the division of linguistic labor neither explain the problem of idiolect, nor excludes the possibility of holism. Dummett's argument against holism is not a knockdown argument; moreover it is grounded in a vision of communication, based on previous sharing of meanings, which does not completely account for phenomena of communication. Against Davidson we may say that his theory of communication as converging grounded on intention alone is not as convincing as the rule-following consideration strategy used by Dummett. Besides it makes communication a mystery, even if for different reasons than the ones denounced by Dummett in his original argument against holism.

We said that Dummett imposes too much sharing for communication to work and Davidson requires too little sharing. We have claimed that it is highly implausible to think that what is necessary for communication is a previous sharing of meanings, conceptual contents, and sets of inferences. However we share abilities concerning mental spaces or conceptual contexts. This level of analysis fills a gap both in Davidson's and in Dummett's theory of meaning. The point does not give a conclusive choice between thesis (I) and thesis (II) defined at the beginning (maybe there is no answer but the old fashioned reflexive equilibrium). We found a space in between idiolects and conventions, showing how idiolects are guided by abilities, which are conventionally shared, and these abilities can be represented as rules to describe the proper working of our communication practices. Davidson's approach might abandon mystery and consider a new level of analysis, where his examples are just one kind of application of a kind of rule, belonging to a more structured set of rules of convergence. Dummett's approach would better elaborate on the intuitive idea of sharing abilities, giving these abilities a more precise status and formal expression.

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