

On the Epistemology of Language

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Abstract

Epistemology of language, a branch of both epistemology and the philosophy of language, asks what knowledge of language consists in. In this paper, I argue that such an inquiry is a pointless enterprise due to its being based upon the incorrect assumption that linguistic competence requires knowledge of language. However, I do not think the phenomenon of knowledge of language is trivial. I propose a virtue-theoretic account of linguistic competence, and then explain the phenomenon from a virtue-semantic point of view.

In this paper I claim that the study of what knowledge of language consists in (the epistemology of language) should give place to the study of what *being* a speaker is, if what we are concerned with is how it is possible to master and understand a language. In order to justify this claim, I start with the task of the epistemology of language (section 1), and then criticize the fundamental assumption, or working hypothesis, of it through Donald Davidson's thesis in his (in)famous paper "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (section 2). In section 3, I formulate Davidson's account of linguistic competence and bring up a problem, which I call the Humpty Dumpty Problem, to the account. I then solve the problem by proposing a virtue-theoretic approach to linguistic competence in section 4. In the concluding section, section 5, I revisit the phenomenon of knowledge of language from a virtue-semantic perspective.

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1.

It is widely held in contemporary philosophy of language (and linguistics) that linguistic competence *requires* knowledge of a formal semantic theory, such as a Davidsonian truth-conditional semantics. So construed, the task of a theorist of language is not only to construct a correct semantic theory (meaning-theory) for a natural language, but also to proffer an epistemological theory of language, a theory that bridges the epistemic/cognitive relation mediated between the contents of the semantic theory and the competence of a speaker of the language. Crispin Wright once gave a neutral description of the relation between the content of a meaning-theory and the competence of speakers.

[S]peakers' competence is subserved by their *knowledge*, in some deep implicit sense, of the contents of ... a formal theory: they are to be thought of as deploying the **information** which such a theory states in the ways mirrored by the deductive articulation of the theory, which is why they are able ... to understand novel utterances which they have never heard before. (Wright 1991, 135, boldface emphasis mine)

The description is neutral since the term "information" *could be* open to interpretation, perhaps psychologically construed (though this is not what Wright suggests). That is, we can psychologize a Davidsonian finitely axiomatized meaning-theory by associating each truth-theoretic axiom with a speaker's subpersonal computational mental processes. This suggestion is attractive because, first, the tacitness of knowledge of a meaning-theory can be explained (away) due to its inaccessibility to consciousness, the main feature of the subpersonal mental process, and, second, a meaning-theory so constructed is empirically grounded, is testable, and can be determined by empirical evidence if need be. Such a psychologically realist construal of tacit knowledge is proposed by Christopher Peacocke (1986, 1989) and Martin Davies (1987, 1989); however, it is not adopted by Michael Dummett (1991). Dummett, following Frege, argues against any psychological approach to the study of language. For Dummett, "[a] meaning-theory should not ... aspire to be a theory giving a *causal* account of linguistic utterances, in which human beings figure as natural objects, making and reacting to vocal sounds and marks on paper in accordance with certain natural laws. We have no need of such a theory" (Dummett 1991, 92). One of the reasons that we do not need such a theory is that it would violate the *rationality requirement*, which states that a theory of meaning should explain and characterize a speaker's linguistic activity as rational (Dummett 1978, 104; 1991, 88–92). The problem for psychologism lies in the fact that unconsciousness can never be

located within the realm of reason (the constituents of which are beliefs, intentions, and other propositional attitudes), which is consciously accessible in principle. Dummett's flat refusal of the psychologistic approach, however, puzzles most philosophers who pursue a *constitutive* construal of tacit knowledge. They doubt how a nonpsychological study could ever reveal the real transmission of information (with nonconceptual content) back and forth between a speaker's understanding of what is said at the personal level and the speaker's tacit knowledge (or mechanism) at the subdoxastic level.

The debate over what *form* implicit/tacit¹ knowledge of language should take remains unsettled among epistemologists of language (see especially Dummett 1978, 1981, 1991 [ch. 4], 1993 [Preface]; Chomsky 1986) and researchers in this field (see e.g., Miller 1997; Knowles 2000; Weiss 2003). In my view, the root of the debate lies in which methodological constraints (designed to impose upon an adequate construal of implicit knowledge) should be respected. But no matter which constraints are applied to form a model of implicit knowledge, the epistemologists of language are working under a common, little challenged assumption: a speaker's knowledge of a compositional meaning-theory for a natural language *L* constitutes the speaker's linguistic competence, the competence to know every (actual and potential) sentence of *L*. Some philosophers have cast doubt on this assumption (e.g., Soames 1984, 1985, 1989; see also Matthews 2003, for a discussion of skepticism about knowledge of language). But in order to suit my purpose, I select Davidson's version, which appears in his later philosophy of language (see Davidson 1984, 1986, 1989, 1993a, 1994).

2.

From an epistemology of language point of view, we can, as Wright puts it, "think of *actual* speakers as equipped with the information codified in the axioms of a successful Davidsonian theory, and as prone to deploy that information in ways reflected by the derivations of meaning-delivering theorems afforded by the theory" (Wright 1986, 206, emphasis mine). However, Davidson has never accepted such a proposal. He reminds us that

You will notice that I do not speak of implicit knowledge here or elsewhere: the point is not that speaker or hearer has a theory, but that they speak and understand in accord with a theory—a theory that is needed only when we want to describe their abilities and performance. (Davidson 1994, 113)

Davidson's attitude toward the notion of implicit knowledge is akin to John Foster's. Foster wondered, "[i]s it not unnatural,

even incoherent, to ascribe states of knowledge to which the subject himself has no conscious access" (Foster 1976, 2)? Of course, such an inquiry is based upon a commonsensical, or epistemic-internalist, notion of knowledge, and has been demystified to a certain extent by tacit knowledge-based theorists' efforts to clarify the notion "tacit knowledge" (e.g., Davies 1987). But Foster did not suggest that theorists conquer the difficulty within the program of tacit knowledge-based theories of meaning. His suggestion was far more radical: "[r]ather than ask for a statement of the knowledge implicit in linguistic competence, let us ask for the statement of a theory whose knowledge would suffice for such competence" (Foster 1976, 2). Davidson gladly and explicitly accepted such a proposal (Davidson 1976). In his view, the *role* of the notion of linguistic knowledge in a meaning-theory can be addressed as follows: "[a]ll we should require of a theory of truth for a speaker is that it be such that, *if* an interpreter had explicit propositional knowledge of the theory, he would know the truth conditions of utterances of the speaker" (Davidson 1990, 312). As Dummett rightly observes,

In [Davidson's] earlier essays, he was disposed to attribute to actual speakers an implicit knowledge of a correct meaning-theory for their language. In later writings, he forswore this attribution, claiming only that the meaning-theory constituted a body of knowledge whose possession by a subject would enable him to speak the language. (Dummett 1991, 103)

For Davidson, a meaning-theory is not really internalized in a speaker's or an interpreter's head as a *genuine* piece of knowledge. Instead, it is merely ascribed by a theorist of interpretation to the speaker and the interpreter *as if* they both possess such a theory. The upshot of Davidson's *instrumental* attitude toward the role of the notion of metalinguistic knowledge, in opposition to Peacocke's and Dummett's constitutive attitude, is that the epistemological problem of language can be sidestepped or legitimately ignored—the problem dubbed by Dummett as the *delivery problem*: "how possession of the [implicit] knowledge operates to guide, prompt, or control the speaker's utterances" (Dummett 1993, xi; see also Dummett 1991, 97). In the context of Davidson's philosophy of language, it is not necessary to uncover an *actual* speaker's or interpreter's knowledge (that enables him to master or understand a language), for what interests Davidson is an *ideal* speaker's or interpreter's (or to put it more accurately, a theorist of interpretation's) metalinguistic knowledge.

Although there is a debate between the instrumental and the constitutive attitude, the former is helpful for my further discussion about *whether knowledge of a formal semantic theory*

is a necessary and sufficient condition for linguistic competence. Or if we do not intend to be involved in an instrumental attitude, we can just imagine a speech community that can be called the α -community, the members of which speak English and are capable of *consciously accessing* the information processing between the axiomatic base of the meaning-theory for English and the meanings of utterances that are derived from the meaning-theory. (I shall return to this thought experiment later.)

Since the publication of his well-known paper “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs” (1986), Davidson has argued that “knowledge of [a formal semantic] theory is neither necessary nor sufficient for understanding a speaker” (Davidson 1999, 598). In Davidson’s own words,

let’s look at the concept of a language I opposed. It was this: 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 such an ability, and it requires no more than this. I argued that *sharing such a previously mastered ability was neither necessary nor sufficient for successful linguistic communication.* (Davidson 1994, 110, emphasis mine)

I shall call the thesis that is encapsulated in his 1986 paper the *Dispensability Thesis*, indicating that the knowledge of formal semantics is dispensable, and formulate it as follows:

Dispensability Thesis. Knowledge of a semantic theory (which is compositional and conventionalized in character) is neither necessary nor sufficient for linguistic competence and communication.

Davidson emphasizes this thesis in several replies to his critics and interpreters (Davidson 1993a, 1994, 1998, 1999). We must note that the thesis does not claim that we should abandon the study of formal semantic theories; it only claims that *knowledge* proffered by a formal semantic theory is neither necessary nor sufficient for linguistic capacity.

Before proceeding to argue for the thesis, I want to explain two essential characteristics of a semantic theory. First, a formal semantic theory must be *compositional*, otherwise it cannot account for the features of a human speaker who is supposed to be equipped with knowledge of the theory: that is, a speaker is “finite” in his knowledge store, and “infinite” or “productive” in his linguistic understanding. Second, a formal semantic theory must be *conventionalized*, by which I mean that the theory must be *shared in advance* by a speaker and a hearer; otherwise a speaker who possesses knowledge of a

semantic theory, though compositional, may not understand what is said by another speaker. Some may wonder why a speaker's linguistic competence should be bothered by his communicative competence or his inability to communicate with other speakers. In effect, a theory of *linguistic competence* can be transformed into (and had better be seen as) a theory of *linguistic communication*, once we treat a language-user's linguistic competence to understand *every actual and potential sentences in a particular language* as the same thing as his communicative competence to understand *every actual and potential utterances made by a speaker of that language*. If this new construal of "linguistic competence" is correct, then it indicates that merely having an unconstrained, or even compositional, semantic theory does not amount to possessing linguistic competence.

Let us turn back to our thought experiment and ask whether an α -speaker's knowledge of a semantic theory (which should be compositional and conventionalized in character) for English is a necessary and sufficient condition for him to master English or to interpret or communicate with other English speakers? In this regard, let us consider Davidson's examination of the phenomenon of malapropism. When Mrs. Malaprop utters the sentence "That is a nice derangement of epitaphs," an interpreter (*as an α -speaker*) should derive the following semantic theorem.

Th "That is a nice derangement of epitaphs" is true in English
iff That is a nice derangement of epitaphs.

to interpret Mrs. Malaprop's utterance. But it is possible that the α -interpreter uses this alternative "theorem."

Th* "That is a nice derangement of epitaphs" is true in English
iff That is a nice arrangement of epithets.

The α -interpreter is supposed to take Th to interpret Mrs. Malaprop, for, in this case, Th is the only information that the semantic theory for English can proffer. But then the α -interpreter fails to communicate with Mrs. Malaprop. As for Th*, it is not derived from the semantic theory for English; strictly speaking, it is not *derived* at all. The α -interpreter could refuse to consider any theorem that does not derive from the theory for English, including Th*, and treat Mrs. Malaprop as irrational (or insane) when he hears Mrs. Malaprop's utterance like "Sure, if I reprehend anything in this world, it is the use of my oracular tongue, and a nice derangement of epitaphs."

Or the α -interpreter could take Th* and other "deviant theorems" (in effect, again, they are not theorems at all) to interpret Mrs. Malaprop and keep communicating with her.

Most of time, malapropism can be understood; otherwise, the thing called malapropism would not be recognized as such. What allows the α -interpreter to construe Th^* ? How does Th^* spring to the α -interpreter's mind, if it is not derived?

In such a situation, the theory that the α -interpreter prepares in advance to interpret his speaker is called by Davidson the *prior theory*, and the theory that the interpreter *does* in fact use is called the *passing theory*. In the case of interpreting Mrs. Malaprop, Th^* is the α -interpreter's passing theory. According to Davidson, a prior theory is not, and should not be, shared by the interpreter and the speaker; a *shared passing theory* is what is required for communication. But this observation of successful communication does not imply or suggest that to possess passing theories and the (modified) semantic theory from which the passing theories are derived *constitutes* linguistic competence and communication. The argument for this is based on two reasons. First, when achieving communication, an interpreter's and an interpretee's theories (including both passing theories and the semantic theory from which the passing theories are derived) "must, of course, coincide *after* an utterance has been made, or communication is impaired. But unless they coincide in advance, the concepts of regularity and convention have no definite purchase" (Davidson 1984, 278). Second, though an interpreter can modify his semantic theory by accommodating the passing theory within it so as to be able to interpret a particular speaker (such as Mrs. Malaprop), knowledge of such a modification to the semantic theory, however, would be insufficient for the interpreter to interpret *another* idiosyncratic speaker.

The moral of the thought experiment can be stated as follows. Since knowledge of a shared prior theory is neither necessary nor sufficient for interpreting a speaker, neither is knowledge of the semantic theory that derives the prior theory. Knowledge of a semantic theory is not *sufficient* for understanding a speaker, since it is possible that an interpreter possesses the very knowledge (e.g., knowledge of the semantic theory for English) while he still does not understand a speaker's utterances (e.g., Mrs. Malaprop's utterance "That is a nice derangement of epitaphs"). Further, sharing knowledge of a semantic theory in advance, that is, having conventions or regularities, is not *necessary* for understanding a speaker, since an interpreter is capable of understanding or interpreting a speaker without conventions or sharing knowledge of the semantic theory with his interpretee (i.e., an interpreter is capable of assigning meanings, say, *arrangement* and *epithet* to the words "derangement" and "epitaph" respectively, the very assignment is different from one that the interpreter possessed in advance).

In my view, the root of Davidson's argument is his project of radical interpretation. It is possible for a radical interpreter,

who has no prior knowledge of his interpretee's culture and language, to understand the interpretee's utterances. In this imaginary scenario, the interpreter, in order to understand his interpretee (the speaker), has to construct interpretative hypotheses about the speaker's utterances and to test the hypotheses by the speaker's linguistic behavior. By such a process the interpreter can in the end understand the speaker, though there are many details in the process left unsaid here. The point is that there is a distinction between prior theories (or interpretative hypotheses) and passing theories (or confirmed hypotheses). Once such a distinction can be made, knowledge of a semantic theory that is prepared in advance is then proved to be unnecessary for understanding a speaker.

If the argument from radical interpretation is more fundamental than the argument from idiolectal error, why didn't Davidson, in arguing for the Dispensability Thesis, go straightforwardly through the scenario of radical interpretation instead of the phenomenon of malapropism? I think a positive reason for Davidson to take malapropism as his study case is that the argument from idiolectal error can preclude the possibilities of misconstruing the argument from radical interpretation. For example, in the scenario of radical interpretation, when an interpreter achieves a series of successful communications with his interpretee, he seems to reach the interpretee's meaning-theory, though over a long period of time. It seems then that the interpreter can apply such a meaning-theory in the future, that is, in his subsequent conversations with the interpreter. So there *seems* to be a possibility of getting a regularized or conventionalized meaning-theory. The case of malapropism, however, excludes this possibility: there is no form, rule, or regularity that governs the phenomenon of malapropism.

If my interpretation of, and argument for, the thesis in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" is correct and convincing, the epistemological program of modeling knowledge of language should be abandoned as a pointless enterprise—pointless, because what an epistemologist of language proffers, and could proffer, is not a *condition* for linguistic competence.

Many philosophers suspect that Davidson's thesis in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs"—which is usually construed by these philosophers as the *No-Language Thesis*, according to which there is no such thing as a language—conflicts with his program of truth-conditional semantics proposed in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (1984). They see a conflict between two Davidsons: a Tarskian Davidson and a Wittgensteinian Davidson (e.g., Bar-On and Risjord 1992, Rorty 1998). But this supposed issue would not undermine my formulation of the Dispensability Thesis unless it has been proven or well argued that the conflict does exist and is irreconcilable,² and further, that the Tarskian Davidson is correct.

3.

The Dispensability Thesis disentangles “knowledge of language” from “linguistic competence” but leaves two other major issues untouched. First, what is the role of knowledge of language? It seems that we do have linguistic knowledge, including both *thin* linguistic knowledge (which we can be aware of when we are prompted, such as our knowledge of English grammar) and *thick* linguistic knowledge or metalinguistic knowledge (which must be posited according to some theoretic considerations). Second, if the *meaning-theoretic account of linguistic competence* is incorrect, a natural retort is to ask what, then, is the *condition* of linguistic competence? What does linguistic competence require?

As to the first issue, Davidson does not deny the *existence* of knowledge of language (especially knowledge of conventions); what he claims is that a study of knowledge of conventions does not and cannot answer the question of what constitutes linguistic competence. A study of knowledge of conventions may be worthwhile, but the role of the notion “conventions” should be clarified or redefined first. Davidson makes his point about “conventions” clearly: “[k]nowledge of the conventions of language is ... a practical crutch to interpretation, a crutch we cannot in practice afford to do without—but 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” (Davidson 1984, 279). As to the second issue, Davidson has suggested that linguistic competence is an ability to converge on passing theories. There are two aspects of Davidson’s own account of linguistic competence. On the negative aspect, he tells us that

We may say that linguistic ability is the ability to converge on a passing theory from time to time.... [T]here are no rules for arriving at passing theories, no rules in any strict sense, as opposed to rough maxims and methodological generalities.... There is no more chance of regularizing, or teaching, this process than there is of regularizing or teaching the process of creating new theories to cope with new data in any field—for that is what this process involves. (Davidson 1986, 107; 1998, 327; see also Davidson 1984, 279)

This account, which can be called the *non-rule-governed account of linguistic competence*, is negative, for it merely tells us that no constitutive rule is needed in the explanations of language mastery and linguistic communication. On the positive aspect of Davidson’s account of linguistic competence, he writes:

A passing theory really is like a theory at least in this, that it is derived by wit, luck, and wisdom from a private vocabulary and

grammar, knowledge of the ways people get their point across, and rules of thumb for figuring out what deviations from the dictionary are most likely. (Davidson 1986, 107)

This description of linguistic competence is positive, or suggestive, because even if there is no rule that can be followed in constructing passing theories, we as speakers still have some methods or “rules of thumb” that can be *relied* upon to converge on passing theories. The process of interpreting others involves wit, luck, and rules of thumb, all of which are *heuristic* in character. Our linguistic competence consists in our capacity to construct (through heuristics) and test hypotheses of what we think a speaker intends to say. According to this interpretation, Davidson’s account of linguistic competence can be labeled as the *heuristic account of linguistic competence*.

In what follows, I bring up a problem in Davidson’s account(s) of linguistic competence. If a speaker’s linguistic competence is not rule-governed or rule-constitutive, why can’t the speaker adopt Humpty Dumpty’s theory of meaning, which states: “When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean”? Let us assume the speaker, or Humpty Dumpty, can. Then a difficulty naturally arises for *us* (rather than for Humpty Dumpty): we cannot understand sentences uttered by Humpty Dumpty, even if the words (word-tokens) he uses can be found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. We can construct interpretative hypotheses for Humpty Dumpty’s linguistic behavior and test them, but no matter how hard we try, we will fail to understand what Humpty Dumpty means by what he says. How could a philosopher of language account for (evade, describe, explain, or whatever) our inability to interpret, or communicate with, Humpty Dumpty? Call this the *Humpty Dumpty Problem*.

At first glance there *appears* to be no significant difference between Humpty Dumpty and Mrs. Malaprop: both of them just *behave* or *act* as an idiolect-user; that is, from an observer’s point of view, the words they use to mean just what they choose them to mean, no matter whether they detect, or not, the underlying theory that governs their linguistic behavior is Humpty-Dumptyian. For example, Mrs. Malaprop uses “That’s a nice derangement of epitaphs” to mean *That’s a nice arrangement of epithets*, and Humpty Dumpty uses “That’s glory for you” to mean *That’s a nice knockdown argument for you*.

If there is no significant difference between the two idiolect-users, Humpty Dumpty and Mrs. Malaprop, and if Davidson’s accounts of linguistic competence do tell us how it is possible for us to understand Mrs. Malaprop, then it is supposed that the accounts can deal with the Humpty-Dumptyian phenomenon as well. This supposition, however, is not true. Suppose we do have linguistic competence that is construed in Davidson’s

sense (that is, the ability to converge on a passing theory from time to time), and so does Humpty Dumpty. He probably already has, otherwise he would not have been able to understand, let alone answer, Alice's statement: "I don't know what you mean by 'glory'." In this situation, it is conceivable that we would not be able to understand Humpty Dumpty. He can use words in his Humpty-Dumpty manner without informing us or furnishing a clue as to what he chooses the words to mean. We wonder, what is still lacking that would constitute a successful communication between Humpty Dumpty and us? Davidson's accounts of linguistic competence do not cover this question at all.

4.

I think the root of the problem lies in Humpty Dumpty's enduring *character*. Although both Mrs. Malaprop and Humpty Dumpty are idiolect-users, there is a difference in kind between them: Mrs. Malaprop is an *ignorant* speaker, who makes idiolectal errors unintentionally, while Humpty Dumpty is an *arrogant* speaker, who creates idiosyncratic idioms on purpose. What does a speaker's personal quality matter in explaining linguistic competence and communication? The point can be seen more clearly when we consider how to distinguish Mrs. Malaprop, Humpty Dumpty, and James Joyce.

These three figures are most certainly *creative* language users—they all make their "language" new to their listeners, but they are nevertheless of different types. Mrs. Malaprop and Joyce—though the former is a lousy language user, while the latter is good at playing language (in an ordinary sense)—always make themselves *understandable* or *interpretable*, that is, allow their interpretee to understand and interpret what they mean by what they say. On the contrary, Humpty Dumpty is neither understandable nor interpretable. Without delving deeper into to a speaker's nature, there is no way to distinguish on the surface between the "linguistic competence" possessed by Mrs. Malaprop and James Joyce, on the one hand, and by Humpty Dumpty, on the other. Let us examine another example of how a speaker's character affects communication.

Assume that Humpty Dumpty is not only uninterpretable but also uncharitable. When Humpty Dumpty meets Mrs. Malaprop, he cannot understand what Mrs. Malaprop means by "That's a nice derangement of epitaphs." The reason that Humpty Dumpty cannot understand Mrs. Malaprop may be that he is not smart or lucky enough to construct a communicative hypothesis about what Mrs. Malaprop intends to mean. But there is another possibility: Humpty Dumpty may simply *refuse* to account for any "utterances" that cannot be dealt with in his language (or the meaning-theory he prepared in advance). He

may decline to treat utterances whose meaning cannot be produced from his semantic mechanism as true (let alone as true as possible, as what the principle of charity requires). In short, in this scenario Humpty Dumpty is not charitable in his interpretation. From a *virtue-semantic* point of view, what Humpty Dumpty lacks in communication is not an ability to converge on a passing theory, but the *virtue of interpretability* (when he is acting as an interpretee, such as when he talks to Alice) and the *virtue of charity* (when he is acting as an interpreter, such as when he meets Mrs. Malaprop).

Both virtues of interpretability and charity belong to what I shall call “interpretative virtue,” which can be defined as: a stable disposition of the mind that originates from the general motivation for linguistic communication and reliable success in attaining the ends of these motives. Interpretative virtues share the nature of virtue in general, so it is helpful to explore the former from the latter. In this regard, I think Linda Zagzebski’s (1996) *pure* theory of virtue is pleasing, for, as she claims, her analysis of virtue in general is broad enough to account for not only intellectual virtues, but also virtues in the fields of morality, art, religion, and so on (1996, 137).

According to Zagzebski’s theory of virtue, a virtue has both a *motivational* component and a *success* component. As to the first component, Zagzebski defines the term “motivation” as “a persistent tendency to be moved by a motive of a certain kind” (1996, 132, emphasis omitted) or “a disposition to have a motive” (1996, 137), and the term “motive,” which appears in the above definition, as an “emotion or feeling that initiates and directs action towards an end” (1996, 131, emphasis omitted). That is to say, a virtue can be understood, due to its motivational component, as a disposition to have an action-directing emotion with a certain end. As to the second component, it relates to the first component. A virtue *V* has an end, because *V* has a motivational component. A virtuous person with *V* desires to produce the end. The question is whether the person who is claimed to have *V* should *successfully* or *reliably* produce the end that is the aim of the motivational component of *V* so that he *does* have *V*? Zagzebski’s answer to the question is affirmative. She claims that “[v]irtue possession *requires* reliable success in attaining the ends of the motivational component of the virtue” (1996, 134, emphasis mine); and in another place she also says that “[a] person does not have a virtue *unless* she is reliable at bringing about the end that is the aim of the motivational component of the virtue” (1996, 136, emphasis mine). Zagzebski’s argument for the constraint that a virtue requires the success component, which I call the *argument from inconceivability*, can be addressed as follows.

It is clear that virtuous persons acting out of virtue have certain aims, and we generally think that it is not sufficient to merely *have* the aims in order to be virtuous, but that a virtuous person reliably produces the ends of the virtue in question.... [I]t does seem to me to be a plain fact about the way we ordinarily think of virtue that a virtuous person is someone who not only has a good heart but is successful in making the world the sort of place people with a good heart want it to be. (Zagzebski 1996, 99–100)

Our inability to conceive a virtuous person who is not reliably successful in attaining the end of the motivational component of the virtue in question reveals a constraint that a person *has to* bring about the end of the motivational component of a virtue so that he is entitled to *possess* the virtue. So construed, for example, a compassionate person is reliably successful in alleviating the suffering of others, and a generous person is reliably successful in giving freely to those who are in need.

So far I have explained Zagzebski's account that a virtue has both a motivational component and a success component. Interpretative virtues as a kind of virtue share the nature of virtue delineated above. The motivational component of an interpretative virtue is the disposition to be moved by the motive for successful communication, and the success component of the interpretative virtue requires an agent who possesses the virtue to reliably succeed in attaining communication. There is much to be said about Zagzebski's notion of virtue (see Alston 2000 [especially 185–6]; Driver 2000; Annas 2003),³ and my notion of interpretative virtue may be need to be redefined accordingly. Let us put this worry aside, however. The more interesting question is, assuming the aforementioned definition of interpretative virtue is acceptable, what is the *significance* of a study of interpretative virtues?

Philosophers now working on the theory of meaning have put themselves either in the camp of rule-based theories (such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Noam Chomsky, Dummett, the early Wittgenstein, the Tarskian Davidson, and more Davidsonians in varieties of forms), or in the camp of non-rule-based theories (such as the later Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida⁴). I do not think this classification is exhaustive, however. In light of the failure of the rule-based theories (in particular the meaning-theoretic account of linguistic competence) and the insufficiency of the non-rule-based theories (Davidson's non-rule-governed and heuristic accounts of linguistic competence), I propose a virtue-theoretic theory of meaning and language (or "virtue semantics") as an alternative. Such a shift can be seen as a shift in ethics, and a reason to shift the focus from rule-based or principle-based ethical theories (such as utilitarianism and Kantianism) to virtue ethics is mainly due to the dissatisfaction with the former. For instance, some philosophers have argued

that moral rules or principles always run out in hard cases, and some have argued that the rule-based moral theories cannot account for the motivational component of moral activities. One salient feature of the shift from a rule-based to a virtue-based approach is the *change in the direction of analysis* (cf. Axtell 2000, xiii): a virtue-based theory focuses on the properties of an agent (i.e., the *traits* of a person's character), while a rule-based theory focuses on the properties of, say, beliefs and acts, which are the *states* or *products* of an agent. Applying this feature to semantics we see that virtue semantics focuses on traits of speakers, rather than on the properties (of the reality) of language. Instead of asking how a language works, virtue semantics inquires into *how (it is possible) to be a speaker*. In this regard, virtue semantics aims to explain the possibility of being a competent speaker via the speaker's interpretative virtues, such as the virtues of charity ("Be charitable"), interpretability ("Be interpretable"), cooperation ("Be cooperative"), informativeness ("Be informative"), sincerity ("Be sincere"), relevance ("Be relevant"), perspicuity ("Be perspicuous"), and so on.⁵ It should be noticed that the notion of interpretative virtues that I introduced above is understood in the scenario of radical interpretation. If what we are concerned with is a set of fundamental virtues that would be *sufficient* for language-users to communicate, then the best way to highlight this concern is through the thought experiment of radical interpretation. (I am not concerned with the sort of "interpretative virtues" that assist, or would assist, interpreters or readers to achieve a *correct* or *objective* understanding of speakers or texts. Nor am I concerned with communicative *skills* that are designed to make communication fluent. Neither of these factors has anything to do with the possibility of communication.) So construed, from a virtue-semantic perspective, what is *required* in radical interpretation to achieve communication is not to apply any principle or rule (such as the principle of charity), but to possess various interpretative virtues, especially the virtues of charity and interpretability.

Since the focus of this paper is the *reason* for the change in the direction of analysis, in what follows I shall address how Davidson draws a lesson from an examination of the Humpty-Dumptyan theory of meaning. I shall show that there is a clue, neglected by Davidson, that can bring us to a virtue-theoretic account of linguistic competence.

In "James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty" (1989), Davidson tells us that there is a tension between "invention" and "tradition": "There is a tension between the thought that what a speaker intends by what he says determines what he means and the thought that what a speaker means depends on the history of the uses to which the language has been put in the past" (143). If we conceive the two thoughts in their most extreme form, it

can be found that the underlying thought of the latter is the rule-based theory of meaning, while the underlying thought of the former is the Humpty-Dumpty theory of meaning (i.e., “When *I* use a word it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more or less”). Which one is correct? For Davidson it cannot be the rule-based theory of meaning, since, as he has argued in several articles, prior knowledge of linguistic rules or conventions is neither necessary nor sufficient for linguistic communication, though such knowledge may be helpful in communication. Davidson, however, does not accept the Humpty-Dumpty theory of meaning, a kind of non-rule-based theory of meaning, either. He tells us that “[f]lying by the net of language could not ... imply the unconstrained invention of meaning, Humpty Dumpty style” (Davidson 1989, 147). Why should we put a constraint on how *speakers* must behave? I think this is Davidson’s reason:

In speaking or writing we intend to be understood. We cannot intend what we know to be impossible; people can only understand words they are somehow prepared in advance to understand. (Davidson 1989, 147)

If Humpty Dumpty does not intend to be understood by *human* speakers, he surely can use a word to mean what he chooses it to mean. But if he intends to be understood by human speakers, then there are several practical considerations he must take into account, especially that “people can only understand words they are somehow prepared in advance to understand.” This consideration reflects our human limitation. So it is suggested that when Humpty Dumpty constructs his prior theory to communicate with others he *should* account for his interpreter’s prior theory as well. This is the interpersonal constraint on how speakers must behave. As Marcia Cavell writes in the introduction to Davidson’s *Truth, Language, and History*, the choice between invention and tradition “is a false choice, Davidson argues: meaning is a function of what the speaker intends, but this intention includes what the speaker expects his hearer to understand. Thus Humpty Dumpty’s theory of meaning ... omits the crucial interpersonal element” (Cavell 2005, xvi). Let me construct Davidson’s argument against the Humpty-Dumpty theory of meaning in a detailed form as follows.

- P1. In speaking or writing, an interpretee (a speaker or writer) intends to be understood.
- P2. If an interpretee intends to be understood, the interpretee cannot ignore what his interpreter knows or assumes about the words he uses.

- C1. The interpretee cannot ignore what his interpreter knows or assumes about the words he uses. (from P1, P2)
- P3. In hearing or reading, an interpreter (a hearer or reader) can only understand words he is somehow prepared in advance to understand.
- C2. The interpretee's use of the words has to be constrained by the interpreter's prior knowledge. (from C1, P3)
- C3. The Humpty-Dumpty theory of meaning (according to which a speaker's use of words needs not be constrained by his hearers's knowledge) is incorrect. (from C2)

The lesson that Davidson intends to draw in the case of Humpty Dumpty, as pointed out above, is the emphasis on the interpersonal element in linguistic understanding. Some may think this emphasis is a mere platitude, but I think it improves upon Davidson's program of radical interpretation. The program is always conceived from a totally third-person perspective (i.e., from a hearer's or interpreter's perspective) on knowledge of language, characterizing what an interpreter would need to know when he knows (interprets) a speaker. The study of Humpty Dumpty shifts the focus of inquiry from *interpreter* to the *interpretee*. The study tells us that to speak a language an interpretee can't do whatever he likes—at least he cannot use a word to mean *just* what he chooses it to mean. Here Davidson imposes a constraint on an interpretee, or "radical speaker." In effect Davidson—or a possible philosopher Davidson*, if one does not agree with what I attribute to Davidson in what follows—also imposes, though implicitly, a constraint on a radical interpreter: an interpreter has to behave charitably in the process of constructing an interpretative theory. If to be understood linguistically and to understand a speaker is not a matter of "anything goes," or, if in mutual linguistic understanding it is required to meet the constraints on being an interpretee/interpreter, why don't we go beyond Davidson's non-rule-governed and heuristic accounts of linguistic competence to inquire further into the *basis* for a language user's "compulsory" actions? That is, if to be a hearer he *should* behave, say, charitably (so that he can understand his interpretee), and to be a speaker he *must* behave, say, interpretably (so that he can be understood), why don't we inquire into what the conditions are for such kind of linguistic "obligation"? Here the term "obligation" is used in a communication-oriented sense, neither utilitarian nor deontological. (Nor do I use the term in a "rule-governed" or "rule-following" sense, such as epistemologists of language would use. See also Davidson [1993b, 1994], where he understands the notion of "obligation" in a rule-following sense

and argues against the need of such an obligation as a condition for verbal communication.) What is at stake here is a language user's *motivation* for communication. If this observation is correct, a virtue-semantic approach is the fruitful way to pursue the inquiry.

5.

Epistemologists of language are inclined to impose rules or principles upon language-users. Such an imposition is questionable in principle, as we have shown in section 2. In reality, language users often break the rules or principles that philosophers impose upon them, yet they are still understandable. An adequate theory of meaning has to explain the "rule-broken" linguistic phenomena—they cannot be taken as playing only a marginal role in the study of language; in contrast, these linguistic phenomena constitute a test for any adequate theory of meaning and language (cf. Davidson 1993a, 167). Davidson's non-rule-governed and heuristic accounts of linguistic competence pass the test; however, the *normativity of language* (here I mean semantic normativity of the type of "ought-to-be" rather than that of "ought-to-do") is not and cannot be covered by such accounts. To be understood and to understand linguistically is not a matter of anything goes; there are norms concerning how (it is possible) to be speakers and hearers. If philosophers were willing to accept the virtue-semantic approach, they would find that both norm-involving and rule-broken phenomena can be explained in a unified manner.

A consequent advantage for virtue semantics is that it can deal with the question that Dummett has long pursued, that is, in what knowledge of language consists. Instead of pursuing a model for knowledge of language, a virtue semanticist *grounds* knowledge of linguistic rules in a speaker's interpretative virtues. From a virtue-semantic point of view, the fact that linguistic behavior is rule governed is seen as linguistic *epiphenomena*, rather than the justification or evidence for the rule-governed account of linguistic competence. For virtue semanticists there is no mystery of knowledge of language. Our linguistic behavior *is* (rather than *should be*) rule-governed, and we *do* have knowledge of a language that governs our linguistic behavior; these are the epiphenomena of our use of a language, rather than the conditions of our being able to use the language. Based on this understanding of the phenomenon of knowledge of language, I suggest that the inquiry should focus on the *source* or *basis* that underlies knowledge of language, rather than the nature of knowledge of language itself.

Notes

¹ In what follows, I use the terms “implicit” and “tacit” interchangeably. Cf. Weiss 2003.

² In effect, Davidson notes that “[a] number of readers sense a conflict between the importance I assign to formal semantical theories and the ‘there is no such thing as a language’ attitude of ‘A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs’” (Davidson 1998, 324). But he replies, “I see no conflict” (Davidson 1999, 598). He finds that “Pereda [1998] has the sensible idea of trying to reconcile the Wittgensteinian and Tarskian modes,” that is, “by emphasizing the importance of a general institutionalized linguistic background against which deviant verbal behavior is understood” (Davidson 1998, 324; 1999, 598).

³ As to the debate within the field of virtue epistemology about how to construe the notion of virtues, see Axtell 1997, where he distinguishes *virtue responsibilism* (the camp that proposes an Aristotelian construal of virtue, such as Zagzebski’s version) from *virtue reliabilism* (the camp that proposes a reliabilist construal; see especially Sosa 1991).

⁴ See especially Derrida’s debate with John Searle on the subject of speech act theory (the so-called Derrida–Searle debate) in Derrida 1988.

⁵ Examples of interpretative virtues are not hard to find: they can be formed either by our positing due to our own interest, or by transforming from various principles, rules, or maxims that we can find in literature, similar to what I did with Grice’s theory. For an elaboration of this idea, see Tsai 2006, ch. 7.

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