

# CONVENTIONS AND LINGUISTIC COMMUNICATION

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“It is a platitude —something only a philosopher would dream of denying— that there are conventions of language, although we do not find it easy to say what those conventions are.” (Lewis (1975)).

“No doubt what Lewis has in mind is the idea that the connection between words and what they mean is conventional. And perhaps only a philosopher would deny this; but if so the reason may be that only a philosopher would say it in the first place.” (Davidson (1982)).

## 1. Introduction

Is the notion of a convention necessary to explain linguistic communication? Perhaps a clearer question in this direction would be: what do speaker and hearer have to convey about for the latter to understand the former? Frege was perhaps the first philosopher to take the fact that human beings succeed in communicating with each other verbally as evidence that there are such things as senses which are shared by all competent speakers of a language. Carnap, who suspected the metaphysical credentials of the Fregean notion of sense, suggested in its stead the notion of a linguistic convention though with the aim of accounting for analyticity and synonymy rather than making sense of communication. As is well-known, Quine questioned the utility of the notion of a convention with respect to explaining analyticity. Nonetheless, David Lewis (1969) attempted to resuscitate linguistic conventions with the view of offering a necessary condition of verbal communication. In this paper, I will be discussing Lewis's proposal and also the notion of linguistic convention which permeates Wittgenstein's later philosophy. In section 2, I will be concerned with clarifying Lewisian conventions:

some criticisms of his manner of spelling out the concept of a linguistic convention will be discussed and dealt with. Section 3 will be dedicated to a more serious objection put forward by Davidson. I suggest that this objection should lead us to abandon Lewis's proposal in favor of Wittgensteinian conventions. Section 4 mounts a challenge to these latter conventions: they must, on the one hand, successfully face Davidson's criticism and, on the other, offer a satisfactory solution to the constitutive side of the Kripke-Wittgenstein skeptical problem about rule-following. The last two sections of the paper contain optimistic answers to the two parts of the challenge.

## 2. Lewisian conventions

In some of his most enigmatic remarks, Wittgenstein advances the idea that the concept of a practice can be used to explain what it is to follow a linguistic rule. The most conspicuous passage is the one which immediately follows the description of a supposed paradox generated within the conception of rule-following as a private activity<sup>1</sup>. There Wittgenstein says:

“And hence ‘obeying a rule’ is a practice<sup>2</sup>. And to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately’: otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.” (Wittgenstein (1953), par. 202).

In other passages of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein assimilates the notion of a practice to notions like custom, institution, technique, language-game, regular activity, regular

<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein (1953), par. 201.

<sup>2</sup> Anscombe translated the German sentence “Darum ist ‘der Regel folgen’ eine Praxis.” as “And hence also ‘obeying a rule’ is a practice.” I omit the “also” since there seems to me to be no textual evidence that Wittgenstein held rule-following to be a practice and something else.

use and convention<sup>3</sup>. But are any of these notions clear enough to serve as primitive for the elucidation of what it is to speak a language? Wittgenstein himself seems to have thought so and, apart from the many examples of language-games he offers in his later remarks, does not provide any further characterization of this cluster of notions. This attitude of refusing to theorize about what he must have taken as the crucial notions for the philosophies of language and mind has raised the suspicion of many philosophers. Davidson, for example, complains of Wittgenstein's disdain for theorizing about meaning, intention, use and motivation:

"There can be nothing wrong, of course, with the methodological maxim that when baffling problems about meanings, reference, synonymy, and so on arise, we should remember that these concepts, like those of word, sentence, and language themselves, abstract away from the social transactions and setting which give them what content they have. Everyday linguistic and semantic concepts are part of an intuitive theory for organizing more primitive data, so only confusion can result from treating these concepts and their supposed objects as if they had a life of their own. But this observation cannot answer the question how we know when an interpretation of an utterance is correct. If our ordinary concepts suggest confused theory, we should look for a better theory, not give up theorizing." (Davidson (1974), p. 143).

One interesting way of spelling out Wittgenstein's concept of a linguistic practice is that proposed by David Lewis<sup>4</sup>. The idea is to cash out this concept in terms of the concept of a convention, understood as follows:

A convention is a regularity (R) in action or in action and belief for a population (P) which satisfies these 6 conditions:

<sup>3</sup> For example, in Wittgenstein (1953), pars. 7, 23, 198, 199, 656 and in Wittgenstein (1978), I: par. 74.

<sup>4</sup> In Lewis (1969) and Lewis (1975).

- (1) everyone<sup>5</sup> in P conforms to R;
- (2) everyone believes that others conform to R;
- (3) the belief mentioned in (2) gives everyone a good reason to conform to R himself;
- (4) everyone prefers that everyone conforms to R;
- (5) there is at least one other regularity (R') which meets conditions (3) and (4);
- (6) everyone in P knows the contents of conditions (1) to (5) and each person in P knows that everyone knows the contents of conditions (1) to (5) and each person in P knows that everyone knows the contents of conditions (1) to (5) and so on. (Lewis (1975), p. 165).

Condition (1) states that certain regularities obtain in the behavior of speakers and between their behavior and the beliefs that their hearers form; speakers behave linguistically in ways that their hearers regard as regular; hearers react to speakers' similar linguistic behavior by forming similar beliefs. More specifically, speakers utter sentences with the intention to say something true—regularity of truthfulness—and hearers take speakers at their word, i.e., form beliefs as a result of these utterances whose content coincides with the utterance's content—regularity of trust. Of course, there may be regularities of other kinds as well; the idea is just that these two—truthfulness and trust—suffice to fix the semantic structure of a given language as spoken by a group of people. If this is the case then it would not be fair to cite routine non-truthful uses of sentences such as lying, being ironic, acting, telling or writing a fictional story, using metaphors and so on as evidence against the obtaining of, for example, the convention of truthfulness<sup>6</sup>. A Lewisian theorist of linguistic conven-

<sup>5</sup> According to Lewis, the characterization of convention would still stand if "everyone" was replaced by "almost everyone" in all the conditions (Lewis (1975), p. 165).

<sup>6</sup> Max Kölbel, for example, has recently suggested (1998) that Lewis's theory of conventions needs to be enriched with indefinitely many further conventions to escape refutation by the fairly common occurrence of lies, responses to exam questions, haggling and so on. The reasons why I think this objection is misguided (and Lewis would agree) are given below.

tions need not commit himself to the inviolability of the regularity of truthfulness; what he cannot accommodate is its *systematic* violation for that would render cheaters uninterpretable. According to Lewis, such speakers would be sinning against the principle of truthfulness, one of his proposed methodological principles of interpretation<sup>7</sup>. Sparser violations of truthfulness can be unproblematically accounted for by appealing to further reasons a speaker might have for deviating from that particular norm.

Condition (2) makes explicit an important aspect of communication. If communication is to succeed there must be at least this much coordination in belief between speakers and hearers: first, the speaker must believe that the hearer will conform to the regularity of trust, that is, believe that the former will come to share a belief that corresponds to the content of each of his utterances; second, the hearer must believe that the speaker will conform to the regularity of truthfulness, i.e., believe that the former will utter sentences whose content he believes to be true; third, speakers and hearers must believe themselves to be truthful and trusting respectively. The rationale for this coordination is again dictated by the method of interpretation. It is a condition of the possibility of interpretation that a language user renders transparent to a suitable interlocutor his intention to be interpreted in a certain way, and that the interlocutor is in a position to discern this intention. The successful transmission of this intention is thus what requires the second order beliefs mentioned in condition 2.

Condition (3) tells us that the belief that the other members of P conform to the linguistic convention (R) is a perfectly good reason for an arbitrary member of P to conform to R himself. Thus, suppose that in the communicative situation the speaker believes that his hearer will abide by the convention of trust and he intends to communicate something to the hearer. These are excellent reasons for the former to act in such a way as to respect the convention of truthfulness. Likewise,

<sup>7</sup> See Lewis (1974), pp. 114-5.

if his interlocutor believes that the speaker will be truthful and he wants to grasp what the latter says, then the former has good reasons to be trusting. According to Lewis, the belief that his fellow language users will follow the convention need to obtain more than just between present speaker and his hearer. Equally important in their role of rationalizing the acts of the present speaker and hearer of conforming to those conventions are their beliefs that past speakers and hearers have also obeyed the conventions of truthfulness and trust.

Condition (4) mentions a desire that must be present in order to sustain the conformity to a linguistic convention R—that is, the desire that everybody, including oneself, be in accord with R. If some or many of the members of P prefer not to follow linguistic rules at all, then it is hard to imagine how there could be such a thing as a language. But this desire must be motivated in turn by a desire to communicate. If the actors in the communicative scene have communication as their goal and both believe that the way to fulfil this goal is for each one to be truthful and trusting, then they will form the desire to be truthful and trusting. Together with the belief mentioned in (2) and (3), the desire to be truthful and trusting in the language L, as well as the desire to communicate, constitute part of the rational explanation of the linguistic behavior of the population P.

Condition (5) articulates one of the most relevant features of the notion of a linguistic convention: its arbitrariness. This is simply the idea that given a systematic regularity of truthfulness and trust in a language L there is always another systematic regularity of the same kind in L' (let's say) that would serve the same purposes of communication as the first; the alternative regularity of truthfulness and trust in L' would be sustained by beliefs and desires similar to the ones mentioned in conditions (2), (3) and (4). Population P uses L but could have used L' for exactly the same ends. It would perhaps be relevant to add at this stage that the claim that our language possesses at least this element of arbitrariness does not commit the conventionalist to any thesis about how

language originated. He is telling a story about what rationalizes and maintains the conventional regularities our language exhibits. Nothing said till now gives us any clue as to how or why we came to settle on these conventions as opposed to others.

The last condition (condition (6)) is an attempt to account for the stability of linguistic conventions. In "Languages and Language", Lewis suggests that this requirement of common (ground and higher order) knowledge of conditions (1) to (5) in the population P may be too strong; he advances in its stead a weaker condition (6) whereby the knowledge operator is replaced by the belief operator. We are left then with a common (ground and higher order) belief in the contents of conditions (1) to (5) in P.

Tyler Burge<sup>8</sup> has offered some counterexamples to even this mitigated condition (6). According to him, a regularity can be judged to be a convention even though the members of P do not know or even believe that it is arbitrary. This might be so merely because the speakers in P could not conceive of any alternative regularity which would serve the same purposes the linguistic convention they abide by serves. This would be the case for a completely isolated linguistic community; the case of Euclidean geometry before the discovery of alternative geometries is a similar one. Burge thinks that not even condition (5) is entirely satisfactory. To illustrate that, he invites us to imagine a community each member of which believes that the words of his or her language possess a divine power so that the belief that the other members of the community follow another linguistic convention would not give him or her a good reason to switch to the alternative convention and furthermore he or she would not prefer to do that rather than stick to his or her own.

I think Burge is right that condition (6) even in its weaker form (with the belief rather than the knowledge operator) is too demanding. I find it more difficult to agree with him as

<sup>8</sup> In Burge (1975).

far as condition (5) is concerned. The reason for my skepticism is that it does seem to capture the intuition that conventions are arbitrary. Burge himself admits that conventions are arbitrary in at least two senses: a) they are determined neither by the biology or psychology of speakers nor by the sociology of linguistic communities; b) they are not unique in best accomplishing the social aims they do in fact accomplish. That Lewis wants to encapsulate with condition (5) exactly these senses of arbitrariness (especially the second) can be seen much more clearly from his second formulation of condition (5) in "Languages and Language".

Perhaps it would be fair to propose as the upshot of the above discussion that, subject to suitable adjustments, Lewis's notion of a linguistic convention reflects some strong intuitions about the regularity, stability, arbitrariness and rationality of our linguistic activity are contemplated by Lewis's notion of a linguistic convention. The most pressing question, however, is whether even with the adjustments in condition (6), Lewisian conventions will be of any help in accounting for the possibility linguistic communication.

### **3. Davidson's criticism of Lewisian conventions**

Davidson, for example, has expressed various misgivings about the prospects of successfully accounting for linguistic communication in terms of conventions. The general charge is that the kind of agreement between speaker and hearer which Lewisian conventions require is much more extensive than what is actually necessary for them to communicate linguistically. Thus, after admitting that mutual linguistic understanding between two people demands mutual agreement with respect to the interpretation of the speaker's words, Davidson says:

"I do not doubt that all human linguistic communication does show a degree of such regularity, and perhaps some will feel inclined to make it a condition of calling an activity linguistic



that there should be such regularity. I have doubts, however, both about the clarity of the claim and its importance in explaining and describing communication. The clarity comes into question because it is very difficult to say exactly how speaker's and hearer's theories for interpreting the speaker's words must coincide. They 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 (1982), pp. 277-8).

Davidson's point in this passage is that concepts such as convention or practice would lose their explanatory power without antecedent agreement between speaker and hearer about the meaning of the speaker's words. The picture that according to Davidson underlies the Lewisian (and perhaps also Wittgensteinian conventionalism) seems to be the following: stable communication —at least in the normal cases where truthfulness and trust are sustaining it— can only be achieved if communicators agree in advance about the beliefs corresponding to each of the utterances of the speaker. This must be so unless there occurs a failure either of the regularity of truthfulness or of that of trust, in which case the belief the speaker intended to express by an utterance would differ from the belief his hearer would have formed as a result of the utterance. For Davidson, such an account of linguistic communication is too rigid; he claims that the kind of agreement postulated by the conventionalist is not strictly necessary for communication to succeed.

Davidson's objection to the conventionalist echoes his complaint against Kripke's communitarian answer to the question about what constitutes using a word with a certain meaning, part of the famous skeptical problem about meaning. The problem is closely related to the worries Wittgenstein expressed about linguistic rule-following. The problem with which Wittgenstein struggled in the *Philosophical Investigations*<sup>9</sup> can be put like this: how can we account for our

<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein (1953). Henceforth, *Investigations*.

speaking and understanding a language? Since he thought mastering a language was tantamount to learning to follow linguistic rules, Wittgenstein formulated the problem in terms of rule-following. Some passages of his later work suggest that the problem is a metaphysical one of spelling out what it is to follow a linguistic rule. Consider, for example, this one:

“Let me ask this: what has the expression of a rule —say a sign-post— got to do with my actions? What sort of connexion is there here?—Well, perhaps this one: I have been trained to react to this sign in a particular way, and now I do so react to it. But that is only to give a causal connexion; to tell how it has come about that we now go by the sign-post; not *what this going-by-the-sign really consists in*<sup>10</sup>. On the contrary; I have further indicated that a person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom.” (Wittgenstein (1953), par. 198).

Apart from the constitutive dimension of Wittgenstein’s rule-following problem, there is clearly an epistemological aspect to it as well. This is the question of the nature of our cognitive access to rule-following. Here one must distinguish between first-person and third-person access to the contents of our words; Wittgenstein was of course sensitive to the asymmetry between the knowledge the speaker himself has of his own language and his audience’s knowledge of that language. Evidence that Wittgenstein saw an epistemological aspect to the problem of rule-following, and, moreover, that he distinguished between first- and third-person variants of the epistemological question can be found in passages like these two:

“Suppose you came as an explorer into an unknown country with a language quite strange to you. *In what circumstances would you say that the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on?*<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> The italics are mine.

<sup>11</sup> My italics.

The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language.” (Wittgenstein (1953), par. 206).

“How can he *know* how he is to continue a pattern by himself —whatever instruction you give him?— Well, *how do I know?*<sup>12</sup>—If that means ‘Have I reasons?’ the answer is: my reasons will soon give out. And then I shall act, without reasons.” (Wittgenstein (1953), par. 211).

The reason why the two epistemological questions must be kept apart can also be extracted from the two last quotes: Wittgenstein believed that whereas third-person access to rule-following is achieved via interpreting the speaker’s behavior, first-person grasp of rule-following is practical<sup>13</sup>. These are topics I have discussed at length elsewhere<sup>14</sup>.

Kripke presents us with another way of approaching the problem of rule-following. He challenges us to find a fact about a language user (S) which: a) can constitute S’s using a word ‘w’ of his idiolect with a certain definite meaning (for instance, using ‘+’ to refer to addition); and b) justify S in his belief that he uses ‘w’ with that meaning (for example, his belief that ‘+’ in his idiolect refers to addition)<sup>15</sup>. Here again we are faced with a metaphysical question (a) and an epistemological one (b). Kripke’s skeptical conclusion about the metaphysical question is that there is no fact about the speaker which constitutes his using a word with a given content. According to Kripke, such a constitutive fact consists in the way a community of speakers uses the words of its common language; the talk of an arbitrary speaker can be compared with the communitarian use of language for correctness. To point to this fact about a linguistic community is therefore to spell

<sup>12</sup> Here again the italics are mine.

<sup>13</sup> A passage where Wittgenstein claims much more clearly that first-person grasp of linguistic rules is practical occurs on page 237 of his *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Diamond (1975)).

<sup>14</sup> First, in Pinto (1998), chapter 3 and, second, in Pinto (1999), sections 3 and 4.

<sup>15</sup> This is in Kripke (1982), pp. 11, 12, 23.

out the communitarian norm for word use: whatever a member of the community does with his or her words. This means, however, that to speak correctly a language user must speak exactly as members of the community would. And, since it makes sense to attribute intentionality to their linguistic responses, it is also reasonable to suppose that agreement in those responses corresponds to agreement with respect to the beliefs associated with such responses. This invites the charge made by many opponents of the community view that the communitarian notion of the linguistic norms is unavoidably judgement dependent<sup>16</sup>.

According to both communitarianism and conventionalism, then, mutual understanding then requires agreement prior to people's linguistic transactions about the correspondence between each utterance and its respective belief. Hence, the difficulty Davidson sees with the conventionalist picture of linguistic communication is inherited by the community view<sup>17</sup>. The difficulty, let us recall, came down to the point that these accounts demand more agreement between language users than is required for communication to take place; less agreement would have done as well. Moreover, Davidson insists, the pervasive occurrence of malapropisms and similar speech mistakes shows that in most cases communication is not impaired by their more than sporadic occurrence<sup>18</sup>. But within a conventionalist or communitarian framework communication would break down were these mistakes to happen systematically.

Let me elaborate on this point a bit. Take, for example, the following exchange between Alfred MacKay and Keith Donnellan quoted by Davidson<sup>19</sup>. Citing Donnellan's explanation of the difference between the referential and attributive

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, John McDowell (1984), p. 328.

<sup>17</sup> I am here thinking only of the pioneers of the community view: Crispin Wright (Wright (1980)) and Saul Kripke (Kripke (1982)).

<sup>18</sup> This is argued for in Davidson's paper on malapropisms (Davidson (1986a)).

<sup>19</sup> Appearing in Davidson (1986a), pp. 438-40.

use of a definite description—for instance, the one that occurs in the sentence “Smith’s murderer is insane”—MacKay complained that Donnellan endorsed a theory of meaning like that favored by Humpty Dumpty<sup>20</sup>. For it looked as if according to such a view which meaning a description has will depend on the speaker’s intention<sup>21</sup>. Donnellan replied that the speaker’s linguistic intentions are irremediably linked to beliefs and expectations about how the hearer is going to understand his utterances, so that it would be absurd for the speaker to have these intentions if he did not justifiably believe that his interlocutor would grasp the content he intended to give to his words and he did not justifiably expect the interlocutor to understand him in the way he intended to be understood. Donnellan illustrates this by saying that if he were to end his reply to MacKay with the utterance “There’s glory for you” he would be understood by MacKay as he intended and would thereby have meant “a nice knock-down argument” by “glory”.

Donnellan’s use of “glory” was not completely new, since the prior mention of Alice’s story and the context of the exchange between him and MacKay provided the latter with the right clues about how to interpret Donnellan’s utterance of “there’s glory for you”. Nonetheless, it portrays the speaker as deviating from the usual meaning of a word of our common

<sup>20</sup> A first-person stipulative account of the content of the words of one’s idiolect. In an argument with Alice over whether birthdays are better than unbirthdays (the remaining 364 days of the year), Humpty Dumpty concludes by saying that while there is only one day for birthday presents there are 364 days for unbirthday presents and adds: “there’s glory for you”. As she confesses not to have understood what he meant by “glory”, he recognizes that this must have happened since he has not told her yet; the words of his language mean whatever he chooses them to mean. Then he tells her that for him “glory” means the same as “a nice knock-down argument”.

<sup>21</sup> In the case of someone who utters the sentence “Smith’s murderer is insane”, he or she may intend to refer to a man he or she believes has murdered Smith and succeed in doing so even if his or her belief is false; but he or she may also use the sentence attributively that is, use it to assert of whoever murdered Smith, if there ever was such a man, that he was insane.

language and nevertheless succeeding in his communicative intentions. Another example of such a success is provided by Davidson himself when he announces the title of his paper as "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs". The intended meaning of the title is promptly captured by anyone who reads the paper.

The interesting thing about malapropisms and similar linguistic phenomena is that the speaker uses an old word with an unusual meaning, a meaning which is not related to any of the word's standard meanings. To use Grice's terminology, malapropisms are paradigmatic cases in which what a speaker meant by an expression (speaker's meaning) and what the expression means in the common language (word meaning) come apart from one another. Thus, in Davidson's title, "epitaph" normally means tombstone inscription, whereas in this context the author's intended meaning was the same as that which corresponds to the common use of "epithet". But if, as the communitarist or conventionalist would have us believe, the meaning of a speaker's word must coincide with the meaning attributed to it by somebody else (a member of a linguistic community) in relevantly similar circumstances, then any divergence of the speaker's intended meaning from the conventional meaning must result in his failing to communicate with others.

Notice that the problem here is not that mentioned in our discussion of Lewis's condition (1). There the question was how to account for the different speech acts that correspond to the same sentence in Lewis's approach. The present concern is with explaining how the fact that a content can be expressed by a word which is not usually linked to that content.

Davidson opposes to the communitarian and conventionalist picture of linguistic communication an account which is compatible with the pervasive occurrence of this latter phenomenon. Communication, he claims, requires that speaker and interpreter agree about the meaning of the words of the speaker; but this agreement need not precede their linguistic exchange. This means that the prior theory the interpreter brings to the occasion of communication may differ considerable

rably from the theory the speaker uses to guide his linguistic conduct on that occasion. According to Davidson, successful communication only demands that the posterior (or revised) theory of interpretation converges to the speaker's theory. The latter theory will articulate the contents the speaker intends to communicate with his words. Following clues given by him, the interpreter will have to revise his prior theory so that it finally more or less coincides with the speaker's theory. If the latter rough coincidence is achieved then communication takes place.

If Davidson is right, then the norm for the correct use of words consists in the linguistic intentions of the speaker. This is not to say that communication can succeed in the total absence of prior semantic agreement between speaker and interpreter. For in order to grasp the linguistic intentions of his interlocutor, the interpreter must agree with him about how to classify a very large number of the latter's linguistic and non-linguistic acts. This in turn is ensured by the fact that in the vast majority of cases speaker and interpreter react to roughly similar stimuli (linguistic and otherwise) in roughly similar ways<sup>22</sup>.

Thus, suppose that an English speaker (John) is in Prague and wants to buy a ticket to travel by streetcar; he has an inkling that the newsagent at the corner, who understands no English, might sell it. John then goes to him, says ten streetcar tickets and points to the streetcar that is just approaching the corner. Suppose further that the newsagent then shows him a packet with streetcar tickets and John reacts by raising his two open hands. After that the newsagent writes the total amount on a piece of paper. John pays, takes the tickets and continues his sightseeing. Some conditions of success of this brief linguistic exchange can be stated right away. Speaker and hearer must react similarly to the gesture of pointing, to the symbols that refer to numbers and so on. They must also believe that the speaker pronounced some words, that he

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Davidson (1994).

pointed to the streetcar, that the newsagent showed the speaker a packet of tickets and so on.

The issue between Davidson, on the one hand, and the Lewisian conventionalist or the Kripkean communitarian, on the other, turns on the amount of agreement necessary to sustain linguistic communication. Perhaps it would be useful to include in this comparison the Cartesian for whom understanding a language does not require any agreement in response or belief between a speaker and somebody else. On the Cartesian picture, it is possible for someone to speak a language no one else could interpret that is, a private language<sup>23</sup>. Now, to use Davidson's terminology, for the Cartesian the attribution of language to a speaker would not require that the speaker's theory for guiding his linguistic behavior coincide with an interpretative theory for that behavior. The conventionalist and communitarian in turn would demand the coincidence of the prior theories<sup>24</sup> speaker and hearer respectively take to the occasion of communication. And finally Davidson claims that coincidence of the two passing theories<sup>25</sup> suffices to guarantee linguistic communication. I am prepared to concede that to Davidson. The question which I want to discuss next is whether, as Davidson maintains, the notion of a convention or practice necessitates an agreement between the

<sup>23</sup> I would like to keep the notions of a private language and of a solitary language apart. The former refers to a language that only the speaker *could* understand whereas the latter denotes a language that as matter of fact only one speaker understands. An example of a private language is that criticized by Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* (Wittgenstein (1953), pars. 243-304); instances of a solitary language are that spoken by Robinson Crusoe or that mentioned in paragraph 243 of the *Investigations*, the language of the monologist. Notice that while in the private language the content and reference of its expressions is private, in the solitary language these are public in the sense that if there was an observer he or she might be in a position to grasp their content and have some access to their referents.

<sup>24</sup> The theories about the content of the words of the speaker possessed by the speaker and his hearer before their linguistic exchange.

<sup>25</sup> That is, the revised versions of the speaker's and of the interpreter's theories in the course of their linguistic exchange.



two prior theories mentioned above. If not, then there is room for a mitigated notion of convention in the explanation of what it is to communicate linguistically.

#### 4. Wittgensteinian practices versus Davidson

As we saw, Lewisian conventions connect similar utterances of certain expressions with similar linguistic intentions—as far as the speaker is concerned—and with similar beliefs—as far as the hearer is concerned. The regular link between utterances and intentions and between these utterances and beliefs corresponds to the first feature of Lewis's elucidation of the notion of a convention. If there were no agreement between communicators prior to their linguistic intercourse then the conventions of truthfulness and trust would be violated and communication would break down. Suppose then that as a result of a malapropism the conventional link between linguistic acts (utterances) and intentions and beliefs is severed. Would it not be open to Lewis in this case to say that the violation of certain regularities of truthfulness and trust can be explained by appealing to these regularities and some feature of the communicative situation which can be used by the hearer to cotton on to the right interpretation of what the speaker said? Such a feature could be, for example, the phonetic similarity between the expression employed by the speaker and the one that is usually associated with the content the speaker intended to convey.

It is tempting to think that such a response to Davidson's objection is available to Lewis since, on the one hand, the latter is well aware of Grice's distinction between speaker's meaning and word meaning and, on the other hand, he also helps himself to the concept of radical interpretation in order to provide a general explanation of what it is for someone to speak a language (and, more generally, to have a mind)<sup>26</sup>. The speaker's

<sup>26</sup> For this purpose see Lewis (1974) and Lewis (1970).

meaning/word meaning dichotomy requires an account that can accommodate intentional and successful deviations from the ordinary use of words. The method of radical interpretation that is, the method of searching for the system of hypotheses about the content of a speaker's utterances and about his propositional attitudes which maximizes his intelligibility for an interpreter may turn out to provide the desired account<sup>27</sup>. Moreover, Davidson's own theory of radical interpretation seems to suffer from the similar problem of having to rely on the existence of a massive amount of regularity between the utterances of a speaker and what he goes on to do, or between such utterances and the obtaining of certain situations in the world as described by his interpreter.

The issue between Lewis and Davidson cannot therefore consist in the fact that the latter would deny whereas the former would insist on the obtaining of behavioral regularity which will count as evidence for the future proposal of a system of interpretive hypotheses for a given speaker. The point of conflict seems to be that, on Lewis's lights, the regularity (or convention) the hearer expects to find in the behavior of his interpretee *constitutes* the norm for word use. This is the crucial claim that Davidson rejects. If we reject that claim, Davidson would say, the concept of a convention would cease to apply to the behavioral regularity that might, from the point of view of an observer, serve as evidence for the interpretation of an interlocutor of his. The concept of convention would cease to apply to such a regularity because the latter may be a regularity that strictly speaking no two communicators share, in which case Lewis's condition (1) would not be satisfied<sup>28</sup>. One may wonder,

<sup>27</sup> Lewisian principles for the maximization of intelligibility like charity, rationalization, truthfulness, manifestation and that of the triangle are discussed in Lewis (1974).

<sup>28</sup> The question remains of why Lewis needed so demanding a notion of a convention, that is one that puts so much weight on the role of the social in the account of what constitutes speaking a language. This question seems to me the more pressing because Lewis also avails himself of a certain notion of radical interpretation. The only answer that occurs to me

however, if there is any interesting concept of convention or practice that can both (a) respect Davidson's criticism of the necessarily shared character of linguistic conventions and (b) still be employed to provide an answer to the constitutive question of the rule-following problem (and hence of the skeptical problem about meaning).

A notion of practice which I think can satisfy these conditions is the one that Wittgenstein puts forward in the *Investigations*. Earlier on we left aside Wittgenstein's notion of a *linguistic practice* for a while, let us recall, in the hope that there might be some clarification of it via, say, the Lewisian notion of a linguistic convention. Now, since such a notion of convention seems hobbled by Davidsonian considerations, it is perhaps worth reconsidering the notion of convention proposed by the author of the *Investigations*.

### 5. Wittgensteinian practices and the constitutive aspect of the rule following problem

Let me start by considering the question of whether Wittgenstein's practices<sup>29</sup> (techniques, customs, conventions and so on) can successfully meet the desideratum (b) mentioned above. One of the most conspicuous formulations of a practice<sub>w</sub> occurs in paragraphs 198-199 and 202 of the *Investigations*, where Wittgenstein addresses the problem of explaining the connection between utterances of words or sen-

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is that Lewis's project of uncovering the content of the words of a speaker and his motivations via the method of radical interpretation is too ambitious. Lewis requires the evidence for the general theory of interpretation for a language user to consist of facts about him as physically described. The project is therefore that of showing how to generate all the mentality of the speaker from an empirical basis whose description does not contain any intentional notion. This is what forces Lewis to impose many more constraining principles (like, for example, the principle of truthfulness) on the theory of interpretation than those used by Davidson.

<sup>29</sup> From now on, I shall denote the Wittgensteinian notion of a practice by the expression "practice<sub>w</sub>" and the Lewisian notion by "practice<sub>L</sub>".

tences and our actions. This is how Wittgenstein formulates his solution to the problem in paragraph 199<sup>30</sup>:

“(...) It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule. It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which a report was made, an order given or understood; and so on.—To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (uses, institutions).

To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique.” (Wittgenstein (1953), par. 199).

Linguistic practices<sub>w</sub> are thus proposed by Wittgenstein as an answer to the constitutive aspect of the problem of explaining rule-following. They are regularities in the behavior of speakers (between different linguistic acts and between linguistic acts and non-linguistic acts of the same or different speakers) described as actions, that is, by means of intentional vocabulary. Thus, in the language-game of saying aloud or writing down a series of natural numbers<sup>31</sup>, the teacher performs a certain action (utters certain words) and the pupil performs a group of other actions (writes down a sequence of signs). As Wittgenstein puts it, an adequately positioned observer might read off this language-game as a system of natural laws governing the game<sup>32</sup>. But in order to be in a position to do this, the observer<sup>33</sup> must discern intentionality in such a behavior, that is awareness and sensitivity on the part of the performers of and to the norms of correct performance. I take this Wittgensteinian claim to mean that the interpreter must observe speaker and interlocutor already giving or-

<sup>30</sup> Recall also the already quoted paragraphs 198 and 202.

<sup>31</sup> Wittgenstein (1953), pars. 143-155, 179-186.

<sup>32</sup> Wittgenstein (1953), par. 54.

<sup>33</sup> The character of the observer, foreign explorer or interpreter makes his appearance in various passages of the *Investigations*. See, for example, paragraphs 32, 54, 207, 243 and paragraph 48, part VI of Wittgenstein (1978).

ders, obeying or refusing them, making utterances, asking questions, making decisions and so on. And to see intentionality in the behavior of the interpretees, Wittgenstein insists, does not beg the question of what constitutes linguistic meaning because it is possible to detect such an intentional behavior even without knowing the language of the interpretees<sup>34</sup>.

The difficulty that supposedly besets any attempt to explain linguistic meaning in terms of an intentional notion may be spelled out in the following way. Our initial problem was how to account for the constitution of the intentional notions of following a linguistic rule (Wittgenstein) or, equivalently, of understanding a word in a certain way (Kripke). If one opts for saying that understanding is constituted by something that is itself intentional (a practice<sub>w</sub>, say), then it looks as if we are led back to the initial problem, for the same constitutive question can be raised about the new intentional item. As far as I can see, there are only two possible lines of solution to this difficulty. The first is to look for the constitution of the intentional realm outside of it; that is, to answer the constitutive question concerning any intentional fact in terms of a non-intentional one. Instances of this strategy are the numerous accounts of linguistic understanding in terms of particular dispositions<sup>35</sup>. I have expounded my reasons for being pessimistic about the prospects of dispositionalism elsewhere<sup>36</sup>.

The second line of solution to the present difficulty is to try and find some explanatory intentional notion, recognition of which in the behavior of the foreigners does not require prior knowledge on the part of an interpreter of their language and the complex pattern of their propositional attitudes. Examples of strategies of this second kind are advanced by both Davidson and the later Wittgenstein. In Davidson's case, the basic intentional concept in terms of which the notions

<sup>34</sup> This is in Wittgenstein (1953), par. 54.

<sup>35</sup> An example of dispositionalism is that proposed by Scott Soames in Soames (1997). I discuss his proposal in a forthcoming paper (Pinto (2000)).

<sup>36</sup> This is in Pinto (2000).

of linguistic meaning, belief and desire are explained is that of a preference for the truth of one sentence rather than another. Davidson's radical interpreter observes instances of such a desire in the behavior of his subjects. This kind of evidence does not beg the question of how somebody can come to know the language of an alien group of people because it is possible to discern this desire without antecedently knowing the content of the pair of sentences the truth of one of which a subject prefers or the complex pattern of his propositional attitudes<sup>37</sup>.

Although Wittgenstein is never as explicit and careful as Davidson about the kind of intentional evidence that could serve an interpreter to work out the language, motivations and worldview of a group of foreign speakers, there is textual support for the idea that he believes certain more basic intentional behavior can be immediately discerned without prior knowledge of the pattern of the speakers' meanings and their attitudes towards these meanings<sup>38</sup>. But a skeptic might want to drive his wedge there between what the interpreter observes (the basic intentional behavior he sees them performing) and that which the interpretees actually do (this basic intentional behavior). Is there room for skepticism here?

It may be that what an interpreter takes to be the characteristic signs of such basic intentional behavior (for example, the characteristic signs of giving and obeying an order, pronouncing a word or sentence, asking a question and answering it and so on) do not really correspond to it. One can imagine, as Wittgenstein never tires himself of doing, a tribe whose behavior diverges so radically from ours that we could not recognize their bodily movements as those which we ordinarily associate with counting objects, giving orders and obeying them, playing a game and so on<sup>39</sup>. One could also imagi-

<sup>37</sup> The point is explicitly made by Davidson in various of his papers on radical interpretation.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, the above mentioned paragraph 54 and also paragraph 506 of the *Investigations*.

<sup>39</sup> Wittgenstein imagines a tribe the members of which play chess by yelling and stamping their feet (Wittgenstein (1953), par. 200).

ne a tribe of perpetual fakers: that is, a community of speakers who exhibit what looks like the same basic intentional behavior we normally present our potential interpreters with but which does not actually correspond to that behavior. The paradigmatic example of this family of cases in the *Investigations* is that of a person who, upon being shown a sequence of new characters, displays all the characteristic signs of having read them, even though the characters may not be part of any alphabet<sup>40</sup>.

At this stage, a connection between the above and a certain aspect of the mind-body problem might be illuminating. What I have in mind here is the question of whether mental events are identical with physical events, and, in particular, whether this identity is contingent or necessary. David Lewis claims that any acceptable theory of the mind must accommodate the more or less bizarre cases of mad pain and Martian pain<sup>41</sup>. The second corresponds to the situation in which mental states of the same type (states of pain, say) are realized in a different physical system (the state of pain does not correspond, for example, in this system to nervous C-fibers firing). Mad pain instantiates the family of cases where mental states of the same type differ in their respective causal roles. The idea is that something might still be pain although what normally occupies the places of its causes and effects differs considerably from what usually play those roles in the case of human pain. According to Lewis, mad pain is not caused, as pain is among us, by cuts, burns, pressure, and so on. And unlike human pain, it is not distracting; it does not lead the subject to groan or writhe; and nor does it compel the subject to do something to get rid of it.

Lewis holds a token-token identity theory of the mind. In order to leave room for mad pain and Martian pain, he had to say that mind-body identities are contingent. Wittgenstein's two examples may suggest that he holds a similar view

<sup>40</sup> Wittgenstein (1953), par. 160.

<sup>41</sup> This is in Lewis (1980).

about the relation between mental and physical states or events. But it is not my purpose here to discuss Wittgenstein's stand on the mind-body problem though. The question which worries me now is whether skepticism makes any sense with respect to the basic intentional behavior an interpreter can grasp immediately from observing his interpretees. In a famous passage of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein says that "the common behavior of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret a foreign language"<sup>42</sup>. In opposition to Cartesian dualism, he makes the following claim:

"Misleading parallel: psychology treats of processes in the psychical sphere, as does physics in the physical. Seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling, willing, are not the subject of psychology *in the same sense* as that in which the movements of bodies, the phenomena of electricity, etc., are the subjects of physics. You can see this from the fact that the physicist sees, hears, thinks about, and informs us of these phenomena, and the psychologist observes the *external reactions* (the behavior) of the subject." (Wittgenstein (1953), par. 571).

And a few paragraphs further: "an 'inner process' stands in need of outward criteria"<sup>43</sup>. These passages suggest that Wittgenstein takes what he calls the characteristic signs of mentality or intentionality as criterial for their attribution to someone (by an interpreter). This means that a situation like that illustrated by Lewis's example of Martian pain would probably not be interpretable by an interpreter whose linguistic practices resembled ours. For such a Martian would not exhibit behavior that his human interpreter would identify as characteristic of human pain, human obeying of orders, human calculating, human mastering of color concepts and so on. And a condition for our imaginary interpreter to identify correctly intentional behavior in his interlocutors is that in-

<sup>42</sup> Wittgenstein (1953), par. 206.

<sup>43</sup> Wittgenstein (1953), par. 580.



interpreter and interpretee agree extensively in their judgements concerning how the external world looks, as well as how to describe behavior in intentional terms. As Wittgenstein puts it, this silent agreement in judgement is what sustains linguistic communication<sup>44</sup>.

The argument against the skeptic which I think can be extracted from Wittgenstein's later work runs as follows: a) the interpretability of a speaker requires massive agreement between his judgements and those of a potential interpreter; b) the kind of scenario proposed by the skeptic is incompatible with the obtaining of this agreement between speaker and interpreter. Therefore, c) were such a scenario to be a real alternative, intelligibility via interpretation would be seriously impaired<sup>45</sup>. In the face of an argument like this, there seems to be only one option open to the skeptic. He must come up with some other viable method of attributing mentality to a would-be language user which allows for the existence of large discrepancies in worldviews between observer and speaker without damaging the intelligibility of the latter. As long as the skeptic does not put forward any good candidate for replacing the method of interpretation as a way of assigning mentality from the third-person perspective, we are justified in rejecting his position.

## 6. The sociality of Wittgensteinian practices

A worry lingers. It was left untouched at the end of section 4 and corresponds to the problem of whether the notion of practice<sub>w</sub> can withstand Davidson's charge that the explanation of communication in terms of linguistic conventions demands agreement in the norms of correct word use prior to

<sup>44</sup> Numerous passages of the *Investigations*, the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Wittgenstein (1978); part VI) and *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein (1969)) contain references to the background of agreed empirical judgement indispensable for linguistic communication.

<sup>45</sup> A similar argument is to be found in Davidson (1986b).

the linguistic exchange between the speaker and hearer. As we noted, Davidson maintains that success of communication requires only agreement between these two characters be after their linguistic commerce. Are Wittgensteinian practices as inherently social as Lewisian conventions?

I do not think so. The best evidence that practices<sub>w</sub> do not share the above-mentioned problematic feature of practices<sub>L</sub> is provided by paragraph 243 of the *Investigations*, where Wittgenstein suggests the possibility of a language spoken by only one individual, the famous example of the monologist. This is what he says:

“A human being can encourage himself, give himself orders, obey, blame and punish himself; he can ask himself a question and answer it. We could even imagine human beings who spoke only in monologue; who accompanied their activities by talking to themselves.—An explorer who watched them and listened to their talk might succeed in translating their language into ours. (This would enable him to predict these people’s actions correctly, for he also hears them making resolutions and decisions).” (Wittgenstein (1953), par. 243).

If we are to take the case of the solitary speaker seriously, then practices<sub>w</sub> are such that they need not be shared by anybody other than the speaker. An interpreter of the monologist must of course share lots of his judgements; this is a condition, as we saw, of the possibility of identifying regularities in his behavior that may allow an interpreter to find out what language-game he is playing. But what constitutes the linguistic norm for the lone speaker cannot be what the interpreter expects of him in advance of their first linguistic encounters, since these expectations concerning the practices<sub>w</sub> of his interlocutor might diverge significantly from the actual ones. The most favorable outcome of these encounters would of course be the convergence (via step by step revision) of the prior system of interpretive hypotheses to the actual practices<sub>w</sub> of the solitary speaker. This respects Davidson’s point that there need not be agreement between communicators

with respect to their prior (as opposed to passing) theories. The question then is whether after the notion of a practice is thus modified from practice<sub>L</sub> to practice<sub>w</sub>, we are left with anything that deserves to be called a convention.

The issue here is not merely terminological. The later Wittgenstein insists in various of his remarks that language is founded on convention<sup>46</sup>. He also refers to the constituents of this foundation as definitions and as grammatical criteria. A familiar example of such definitions or criteria is that of the length of a meter as equality of length or congruence with the Parisian standard platinum bar. Another one is the association by means of a table of various words with certain patches of color. Many features of Lewisian conventions are present in the Wittgensteinian picture. For instance, their arbitrariness (Lewis's condition (5)), regularity, rough stability (something less strict than condition (6)), rationality (something like conditions (3) and (4)), agreement in action and belief (although this agreement may be strictly obtained only after the linguistic interchange) and so on. Some element of indeterminacy is also present in Wittgenstein's account of linguistic conventions, which according to him can be revised in the face of recalcitrant experience. Following the analogy between speaking a language and playing a game, linguistic conventions or rules can be read off by spectators of a language-game as natural laws governing its play<sup>47</sup>. But they are also the norms, he hastens to add, by reference to which spectators evaluate the correctness of moves in the game. They are the norms of our linguistic practices.

Davidson (and perhaps Quine<sup>48</sup>) would be reluctant I take it to call Wittgensteinian grammatical criteria conventions precisely because the ingredient of prior agreement about the convened criteria may be missing. Call practices<sub>w</sub> however you like, I hope to have removed here at least one obstacle to their

<sup>46</sup> For example in Wittgenstein (1953), pars. 354-5.

<sup>47</sup> Wittgenstein (1953), par. 54.

<sup>48</sup> In Quine (1936).

acceptance for the purposes of explaining linguistic understanding. Davidson has expressed other sorts of misgivings about using the notion of a linguistic rule to elucidate what it is to speak a language. For example, in one of his discussions of the skeptical problem about meaning, Davidson complains:

“We ought to question the appropriateness of the ordinary concept of following a rule for describing what is involved in speaking a language. When we talk of rules of language we normally have in mind grammarians’ or linguists’ descriptions (generalized and idealized) of actual practice, or (often) prescriptions grammarians think we should follow. Rules can be a help in learning a language, but their aid is available, if at all, only in the acquisition of a second language. Most language learning is accomplished without learning or knowing any rules at all. Wittgenstein does, of course, treat meaning something in much the same way he treats following some procedure, such as adding in arithmetic. (...) We normally follow no procedure in speaking; nothing in the everyday use of language corresponds to taking the sum in adding.” (Davidson (1992), p. 259).

I have dealt with this objection from Davidson elsewhere<sup>49</sup>. In short, the objection dwells on a very specific understanding of a linguistic rule which is foreign to the conception espoused by the author of the *Investigations*. Nonetheless, many other criticisms of the basic notion of rule-following remain to be answered<sup>50</sup>. My purpose here was just to show that the objectionable sociality of practices<sub>i</sub> does not beset the notion of a practice<sub>w</sub>.

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<sup>49</sup> In Pinto (1998), chapter 3.

<sup>50</sup> For instance, Michael Dummett’s charge that Wittgensteinian conventionalism is incompatible with a sound explanation of the validity of deduction since decision seems to be involved in Wittgenstein’s account of what it is to go on correctly in any instance of following a linguistic rule. I have discussed this objection in Pinto (1998), chapter 7.

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## Abstract

En el siglo XX, se ha intentado articular el convencionalismo lingüístico de maneras distintas. Uno de los enfoques más prometedores fue el que propuso David Lewis a finales de los años 60 e inicio de los 70. Lewis subsume las regularidades convencionales que subyacen a la actividad de hablar un lenguaje bajo los estados de equilibrio más generales que resultan de cualquier tipo de comportamiento cooperativo racional. En este artículo propongo que, pese a su atractivo, las convenciones lewisianas deberían ser abandonadas en favor del convencionalismo lingüístico del segundo Wittgenstein. Mi motivación para recomendar tal giro es que la propuesta de Lewis no es capaz de ofrecer una respuesta satisfactoria a la objeción de Donald Davidson, de acuerdo con la cual la teoría convencionalista de Lewis no puede explicar la ocurrencia sistemática de malapropismos (malapropisms) en nuestro uso ordinario del lenguaje. En las últimas secciones del artículo, me dedico a mostrar cómo las convenciones wittgensteinianas sí pueden explicar el fenómeno de los malapropismos.