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ON DAVIDSON AND INTERPRETATION*

ABSTRACT. Davidson's theory of interpretation, I argue, is vulnerable to a number of significant difficulties, difficulties which can be avoided or resolved by the more Quinean approach which I develop. In Section 1 I note difficulties which apply to T-theories but are avoided by translation manuals. In Section 2 I show how to construct what I call 'T-manuals', which are like T-theories in requiring Tarskian structure, but like translation manuals in avoiding the difficulties discussed in Section 1. In Section 3 I show that the approach using T-manuals does at least as well as Davidson's with respect to a number of other concerns of his. In Section 4 I show that it does better than Davidson's with respect to reporting interpretations, especially where demonstrative utterances are concerned. In Section 5 I argue for (somewhat modified) Quinean empirical constraints, which go with manuals, as superior to the empirical constraints Davidson imposes, which go with T-theories. In Section 6 I show that Davidson is unable to offer an adequate account of what an interpreter knows; and propose a more acceptable theory of language mastery which gives a central role to the requirement that the interpreter's language usage satisfy the refined and amplified Quinean empirical constraints of Section 5.

1.

Davidson proposes to use T-theories for interpretation. He wants to obtain, subject to his empirical constraints, a theory which 'entails (by a finite set of non-logical axioms and normal logic), for each sentence S of L, a theorem of the form:

\[ S \text{ is true-in-L if and only if } p \]

where 'S' is replaced by a standardized name of S and 'p' by a translation of S into the language of the theory'.

There is a point about theories of truth somewhat analogous to Quine's objection to non-essentialistic modal logic. If 'p' is any contingently true sentence, then, say,

'Es regnet' is true-in-German when spoken by x at t if and only if p and it is raining near x at t.

Such sentences will not in general serve for adequate interpretations, however. J. A. Foster raises this point, but thinks that Davidson's

holistic constraints rule out such cases, apparently on the grounds that such sentences yield ascriptions of beliefs to a subject which there is no justification for assuming him to have.\textsuperscript{3} Evans and McDowell concur.\textsuperscript{4}

I do not see, however, how granting this point would help Davidson, for the requirement that a method of interpretation should not ascribe to a subject beliefs which there is no justification for assuming him to have seems to be a requirement that \textit{no} T-theory can satisfy. The problem is due to the fact that any logical consequence of a theorem of a theory is itself a theorem of that theory. If, for example, 'LT' is any logical truth, then

\begin{enumerate}
  \item 'Snow is white' is true-in-English if and only if snow is white and LT
\end{enumerate}

is a logical consequence of the paradigmatic T-sentence and is itself a T-sentence. But there is no justification for assuming a subject to believe all logical truths. To take an extreme example: if \( B \) is a very difficult mathematical theorem using axioms \( A_1, \ldots, A_n \), then '\( A_1, \ldots, A_n \supset B \)' is a logical truth; but to interpret someone familiar with mathematical language but not especially mathematically talented as asserting

\[ 0 = 0 \, \& \, (A_1, \ldots, A_n \supset B) \]

when he asserts

\[ 0 = 0 \]

certainly seems unsatisfactory. It is easy to envisage cases in which 'D' and 'LT' are the desired translations of 'D*\textsuperscript{*1}' and 'L*\textsuperscript{*1}', but where a subject assents to 'D*\textsuperscript{*1}' and dissents or abstains from 'LT*\textsuperscript{*1}' and 'D\textsuperscript{and LT)*\textsuperscript{*1}. But Davidson's use of T-theories requires one to accept 'D and LT' as a translation of 'D*\textsuperscript{*1}. And this does not fit well with Davidson's intention that expressions in \textit{oratio obliqua} have their ordinary meanings. For if (1) were interpretative, then, with Davidson's paratactic analysis

\begin{enumerate}
  \item John believes that. Snow is white.\textsuperscript{5}
\end{enumerate}

may be translated by

\begin{enumerate}
  \item John believes that. Snow is white and LT.\textsuperscript{5}
\end{enumerate}