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Conventionalism as the Component of Meaning: Examination of Davidson's View

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Abstract: Davison has two famous articles against conventionalism. The core of his argument is to scrutinize erroneous but successful conversations which happen in language occasionally and conventional meaning cannot explain how the speaker and the listener understand each other in these cases. However, his premises are not clear and it makes it difficult to study and criticize his main point. We believe there are at least five premises such as: 1) The listener comprehends the words the speaker has said in their conventional meaning; 2) If the conversation is successful then the listener has understood the words and sentences in their general first meaning; 3) Sometimes the conversation is successful although there are some misuse of words; 4) In these cases the conventional meaning is not the same as general first meaning; 5) If the listener comprehends the words in their general first meaning, then he has not in his mind their conventional meaning; so (Conclusion) conventionalism is not acceptable. We claim that we can save the conventionalism by analyzing these premises and pointing out that users of a language can have several meanings of a word in their mind and choose between them according to hints and backgrounds. Besides, conventional theory of meaning can accept new and different uses of words that have already been used in some old fashion ways, and in addition, special cases occur rarely in everyday use of linguistic expressions. So, opposing Davidson, we have sound grounds to keep conventionalism.

Keywords: Donald Davidson; Conventionalism; Theory of Meaning; General First Meaning; Literal First Meaning.

Introduction

In this article, we discuss about a famous objection which is made by Davidson against conventionalism. He disputes against linguistic conventions on the origin of meaningful errors in language. The argument is the heart of his piece “A nice derangement of epitaphs” as he says:

"We should try again to say how convention in any important sense is involved in language; or, as I think, we should give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions" (Davidson, 2005).

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which, carry on the track of his former writing "Communication and convention" (Davidson, 2001). In these two articles, Davidson engages in two targets: he disagrees against conventionalism about meaning and he elaborates his alternative version. For the points of this article, we limit ourselves to an argument which we think to be Davidson's case and very briefly we will talk about his positive account. However, there is an instant problem: Davidson has never tried to give an account of what he takes to be his main argument. So, naturally, what has been presumed from Davidson's idea also varies.

It is fair that first we give some clues about the story here at hand. Consider we have a conversation like below :

I would say to you :

- I take for granite that you are going to finish the job .

You would not complain and have understood my sentence as :

- I take for granted that you are going to finish the job .

In fact, you have fixed my linguistic mistake of stating "granite" instead of "granted." Davidson's problem is how we can explicate the communicative achievement in situations like such linguistic misfortunes, or "malapropisms"[1] as he calls them.

According to him, these phenomena are worthy of note, because they illustrate that a convention is neither necessary nor sufficient to clarify successful conversation in all cases of linguistic communication. Therefore, conventionalism cannot unfold successful social interactions in cases like above. The basis why conventionalism is not victorious in giving explanation in instances of misuses of words could be explained as this: according to conventionalism, a term's literal (or conventional) meaning is something one should know in advance of using it. Nevertheless, in instances of successful communication with misuses of words, it looks as if what the speaker's statement means is not the presumed meaning of the words uttered. On the other hand, users of language often comprehend utterances like the above example in the speaker's intended sense. Therefore, conventionalism cannot put in plain words why users, in reality, comprehend mistaken words .

Linguistic misuses frequently occur to language users. Thus, they are hypothetically significant, because we cannot just close our eyes to these circumstances by claiming they are insignificant or secondary. Accordingly, conventionalism either has to limit the usefulness of its explanation and offer a further account to fill the explicatory breach, or its account is mistaken for the reason that it presents the incorrect outcomes in important situations. We will try to argue that the use of conventions doesn't have to be limited. However, a supplementary explanation is necessary to fill the explicatory gap .

To sum up, there is a risk against conventionalism in general (cases like example above). So, to confront this problem, we need to see how Davidson goes on to develop this problem into an argument .

2. The Problem

The last sentences of the article "A nice derangement of epitaphs" seem to have the conclusion Davidson is trying to reach if there would be an argument :

> "We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases. And we should try again to say how convention in any important sense is involved in language; or, as I think, we should give up the attempt to illuminate how we

[1] A misuse of words, e.g., the aggravator in the washing machine for the agitator, or a detestable wrench for an adjustable wrench. (Bussmann, Trauth, et al. 1996).

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> communicate by appeal to conventions." (Davidson, 2005: 107)

What does he imply by a "clearly defined shared structure"? It seems he means a set of laws that can be used to get what an expression means. We can say he prefers to articulate such a structure as a Tarskian truth theory (Davidson, D. 1967: 304–23). His theory about meaning and semantics develops on the basis of a holistic conception of linguistic understanding (Malpas, Jeff, 2014). However, nothing rests on the individual choice. Davidson tries to say that language users do not employ such a plainly defined shared structure while they communicate in a linguistic society. In other words, in linguistic communication, we do not have a code book that encodes what we want to state as a message and decodes the massage at the other end of communication line. This image can be found in many conventionalist versions about linguistics and meaning[2].

The result already points to some elements of Davidson's argument: he is trying to explain some forms of communication and their success (or failure) by help of linguistic skills. It seems that, conventionalism is mistaken when it is a claim about communicative part of conventions. According to conventionalism, in any actual language, there must be a mutual coordination between the speaker and the end user. Shared knowledge about conventions is a good base to build a code and decoding handbook that all language users can use to understand each other.

To understand Davidson's rejection of conventionalism, first we have to recognize when linguistic interaction is successful, what are the suppositions about the function of conventions in linguistic interaction, and examples which persuade us to think that conventions cannot satisfy this task? After this, we will reach at outline of the Davidson`s argument. Here the most important notion is the concept of meaning joined to successful linguistic interaction which is called "first meaning".

3. First Meaning[3]

Davidson explains the function of linguistic conventions in communication by explaining the function of conventional meaning in interactions. To achieve this goal, he presents two distinct notions of meaning which he calls both "first meaning"[4]. The first one depicts what successful interaction –not necessarily linguistic– depends on. The other one is related only to linguistic communication; it seems exactly to be the famous notion of "literal meaning". To distinguish these two, we will refer to the former notion as "general first meaning" and to the latter as "literal first meaning".

The former one is "general" for the reason that it's the primary meaning that a user comes to in analyzing of an utterance:

> "The concept applies to words and sentences as uttered by a particular speaker on a particular occasion [or the] first meaning comes first in the order of interpretation. But 'the order of interpretation' is not at all clear. For there

[2] Like in a signaling game. A signaling game is a dynamic, Bayesian game with two players, the sender (S) and the receiver (R). The sender has a certain type, t, which is given by nature. The sender observes his own type while the receiver does not know the type of the sender. Based on his knowledge of his own type, the sender chooses to send a message from a set of possible messages M = {m1, m2, m3,… ,mj}. The receiver observes the message but not the type of the sender. Then the receiver chooses an action from a set of feasible actions A = {a1, a2, a3,… ,ak}. The two players receive payoffs dependent on the sender's type, the message chosen by the sender and the action chosen by the receiver. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Signaling_game

[3] According to Davidson, the meaning that should be found by consulting a dictionary based on actual usage.

[4] This distinction is suggested by us to reach a better understanding of his argument.

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> are cases where we may first guess at the image and so puzzle out the first meaning. …
> And of course, it often happens that we can descry the literal meaning of a word or phrase by first appreciating what the speaker was getting at.
> A better way to distinguish first meaning is through the intentions of the speaker. The intentions with which an act is performed are usually unambiguously ordered by the relation of means to ends (where this relation may or may not be causal)….” (Davidson, 2005:91–92)

It seems Davidson thinks about different paths of conveying a meaning (“means to ends”) in the following two ways:

1) S means A_n by doing A_{n-1}. ... S means A_2 by A_1.

and

2) S means A_1 with the purpose of A_2-ing. ... S means A_{n-1} with the purpose of A_n-ing .

When the meaning relation is about communication, then S does A_1 by stating some expression. Davidson thinks that the intent and purpose of a speaker are generally arranged clearly. In this way, he demonstrates general first meaning like this :

> “Suppose Diogenes utters the words “I would have you stand from between me and the sun” (or their Greek equivalent) with the intention of uttering words that will be interpreted by Alexander as true if and only if Diogenes would have him stand from between Diogenes and the sun, and this with the intention of getting Alexander to move from between him and the sun, and this with the intention of leaving a good anecdote to posterity. Of course, these are not the only intentions involved; there will also be the Gricean intentions to achieve certain ends through Alexander’s recognition of some of the intentions involved. Diogenes’ intention to be interpreted in a certain way requires such a self-referring intention, as does his intention to ask Alexander to move. In general, the first intention in the sequence to require this feature specifies the first meaning.” (Davidson, 2005:92).

Accordingly, when Diogenes pronounces these sentences with these complicated aims arranged by a means-to-end relation, the first goal in this structure controls the general first meaning of the words spoken on that specific occurrence of use .

Considering above, we can illustrate general first meaning in this way: It is a notion that concerns expressions on a specific occurrence of use[5]. The first meaning of an expression on a specific occurrence of use is what the user has in mind and wants the utterance of terms to mean that for a precise listener on a specific occasion. In another words, general first meaning is the user's first communicative goal that establishes what the user's words mean. So we have to ask what the first communicative goals are. As he says, it ought to be the earliest intention in this interaction because a user may as well have more intentions and goals to reach through the hearer’s identifying some of the user's intentions. However, these further purposes is not supposed to establish the word’s general first meaning. Also, as Kemmerling says:

> “It is much more like a hybrid between what Grice calls utterer’s occasion meaning and what he calls applied timeless sentence meaning.” (Kemmerling, 1993: fn. 19)

[5] Another definition of first meaning could be like this: the listener’s knowledge or the skill one must have to decode and construe a speaker.

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So general first meaning is not limited to verbal interactions and also can be employed for non-linguistic forms of communication .

The difficulty is that Davidson tries to maintain the division between speaker-meaning and literal-meaning. Literal meaning is directed only to linguistic expressions. That's why he tries to find a different conception of meaning that is similar to literal meaning; although this separation is not always easy; for example, when by "first meaning" he really meant "literal meaning":

> "I confess that having explained what I meant, I have sometimes allowed myself to substitute the phrase 'literal meaning' for 'first meaning.'" (Davidson, 1993:118)

If we name this notion "literal first meaning", then according to Davidson, it must encapsulate conventional meaning. By having the general first meaning in mind, he defines literal first meaning as follows:

> i) First meaning is systematic. A competent speaker or interpreter is able to interpret utterances of his own or those of others on the basis of semantic properties of the parts, or words, in the utterance, and the structure of the utterance. For this to be possible there must be systematic relations between the meanings of utterances .
>
> ii) First meanings are shared. For speaker and interpreter to communicate successfully and regularly, they must share a method of interpretation.
>
> iii) First meanings are governed by learned conventions or regularities. The systematic knowledge or competence of the speaker or interpreter is learned in advance of occasions of interpretation and is conventional in character.

To start with, the literal conception is about linguistic interactions with words, expressions, and sentences – and just to them. In the second clause, an essential condition for good linguistic interaction is that general first meaning is mutual among both users involved in action. In 3rd condition, a word's literal first meaning is established before it is inferred on a specific occurrence. Moreover, general first meaning governs a meaning on a specific occurrence of use. And literal first meaning is conventional (Gustafsson, Martin .1998: 440).

Now we can put a step forward in illustrating Davidson's argument: As conventionalism maintains, the literal meaning of a word in a specific utterance is its conventional meaning (Reimer, Marga: 320). In another words:

> P1) the literal meaning of a word in a specific utterance is its literal first meaning.

This claim is about literal meaning being literal first meaning. Is this claim true or need some adjustments? We return to it soon .

4. First Meaning and Linguistic Conversations

According to Davidson, literal first meaning has an important role in the successful linguistic interaction. This idea is essential for his line of reasoning. We can see this thought in his second condition above about the communicative function of first meaning. He says a more lucid explanation here :

> "Because a speaker necessarily intends first meaning to be grasped by his audience, and it is grasped if communication succeeds, we lose nothing in the investigation of first meaning if we concentrate on the knowledge or ability a hearer must have if he is to interpret a speaker." (Davidson, 2005:92)

In this phrase, he tries to show the process of travel from first user's knowledge to the one's who is the end user[6]. In this process, if speaker is successful, then the first meaning has reach

[6] The user at the end of conversation line that is supposed to understand the conversation.

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to his goal. But is he talking about general meaning or the literal? In view of the fact that he has not presented the literal first meaning yet, then we can suppose he has general meaning in his mind. Consequently, the next premise of Davidson's argument against conventionalism would be like below :

P2) For having a successful linguistic interaction, it is necessary that the end part of communication grasps and comprehends the speaker's general first meaning.

5. Davidson's Special Cases

Experiencing misuses of words in language is common. In some of these cases, an "incorrect" use of a word does not stop successful interaction in language and end users (users who are the recipients of conversation) comprehend the original aim and meaning of the speaker. These linguistic accidents ought to be distinguished with realistic mistakes, for example in cases of misinformation or lies. By some examples we try to reach our point:

- The flood damage was so bad they had to <u>evaporate</u> the city. (speaker means evacuate)

Or

- George W. Bush: "We need an energy bill that <u>encourages</u> consumption." (he probably meant <u>discourage</u>)

But these errors needn't be unintentionally made. Davidson offers some jokes from a radio comedy (as in The New Yorker[7], 4 April 1977, p. 56.) that shows his point of view:

"Goodman Ace wrote radio sitcoms. According to Mark Singer, Ace often talked the way he wrote :

Rather than take for granite that Ace talks straight, a listener must be on guard or an occasional entre nous and me . . . or a long face no see. In a roustabout way, he will maneuver until he selects the ideal phrase for the situation, hitting the nail right on the thumb. The careful conversationalist might try to mix it up with him in a baffle of wits." (Davidson, 2005:89)

Hence, according to this later quote, end users can – and in fact do – effectively comprehend these misuses. So, the third premise of the Davidson`s argument against conventions is:

P3) There are instances of successful linguistic interaction while some words are completely misused.

The important claim here is that according to Davidson, in these cases, the conversation is successful and the end user comprehends the literal meaning; so, what is literal meaning here? "It's a notion of what words, when spoken in context mean (Davidson, 2005:91).

If we accept the Davidson's portrayal of conventionalism, then literal meaning would be exactly the literal first meaning. So, we can conjecture that the fourth premise is:

P4) As stated in conventionalism, if linguistic conversation is successful despite of some misuses of words, the end user understands the errors in a way that the literal first meaning is grasped in the end .

6. Outline of the Argument

Now consider this conversation:

First user: Flying saucers are just an optical <u>conclusion</u>.

General first meaning is: Flying saucers are just an optical illusion.

Conventional meaning is: Flying saucers are just an optical conclusion.

If we suppose that on this circumstance, linguistic conversation is successful despite of the error, then according to Davidson, the end user understands the word in its general first

[7] The New Yorker is an American magazine of reportage, commentary, criticism, essays, fiction, satire, cartoons, and poetry.

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meaning[8]. It is worthy to note that the conventional meaning of a word is known before its specific uses. So

> P5) If despite the errors and misuses, the conversation and interaction is successful, the general first meaning of the mistaken word is not one and the same of its conventional meaning.

Davidson points out that if these cases of communication work, it cannot be justified by conventionalism and conventional meaning. The end user must comprehend the incorrect word as its general first meaning to have a conversation successfully. Therefore, Davidson's idea may be put as below :

> P6) If the faulty communication is successful and the end user comprehends the sentences in their general first meaning, then he doesn't comprehend them in their conventional meaning .

We should have it in mind that general first meaning is the intention of the conversation, so there is no circularity, for we are not defining the meaning of a word by its other meanings.

Now, after all these stories, Davidson announces the flawed part of conventionalism:

> "Stated more broadly now, the problem is this: what interpreter and speaker share, to the extent that communication succeeds, is not learned and so is not a language governed by rules or conventions known to speaker and interpreter in advance; but what the speaker and interpreter know in advance is not (necessarily) shared, and so is not a language governed by shared rules or conventions. What is shared is, as before, the passing theory[9]; what is given in advance is the prior theory[1] , or anything on which it may in turn be based." (Davidson, 2005:105–106)

For us to present the Davidson argument, it is necessary to have a conceptual change in our notions, because Davidson talks about his problem with conventionalism in terms of literal first meaning (Glüer, 2013: 344), and not conventional meaning. With a little deliberation, it becomes obvious that when the erroneous conversation is successful, general first meaning cannot be the candidate for literal first meaning mentioned in three conditions before. Literal first meaning would be the general first meaning seeing the three conditions. And general first meaning is the intention of the conversation that speaker have in mind in that specific conversation. However, these three conditions set some rules and conventions on their own that are in parallel of general first meaning; especially in third one: First meanings are governed by learned conventions or regularities. So, the literal first meaning of words is made by some rules and conventions.

But if we analyze the explanation, we have about literal first meaning, then we may come to an inconsistency. Because there would be two elements that govern the meaning of a word (in an erroneous but successful conversation) and they may not match. If we go back to our examples before, the general first meaning and literal first meaning do not correspond with each other. As definition says, literal first meaning is general first meaning plus conventions. So, there is a question: is it possible that general first meaning meets the three conditions that Davidson has mentioned? In conversations with misuses of words, these conditions and general first meanings go two

[8] The explanation that Davidson provides is rather brief, since the speaker meaning of words and sentences relies on many features on conversation and background. (Kemmerling, 1993:101).

[9] The passing theory is the one that speaker of a language uses to construe the statements of a conversation. We have to remember that the passing theory is a system "geared to the occasion". (Davidson, 2005:101).

[1] For the hearer, the prior theory expresses how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker.

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different directions. Either these conditions are fulfilled or (exclusive disjunction) we have the general first meaning. In these erroneous but still successful cases, we cannot have both.

So, is it possible that conventionalists have forgotten to think their account through? It seems that Davidson has his own read about conventionalism which is not completely accurate. It is not in their thought that these instances are meaningless; although their account does not agree with Davidson's. So, we propose it is better to reconstruct Davidson's argument in term of conventions instead of literal first meaning. In this way we have to omit premises Number 1 and 4.

7. The Argument

As mentioned in last section, to avoid inconsistency and being faithful to conventionalism, we will have some changes to reach our last version of the argument (it is worthy to note again that here we are examining erroneous but still successful conversations):

1) According to conventionalism, the end user comprehends the mistaken words that the speaker has said in their conventional meaning.

2) If the conversation is successful then the end user has understood the words and sentences in their general first meaning .

3) In some instances, the conversation is successful although there are some misuses of words .

(Corollary) In these instances, the end user comprehends the misused words in their general first meaning .

4) In these instances, the conventional meaning is not the same as general first meaning .

5) In these instances, if the end user comprehends the words in their general first meaning, then he has not in his mind their conventional meaning (and vice versa).

Conclusion: Conventionalism is not acceptable.

Premise 1 is a brief sketch of conventionalism. It is important because this is one side of inconsistency. Other premises are the ones discussed before. The corollary has mentioned here to ease the follow of the argument and explains the meaning of misused words for the end user. The conclusion shows what Davidson has in mind. With corollary (the end user comprehends the faulty words in their general first meaning) plus premise 5, we reach to the point that this meaning in not the conventional meaning. But this contradicts premise 1. Consequently, we deny the premise 1 by reductio ad absurdum. So, the first to conclude is that conventionalism is off beam and incomplete, in favor of Davidson. If this argument is sound, then the conventional meanings is not the meaning that the user wants to be understood by the end user. But this is one of the necessary conditions for every successful communication. As a result, conventions can neither be the source of literal meaning nor give reasons for successful conversation .

8. Critical Analysis of Argument

As taught by logic, the validity of an argument is different from its soundness. A sound argument is a valid one with also true premises. The argument we reconstruct from Davidson`s papers is valid. But in what comes follow we try to show it is not sound.

To begin with, conventions are not essential for successful conversation. Users can express what they have in mind with no needs for conventions. It is common in all sorts of communication. To have a successful communication the only thing you have to do is to send a good signal in a way that end user identifies and distinguishes the intent and purpose you have in mind. This is the sufficient condition .

But explaining the successful linguistic conversations is something else and need more than identifying intentions and purposes. We have to offer some accounts to shed some light

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on the complexity of how speakers can communicate complicated and unanticipated intentions by expressing sentences and words. One of these accounts is conventionalism which according to it, fundamental rules which have roots in agreements in society, rather than on external reality, is responsible for meaning of expressions. This account is quite realistic and hard to deny, especially in everyday cases. However, the erroneous but still successful conversations are grave instances for this account. Conventional meaning of words is not what is meant by user and not what end user comprehends .

So, first conclusion would be that conventionalism cannot clarify erroneous but still successful conversations, if we do not want to go all the way, like what Davidson does, and deny it all .

Nevertheless, this inference is still too sharp and heavy. We cannot give up conventions easily. We think that the problem comes from the premise 5. It says it is not possible for a user of a language to have two meanings of a word in mind simultaneously. But we can understand conventional meaning of a word or expression even if it is not in its right or perfect place in a conversation[1] .

Grice has the same tactic to describe irregular meanings that goes like this: the end user understands that the conventional meaning is not the one used in the context and, by using other hints and backgrounds he concludes that the expressions are used in other intentions, i.e., their general first meaning (Gradinaru, 2009: 112).

This justification is better than Davidson's account in these ways: First, it's consistent with the details Grice has offered for implicatures (Grice, 1975: 43). Second, erroneous but successful conversation should be relying on other knowledge the users have like, syntactic, semantic, and practical usages of words and sentences in everyday language. For instance in the example we mentioned before, "take for granite" is similar to "take for granted" in sound and phonetic and syntax. Conventionalism can justify the reason why despite these errors and misuses, similar expressions in sound or syntax, can make a same meaning: some syntactical or semantic conventions have some sort of wide superiority over use of the expressions in the language. Other accounts cannot have this simple and economical explication for the mistakes in language. So, we think the 5th premise must be cast off and therefore conventionalism will be saved. Moreover, even in sentences with some wrong words, conventional meaning helps the end user to understand the whole idea of the sentence. For instance, if one out of the five words in a sentence was wrong, the conventions related to other four words make a good foundation for the hearer to comprehend the whole meaning and guess a way to correct the mistake. But if the number of misused words were more, consider four out of five, this foundation would not be built and the end user would not be able to understand the meaning of the sentence, because those related conventions do not match to each other. Again, conventionalism is an easy way to explain the shared knowledge which seems to be necessary in any interaction.

9. Conclusion

Opposing Davidson, we have sound grounds not to reject conventionalism for the problems Davidson present vaguely in his papers. However, Davidson intelligently has pointed out some major difficulties about some special cases in every day linguistic conversations, i.e., erroneous but successful conversations. Conventionalism has to modify itself if it wants to be a valid account for explication meaning of expressions.

One way to do this modification is to change the purpose of conventionalism. It is better to

[1] To avoid any confusion, general first meaning can be defined any intention the speaker had.

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consider conventionalism not as an account for linguistic conversation and interaction. It is really a theory of meaning and if it has some comments about how words and expressions are used, they are not the core of the theory. In another word, conventional theory of meaning can accept new and different use of words that have been used in some old fashion ways before; and it is clear: if there are some rules and conventions governing uses of a word, then these conventions make some specific meaning for that word. However, there are some occurrences of words that do not obey the rules, so the meaning they have in these cases is not explained by conventionalism. According to Davidson and in a larger dimension, shared linguistic conventions are inessential to linguistic communication:

> "Knowledge of the conventions of language is thus 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, 2001:279)

Davidson concludes that theories of meaning and understanding should not assign convention a foundational role (Rescorla, 2011).

We think here a point has missed. By comparison these cases have a little percentage of every day uses of linguistic expressions and we have to consider them just novel or odd instances.

In the end, we shouldn't send away these deep visions that Davidson has made. At least now we know there are some cases where conventionalism cannot be explained. As he emphasizes: "try again to say how convention in any important sense is involved in language." (Davidson, D. 2005:107) Another message Davidson has is that linguistic meaning is open to change and vary from one occurrence to another. So, any theory of meaning must make room for deviations and changes in the linguistic activities of language users.

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قراردادگرایی به‌عنوان مؤلفه تعیین‌کننده معنا: بررسی دیدگاه دیویدسون

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چکیده: دونالد دیویدسون حداقل در دو مقاله مشهور خود علیه قراردادگرایی موضع‌گیری کرده است. هسته مرکزی استدلال او مراودات و گفت‌وگوهایی است که با وجود داشتن اشتباه و جایگزینی غلط کلمات، موفق هستند. او معتقد است معنای قراردادی کلمات در چنین مواردی نمی‌تواند توضیح دهد چگونه گوینده و شنونده معنای گفت‌وگو را درک می‌کنند. اما این موضع‌گیری او در استدلالی روشن و منقح مطرح نمی‌شود. طبق ادعای این مقاله، حداقل پنج مقدمه را می‌توان در استدلال دیویدسون یافت: ۱) طبق قراردادگرایی، برای شنونده معنی کلمات همان معنایی است که قراردادهای زبانی تعیین می‌کنند؛ ۲) اگر مکالمه موفق باشد آنگاه شنونده معنی کلمات را به‌صورت معنای اولیه و متداول آنها درک کرده است؛ ۳) گاهی باوجود کلمات نادرست، مکالمه موفق‌آمیز است؛ ۴) در این موارد معنای اولیه و متداول همان معنای قراردادی نیست؛ ۵) اگر شنونده معنای اولیه و متداول را از منبعی غیر از قراردادها به‌دست آورد، آنگاه هیچ لزومی به فرض قراردادهای زبانی نیست. در نتیجه باید گفت قراردادگرایی نادرست است. اما با تحلیل درست مقدمه‌های استدلال می‌توان قراردادگرایی را از این حمله نجات داد، به‌خصوص اگر بدانیم کاربران زبان می‌توانند چندین معنی از یک کلمه را در ذهن داشته باشند و سپس با کمک قرائن مکالمه یکی را انتخاب کنند. همچنین قراردادگرایی امکان وجود معانی مختلف برای کلمات را نفی نمی‌کند. به‌علاوه، چنین مواردی در مکالمات روزمره بسیار کم رخ می‌دهند. بنابراین باوجود نظر دیویدسون، شواهد خوبی برای حفظ قراردادگرایی وجود دارد.

واژه‌های کلیدی: دونالد دیویدسون، قراردادگرایی، نظریه معنی‌داری، معنی اولیه متداول، معنی اولیه تحت‌اللفظی

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