



# Inquiry

An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy

ISSN: 0020-174X (Print) 1502-3923 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/sinq20>

## Deranging the Mental Lexicon

Endre Begby

To cite this article: Endre Begby (2015): Deranging the Mental Lexicon, Inquiry, DOI: 10.1080/0020174X.2015.1115276

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2015.1115276>



Published online: 27 Nov 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Deranging the Mental Lexicon

ENDRE BEGBY

*Simon Fraser University*

(Received 21 January 2015; accepted 18 September 2015)

**ABSTRACT** *This paper offers a defense of Davidson's conclusion in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', focusing on the psychology and epistemology of language. Drawing on empirical studies in language acquisition and sociolinguistics, I problematize the traditional idealizing assumption that a person's mental lexicon consists of two distinct parts—a dictionary, comprising her knowledge of word meanings proper, and an encyclopedia, comprising her wider knowledge of worldly affairs. I argue that the breakdown of the dictionary–encyclopedia distinction can be given a cognitive and functional explanation: facts regarding language learning and the challenges of coping with linguistically diverse environments require that dictionary and encyclopedia remain deeply integrated rather than categorically distinct dimensions of the mental lexicon. This argument provides support for a psychologized version of Davidson's conclusion in 'Derangement': there is no such thing as a language, in the sense that there is no diachronically stable and uniquely specifiable object that could constitute the language which a person knows. I then apply this conclusion to the question of whether the concept of a public language—understood as a more or less stable body of conventions shared by a group of speakers—could nonetheless retain an important explanatory role in philosophy of language and linguistics.*

## I. An Opening Tableau

It's Sunday morning, and you are enjoying a quiet moment with your favorite newspaper. Turning to an interesting looking critical op-ed on a recent turn in development policy in Africa, you come across the following sentence:

[Ex. 1] 'Aid agencies have only themselves to blame for elision between humanitarianism and military intervention.'<sup>1</sup>

---

*Correspondence Address:* Endre Begby, Department of Philosophy, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby B.C., Canada. Email: [ebegby@sfu.ca](mailto:ebegby@sfu.ca)

<sup>1</sup>'Does Humanitarian Aid Prolong Wars?' *The Observer*, April 25, 2010.

Even as you are busy thinking about world affairs, your attention is drawn to the word ‘elision’. You might think, ‘Oh, is that what “elision” means?’ You might think, ‘I didn’t know “elision” could mean that!’ Or you might think ‘hey, that’s not what “elision” means!’ I make the following bold conjecture: where you stand with respect to the meaning of the word ‘elision’ makes little difference to your ability to *understand* what the author of the piece intended to convey, namely, to a first approximation, that aid agencies themselves are to blame for the loss of a distinction between aid and intervention. More specifically, it seems that the kind of puzzled responses I canvassed above come, in a sense, precisely after the fact of having understood what the author intended to convey. We understand first, we worry about meaning later, if at all.

This is one instance of a broader range of phenomena that occupies Davidson in ‘A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs’. This broader range includes ‘our ability to perceive a well-formed sentence when the actual utterance was incomplete or grammatically garbled, our ability to interpret words we have never heard before, to correct slips of the tongue, or to cope with new idiolects’.<sup>2</sup> What these various phenomena have in common is that they ‘introduce expressions not covered by prior learning’<sup>3</sup> or for which our standing linguistic competence is otherwise insufficient to yield a plausible interpretation. What is striking, of course, is that such phenomena rarely trouble us; we understand what the speaker intended to convey, often without even noting that the utterance is somehow anomalous or incomplete. Famously, Davidson’s contention in ‘Derangement’ is that our extensive reliance on these abilities in our everyday communicative exchanges places ‘standard descriptions of linguistic competence’ under serious strain, even to the point of warranting the now notorious conclusion that ‘there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed’.<sup>4</sup>

## II. Introducing ‘Derangement’

‘Derangement’ is a peculiar piece of writing, and its place in Davidson’s larger body of work remains contested. To some early readers, such as Ian Hacking<sup>5</sup> and Michael Dummett,<sup>6</sup> it constitutes a capitulation of sorts, an abandoning of the subject matter of Davidson’s long-standing constructive project of

---

<sup>2</sup>Davidson, ‘Derangement’, 95.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 94.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 95, 107.

<sup>5</sup>Hacking, ‘The Parody of Conversation’.

<sup>6</sup>Dummett, ‘A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs’.

developing the foundations for natural language semantics.<sup>7</sup> To others, such as Ernest Lepore and Kirk Ludwig, the argument of ‘Derangement’ is quite compatible with this project: instead, what it adds is merely a hyperbolic and essentially superfluous attack on a view of language which no ‘reasonably sophisticated philosopher or linguist has held’.<sup>8</sup>

These discussions take direct aim at the conclusion that there is no such thing as a language. These critics typically argue, in one way or another, that whether or not Davidson’s more specific observations are correct, public languages such as English or Swahili nonetheless continue to play an essential explanatory role in any reasonable philosophical account of linguistic communication. I will return to these discussions in Section 6.

Meanwhile, my analysis will take a somewhat different route, foregrounding a separate, and to my mind rather underappreciated strand in Davidson’s argument. This strand is best expressed in Davidson’s observation that one consequence of his argument in ‘Derangement’ is that of ‘eras[ing] the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally’.<sup>9</sup> I believe this is the deeper motivating idea of the paper, and a crucial point of connection with companion pieces such as ‘Communication and Convention’ and ‘The Social Aspect of Language’: there is much to be said about linguistic competence, but nothing we can say that would firmly distinguish linguistic competence specifically from more general knowledge of the world and of our social environment.

The centerpiece of my reading, then, is a claim about *knowledge of language*. My discussion in the following will largely be constrained to lexical knowledge. Accordingly, my point of entry will be the structure of the mental lexicon: I take Davidson’s point about ‘erasing the boundary’ to speak to the impossibility of drawing a firm line between knowledge of word meanings proper (ensconced in a ‘mental dictionary’), on the one hand, and knowledge of worldly states of affairs (ensconced in a ‘mental encyclopedia’), on the other. Without appeal to such a distinction, it would seem impossible to say where linguistic knowledge ends and where worldly knowledge begins. After exploring the idea of the mental lexicon in more detail in Section 3, Section 4 turns to showing why this distinction is much more problematic than many philosophers and linguists—including, pace Lepore and Ludwig, some reasonably sophisticated ones—have typically supposed. My argument centers on the question of how a lexicon is acquired, and draws crucial inspiration from empirical studies of language learning.

---

<sup>7</sup>For example, Davidson, ‘Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages’, ‘Truth and Meaning’, ‘Semantics for Natural Languages’. Ramberg, *Donald Davidson’s Philosophy of Language*, offers an important defense of Davidson against this line of thinking. See also Bar-On and Risjord, ‘Is there Such a Thing as a Language?’ and Pietroski, ‘A Defense of Derangement’ for further developments.

<sup>8</sup>Lepore and Ludwig, *Donald Davidson*, 264.

<sup>9</sup>Davidson, ‘Derangement’, 107.

But I also want to flag a distinctive positive thesis of this paper: as I argue in Section 5, the failure of the distinction between dictionary and encyclopedia is not just, as it were, a brute fact that theorists of language are forced to contend with. Instead, it is a moment of positive explanatory significance; crucial to communicative competence in natural language. In particular, in light of the challenge of coping with linguistically diverse environments it is fundamentally a good thing that dictionary and encyclopedia remain deeply integrated rather than categorically distinct dimensions of the mental lexicon. (More generally, I believe the failure to appreciate this fact is one aspect of a larger and more widespread failure among philosophers of language to appreciate the extent and significance of language variation.)

I take it that these arguments establish the following conclusion concerning knowledge of language: there is no diachronically stable and uniquely specifiable object that could constitute the language that a person knows. As I aim to show in Section 6, this conclusion provides a novel and illuminating angle on common objections to ‘Derangement’ which claim that, for all Davidson has shown, there is still an important explanatory role for public languages to play in a philosophical account of linguistic communication.

### III. The Mental Lexicon

My point of entry, then, is the idea of a mental lexicon. In contemporary linguistic theory, the mental lexicon is to be distinguished, first and foremost, from the mental grammar. Roughly, the mental lexicon contains the elements to be combined, while the mental grammar contains the rules for their combination. There are many questions to be asked also of this distinction.<sup>10</sup> But my present focus is on the structure of the mental lexicon itself. In particular, it is widely assumed that there is a further distinction to be drawn within the mental lexicon between a speaker’s knowledge of word meanings proper—ensconced in the speaker’s ‘dictionary’— and the speaker’s wider knowledge of the world, ensconced in an ‘encyclopedia’.<sup>11</sup> Take the time-honored example ‘bachelor’: the dictionary entry for ‘bachelor’ must minimally contain enough

---

<sup>10</sup>In particular, I have in mind the approach sometimes known as cognitive grammar (sometimes construction grammar): cf. Langacker, *Concept, Image, and Symbol; Cognitive Grammar*; Goldberg, *Constructions*; ‘The Nature of Generalization in Language’, and, for a broader application, Tomasello, *Constructing a Language*.

<sup>11</sup>The terminology is perhaps most strongly associated with the work of Jerry Katz (e.g. Katz and Fodor, ‘The Structure of a Semantic Theory’; Katz, ‘The Neoclassical Theory of Reference’, 116–7). It is important to note, however, that the philosophical point at stake in no way depends on this terminology. Thus, for instance, see Bierwisch and Kiefer, who speak in terms of ‘semantic core’ vs. ‘semantic periphery’. This core ‘comprises all and only those semantic specifications that determine, roughly speaking, [a lexeme’s] place within the system of dictionary entries, i.e. delimit it from other (non-synonymous) entries. The periphery consists of those semantic specifications which could be removed from its reading without changing its relation to other lexical readings within the same grammar’ (Bierwisch and Kiefer, ‘Remarks on Definitions in Natural Language’, 69–70).

information to specify its reference, namely unmarried men. By contrast, it could only belong to the associated encyclopedia entry that bachelors lead a certain kind of carefree lifestyle.<sup>12</sup> On the traditional picture, dictionary and encyclopedia comprise properly distinct parts of the mental lexicon, although we are sometimes apt to get them confused because dictionary entries also serve as index points under which the various bits of encyclopedic knowledge is stored, and through which they are retrieved.

Why posit a dictionary–encyclopedia distinction in the first place? One strand of argument emphasizes computational constraints in individual psychology: if language processing is to be a tractable task, then we must suppose that it operates on a limited and stable store of information.<sup>13</sup> This store of information constitutes the individual language user’s mental dictionary, to be distinguished from his mental encyclopedia.

Another strand of argument, probably more prominent in contemporary philosophical debates, emphasizes the intersubjective, communicative dimension of language: communication requires that speaker and hearer assign the same meanings to the same words. But different speakers differ widely in their associations and inferential proclivities with respect to any particular word. If communication is to be possible, it must be because this variation bears on the mental encyclopedia, leaving intact a dictionary that is (largely) shared between (all competent, mature) speakers of the language. This line of thought is typically motivated by a quasi-transcendental argument from the possibility (and relative ease) of linguistic communication: since such communication would be (all but) impossible without a publically shared dictionary, we can conclude that such a dictionary exists. In the words of the pioneering psycholinguist George Miller, ‘[t]his approach might at least make it possible to understand how someone who believes the earth is flat could converse satisfactorily about *up* and *down* with someone who believes the earth is round’.<sup>14</sup>

This sort of thinking need not, of course, be explicitly cast in terms of the dictionary–encyclopedia distinction. For recent examples, consider, for instance, Herman Cappelen and Ernest Lepore, who claim that linguistic competence in English somehow gives us ‘direct cognitive access’ to the minimal semantic content of any arbitrary sentence belonging to that language.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Emma Borg argues that linguistic communication involves context-invariant ‘minimal propositions’, which ‘are (and are known to be) the content any competent language user is guaranteed to be able to recover merely through exposure to the sentence uttered’.<sup>16</sup> This minimal semantic content is to be contrasted with the

<sup>12</sup>See, e.g. Aitchison, *Words in the Mind*, Ch. 4; Murphy, *Lexical Meaning*, Ch. 3; Riemer, *Introducing Semantics*, Ch. 3.3 for textbook accounts of the dictionary–encyclopedia distinction, its motivation in linguistic and psychological theory, and the problems it faces.

<sup>13</sup>cf. Riemer, *Introducing Semantics*, 101.

<sup>14</sup>Miller, ‘Semantic Relations among Words’, 83.

<sup>15</sup>Cappelen and Lepore, ‘Shared Content’, 1051.

<sup>16</sup>Borg, ‘Minimalism versus Contextualism in Semantics’, 353–4.

richer levels of meaning that might *also* be activated simultaneously, but which will likely vary from subject to subject and occasion to occasion. While these authors have little to say directly about the structure of the mental lexicon, it should be easy to see that these arguments assume a clear distinction between dictionary and encyclopedia: the minimal semantic content is what is specified by the dictionary entry, that without which we would not count as knowing the meaning of the word. By contrast, the collateral meaning is tied up in the encyclopedia. I characterize this sort of reasoning as quasi-transcendental not to disparage it, but to point out that the assumption is supported less by positive evidence than by the evidently disastrous consequences that would flow from denying it: without it, so the reasoning goes, we have no account of how linguistic communication succeeds.<sup>17</sup>

By contrast, one persistent source of skepticism about the distinction views it essentially as a psychologized version of the analytic-synthetic distinction, and vulnerable to the same kind of objections: that is, while the distinction seems theoretically clear on the face of it, no one has ever successfully been able to say, of any suitably large segment of the lexicon, what bits of information belong to the dictionary and what parts could be relegated to the encyclopedia. In other words, no one has been able to say what aspects of a word's meaning all speakers of a language must agree upon in order to count as knowing the meaning of that word.<sup>18</sup>

I believe this is a real worry, one which has yet to be properly addressed in the literature. But I want to emphasize that this strategy still leaves on the table the view that the dictionary-encyclopedia distinction provides something like a useful *idealization*, a sensible functional map, perhaps, of lexical and communicative competence, even if the territory is rarely as sharply defined as the map might seem to suggest. Accordingly, my aim in the following is to take

---

<sup>17</sup>Others may broadly support this general approach to semantics, but attempt to divest it of any psychological implications. The results are not, I think, encouraging. Thus, consider Scott Soames, who holds that 'the meaning of a term is the minimal content that must be associated with it by a rational agent—over and above the agent's ability to reason intelligently and efficiently—in order to communicate with other members of the linguistic community' (Soames, *Philosophy of Language*, 172). Since this notion of meaning is 'determined by rational reconstruction, not by psycholinguistic research', it is 'not assumed that speaking a common language requires us to have psychologically robust representations that carry all and only the information *semantically* encoded by sentences' (ibid.). As it turns out, this last point could well be deployed to capture an important part of the conclusion I will offer in this paper. But even so, it will turn out that the argument by which I arrive at that conclusion effectively sidelines the assumption that any amount of 'rational reconstruction' can help determine a minimal content which any 'rational agent' must associate with a particular term in order to communicate with other members of the linguistic community. If my argument is correct, there is no definite minimal content that even an idealized 'rational agent' must associate with a term in order to communicate efficiently. In brief, by assuming a sharp distinction between narrowly linguistic and more broadly cognitive or epistemic dimensions of communicative competence (cf. 'ability to reason intelligently and efficiently'), Soames's approach begs the question at stake.

<sup>18</sup>See, e.g. Marconi, *Lexical Competence*, 36–8; Jackendoff, *Foundations of Language*, 286.

steps toward developing a functional, cognitive perspective on the failure of the dictionary–encyclopedia distinction. Drawing on perspectives from language acquisition and sociolinguistics, the next two sections argue that the failure of the dictionary–encyclopedia distinction is not simply a brute fact that our theories will have to contend with. In particular, it is not indicative of a design flaw, or a source of interference or distortion in an otherwise neatly modular system. To the contrary, given the kinds of environments in which language is acquired and in which linguistic competence is exercised, it is quite essential to natural language competence that there be continuous interplay between the two dimensions of the mental lexicon, or in Davidson’s terms, between knowing a language and knowing one’s way around in the world more generally.

#### IV. Lexical Acquisition

To get us started on thinking about this, I want to call attention to the fact that a mental lexicon is not given, but acquired. So how does one come into possession of one? Oddly, this question is rarely considered in the philosophical literature.

In the scientific literature, it is commonly observed that lexical acquisition is a process that starts in earnest in the child’s second year and which is essentially complete at some point in the early to late teens. A conservative estimate sets an average adult English speaker’s vocabulary at around 60,000 words, leaving us with the task of learning around 10 new words per day from age 1 until 19. Obviously, the rate of acquisition is not uniform throughout the process; it is presumed to peak somewhere in the middle teens and to flatten out shortly after.<sup>19</sup>

In light of these facts, a neat and orderly picture might have it that the formation of the mental dictionary is more or less complete by a certain stage of development, and that what is acquired afterwards—apart from a few relatively esoteric additions acquired, perhaps, during college education or vocational training—is encyclopedic knowledge, knowledge garnered in large parts by testimony to which one can enjoy access only by drawing on knowledge previously stored in one’s mental dictionary.

This is certainly the impression we might get if we look only at word *forms*. But it is integral to a lexicon that it maps forms to meanings. So, what would the picture look like if we focused not simply on the acquisition of new word forms, but on the acquisition of new meanings—senses—to pair with the already stored word forms? This is a process which is exceptionally hard to

---

<sup>19</sup>Different accounts differ on the precise details, but agree on the broad trajectory. See, e.g. Bloom, *How Children Learn the Meanings of Words*, Ch. 2; Clark, *The Lexicon in Acquisition*, Ch. 1; Nagy and Herman, ‘Breadth and Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge’; Carey, ‘The Child as Word Learner’.



quantify in the way that one might quantify the acquisition of new word forms. But as I will argue, there is a sense in which this process does not tail off in quite the same way as the acquisition of new word forms does, but continues more or less unabated throughout one's life. Moreover, it is a process which renders problematic the distinction between dictionary and encyclopedia.

Here is why. As is widely acknowledged in the language acquisition literature, most words are learned from linguistic context rather than from ostensive demonstration (e.g. 'this is an apple').<sup>20</sup> There are two aspects to this: first, most words in our vocabularies have meanings that could not easily be fixed by ostension in the first place (e.g. 'love', 'justice', 'mortgage', 'dreaming'); these are, to borrow from Paul Bloom, words whose meanings 'could only be conveyed through the vehicle of language'.<sup>21</sup> Second, many of our words are learned from reading, where ostensive resources are sorely lacking.<sup>22</sup> If we say, as I did above, that an *average* English speaker's vocabulary will consist of about 60,000 entries, it is nonetheless clear that many are in possession of a far greater number, say, 100,000 or more. This surplus could only plausibly be accounted for by exposure through reading.<sup>23</sup>

I believe these observations provide an excellent entry point into Davidson's thinking in 'Derangement'. As have seen, Davidson argues that we need a theory that can account for our comprehension of 'expressions not covered by prior learning'. Plainly, if we maintained a theory of language comprehension by which we understand utterances simply by decomposing them into words that we then map onto a stable repository of stored meanings, then we would lack an account of how we came to be in possession of most of the words that form our mental lexicons. Certainly, we do exercise our standing linguistic competence—however we define it—in extrapolating the meaning of new words from linguistic context. But trivially, the standing linguistic competence is not sufficient, and we must seamlessly draw on encyclopedic knowledge as well (including a good deal of the sort of commonsense psychology that underlies ascriptions of communicative intentions to speakers). In order to explain certain basic features of language acquisition, then, we must presume that we are in possession of a primitive capacity for comprehension which allows us to assign meanings to words by extrapolation from the linguistic context in which they occur. According to Paul Bloom, our apprehension of such unfamiliar word meanings could only arise from a 'sensitivity to the meaning of the

---

<sup>20</sup>cf. Nagy and Herman, 'Breadth and Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge'.

<sup>21</sup>Bloom, *How Children Learn the Meanings of Words*, 212.

<sup>22</sup>cf. Sternberg, 'Most Vocabulary is Learned from Context'.

<sup>23</sup>cf. Miller, *The Science of Words*, cited in Bloom, *How Children Learn the Meanings of Words*, 192.

passage as a whole'.<sup>24</sup> This phrasing suits me well, as it evokes the sort of holistic approach to language comprehension that is generally characteristic of Davidson's work.<sup>25</sup>

Admittedly, though, these observations wouldn't trouble the traditional picture much if we could assume that this was a one-time event: we encounter a new word form embedded in a sentence; clearly we cannot draw on a previously stored dictionary entry; so we draw on standing linguistic resources to decode what we can of the sentence, and draw on encyclopedic knowledge to extrapolate a meaning for the word in question. Now, the word form along with the extrapolated meaning is stored in the dictionary, ready to go for the next encounter. On this picture, then, encyclopedic knowledge can be of invaluable assistance in *adding entries* to the dictionary. But once an entry is added, it is closed off from further infiltration of encyclopedic knowledge.

But this clearly cannot be right. An obvious problem is that most word meanings are significantly broader than what could be extrapolated from a single occurrence. Take, for instance, the sentence 'justice is the first virtue of social institutions'. There is no simple decomposition of this sentence which will yield a sense for 'justice' which corresponds to anything like what we might recognize as a plausible dictionary entry for that word.

Much is made in the scientific literature of the notion of 'fast mapping', going back to Susan Carey and Elsa Bartlett's experimental observation that children can acquire a new word after as little as a single exposure.<sup>26</sup> But the sense of 'acquisition' in play here is much thinner than what interests us at present. The observation is that surprisingly few exposures are required for children to acquire a word form, along with its grammatical category (e.g. noun or verb), as well as a first, rudimentary sense of the semantic space in which the word operates (e.g. mass/count; animate/inanimate, etc.). For instance, when told to 'fetch me the gleeb', the child will swiftly assign 'gleeb' to the category of nouns, based simply on its place in the sentence. But it will also, plausibly, note that 'gleeb' is preceded by a definite article, and infer that a gleeb is likely a discrete, bounded object, much like a doll or a ball, unlike snow or grass.<sup>27</sup> But as Carey and Bartlett themselves note, fast mapping includes 'only a small fraction of the total information that will constitute a full

<sup>24</sup>Bloom, *How Children Learn the Meanings of Words*, 191–2.

<sup>25</sup>It is also reminiscent of the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer (e.g. *Truth and Method*), whose thinking on these issues chimes well with Davidson's approach in 'Derangement'. In honor of Gadamer, we might say that this sensitivity is an expression of our 'hermeneutic capacity'. If so, the present argument is an inquiry into the source and structure of this hermeneutic capacity, and its place in the overall picture of linguistic and communicative competence.

<sup>26</sup>See Carey and Bartlett, 'Acquiring a Single New Word', whose approach is indebted to the pioneering work of Roger Brown (e.g. 'Linguistic Determinism and the Part of Speech'). See also Carey, 'Beyond Fast Mapping', for current reflection on these issues.

<sup>27</sup>cf. Brown, 'Linguistic Determinism and the Part of Speech'; Gleitman, 'The Structural Sources of Verb Meanings'; Bloom, *How Children Learn the Meanings of Words*, Ch. 8.

learning of the word'.<sup>28</sup> Thus, what is striking about these findings is in part the discrepancy between the speed with which children are able to acquire these phonological and morphosyntactic features and the slowness of their acquisition of the word's richer semantic features.<sup>29</sup> It seems safe to assume that most philosophers who are interested in lexical meaning—certainly those who have engaged with Davidson on these points—are primarily interested in these richer dimensions of meaning.

I want to warn, however, against thinking of this simply in terms of an incapacity (i.e. that we are, for one reason or another, remarkably *good* at extracting syntactic and morphological information from sentences we are exposed to, but at the same time remarkably *poor* at extracting the semantic information). Instead, I believe there is a functional, cognitive story to be told here. In particular, it would be odd, from a cognitive point of view, to let one's dictionary be hostage to the quality of the information one could glean from a randomly selected first encounter with a word in use. One need not be an anti-individualist (for instance) to be struck by the frequency and degree of misinformation at evidence in ordinary speakers' use of words, e.g. Tyler Burge's 'I have arthritis in my thigh'.<sup>30</sup> (My 'elision'-example might also be a case in point: I will return to this later.) And in the process of acquiring a lexicon, one is overwhelmingly more likely to draw one's data from encounters with ordinary speakers than from putative experts. As such, a dictionary-formation procedure which fixed the entry on first exposure would leave us extremely vulnerable to linguistic disinformation, to our significant cognitive and epistemic disadvantage.

Could we assume, then, that the dictionary entry will be fixed not on our first encounter, but after some inductive procedure has been performed on a tractably finite set of early exposures to the word in action? On such a view, encyclopedic knowledge is key to gathering the evidence and to performing the inductive task, but once that task is executed, it is not called for again. This is scarcely a decisive improvement: the smaller the set, the more the process is hostage to contingent circumstance and the more liable it is to eventuate in an idiosyncratic dictionary entry, thereby defeating the grounding motivations of the approach. By contrast, if we imagine the set to be larger, we have a different problem. One thing that is seldom remarked even in the literature that notes how most words are learned from context is just how rarely—all things told—we encounter many of these words in action. So if the limit is set at a suitably large number, then there will be many words whose entries will not be fixed in our dictionaries before we are well into our mature linguistic careers, and even some words for which we might never cross the threshold at all. (For example,

<sup>28</sup>Carey and Bartlett, 'Acquiring a Single New Word', 18.

<sup>29</sup>See also Bloom, 'Myths of Word Learning', 214–7.

<sup>30</sup>Burge, 'Individualism and the Mental'.

‘Hirsute’, ‘atavistic’, ‘uxorious’, and, again, ‘elision’, at least if you are not a linguist.)

## V. A Davidsonian Model: Prior and Passing Theories

Before moving on, it will be useful to summarize the findings of the previous section. Focusing on language acquisition brings to our attention the fact that dictionary entries aren’t simply given, but must be inductively drawn from evidence of the word in use.<sup>31</sup> This evidence can only be accessed and evaluated by drawing on encyclopedic knowledge. So dictionary and encyclopedia clearly blend into each other in the process of *forming* a mental lexicon. If we think that dictionary and encyclopedia nonetheless form properly distinct parts of a language user’s communicative competence, this must be because we believe the window slams shut at some point. But the shorter we assume that the window stays open, the less reliable the results of the inductive procedure, and the lower the probability that the dictionary entry will actually do us the service that the theory requires. If we believe that the window stays open for a longer time, then statistical evidence suggests that many of us go through (large parts of) our lives without a dictionary entry for many of the words that we nonetheless appear to deploy in competent communication. So again, we lose out on the motivation for drawing the distinction in the first place.

In my view, ‘Derangement’ offers the outline of a more promising model. On this model, there is no strict cut-off, no point at which the dictionary entry is fully formed; not at large, nor with respect to particular entries. Instead, it remains open as the evidence from actual usage accumulates. Davidson outlines this model in terms of a distinction between *prior* and *passing* theories of interpretation.<sup>32</sup> To a first approximation, the prior theory captures how an interpreter is prepared to understand an arbitrary utterance in advance of a communicative encounter. Our prior theory, at any given time, represents the inductive generalization over previous encounters, formed by absorbing lessons drawn from passing theories, theories tailored to meet the demands of particular utterances in particular communicative settings. As the inductive base expands, so our prior theories grow more firm, as, consequently, do the semantic anticipations that we bring to any new communicative encounter. But successful communication occurs only when speaker’s and hearer’s passing theories coincide.

---

<sup>31</sup>In passing, it is perhaps worth noting that this picture is not essentially altered even if one were to accept Jerry Fodor’s (extremely controversial) claim that word learning could only proceed by mapping phonological forms onto a fixed stock of innate concepts (cf. Fodor, *The Language of Thought*). Here, the inductive problem arises in the form of the question of how the available evidence can reliably guide us to the *unique* concept that the word (supposedly) expresses, rather than merely imposing constraints on the set of possible concepts.

<sup>32</sup>See Davidson, ‘Derangement’, 100ff.

It is perfectly possible, of course, to encounter utterances that meet all our semantic anticipations. In such cases, the passing theory will simply be a specification of the prior theory applied to the case at hand (i.e. one that resolves ambiguities and polysemies, assigns referents to indexicals and demonstratives, and so on). But often enough, we will meet with utterances that upset our semantic anticipations. Here, our encyclopedic knowledge will aid in the construction of a plausible passing theory. Now we are faced with a choice: to update our prior theory based on what the passing theory yields, or to dismiss the new usage as idiosyncratic. The more expansive the inductive base that underlies our prior theory, the more prepared we will be to dismiss even a usage that we nonetheless perfectly well understand, unless there are complicating factors such as the perceived prestige or authority of the speaker, etc.<sup>33</sup>

This already signals a serious problem for the standard picture. But as Davidson suggests, even such cases may turn out to require a more complex treatment, a full account of which would take us well into the domain of socio-linguistics. First, the passing theory can—and maybe should—be molded into a prior theory made to fit the particular speaker in question. In such cases, there will be a discrepancy between, say, one's *default* prior theory, which captures how one is prepared in advance to meet the linguistic productions of any generic speaker of the language in question, and one's *specific* prior theory, which is tailored to particular interlocutors.<sup>34</sup>

But second, even a usage that one dismisses as idiosyncratic should not be allowed to sink without a memory trace. Language use is forever changing, and what one dismisses as idiosyncratic on a first encounter may well be an instance of an emerging pattern of use. (Again, the 'elision'-example is useful: since I first deployed this example in print a couple of years ago,<sup>35</sup> the online version of the OED now lists 'Join together; merge' as a legitimate secondary sense of 'to elide', whereas Merriam-Webster's entry remains unaltered.)

Third, it is too quick to presume that the choice is always between updating one's default prior theory and creating a specific prior theory for *individual* interlocutors. A new usage never spreads at a uniform rate throughout a population. One may well observe that the new usage is in vogue with particular groups of speakers, and attempt to construct a prior theory to fit the

<sup>33</sup>For an important early account of the linguistic significance of 'social pressures from above', see Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns*, Ch. 5. Sonia S'hiri's 'Speak Arabic Please!' is an illustrative study of Tunisian Arabic speakers' accommodation to the perceived prestige of their Middle Eastern peers in the context of a London immigrant community.

<sup>34</sup>The literature on discourse collaboration and lexical entrainment offers a useful theoretical and empirical angle on this. See, e.g. Clark, *Using Language*; Schober and Clark, 'Understanding by Addressees and Overhearers'; Brennan and Clark, 'Conceptual Pacts and Lexical Choice in Conversation'; as well as Ludlow, *Living Words*, Ch. 3 for philosophical reflection. Also of relevance is sociolinguistic work on phenomena such as code switching and accommodation, which are sadly overlooked in virtually all philosophical discussions of language and communicative competence. See, e.g. Wardhaugh, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, Ch. 4 for an overview of such issues.

<sup>35</sup>Begby, 'Semantic Minimalism and "the Miracle of Communication"', 969–70.

demographic in question (useful parameters include, gender, age, geographic location, educational background, and social standing).<sup>36</sup>

In my view, these observations leave the dictionary–encyclopedia distinction in complete disarray. What emerges instead is a complex but integrated picture of lexical and communicative competence. Any conversational encounter presents communicators with a choice of ‘theory’. This choice is competently met only by situating interlocutor, subject matter, context of conversation with respect to encyclopedic knowledge. So encyclopedic knowledge bleeds into what remains of ‘standing linguistic competence’ from both ends: both in choice of theory, and in terms of continuously reshaping that theory to accommodate new data. In a highly idealized way, then, we can say that a prior theory represents a person’s standing linguistic competence *at a time*. But that notion will be relativized along multiple dimensions, depending on a large number of facts that could only be accessed via encyclopedic knowledge.

Moreover, and as I have emphasized throughout, there is no plausible way to meet these observations by claiming that, whatever the empirical data might seem to suggest, it is nonetheless distinctively sub-optimal, from the point of view of cognitive architecture, if dictionary and encyclopedia are not properly distinct parts of the mental lexicon. This approach would neglect the fact that the failure of the dictionary–encyclopedia distinction can be given a functional and cognitive reading. Facts regarding language learning and the challenges of coping with linguistically diverse environments suggest that it is fundamentally a good thing that dictionary and encyclopedia remain deeply integrated rather than categorically distinct dimensions of the mental lexicon. This integration is clearly necessary in the *acquisition* of the mental lexicon. But it is arguably also essential to the *maintenance* of the mental lexicon, so as to permit competent navigation of the complex social space that is communication by language. Accordingly, the failure of the dictionary–encyclopedia distinction is not a matter of interference or distortion in an otherwise neatly modular system. In the parlance of our times, it is not a bug, but a feature.

In sum, starting from Davidson’s observation that one consequence of the argument of ‘Derangement’ is that of ‘eras[ing] the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally’, we have, by way of considerations drawn from language acquisition and sociolinguistics, arrived at the conclusion that there is no diachronically stable or uniquely specifiable object which could constitute the language that a person knows. This conclusion mimics Davidson’s more famous conclusion that ‘there is no such thing as a language’, though transposed into a cognitive key. I turn now to seeing how these considerations can inform us as we consider arguments

---

<sup>36</sup>Consider, for instance, Labov’s exploration of a ‘gender paradox’ in ‘The Intersection of Sex and Social Class in the Course of Language Change’ or recent research on how immigrant slang shapes the language also of non-immigrant school children (e.g. Freywald et al., ‘Kiezdeutsch as a Multi-ethnolect’).

and objections that bear more directly on Davidson's apparent eliminativism about *public* languages.

## VI. Is there Such a Thing as a Language?

Davidson says there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. It is important to be clear right away about what is at stake here. In particular, I want to emphasize that this conclusion leaves untouched a number of senses in which public languages may yet be said to exist or not: in particular, the conclusion has no clear bearing on the claim that public languages may be said to exist as abstract, perhaps Platonic entities.<sup>37</sup> Nor is it clear that Davidson's conclusion is motivated by the sort of 'methodological naturalism' that we find, for instance, in the work of Noam Chomsky, according to which the concept of a public language has no place in a serious scientific ontology.<sup>38</sup> Quite simply, these sorts of metaphysical and methodological issues are just not on the horizon in 'Derangement'.<sup>39</sup>

Instead, the context makes clear that Davidson has in mind a highly particular conception of language, and, moreover, that his concern with this conception is substantive and epistemic. The conception in question is one on which language is 'governed by learned conventions or regularities'<sup>40</sup> and on which,

---

<sup>37</sup>For example, Katz, *Language and Other Abstract Objects*; Soames, 'Linguistics and Psychology'; Wiggins, 'Languages as Social Objects'.

<sup>38</sup>For example, Chomsky, *Language and Thought*, 18; 'Language and Mind', 48–9. For philosophical reflection, see e.g. Stainton, 'Meaning and Reference: Some Chomskian Themes' and Collins, 'Naturalism in the Philosophy of Language'.

<sup>39</sup>While I am at it, I also want to warn against another potential misreading, according to which the main thrust of 'Derangement' would be to urge us to abandon public conventional languages as the focal point of semantic theorizing and to look instead at 'idiolects', i.e. the speech dispositions of individual subjects. (For example, Lepore and Ludwig, 'Truth and Meaning', 53; Wheeler, 'Language and Literature', 187). This reading certainly receives a measure of support from Davidson's subsequent essay, 'The Social Aspect of Language', which opens with the following question: 'Which is conceptually primary, the idiolect or the language?' (Davidson, 'The Social Aspect of Language', 109), and evidently goes on to muster arguments for the former answer. To my mind, it is both unfortunate and extremely puzzling that Davidson would accept this way of framing the issue. Clearly, there is some sense in which idiolects are closer to the relevant source of evidence, on Davidson's thinking, than public languages. Nonetheless, as a theoretical construct intended to serve a certain kind of explanatory role, idiolects suffer all the same problems as do public languages. (For similar arguments, see Dummett, 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', 469; and, in a slightly different context, Collins, 'Naturalism in the Philosophy of Language', 47.) Thus, by the criteria on which Davidson says there are no such thing as languages, there are also no such thing as idiolects, i.e. no diachronically stable and uniquely specifiable object which constitutes the speech dispositions of an individual language user. If my argument is sound, what should primarily bother Davidson in 'Derangement' is the very idea of a specifically linguistic capacity which offers a unique and stable contribution to our communicative competence, not how thick or thin our account of that capacity is.

<sup>40</sup>Davidson, 'Derangement', 93.

accordingly, we should model subjects' lexical competence in terms of their prior knowledge of these conventions. Famously, Davidson offers malapropisms (e.g. 'do I detect a hint of condensation in your voice?') as a convenient and relatively familiar case where a linguistic expression violates such a convention but is nonetheless easily understood by the hearer. This, then, opens up the question of what essential role such learned conventions ever play in our linguistic interactions. Davidson's answer is 'none'. He writes:

In linguistic communication, nothing corresponds to a linguistic competence as often described [...] I conclude that there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases.<sup>41</sup>

Instead, successful communication is a much more encompassing cognitive achievement, which, as he puts it in a later essay, involves 'the exercise of the imagination, appeal to general knowledge of the world, and awareness of human interests and attitudes'.<sup>42</sup> This is not to say that such 'learned conventions'—in the guise of more or less settled expectations about interlocutors' likely linguistic habits—never play a role, because they most certainly do. But it is to say that they play no *essential* role: rather, these more global cognitive processes can easily compensate where our semantic expectations are frustrated, as they often will be. (Indeed, and as I argued in Section 4, without this assumption, we would be at a loss to explain how we came to learn these conventions in the first place.) What does not exist, then, according to Davidson, is some convention-governed structure, knowledge of which could fully account for a subject's ability to retrieve the literal meaning of any arbitrary sentence in his or her language.<sup>43</sup> Considered as a theoretical posit intended to throw light on a certain kind of cognitive competence, conventional public languages such as English or Swahili are of strictly limited utility.

Lepore and Ludwig take issue with this line of thinking.<sup>44</sup> On their view, we can happily embrace the conclusion that prior knowledge of language is neither necessary nor sufficient for communicative competence, while still maintaining that public, conventional languages such as English or Swahili

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 107.

<sup>42</sup>Davidson, 'The Social Aspect of Language', 110.

<sup>43</sup>This line of thought obviously presupposes that literal meaning—what Davidson calls 'first meaning' ('Derangement', 91–2)—should not be systematically identified with conventional meaning. This is a crucial sticking point for many of Davidson's critics (cf. Green, 'Davidson's Derangement'; Reimer, 'What Malapropisms Mean'). I will return to this point below.

<sup>44</sup>Lepore and Ludwig, *Donald Davidson*.



play an ineliminable explanatory role in linguistic theory.<sup>45</sup> But what, more precisely, is this explanatory role? Note that Davidson may well agree that speakers, at some level of cognitive representation, hold beliefs about public languages such as English or Swahili, and seek to adjust their linguistic performances accordingly. Or to state the point in Davidson's preferred vocabulary: speakers have more or less firmly entrenched *prior theories* about the linguistic patterns they are likely to meet with in their everyday communicative encounters. These beliefs certainly do play a vital explanatory role with respect to their communicative competence. But how might we get from here to the claim that actual (though presumably abstract) entities such as English likewise play an ineliminable explanatory role? In my view, the only way to bridge this gap would be by showing that *English*, as such, plays a distinctive causal role in bringing speakers into linguistic unison over and above the simpler and more familiar social mechanisms of belief calibration that are at play in language acquisition and testimonial exchange. I believe the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic data firmly support Davidson's view: our beliefs about the semantic contents expressed in arbitrary communications, even in familiar domestic settings, calibrate and continuously recalibrate along a number of different axes, reflecting broadly explicable patterns of social interaction.<sup>46</sup> Quite simply, it is not *English* that brings about this level of interpersonal calibration. It is concrete, dateable encounters with the testimony of other people with whom we stand in specific social relations: as teachers, parents, peers, colleagues, friends, or lovers. In fact, the level of linguistic calibration that we see is precisely what we would expect from the role that linguistic interaction plays in disseminating knowledge.<sup>47</sup> If we will, we can say, in a rough and ready way, that all of these calibration patterns fall under the superordinate category of English (as opposed, for instance, to Swahili). But this categorization gives us no

---

<sup>45</sup>See also Stainton, 'A Deranged Argument against Public Languages', for a similarly motivated argument.

<sup>46</sup>As per my argument in Section 5. This should hopefully also be sufficient to indicate why I have little faith in Lepore and Ludwig's stipulation that we are in possession of a notion of an 'ideal speaker of the public language' (*Donald Davidson*, 274) which we deploy, by default, whenever 'we encounter a speaker [...] for whom we have no clues to idiosyncratic usage' (*ibid.*, 275). Lepore and Ludwig believe that this 'theory' of the ideal speaker 'characterizes our competence in the public language' (*ibid.*, 274). By sharp contrast, I believe it is a crucial part of our linguistic competence that we are at least minimally cued in, at whatever level of mental representation, to sociolinguistic differences between groups of speakers. In my view, this renders any attempt to characterize linguistic competence with reference to an 'ideal speaker of the public language' entirely otiose, at least to the extent that this 'public language' is supposed to correspond to large-scale structures such as English. (See also my argument in fn. 17 above against Soames's claim that 'rational reconstruction', involving reference to an ideal 'rational agent', may help determine linguistic meaning.).

<sup>47</sup>On this, see Begby, 'Lexical Norms, Language Comprehension, and the Epistemology of Testimony', Section VI. This is, as I see it, another crucial reason to emphasize the deep integration between dictionary and encyclopedia in the mental dictionary.

explanatory leverage over and above Davidson's distinction between prior and passing theories.

However, my invocation of subjects' 'beliefs' about language, and of mechanisms of interpersonal belief calibration, might be seen to simply give back with one hand what it just took away with the other. Above, we described the view of language at issue as one that accords a central explanatory role to conventions. And it may well be thought that such calibrated beliefs about language is just what conventions are. So, far from denying the existence of public languages, then, Davidson's argument can be seen precisely to affirm it.

But the details matter here. To be sure, we can describe—at some level of abstraction—the relatively finely coordinated prior theories of English speakers as forming a body of conventions. But this is a far cry from holding that this description gives us new and important explanatory insights into communicative competence. It is even farther from establishing the claim that these conventions, just as such, hold some kind of important normative sway over the linguistic performances of individual speakers, such that the literal meaning of an arbitrary utterance just is the conventional meaning of the sentence uttered, irrespective of what the speaker intended to convey.<sup>48</sup>

Plausibly, this sort of approach may have a good grip on cases where a speaker knowingly and intentionally violates the relevant semantic conventions, for instance for humorous effect (as in the case of Goodman Ace, in Davidson's opening example).<sup>49</sup> Here, a case can be made that the speaker is precisely channeling his communicative intention through the semantic conventions and is relying on the speaker to recognize this fact. It is a different matter, however, in cases (presumably far more common) where the speaker simply has false beliefs about the conventions in question.

To see how, we may return to my opening example. Assume, then, for the sake of discussion, that the conventional meaning of 'elision' in English is that of 'omission'. Assume further that the speaker believes instead that its meaning is closer to that of 'conflation'. He now utters 'aid agencies have only themselves to blame for elision between humanitarianism and military intervention'. At this point, one of a number of things can happen. Maybe (i) the hearer has a firm belief that 'elision' means omission, not conflation, and that the speaker's utterance literally means what it conventionally means. Realizing that this is nonetheless probably not what the speaker intended to convey, he adjusts his interpretation to yield something like 'aid agencies have only themselves to blame for *the erosion of the distinction* between humanitarianism and military intervention'. No doubt, the standard approach can handle this sort of case. To say that the hearer achieves this understanding in part by 'the exercise of the

<sup>48</sup>cf. Bar-On and Risjord, 'Is there Such a Thing as a Language?'; Green, 'Davidson's Derangement', Reimer, 'What Malapropisms Mean'. See Begby, 'Lexical Norms, Language Comprehension, and the Epistemology of Testimony' for a broadly Davidson-inspired account of norms and patterns of accountability in language use.

<sup>49</sup>Davidson, 'Derangement', 89.

imagination, appeal to general knowledge of the world, and awareness of human interests and attitudes', does in no way prejudice the claim that he *also* uses his linguistic competence, a competence which we may well describe in terms of 'knowledge of convention'.

But I take it to be at least as plausible, probably much more plausible, that one of the following scenarios obtain instead: (ii) the hearer has no firm belief about what 'elision' means, and takes this as one opportunity to learn it; (iii) the hearer does have the belief that 'elision' means 'omission', but is open to the possibility that it may also have further senses of which he is unaware; (iv) the hearer believes—based on limited data—that 'elision' means 'omission', but now revises that belief in light of his understanding of the speaker's utterance, taking it that his previous belief was misinformed; or finally (v) he, just like the speaker, believes that 'elision' means something like conflation. In all of these cases, the appeal to linguistic conventions—over and above speaker's and hearer's beliefs about language—as holding some kind of normative sway over production and comprehension is not only otiose but positively obfuscatory. What matters is the speaker's and hearer's ability to 'converge on a passing theory' for the utterance in question, or in plain language, to reach an agreement on what the speaker has said. Semantic conventions play no explanatory role here. By contrast, what clearly does play an explanatory role is the seamless integration of dictionary and encyclopedia in the hearer's mental lexicon.

What remains to establish Davidson's conclusion is merely the relatively short step of showing that even in cases where speaker's and hearer's beliefs do in fact correspond to the stipulated public convention, these conventions do not play any real explanatory role in their own right. Instead, all the explanatory power is lodged at the level of the beliefs that interlocutors bring to the communicative setting. I believe this follows essentially by parity of reasoning: if convention plays no role in explaining successful communication in a case where speaker and hearer jointly believe, for instance, that 'elision' means *conflation*, there is no reason to think that it plays a role in cases where they jointly believe it means *omission*.

Surprisingly, there is a strand of argument in Lepore and Ludwig which seems compatible with this line of reasoning. They write:

[S]ince speaker and hearer need to converge on a passing theory for successful communication, they must converge on a common set of rules governing the speaker's use of words, that is, on shared conventions. In this sense, conventions are necessary for communicative success, at least in so far as it is *linguistic* communication.

<sup>50</sup> Maybe, then, the point about conventions is not that they play a role in explaining how successful communication comes about, but that successful communication effectively *institutes* a convention. This notion of convention, they concede, is not grounded in learned regularities, and may only hold between the interlocutors in question.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, it appears to be a notion with genuine normative import: to emphasize, convergence in passing theory necessarily involves convergence ‘on a common set of rules governing the speaker’s use of words’.<sup>52</sup>

However, and even aside from the fact that it completely loses touch with the idea that large-scale public languages such as English play an important explanatory role with respect to communication, I doubt that this can be made into a cogent view. If we allow, as Lepore and Ludwig do, that such conventions (so-called) can be dyadic (involving only two people) and ahistorical (can come into being as a result of an occasion-specific instance of mutual understanding), then it is entirely unclear how any kind of ‘rule’ to govern the use of a word can be reliably extracted from the extremely limited data that might be in play. That is, there may simply not be enough information in particular dyad’s (perfectly successful) communicative encounter to permit them to extract by mutual agreement anything like a rule governing the use of a particular word. Staying with our example, we can assume that speaker and hearer converge on the meaning of the sentence uttered, and they agree on what contribution ‘elision’ makes to that particular sentence. But what sort of rule for the speaker’s use of ‘elision’ is the hearer supposed to be able to extract from that single data point? At best, the utterance provides a partial glimpse of *one sense* which the speaker is prepared to attach to that word. The next time the speaker uses the word, it might be with a different sense. In fact, if ‘rules’ are in play at all, it seems evident that speaker and hearer can materially *disagree* about what that rule *would be*—e.g. what else the word might refer to in other contexts—to no detriment to their ability to understand each other on this particular occasion. To put the point in Davidson’s terminology, speaker and hearer can converge in passing theory without, as a result, converging in prior theory. What takes up the slack is, again, their shared understanding of how the world is.

---

<sup>50</sup>Lepore and Ludwig, *Donald Davidson*, 282.

<sup>51</sup>To this extent, their view seems reminiscent of the view explored by Ruth Millikan in ‘In Defense of Public Language’ and ‘Language Conventions Made Simple’.

<sup>52</sup>Evidently, they intend for this notion of convention to resonate with Davidson’s concluding line in ‘Communication and Convention’ (282): ‘philosophers who make convention a necessary element in language have the matter backwards. The truth is rather that language is a condition for having conventions’. On this, see Lepore and Ludwig, *Donald Davidson*, 283.

## VII. Conclusion

This paper has sought to offer a novel inroad on the argument of ‘Derangement’. Taking my cue from Davidson’s observation that one consequence of the argument is that of ‘eras[ing] the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally’, I have focused on the structure of the mental lexicon. I have argued that the failure of the dictionary–encyclopedia distinction provides one important source of support for Davidson’s conclusion that ‘there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed’: if my argument is correct, then there is no diachronically stable and uniquely specifiable object which could constitute the language that a person knows. Linguistic knowledge—specifically lexical knowledge—exists in deep and continuous interplay with world knowledge. Which ‘language’ a speaker is prepared to deploy ahead of a given communicative encounter—which *prior theory*, in Davidson’s terminology—will rightly depend on a number of factors, including who is speaking, what is the subject matter of the conversation, who else is within ear shot, etc. Of course, there will be a good deal of overlap between these ‘theories’, and at any rate a competent language user will be continually prepared to update her theory as the evidence accumulates. But the point remains that lexical knowledge seamlessly interacts with worldly knowledge at all points of a conversation. This thinking undermines the common view that such interaction could only be reckoned as a failure of sorts, a matter of ‘noise’ or interference in what ought, by design, to constitute a modular system. On the contrary, I believe the integration is highly functional, and can be given a cognitive reading: the continuous interaction between our linguistic capacities and our general knowledge of the world is essential to our ability to effectively navigate the social space of communication.

In my view, these reflections also leave the concept of a public language without any real explanatory task to claim as its own, just as Davidson argued. At best, that concept can be deployed in a strictly descriptive capacity in order to capture—though necessarily in a vague and imprecise way—large-scale patterns of coordinated belief within a group of individuals. But it is precisely the beliefs that individual speakers and hearers bring to the communicative setting which do all the real explanatory work. And if this essay’s main line of argument is correct, it will be futile to attempt to finely distinguish the narrowly semantic dimension from the more broadly epistemic dimension of those beliefs.

## Acknowledgments

I am pleased to acknowledge a very special debt of gratitude to Bjørn Ramberg, without whom this paper would likely never have seen the light of day. Readers familiar with Bjørn’s published work on Davidson will hopefully recognize its deep influence on the approach I take here, which has been

further shaped by our countless and exceptionally rewarding conversations stretching over many years. I would also like to thank Josh Armstrong, Liz Camp, Dorit Bar-On, and Rob Stainton for extremely helpful discussions at various stages of preparation, and to CSMN for supporting and staging the workshop where the paper was first presented.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### References

- Aitchison, Jean. *Words in the Mind: An Introduction to the Mental Lexicon*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987.
- Bar-On, Dorit, and Mark Risjord. 'Is there Such a Thing as a Language?' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 22, no. 2 (1992): 163–90.
- Begby, Endre. 'Semantic Minimalism and the "Miracle of Communication"'. *Philosophical Studies* 165, no. 3 (2013): 957–73.
- Begby, Endre. 'Lexical Norms, Language Comprehension, and the Epistemology of Testimony'. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 44, no. 3–4 (2014): 324–42.
- Bierwisch, Manfred, and Ferenc Kiefer. 'Remarks on Definitions in Natural Language'. In *Studies in Syntax and Semantics*, ed. F. Kiefer, 55–79. Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1969.
- Bloom, Paul. *How Children Learn the Meanings of Words*. Cambridge: MIT press, 2002.
- Bloom, Paul. 'Myths of Word Learning'. In *Weaving a Lexicon*, eds. D.G. Hall, S.R. Waxman, 205–24. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004.
- Borg, Emma. 'Minimalism versus Contextualism in Semantics'. In *Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism: New Essays on Semantic Minimalism*, eds. G. Preyer and G. Peter, 339–59. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Brennan, Susan E., and Herbert H. Clark. 'Conceptual Pacts and Lexical Choice in Conversation'. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 22, no. 6 (1996): 1482–93.
- Brown, Roger. 'Linguistic Determinism and the Part of Speech'. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 55, no. 1 (1957): 1–5.
- Burge, Tyler. 'Individualism and the Mental'. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (1979): 73–121.
- Cappelen, Herman, and Ernest Lepore. 'Shared Content'. In *The Oxford Handbook in the Philosophy of Language*, eds. E. Lepore and B. Smith, 1020–55. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Carey, Susan. 'The Child as Word Learner'. In *Linguistic Theory and Psychological Reality*, ed. M. Halle, J. Bresnan, and G.A. Miller, 264–93. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978.
- Carey, Susan. 'Beyond Fast Mapping'. *Language Learning and Development* 6, no. 3 (2010): 184–205.
- Carey, Susan, and Elsa Bartlett. 'Acquiring a Single New Word'. *Proceedings of the Stanford Child Language Conference* 15 (1978): 17–29.
- Chomsky, Noam. *Language and Thought*. London: Moyer Bell, 1993.
- Chomsky, Noam. 'Language and Nature'. *Mind* 104, no. 413 (1995): 1–61.
- Clark, Eve. *The Lexicon in Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Clark, Herbert. *Using Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

- Collins, John. 'Naturalism in the Philosophy of Language; or Why There is No Such Thing as Language'. In *New Waves in Philosophy of Language*, ed. Sarah Sawyer, 41–59. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Davidson, Donald. 'Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages'. Reprinted in *Inquires into Truth & Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984 [original publication 1966].
- Davidson, Donald. 'Truth and Meaning'. Reprinted in *Inquires into Truth & Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984 [original publication 1967].
- Davidson, Donald. 'Semantics for Natural Languages'. Reprinted in *Inquires into Truth & Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984 [original publication 1970].
- Davidson, Donald. 'Communication and Convention'. Reprinted in *Inquires into Truth & Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.
- Davidson, Donald. 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs'. Reprinted in *Truth, Language, and History: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 5. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005 [original publication 1986].
- Davidson, Donald. 'The Social Aspect of Language'. Reprinted in *Truth, Language, and History: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 5. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005 [original publication 1994].
- 'Does Humanitarian Aid Prolong Wars?' *The Observer* April 25, 2010.
- Dummett, Michael. 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking'. In *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. E. Lepore, 459–76. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1986.
- Fodor, Jerry A. *The Language of Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975.
- Freywald, Ulrike, Katharina Mayr, Tiner Özçelik, and Heike Wiese. 'Kiezdeutsch as a Multiethnolect'. In *Ethnic Styles of Speaking in European Metropolitan Areas*, eds. F. Kern and M. Selting, 45–73. Amsterdam: Johns Benjamins, 2011.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. Trans. J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall. London: Continuum, 1989 [original German publication 1960].
- Gleitman, Lila. 'The Structural Sources of Verb Meanings'. *Language Acquisition* 1, no. 1 (1990): 3–55.
- Goldberg, Adele E. *Constructions: A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Goldberg, Adele E. 'The Nature of Generalization in Language'. *Cognitive Linguistics* 20, no. 1 (2009): 93–127.
- Green, Karen. 'Davidson's Derangement: Of the Conceptual Priority of Language'. *Dialectica* 55, no. 3 (2001): 239–58.
- Hacking, Ian. 'The Parody of Conversation'. In *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. E. Lepore, 447–58. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1986.
- Jackendoff, Ray. *Foundations of Language: Brain, Meaning, Grammar, Evolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Katz, Jerrold, and Jerry A. Fodor. 'The Structure of a Semantic Theory'. *Language* 39, no. 2 (1963): 170–210.
- Katz, Jerrold. 'The Neoclassical Theory of Reference'. In *Contemporary Perspectives in Philosophy of Language*, ed. P.A. French, T.E. Uehuling Jr., and H.K. Wettstein, 103–24. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1979.
- Katz, Jerrold. *Language and Other Abstract Objects*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981.
- Labov, William. *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972.
- Labov, William. 'The Intersection of Sex and Social Class in the Course of Linguistic Change'. *Language Variation and Change* 2, no. 2 (1990): 205–54.
- Langacker, Ronald W. *Concept, Image, and Symbol. The Cognitive Basis of Grammar*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990.
- Langacker, Ronald W. *Cognitive Grammar: A Basic Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Lepore, Ernest, and Kirk Ludwig. 'Truth and Meaning'. In *Donald Davidson*, ed. K. Ludwig, 35–63. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

- Lepore, Ernest, and Kirk Ludwig. *Donald Davidson: Meaning, Truth, Language, and Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Ludlow, Peter. *Living Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Marconi, Diego. *Lexical Competence*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997.
- Miller, George A. 'Semantic Relations among Words'. In *Linguistic Theory and Psychological Reality*, eds. M. Halle, J. Bresnan, and G.A. Miller, 60–118. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978.
- Miller, George A. *The Science of Words*. New York: Freeman, 1996.
- Millikan, Ruth G. 'In Defense of Public Language'. In *Chomsky and His Critics*, eds. L.M. Antony and N. Hornstein, 215–37. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.
- Millikan, Ruth G. 'Language Conventions Made Simple'. *The Journal of Philosophy* 95, no. 4 (1998): 161–80.
- Murphy, M. Lynne. *Lexical Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Nagy, William E., and Patricia A. Herman. 'Breadth and Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge: Implications for Acquisition and Instruction'. In *The Nature of Vocabulary Acquisition*, eds. M.G. McKeown and M.E. Curtis, 19–59. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1987.
- Pietroski, Paul M. 'A Defense of Derangement'. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 24, no. 1 (1994): 95–117.
- Ramberg, Bjørn T. *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.
- Reimer, Marga. 'What Malapropisms Mean: A Reply to Donald Davidson'. *Erkenntnis* 60, no. 3 (2004): 317–34.
- Riemer, Nick. *Introducing Semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- S'hiri, Sonia. "'Speak Arabic Please!': Tunisian Arabic Speakers' Linguistic Accommodation to Middle Easterners'. In *Language Contact and Language Conflict in Arabic: Variations on a Sociolinguistic Theme*, ed. A. Rouchdy, 119–74. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Schober, Michael F., Herbert H. Clark. 'Understanding by Addressees and Overhearers'. *Cognitive Psychology* 21, no. 2 (1989): 211–32.
- Sternberg, R.J. 'Most Vocabulary is Learned from Context'. In *The Nature of Vocabulary Acquisition*, eds. M.G. McKeown and M.E. Curtis, 89–105. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1987.
- Soames, Scott. *Philosophy of Language*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.
- Soames, Scott. 'Linguistics and Psychology'. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (1984): 155–79.
- Stainton, Robert J. 'Meaning and Reference: Some Chomskian Themes'. In *The Oxford Handbook in the Philosophy of Language*, ed. E. Lepore and B. Smith, 89–106. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Stainton, Robert J. 'A Deranged Argument against Public Languages'. This volume.
- Tomasello, Michael. *Constructing a Language: A Usage-based Theory of Language Acquisition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Wardhaugh, Ronald. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 5th ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.
- Wheeler, Samuel C. 'Language and Literature'. In *Donald Davidson*, ed. K. Ludwig, 183–206. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Wiggins, David. 'Languages as Social Objects'. *Philosophy* 72, no. 282 (1997): 499–524.