How Should We Understand the Social
Character of Language?

Anita Avramides

RESUMEN

En este artículo exploro el compromiso de Dummett con el carácter social del lenguaje. Explico cómo surge este compromiso y cómo está conectado con la obra tanto de Frege como de Wittgenstein. Sugiero que Dummett tiene una concepción particular del carácter social del lenguaje y la contrasto con la concepción de Davidson de la conducta lingüística. Sugiero también que a esas diferentes concepciones de lo social se les puede seguir el rastro hasta los diferentes puntos de vista que ambos tienen sobre la determinación del significado.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Dummett, Davidson, determinación del significado, orígenes de la filosofía analítica, filosofía del lenguaje ordinario, teoría de la intención comunicativa.*

ABSTRACT

In this paper I explore Dummett's commitment to the social character of language. I explain how the commitment emerges, and how it connects with the work of both Frege and Wittgenstein. I suggest Dummett has a particular conception of the social character of language, and I contrast this with Davidson's conception of the social character of linguistic behaviour. I also suggest that these different conceptions of the social can be traced to their very different views concerning the determinacy of meaning.

KEYWORDS: *Dummett, Davidson, Determinacy of Meaning, Foundations of Analytical Philosophy, Ordinary Language Philosophy, Theory of Communication Intention.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Those that knew Michael Dummett knew that he was very English, and undoubtedly a very *Oxford* philosopher. But when one reflects on his early career, one finds a philosopher somewhat at odds with Oxford philosophy and one in some respects more at home with the American school of philosophy. Mathieu Marion notes that Dummett was 'the first Oxford philosopher

with a working knowledge of logic…and the first to assimilate fully the revolution in philosophical logic brought about by Frege' [Marion (2000), p. 501]. It was his interest in Frege's work that, in turn, provoked Dummett's study of mathematics and logic. This study led to a Harkness Fellowship at Berkeley, where Dummett first encountered and befriended Davidson (who was teaching at Stanford). This interest in mathematics and logic is one of the things that placed Dummett somewhat at odds with the Oxford philosophy of the time.

The time was the 1960's and Oxford was still in the grip of what is often referred to as Ordinary Language Philosophy. Austin had died in the first months of the new decade, and the work of Wittgenstein was highly influential. Dummett recalls that Wittgenstein's *Blue and Brown Books* arrived in Oxford in his last year of study, and he writes: 'The impact on me was immense: for about 3 months, everything I tried to write came out as a *pastiche* of Wittgenstein' [Dummett (2007), p. 9]. The impact, of course, soon faded and Dummett's own distinctive style emerged. Peacocke writes, 'As Wittgenstein's contribution [to philosophy] is inconceivable without Frege's, Michael Dummett's contribution is inconceivable without both of theirs' [Peacocke (1997), p. 2]. Dummett's work builds on that of Frege and Wittgenstein, while being deeply critical of it. Dummett is also critical of the work of the ordinary language philosophers so prominent in Oxford during his 'philosophical infancy'. One element of their work that he strenuously opposes is the idea that philosophy is not in the business of seeking substantial truths and should be concerned only with the elucidation of concepts.

II. A HOMERIC STRUGGLE

In his 1969 inaugural lecture, Peter Strawson identified a debate connected with the following questions, – What is it for anything to have a *meaning at all.* What is it for a particular sentence – or for a particular phrase or word – to have meaning? Strawson's interest was not so much to give a direct reply to these questions as to consider two opposing approaches to them. One approach is that of the theorists of communication-intention, and the other that of the theorists of formal semantics. Strawson memorably referred to the struggle between these approaches as having a Homeric quality and noted that while a Homeric struggle calls for gods and heroes so this struggle has its strong players. The player-gods that Strawson identified on the communication-intention side were Grice, Austin and the later Wittgenstein. On the formal theory side he identified Chomsky, Frege and the early Wittgenstein; he also added Davidson to this list. At this time, much of Dummett's groundbreaking work on meaning had not been published. It was not long, however, before that work began to be known and it soon became clear that another

player-god had come on the scene; his name would need to be added to the list alongside Frege's. Looking then at this more complete list, what we find is that Davidson and Dummett are player-gods on the same side of the struggle identified by Strawson. This, however, would be before Davidson published his 1986 paper 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs'. Once one reads *this* paper it becomes less clear that Strawson's original list is correct. In the debate that opens up between Davidson and Dummett after the publication of that paper, it begins to look as if Davidson should be correctly placed on the list that includes Grice, Austin and the later Wittgenstein. I want now to identify some of the reasons that might be taken to have led these two player-gods onto opposite sides of this important struggle at the end of their respective careers.

III. ALICE VS. HUMPTY DUMPTY

Lewis Carroll, with his *Through the Looking Glass*, has provided philosophers with a very vivid way of making a most important point. In the story Humpty Dumpty says to Alice 'There's glory for you', and follows this with: 'When *I* use a word it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less'. Alice replies, 'The question is, whether you *can* make words mean different things'. In the debate that opens up about meaning, Davidson has some sympathy with Humpty-Dumpty (although there are important differences here), while Dummett sides with Alice. Alice's point is that 'glory' just doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'. As Dummett writes: 'Humpty-Dumpty couldn't mean that by the word, because the word itself did not have it in it to bear that meaning' [Dummett (1986), p. 470].

Dummett comments on the Humpty-Dumpty view of language throughout his writings. It emerges, for example, in his discussion of Husserl's work on meaning. Dummett believes that Husserl's discussion of 'ideal meaning' is based on the Humpty-Dumpty view of meaning. In opposition to Husserl, Dummett writes: 'a word of a language does not bear the meaning that it does because a large number of people have chosen to confer that meaning upon it; they use it as having that meaning because that is the meaning it has in the language…. It is only from learning a language that anyone acquires the very conception of a word's having a meaning' [Dummett (1993c), p. 49]. Dummett reminds us of Wittgenstein's remark in the *Philosophical Investigations* where he invites us to make the following experiment: *say* 'It's cold here' and *mean* 'It's warm here' [Wittgenstein (1953), § 510]. No doubt Dummett expects us to think in response: it cannot be done.

I want now to look more closely at the philosophical ideas which inform Dummett's commitment to Alice's view of meaning as against Humpty-Dumpty's. Among these are some of Dummett's most deeply held philoso-

phical ideas, and ones which define not just his work but what he sees as the foundation of analytical philosophy.

Earlier I mentioned Dummett's dissent from the Ordinary Language School of Philosophy. I want now to draw attention to another idea associated with that school that Dummett rejects: a disregard for a distinction between semantics and pragmatics. For Dummett this is a relatively straightforward distinction. Frege distinguishes between sense, force and tone or colour; Dummett adds that we can think of these as ingredients within an overall notion of meaning which we can picture as a series of concentric circles: at the innermost core there is reference – the relation of words to the world; at the next circle, there is sense – what Frege takes to be the route to reference; in the next circle there is force, and this is followed in a further circle by tone. In opposition to this composite view of a theory of meaning, Dummett accuses the ordinary language philosophers of expelling semantic concepts in a determination to pay attention to nothing but the use of particular sentences. Connected with this rejection of the traditional semantics-pragmatics distinction is the rejection of generality. Wittgenstein, in his later work, accuses philosophers of striving to uncover generality rather than looking at individual use. These two ideas are connected: attention to individual use draws one away from the generality embodied in the traditional account of semantics and away from the idea of literal meaning. Dummett observes that where the distinction between semantics and pragmatics is obliterated, there we find new distinctions attempting to fill a void. Thus we find in the work of these philosophers the introduction of such ideas as presupposition, conversational implicature, and the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary force. Dummett concludes that, with the introduction of these new distinctions, ordinary language philosophy ceased to exist, 'almost without anyone noticing…. An era had ended, not with a bang but a whimper; and the moment was propitious for the American counter-attack' [Dummett (1978a), p. 445]. I am not sure the new distinctions did quite spell the end of ordinary language philosophy. I shall suggest, below, that we can read Davidson's later writing on language as in the spirit of this work – in the spirit only, as there are many very important differences. But I think that we can read in Dummett's attitude towards some of what Davidson writes in the later part of his career shades of the animus that that he showed towards ordinary language philosophy at the start of his career.

IV. THE ROAD TO ANALYTICAL PHILOSOPHY

I now want to take one more step back, as it were, and look at what might be thought to inform Dummett's commitment to ideas that contrast so profoundly with those that are to be found in the work of ordinary language

philosophy. Here we find Dummett influenced by both Frege and Wittgenstein. Let me begin with the more obvious of influence, that of Frege.

Dummett writes: 'What distinguishes analytical philosophy, in its diverse manifestations, from other schools is the belief, first, that a philosophical account of thought can be attained through a philosophical account of language, and, secondly, that a comprehensive account can only be so attained' [Dummett (1993a), p. 4]. Dummett claims to find the first clear example of this linguistic turn in Frege's *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik*. Starting with the question, How are numbers given to us, granted that we have no idea or intuition of them? Frege develops an answer that depends upon the context principle: only in the context of a sentence does a word have meaning. Dummett observes that with this question and reply Frege turns an epistemological enquiry into a linguistic one. He points out that, despite this turn to language, Frege is always clear that what really interested him are *thoughts* rather than the sentences which express them. Dummett connects this with Frege's disillusionment with *natural* language. Nonetheless, Dummett sums up Frege's attitude here thus: 'Language may be a distorting mirror: but it is the only mirror that we have' [*Ibid.*, p. 6]. Among the questions that pre-occupy Dummett in many of his papers are the following: to what extent can we defend Frege as (i) a philosopher of language and (ii) an analytic philosopher? Dummett defends Frege's place unquestionably as a philosopher of language, but claims that Frege's standing as an analytical philosopher is incomplete. Dummett first identifies the lacuna in Frege's work that compromises his analytical status, and then, using the building blocks prepared by Frege, builds his own philosophy of language. In the process he fills the lacuna in Frege's work - thereby establishing his own standing as unquestionably a philosopher of language *and* an analytical philosopher. A brief account of all this will help us to appreciate the place of the social in Dummett's account of language.

One point made by Frege, and emphasized by Dummett, is that the study of thought is to be distinguished from the study of the psychological process of thinking. This is Frege's anti-psychologism. This untangling of the philosophy of thought from philosophical psychology is identified by Dummett as an important moment in the linguistic turn, as it allows philosophy to concentrate on the question, What is thought? Important though anti-psychologism is, there is another idea that Dummett thinks is even more important, and it is one he also finds in Frege's work: the *in principle* communicability of sense. In one place Dummett claims that the role of language as the vehicle of thought is secondary to its role as an instrument of communication [Dummett (1978a), p. 452] As Barry Smith graphically puts the point: 'Words give us immediate entry to the mind of others' [Smith (2006), p. 942]. The alternative is to hold that we form hypotheses about each other's meanings. This is the unacceptable result of the code conception of language. On this

conception, meaning is something subjective and language is viewed as the vehicle whereby some inner subjective experience is communicated to another. The result of viewing things in this way is to make it no more than an hypothesis that the sense that you attach to my utterance is the sense I intend it to bear. This conception of language is associated with the empiricism of some early modern philosophers. Dummett credits Frege with recognizing the inadequacy of the code conception and identifies two significant problems with this way of viewing the relation of thought to language. Firstly, it fails to explain what it is for a word to have a certain sense. In the place of such an all important explanation, empiricism provides a psychological mechanism to account for our ability to associate a sense with a word. Dummett takes the view that '[p]hilosophy is concerned, not with how it comes about that we understand words and sentences, but with what that understanding consists in' [Dummett (1981b), p. 679]. Secondly, the code conception makes communication out to be no more than an act of faith. Frege insists that communication depends upon the possibility that the thought I grasp may be the very same thought that you grasp.

A commitment to the in principle communicability of sense is fundamental to Dummett's work on meaning, but he develops this idea in a way that introduces an important divergence from Frege's thinking. It is here that we begin to see the influence of Wittgenstein. Dummett observes that, despite his emphasis on the communicability of sense, Frege fails to appreciate the social character of language. Dummett traces this failure to Frege's account of sense. Frege's account of sense is a complex matter and Dummett teases out several different ways of understanding this Fregean notion (see, for example, [Dummett (1981a), pp. 156 ff. & (1993v), pp. 104-5]). On one interpretation sense is not only objective but is to be identified with some, eternal and immutable entity, existing in an independent, third, realm.[1] Dummett points out that, although Frege is keen to banish sense as a *content* of consciousness, he does not appear to balk at the idea that sense is to be thought of as an *object* of conscious attention. Dummett takes this account of sense to have several defects, chief amongst these being that it 'could as well apply to the senses of an idiolect as to those of the expressions of a common language' [Dummett (1993a), p. 13]. Dummett refers us to 'Der Gedanke', where Frege claims that when two people identify the same person in different ways they express different thoughts when talking about that person [see Dummett, (1981ii), p. 113]. Frege claims that these two people speak different languages, while Dummett holds that we might equally say that according to Frege we here have two language users whose 'idiolects do not wholly coincide' [*Ibid*.]. Dummett reads Frege's work as here containing a tacit commitment to the view that an idiolect is logically prior to a common language and identifies two problems with this view. Firstly, it overlooks an aspect of language use that is captured by an observation made by Hilary Putnam and re-

ferred to as the *division of linguistic labour*. Dummett generalizes the point: a person may use a word knowing little to nothing about its meaning, intending with her use to advert to the meaning of the word in the public language. But there is a deeper point in the offing, and it is connected with the second of the two problems that Dummett identifies with prioritization of the idiolect over the common language: it gives rise to the idea of private ostensive definition for the senses of words for perceptual qualities and inner sensations. There is much not to recommend this idea, but for our purposes it will suffice to point out that it leads directly back to *in*communicable private senses. This difficulty is one traced out by Wittgenstein. The problem is avoided if one prioritizes the common language, and Dummett follows Wittgenstein in doing just this. What Dummett takes Frege to have missed with his concentration on idiolects is the way in which users of a language take themselves to be 'responsible to' the established usage of words in a 'common language [Dummett (1981iii), p. 189]. Dummett claims that while there is no reason to deny that Frege would have had to appeal to the social in the account given of force, his notion of sense ultimately reintroduces private understanding [Dummett (1981ii) p. 113]. For a conception of language that gives it a social character at its heart, so to speak, he believes that we must turn to Wittgenstein.

Dummett, as we have seen, identifies in Frege's writing a view of sense as something individualistic. Sense must be communicable but our conception of what is being communicated is highly individualistic, the objectivity of senses notwithstanding. This is because, on this view, each individual has a particular grasp of some independently existing immutable entity. It is this that leads Frege to speak of different people speaking different languages and Dummett to write of Frege's commitment to idiolects. Now one might conclude that, in so far as Frege's commitment to senses as Platonic objects leads him to think of languages as idiolects, and in so far as it is a mistake to think of languages as idiolects, the mistake may be taken to originate with this commitment. But this is not how Dummett sees things. Dummett claims that the error here should be traced to Frege's account of grasp of sense. Frege's preoccupation with psychologism leads him to place much less weight on the question of what it is to grasp a sense once it has been extruded from the mind and located in an independent third realm. According to Dummett, it is with its answer to this question that analytical philosophy comes fully of age [Dummett (1981i) pp. 54-5].

When we consider what grasping a sense consists in, we run up against the following dilemma: either we think of grasp of sense as having something directly to do with language or we do not. If we do not, then, as well as accounting for grasp of sense we need also to account for the association of that grasped sense with linguistic expressions. It is hard to see how this two-step operation can avoid falling into the psychologism that Frege is so against. This account also risks making communication out to be no more than an act of

faith. So, if we want to stay true to the core doctrine of Frege's thought – anti-psychologism and the communicability of sense – we cannot adopt this account of grasp of sense. There is much, then, to drive the analytical philosopher to hold that grasp of sense has something directly to do with language. Sense can be grasped only as the sense of a linguistic expression, and what constitutes a speaker's attaching a sense to an expression is her *use* of that expression. Communicability of thought is secure on this account, as the sense that a speaker attaches to a sentence is ascertainable from her observable behaviour – from her *use*. It is thus that Dummett comes to his own brand of analytical philosophy and the view that the sense of a word or sentence is to be identified with its use. Once we adopt *this* account of grasp of sense, then even if we allow that an individual can grasp a sense in advance of acquiring a language, this will play no role when it comes to an account of that individual's use of a word as bearing that sense. An account of the speaker's use will suffice to explain her grasp of its sense. There is no longer any need to appeal to a third realm of eternally existing immutable senses: 'The sympathetic interpretation of a grasp of sense as an ability makes the grasp of sense the primary concept: we now have no account of what a sense is save that it is embedded in the account of grasp of that sense. Sense, in other words, has become just the cognate accusative of the verb 'to understand'' [Dummett (1993d), pp. 107–8]. Once this step is taken, analytical philosophy can be said properly to have come of age. Full maturity of this school of philosophy brings together two important ideas: (i) the study of language is necessary for the study of thought, and (ii) language is essentially social.

V. TWO CONCEPTIONS OF THE SOCIAL

Dummett manages to shrug off the need to appeal to eternal immutable objects existing in an independent third realm in his account of sense. I want to suggest that the spectre of these Fregean senses still hangs over Dummett's account of grasp of sense, and hence his account of meaning. While concentrating on the individualism associated with Fregean senses, Dummett omits to mention their determinate nature. Fregean senses are fully determinate, and when setting out to account for grasp of sense Dummett is setting out to account for grasp of determinate sense. For Frege determinacy of meaning is secured by the identification of sense with objects in a platonic third realm, but Dummett points out that this move also goes along with a commitment to idiolects. Dummett rejects this commitment and insists on the priority of common language over idiolect. The move away from senses identified as objects in a platonic third realm is a move designed to capture the essential social character of language. The conception of meaning as determinate is not altered by this move; nor is it intended to be.

It is important to understand how Dummett sees his account of meaning to be consistent with the social character of language. Dummett holds that a theory of meaning is a theory of what a speaker knows who knows a language. Furthermore, he claims that knowing a language is to be thought of as intermediate between pure practical knowledge and pure theoretical knowledge. This is why one cannot answer the question, 'Do you know Spanish?' by saying, 'I don't know, I have never tried.' A speaker has this knowledge implicitly, and it is the job of a theory of meaning to make what is known explicit. In one place Dummett writes: a speaker has 'mastery of a procedure, of a conventional practice' [Dummett (1993iv), p. 69]. When this knowledge is captured in a theory of language use, that use will reflect the conventional practice of a community of language users. In another place Dummett writes that there is nothing to controvert the idea that meaning has to do with knowledge so long as: 'sense is taken as something conferred on an expression by the practice of the linguistic community taken as a community… The knowledge possessed by the community is neither the intersection nor the union of the knowledge possessed by each member' [Dummett (1978b), pp. 427-8]. And in yet another place he writes: when one looks to find 'something non-mythical but objective and external to the individual mind to embody the thoughts which the individual subject grasps … Where better to find it than in the institution of a common language?' [Dummett (1993b), p. 25].

Dummett is committed not just to the manifestation of linguistic knowledge, but also to the possibility that it be *fully* manifest. He claims that without this second commitment there could never be for a particular expression 'conclusive evidence for the attribution to [a speaker] of any specific understanding of the expression' [Dummett (1993), p. xiv]. Here we find a commitment to the determinacy of sense: conclusive evidence is evidence for something determinate. This commitment is also seen in the way in which Dummett writes of the communicability of sense. In one place, in reaction to the idea that one can only form a hypothesis about what another means, he writes, 'If such a hypothesis could not be established conclusively,… then thought would not be in principle communicable' [Dummett (1993d) p. 102].

I have identified two important ideas in Dummett's work: (i) the social character of language, and (ii) the determinacy of meaning. I now want to suggest that Dummett's conception of the social character of language is such as to mesh with the determinate nature of meaning. On my way of looking at the relationship between Dummett's account of meaning and Frege's, the former aims to achieve determinate meaning by replacing platonic objects to which individuals have highly personal relations with appeal to speakers' use of language which reflects a conventional or social practice. Determinacy of meaning is retained while common language is given priority over idiolect. If this is correct, then Dummett's conception of the social must be such as to yield determinate meaning.

Dummett thinks that there is more than one way a theorist of meaning may back himself into a conception of language that prioritizes the idiolect over the common language. Davidson is another philosopher who does this, and it should be clear to anyone who has even a passing acquaintance with his work that the explanation here cannot be traced back to a commitment to senses as platonic objects. What, then, explains Davidson's conception of language as idiolect? In an early exchange with Davidson published in 1975, Dummett outlines how Davidson's truth-theoretic account of meaning leads to a conception of language as 'something spoken by a single individual at a certain period', and he explains how this truth-theoretic account 'runs the risk of becoming solipsistic' and of 'losing the conception of the linguistic community' [Dummett (1993iii), p. 18]. It runs this risk because, in order to serve as a theory of *meaning*, that account must be supplemented with a theory of interpretation which operates holistically. Holistic constraints operate on a truth-theory at the level of the theorems, and Dummett sees these constraints as taking the place of 'a specification of what a knowledge of the propositions expressed by the axioms, or by the T-sentences, consists in' [*Ibid*., p. 16]. Holism is, thus, contrasted with atomism (or molecularity). Dummett explains that one can see the importance of choosing atomism over holism in one's theory of meaning when one considers linguistic error. He doesn't specify the kind of error he has in mind, but I think it is clear that malapropism constitutes an example. What Dummett observes is that a truth-theoretic account of meaning such as Davidson's can only account for linguistic error by attributing to individual speakers divergent theories of truth for their language. It cannot, as an atomistic theory can, appeal to the meaning of the words in a common language. It cannot do this because meaning is only related to the truth conditions captured in the truth-theory by dint of constraints on the theory that relate to language as a whole. In effect, holism leads to a priority of the idiolect over the common language.

In his 1986 paper 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' Davidson writes: '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' [Davidson (1986), p. 446]. In the exchange with Dummett that followed the publication of this paper, Dummett accuses Davidson of repudiating the notion of a common language in favour of largely overlapping idiolects. Davidson does not defend himself against this accusation, but writes that in his view 'Dummett, by making language primary, has misplaced the essential social element in linguistic behaviour' [Davidson (1994), p. 1]. It would seem that both Dummett and Davidson want to appeal to the social in their respective accounts of language and linguistic behaviour. I want now to offer a suggestion for how we might understand the different ways in which these two philosophers understand the social and the way it should figure in an account of language.

In his desire to retain the Fregean idea of determinate meaning, Dummett adopts a very particular conception of the social. Davidson, on the other hand, unfettered by any commitment to determinacy of meaning is in a position to adopt a quite different conception of the social.[2] When Davidson writes of the social, he connects it with linguistic *behaviour*. In this way, Davidson draws our attention to the fact that communication and understanding are *things we do*. We could say that our understanding of each other is manifest in what we do; in our use of language we manifest an understanding of each other. However we put the point, we find that the expression of understanding is bound up with an interaction that takes place between speakers. This is another way of talking about interpretation. What Davidson questions is whether this understanding – this communication – that takes place between speakers requires the existence of linguistic convention. It is his belief that it does not. In one place he reminds us of how interpretation proceeds. He writes: 'The interpreter of another's words and thoughts must depend on scattered information, fortunate training, and imaginative surmise in coming to understand the other' [Davidson (2000), p. 37]. There is no mention of linguistic convention (although Davidson has nothing against this being used as well; it just isn't necessary). When he writes of 'imaginative surmise' is Davidson saying that we can do no better than to form hypotheses about what another means? I don't think so.[3] But nor do I think that Davidson is taking it that what we understand when we understand another is determinate in quite the sense that Dummett insists that it must be.

Davidson writes that when we abandon the notion of language as conventional practice we erase 'the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world' [Davidson (1986), pp. 445-6]. Dummett insists that there is an important point of difference between linguistic and other behaviour: ordinary actions make a difference in the world independently of any conventional significance, whereas without knowledge of conventions 'we do not have the same clues to the intentions behind the utterances, because, without understanding, we do not know what the speaker has done by uttering those sounds' [Dummett (1986), p. 474]. But Davidson thinks there are clues quite independent of linguistic conventions to help us discern a speaker's intentions, just as there are in the case of non-linguistic action. What is important in the interpretation or understanding of *all* actions is a certain *inter*action amongst subjects. One subject notes the context of the action of the other, and everything s/he knows about that context and about the other. The subject relies on 'wit, luck, and wisdom'. S/he also relies on 'knowledge of the ways people get their point across' to others – which may or may not involve appeal to linguistic convention [Davidson (1986), p. 446]. The emphasis here is not on the social as embodied in linguistic convention, but on the social as embodied in *whatever it takes* to achieve communication. Davidson clearly believes in the in principle communicability of thought, and Dummett

does acknowledge this. But Dummett claims that Davidson falls into error because he concentrates 'too exclusively' on the communicative function of language and fails to appreciate that it is also a vehicle of thought [see Dummett (1986), p. 471)]. But I am not sure what point Dummett is making here. Why can we not say that in its role as an instrument of communication language just is a vehicle of thought? Perhaps in re-emphasizing language as the vehicle of thought Dummett wants to remind us that there is something determinate that is being communicated, and that this is lost if we concentrate only on language as an instrument of communication. But perhaps we should see this talk of 'vehicle of thought' as a vestige of a Fregean legacy that analytic philosophers can get along without. Perhaps talk of vehicles of thought tempts us to think of what is being communicated as fully determinate. And once we are committed to all this, the only way to acknowledge the social aspect of language is to acknowledge a common practice that is reflected in an individual's use of language. The common practice yields determinate meanings and an individual is taken to be responsible to this practice in his use of the language. But this is a view of our linguistic practice as something that is (to a large extent) crystallized. There is another way of viewing our linguistic practice that takes it as an ongoing interactive process. When viewed in this way, the practice is more fluid, there is no linguistic convention to which we are responsible. Importantly, this way of viewing the practice of speaking a language does not serve up determinate meanings.

So long as we are wedded to the determinacy of meaning – to the idea that there is a determinate thought that is manifest in our use of a word or expression – we will be wedded to an idea of the social as embodied in a common practice. This is the picture of the social aspect of language that Dummett gives us. If, however, we let go of the idea of determinacy of meaning, we are free to adopt a quite different idea of the social. Our linguistic behaviour will be social, but it will not be responsible to a common language or linguistic convention. Understanding each other will be a matter of interpretation that will proceed in any way that it can. What guides the process is the desire to be understood, and being understood is a social business. This is a picture of the social aspect of linguistic behaviour that Davidson gives us. Earlier I referred to Dummett's Wittgensteinian challenge to say 'It's warm here' and mean 'It's cold here'. Dummett appeals to this challenge as a way of defending Alice's view of language against Humpty Dumpty's. But if I am shivering and icy winds are blowing as we walk of the side of a mountain in mid-winter and I say (slipping in my choice of word) 'It's warm here', I predict that we will end up laughing and talking about Freudian slips, and that you will certainly understand that I meant to say that 'It's cold here'. (My husband has an irritating habit when driving of saying 'Turn left' when he intends me to turn right. I usually know what he means me to do.) Errors do occur in our use of language and communication is (usually) unimpeded. I

recently came across a New Yorker cartoon that shows a politician giving a speech and the caption reads: I regret that my poor choice of words caused some people to understand what I was saying. Humpty Dumpty was partly right. So long as we keep our wits about us, we can understand another who slips up in her use of words much in the way that we can understand what someone is doing who goes to the liquor cabinet in order to pour herself a gin and tonic and ends up mixing the tonic with water.

We find in the work of Dummett and Davidson two different ways of defending the social character of language. I have suggested that these different conceptions of the social character of language have their roots in the way each of these philosophers thinks about meaning. If we return to the Homeric struggle identified by Strawson, it may now appear that Davidson should be placed on the communication-intention side of this struggle rather than on the formal theory side as Strawson originally suggested. But this is not entirely clear. Davidson never wavers when it comes to the need to give a systematic account of meaning. He also is happy to talk of literal meaning – although he associates this with 'first meaning' rather than conventional meaning [Davidson (1986), p. 442]. Strawson characterizes the communication intention theorist as someone who gives priority to communication-intention over convention. This characterization certainly fits Davidson, and it places his work very much at odds with Dummett's. It would seem that, at least as far as *this* issue is concerned, Davidson is wrongly placed by Strawson on the formal theory side of the debate. I think one can equally say that there is something of the *spirit* of ordinary language philosophy still alive in this work of Davidson's. I am not sure there is much to be gained in deciding whether someone falls within this school or that, or lines up on this list of philosophers or that. I do, however, think there is enough of the spirit of ordinary language philosophy about Davidson's work to distance his work from that of the pure formal theorists of meaning – and this is enough to place his work on a collision course with Dummett's.

St. Hilda's College
University of Oxford
Cowley Place, Oxford, OX4 1DY, UK
E-mail: anita.avramides@st-hildas.ox.ac.uk

NOTES

[1] Dummett points out that Frege's account of sense supports his realism – which he upheld in opposition to the idealism that dominated the German philosophy of his day. The connection between realism and immutable, objective senses is this: such a

view is required to explain how we can hold that anything is true at a time when there is no one to think it [Dummett (1981), p. 154].

  [2] N.B. Indeterminacy is part of interpretation; meaning can be taken to be determinate once communication succeeds.

  [3] Davidson may accept that, while not being an hypothesis, interpretation is a matter of faith – faith in the fact that the subject under interpretation shares our nature and so responds to the world in much the same way that we do. In this Davidson could be said to be following the later-Wittgenstein.

REFERENCES

DAVIDSON, D. (1986), "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs", in Lepore, E. (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, pp. 433-447.
— (1994), "The Social Aspects of Language", in McGuinness, B and Oliveri, G. (eds.), *The Philosophy of Michael Dummett*, Dordrecht, Kluwer, pp. 1-16.
— (2000), "Knowing One's Own Mind", *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 15-39.
DUMMETT, M., (1978), *Truth and Other Enigmas*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.
— (1978a), "Can Philosophy be Systematic, and Ought it to Be?", in Dummett (1978) pp. 437-459.
— (1978b), "The Social Character of Meaning", in Dummett (1978), pp. 420-431.
— (1981), *Frege Philosophy of Language*, 2nd edition, London, Duckworth.
— (1981a), "Some Theses of Frege's on Sense and Reference", in Dummett (1981), pp. 152-204.
— (1981b), "Frege's Place in the History of Philosophy", in Dummett (1981), pp. 665-685.
— (1981c), *The Interpretation of Frege's Philosophy*, London, Duckworth.
— (1981i), "Was Frege a Philosopher of Language?", in Dummett (1981c), pp. 36-56.
— (1981ii), "Indexicality and *Oratio Obliqua*", in Dummett (1981c), pp. 83-148.
— (1981iii), "The Causal Theory of Reference", in Dummett (1981c), pp. 186-196.
— (1986), " 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs': Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking", in *Truth and Interpretation*, in Lepore, E. (ed.), Oxford, Basil Blackwell, pp. 459-477.
— (1993), *Origins of Analytical Philosophy*, London, Duckworth.
— (1993a), "The Linguistic Turn", in Dummett (1993), pp. 4-15.
— (1993b), "The Extrusion of Thoughts from the Mind", in Dummett (1993), pp. 22-28.
— (1993c), "Husserl's View of Meaning", in Dummett (1993), pp. 43-57.
— (1993d), "Grasping a Thought", in Dummett (1993), pp. 99-110.
— (1993e), "The Extrusion of Thoughts from the Mind", in Dummett (1993), pp. 22-28.
— (1993i), *The Seas of Language*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
— (1993ii), Preface, in Dummett (1993i),pp. vii-xvii.
— (1993iii), "What is a Theory of Meaning? (I)", in Dummett (1993i), pp. 1-34.
— (1993iv), "What is a Theory of Meaning? (II)", in Dummett (1993i), pp. 34-94.
— (1993v), "What do I know when I know a Language?", in Dummett (1993i), pp. 94-106.

— (2007) "Intellectual Autobiography", *The Philosophy of Michael Dummett*, Library of Living Philosophers XXXI, R.E. Auxier and L.E. Hahn eds., Chicago and LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court [pp. 3-32].

MARRION, M., (2000) "Oxford Realism: Knowledge and Perception II", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 8 (3), pp. 485-519.

PEACOCKE, C. (1997), "Concepts without Words", in Heck, Jnr., R. (ed.), *Language, Thought and Logic*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp. 1-35.

SMITH, B. (2006), "What I Know When I Know a Language", in Lepore, E. and Smith, B. (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp. 941-983.

STRAWSON, P. (1969), "Meaning and Truth", Clarendon Press, Oxford.

WITTGENSTEIN, L. (1953), *Philosophical Investigations*, New York, The Macmillan Company.

Morality, Self-Knowledge and Human Suffering

An Essay on The Loss of
Confidence in the World

Josep E. Corbí

ROUTLEDGE