Davidson's Indeterminacy of Meaning Thesis: An Answer from EM analysis of conversation

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Introduction

My concern by doing an analysis of conversation about an informal meeting taking place among scholars within the walls of a British University is to address an argument made in the philosophy of language. It is the one known as the indeterminacy of meaning argument. My point about it is that an ethnomethodological (henceforth EM) study of ordinary conversation may answer adequately an issue that philosophy of language has captured nicely in Davidson's writing (1984: 63). I suggest that the indeterminacy of meaning argument is prevailing beyond philosophy circles and touch sociology as well as other domains of research where interdisciplinary works take place. It is, then, important to take Davidson's argument seriously and show how EM can clarify it by investigating data.

1 - The argument: Davidson's Indeterminacy of Meaning Thesis

The argument of the indeterminacy of meaning (Henceforth IM) is that speakers know the meaning of their utterances by knowing the belief that current speaker intends to express. The issue with IM thesis turns out to identify how meaning is inseparable of forging our belief. The way to check speaker's belief is to identify the condition in which sentences are true. The way in which true condition of a sentence is found is by assignment. Speakers decide that there is condition for truth. Davidson accepts that doing precisely this assumes a degree of indeterminacy. IM argument implies that meaning of sentences is the result of a decision process which condition cannot be totally recovered.
My argument in this paper is that assignment of true condition of meaning isn't an apriori uniform decision process. Its condition can be recovered by proceeding to an EM analysis of conversation.

2 - The data: An Academic Discussion

I gathered ethnographical data by recollection. One of the techniques used here to recover those data is annoyance. The present author has been involved in the following interaction at his disadvantage through misunderstanding. Methodologically speaking, annoyance revealed to be, in this case, a reliable method of investigation. The extract presented here is part of conversation that took place among 7 scholars in a university weekly meeting (1 professor, 3 PhD, 3 PhD students). Discussants know each other. They are asked to bring their own materials such as notes, topic, readings or any concerns in this forum for examination. Our extract is a casual talk concerning Wittgenstein and culture:

Peter:	Wittgenstein didn't like (.) didn't understand Shakespeare
Paul:	But he quoted him in King Lear saying "I teach you differences"
Peter:	he reads it first AND he didn't like it, he did not understand it, I guess he understood Goethe *ah AH* and *I* don't understand it *ah AH*
Paul:	I do not understand Shakespeare, I saw King Lear on French TV and I did not understand it (.) perhaps it is a matter of culture
Jack:	perhaps it is a matter of CULTURE, do you think you have an immediate grasp of Racine?
	(Silence)
John:	(Topic change)

The extract, presented here, starts with Peter's remark on the fact that Wittgenstein did not appreciate Shakespeare. Peter suggests that Wittgenstein's taste for Shakespeare was somewhat superficial. It suggests that Wittgenstein did not fully grasp what Shakespeare may have conveyed in his writings and plays. Paul seems to be puzzled by Peter's saying about Wittgenstein. Paul is trying to get more from Peter's affirmation. Paul challenges what seems, at first sight, a blunt affirmation. He wants to do that because he knows that Peter is a professor well-versed in Wittgenstein's philosophy. Therefore, challenging him will get him to specify his point about Wittgenstein's misunderstanding of Shakespeare. Paul pushes Peter to start an investigation of what he has just been said in the first sequence. He advances a contradiction built on evidence. From Paul's point of view, it seems that Wittgenstein has appreciated, or at least has considered with seriousness one of Shakespeare's piece of work, namely 'King Lear'. Paul has selected the idea of noticing differences. It is noticeably important in Wittgenstein's approach of philosophy.

Professor Peter did take the challenge. He understood perfectly that Paul asked him to ground further his affirmation concerning Wittgenstein's misunderstanding of Shakespeare. Peter indicates that Wittgenstein has effectively read at least this piece. It nevertheless does not mean that he liked it. Professor Peter does not ground his affirmation on sources that the audience may consult. Nevertheless,

he carries on to give some substance to what he means by Wittgenstein not understanding Shakespeare. What Peter is doing in conversation is providing a cultural explanation of Wittgenstein's not grasping Shakespeare's subtleties. Peter is grounding his argument on the basis that Wittgenstein did not grow up in Great Britain and has certainly not be exposed to the kind of environment that may bring British's people in contact with Shakespeare's work. Peter suggests further that Wittgenstein may have been exposed to Goethe as part of the German speaking culture. It may be the kind of literature German-speaking people may have encounter once in their life. The probability for Wittgenstein to have done so is high (Monk 1990: 302 & 510; Malcolm 1958: 77).

What Professor Peter is doing is to show how culture may influence understanding. He does so by marking his point with a verbal emphasis (ah Ahh). It suggests that this link with understanding and culture may have to do with a form of life or what sociologist could call socialisation. And Professor Peter wants to make this point on culture very clear by building comparison between what he is saying about Wittgenstein and what he is saying about himself. He built his emphasis by marking the 'I' in his 'and I don't understand it' as well as marking the fact that himself is subject of misunderstanding other culture and, in this occasion, the German speaking one. What professor Peter is suggesting is that everybody even himself may be subject to such misunderstanding of other's culture. By bringing this opposition based on Goethe/Shakespeare, Professor Peter is bringing to the fore a difference that make audience listening the expression of cultural differences. But Professor Peter's subtlety in his commentary works out a point about 'understanding culture' as a topic. Making recognisable differences is one way making available the issue of culture. And Professor Peter's tour de force in his use of markers is to show precisely this. In this instance, the cultural difference is precisely this conversational activity of making this distinction such as that the audience recognises who is entitled to say something according to what he knows mundanely about the distinction. In this case, he uses the contrast Wittgenstein/himself as an available resource of the conversation.

At this point of the discussion, Paul took the turn. Paul understood what was meant concerning cultural differences as a mundane phenomenon. He put himself as another example of what Peter indicated by bringing his national origin as a resource in the conversation to draw another contrast of the same sort between his misunderstandings of Shakespeare. He produces the cultural contrast mentioned before. And he confirms the topic by saying that he did not understood Shakespeare's play too. The point is not to just add his stone to the edifice to confirm what has been said before. Paul continues to specify what he expects of his bringing new evidences to the topic. He indicates with caution (his 'perhaps') that the topic of culture should be made more explicit. In other words, what Peter indicates with the use of markers such as 'ah ahh' (at the end of each terms of the literary contrast) as well as his emphatic 'I' in 'I don't understand it' is an implicit understanding of cultural differences. What Paul is looking for as a result of his participation on the topic is an explicit formulation of what has been said, here, about culture. In our conversational extract, Paul is using 'perhaps it is a matter of culture' as an explicit formulation of what went on in the previous turn of talk. According to Davidson 'perhaps it is a matter of culture' will be seen as the expression of a speaker's belief. As such, it should be checked against the condition in which the sentence is true. It will ask to consider if 'understanding Shakespeare is a matter of culture'. But in the conversation, Paul's formulation turns out to be an invitation for others in the meeting to inquire further. It is an address to the audience of this meeting to participate to it. For this sake, Paul is assuming a practical vagueness of the expression 'a matter of culture'. It is an open-ended view of it such that it asks others to clarify further what it may

means. This open-endedness of the expression is clearly perceived by the next conversationalist. Jack is intervening in a special way. He is not only working out the meaning of Paul's expression (to check what can be considered true in the sentence – according to Davidson's IM) but provides a work of interpretation.

2 - The provision of Metaphysical Interpretation

Jack takes his turn by repeating Paul's last expression 'perhaps it is a matter of culture'. What Jack is doing by this repetition is providing another context. He cuts the opportunity to read Paul's use of 'Perhaps it is a matter of culture' as a fishing device. What the repetition is doing is removing the logical possibilities of further inquiry suggested by Paul. The repetition isn't a questioning. It takes up this expression as something to examine in itself. Jack is making this expression a problematic one, i.e. one that has to be taken notice of. What Jack is doing is providing a context of metaphysics in conversation. He indicates what is problematic by making a work on the term 'culture'. In Jacks repetition, it becomes 'Perhaps it is a matter of CULTURE'. An obvious emphasis on this term is marked through repetition, verbal accentuation, the insisting tone of voice as well as the movement of Jacks' both hands toward the ceiling. In this conversation, selecting and reifying the expression 'matter of culture' provides for metaphysical context. The verbal working of 'culture' into 'CULTURE' provides its metaphysical intonation by this specific working out of the expression but also by breaching the tone of the current discussion. Jack provides the metaphysical intonation not by providing necessarily a system of thought prior to the use of his expression 'CULTURE'.

Jack provides a clever and interrelated justification to his using the reified version of 'culture'. He produces a justification of his challenge of Paul's expression 'perhaps it is a matter of culture' by working out what he means. We can read Jack substantiation of his interpretation of culture as 'grand culture' with his questioning: 'Do you think you have an immediate grasp of Racine?' Jack formulates a direct challenge to Paul by introducing a French author in the discussion. Doing so, he orientates the question specifically to Paul, the previous interlocutor. Jack's questioning is also a substantiation of his interpretation of 'culture' in a metaphysical mode.

We have seen that Jack's emphasis on the expression 'culture' gives another turn to the whole expression. Jack argument is that a substantive conception of culture is non-sense. For that, Jack challenges his co-interlocutor by asking him if he has any 'immediate' understanding of Racine. Here, Jack's expression 'immediate' can be read as 'immanent'. This is where Jack provides a metaphysical substance to the verbal reification of 'CULTURE'. Jack's question to Paul can be formulated as 'Do you have an immanent understanding of Racine given that you are French?' In other words, Jack suggests that it make no sense to speak of French culture or any culture as a domain of well-defined stock of knowledge embodied in some way into its members. What Jack did was to suggest a naturalistic view of culture by ironically showing how such view was unsustainable. His suggestion was: 'do you know naturalistically, as part of your French background, the significance of Racine plays?' Jack's challenge is very strong in the sense that the silence following it confirms that its answering was not an easy task.

3 – Introducing Vagueness into the Use of Expression is a Metaphysical Procedure

What is important for the import of metaphysical context in the ordinary conversation is the way in which an issue is constructed. And for this sake, the

ability to work out actively the vagueness of an expression is essential to the exercise. According to Davidson, the truth of a sentence is done by immanent ascription of meaning. If this ascription of meaning is not done really, then speakers are faced with IM. Looking at Jack's construction of an interpretation of Paul's expression 'perhaps it is a matter of culture' shows that Jack is working to create vagueness or ascribe vagueness rather than ascribe definite meaning (as Davidson think it does). What is important for metaphysics is that the import of another context remains a practical possibility. And for this sake, the speaker should be able to present an alternative context that works on a superficial assimilation of the previous topic. In our case, this is done with the interpretation of culture through repetition. In other words, it is of crucial importance for a user of metaphysic to get the opportunity to ascribe free interpretation. What Jack has done is t introduce with refinement a metaphysical intonation to Paul's use of the expression culture. Doing this requires further skills. Let's review some of the operative strength of metaphysical expression.

> (1) A characteristic of metaphysical manipulation is working out an expression as equivocal. Superficially, it seems that the argument is implacable (Paul did not answer the challenge). In fact, at this point in the conversation Paul was faced with a practical impossibility. First, Paul was inviting further inquiry. He was not looking to provide himself an answer. Secondly, Paul did not talk about culture in terms of the embodiment of cultural knowledge. As a result, Paul was suddenly pushed to make the best of a logical incongruence forced upon him by Jacks' language game. Third, from a suggestion to pursue an inquiry, he is projected into having to answer a question, which premises he does not himself accept.
> (2) What is interesting in Jack's intervention is the way in which the force of persuasion of his argument is engineered. The force of metaphysical move in language is that it seems, on the face of it, to convey things that nobody thought possible before.

The force of metaphysics in everyday talk comes from its 'unexpected springing up'. As seen before, it is unexpected because a work of elaboration of its meaning has to be done before it could be re-injected into the audience. It does not build up on the logic of previous discourse. In other words, it does not answer to Paul's invitation to investigate further. It denies the investigation as a proper invitation by working out the reason of its non-sense. In this sense, it is a construction within a conversation. It is powerful because it is done thanks to the performative character of language. It has brought co-conversationalists in the environment created by Jack's interpretation of the expression. Nobody challenges Jack back concerning his interpretation. And especially Paul's did not find a way to answer it.

Before finishing on the closing of this conversation I would like to address the two features of Jack's construction of a metaphysical interpretation of culture. (1) He built a meaning of Paul's expression as non-sense. (2) The new proposed meaning is persuasive. If we take Davidson's IM argument, he will say that the ascription of meaning to a sentence is not guaranteed to be successful, leaving a space for indeterminacy. In our case, Jack's working out the reification of culture could be seen as an accident, a questioning of the true condition of Paul's sentence. According to Davidson, the good condition to decide the meaning of culture will be to apply a conscious decisional answer to a definition of this type: culture is a matter of this and this… In this case, the decision will lead to defining the true condition of a sentence (the true meaning of culture). Jack's metaphysical construction shows that a decisional process is going to produce a reification of culture as non-sense. This decision process does not lead to defining the true condition of the meaning of culture. It suggests an alternative meaning.

And it formulates a challenge that has to be answered in some ways. Let see how it is answered pragmatically.

4 - The Silence and the Nature of the Unsaid

The coming silence can be seen by Jack's metaphysical move as a movement that hits the target. Let us review the different possibilities for not continuing the topic:

1. Jack understood perfectly the topic of 'culture' in its contrastive elaboration. For him, no explicit formulation needed to be produced. Jack formulates his irritation concerning Paul's search for an elaboration on culture. By constructing his metaphysical interpretation, Jack is questioning what an explicit formulation of culture would look like?
2. Jack's force of his argument has left all participants without voice. It is impossible to argue for a reified conception of culture. Then another topic has to take place.
3. No other participants could add on constructively to the on-going discussion initiated by Peter and Paul. Jack' initiation of a closing of the topic is an occasion for others to restore their potential participation to the meeting.
4. Given the informal nature of this meeting, and given the fact that Wittgenstein's topic on his understanding of Shakespeare was accidental itself, initiation and change of topic can be done by demonstration of irritation or annoyance. In our case, the manifestation of one of the member of the group not to carry on the topic further is seen by all participants of the meeting as a sufficient enough invitation to change of topic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have seen that:
(1) The ascription of meaning of culture dependant on relevant condition cannot be decided apriori such as finding out speaker's belief. Our EM analysis of conversation shows that the meaning of culture was elaborated turn by turn before the actual formulation of the explicit topic. The relevant condition of meaning of the expression 'culture' depends on the contrastive elaboration of literary figures. The actual formulation of culture is not the formulation of a belief of what the discussion was about but a request to inquire the topic further.
(2) The meaning of an expression is not equivalent of the condition for an expression to be true. Our EM analysis of conversation shows that the expression 'Perhaps it is a matter of culture' does not get answered by knowing if 'Understanding Shakespeare is a matter of culture'. It shows that an expression can be challenged. For that, the meaning of an expression can be reworked as non-sense.
(3) The reworking of an expression isn't in itself the example of the IM thesis (like trying to get closer to true/false condition of meaning, or, closer to the speaker's belief.) It can be an exercise in itself in a metaphysical manner. It does not deal with true/false meaning. It uses the constructed non-sense of holding the view of the immanence of culture to do something within the conversation within which it takes place. In our case, the reification of an expression has been used as a tool to change topic in conversation.

Reference:

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