

Metaphor and Varieties of Meaning

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Davidson on Metaphor

In discussions of metaphor, Davidson is (in)famous for claiming that metaphorical utterances lack any distinctive, nonliteral meaning. But there is much less agreement about just what he means by this. In this article, I explicate this claim as it occurs in “What Metaphors Mean” (1978) and relate it to his reflections on language in “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs” (1986), leaving the project of locating both papers within his broader views on interpretation for another time. In Section 1, I argue that despite some puzzling inconsistencies, the overall thrust of “What Metaphors Mean” is a radical form of noncognitivism. In Section 2, I argue that in “Nice Derangement,” Davidson applies several of the arguments offered against metaphorical meanings in “What Metaphors Mean” to linguistic meaning more generally; but his criteria for what counts as “meaning” have shifted to include context-local word meaning alongside Gricean speaker’s meaning. With respect to metaphor, he appears to have abandoned his previous noncognitivism for an analysis in terms of speaker’s meaning, but it is not clear that this new view is justified by his new model of meaning. In Section 3, I articulate and evaluate a neo-Davidsonian view of metaphor, which retains as much as possible from both papers.

1. “What Metaphors Mean”

The central claim of “What Metaphors Mean” is clear: “Metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more” (WWM 32). However, Davidson never makes explicit just what he means by “mean,” and the term is notoriously ambiguous in both ordinary and philosophical discourse. In this section, I work my way through a series of increasingly strong interpretations of what he might

mean, ultimately arguing that the most radical view does the most justice to the largest proportion of what he says.

The weakest reading of the central thesis is simply the denial of the view that words themselves change meanings when used metaphorically. Depending on what one means by “semantics” and “pragmatics,” this weak reading is naturally captured in the relatively uncontroversial slogan that metaphor is pragmatic rather than semantic.¹ And much of “What Metaphors Mean” does attack the idea of metaphorical word meanings by invoking the distinction between meaning and use:

I depend on the distinction between what words mean and what they are used to do. I think metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use. . . . It is no help in explaining how words work in metaphor to posit metaphorical or figurative meanings, or special kinds of poetic or metaphorical truth. These ideas don't explain metaphor, metaphor explains them. Once we understand a metaphor we can call what we grasp “the metaphorical truth” and (up to a point) say what the “metaphorical meaning” is. But simply to lodge this meaning in the metaphor is like explaining why a pill puts you to sleep by saying it has a dormative power. Literal sentences and literal truth conditions can be assigned to words and sentences apart from particular contexts of use. This is why adverting to them has genuine explanatory power. (WWM 33)

Similarly, he says:

The point of the concept of linguistic meaning is to explain what can be done with words. But the supposed figurative meaning of a simile [or a metaphor] explains nothing; it is not a feature of the word that the word has prior to and independent of the context of use, and it rests upon no linguistic customs except those that govern ordinary meaning. (WWM 40)

Because it is so uncontroversial to place metaphor in the domain of use, these passages are notable more because they articulate criteria for linguistic meaning – as something a word has “prior to and independent of” specific conversational contexts, in virtue of “linguistic customs” – that will become Davidson’s target in “Nice Derangement.” The weak interpretation of the central thesis is weak in the sense that it holds that this criterion for *word* or sentence meaning is compatible with allowing that metaphor exemplifies some other, more context-bound species of *speaker’s* meaning.

Davidson does appear to embrace metaphorical speaker’s meaning at several points in “What Metaphors Mean.” For instance, he grants that metaphor “is effective in praise and abuse, prayer and promotion, description and prescription” (WWM 33). He also claims that metaphors can serve as assertions, lies, and promises:

What makes the difference between a lie and a metaphor is not a difference in the words used or what they mean (in any strict sense of meaning) but in how the words are used. Using a sentence to tell a lie and using it to make a metaphor are, of course, totally different uses, so different that they do not interfere with one another, as say, acting and lying do. . . . It can be an insult, and so an assertion, to say to a man “You are a pig”. . . . What distinguishes metaphor is not meaning but use – in this it is like assertion, hinting, lying, promising, or criticizing. (WWM 43)

On the weakest reading of the central thesis, the speaker of a metaphor exploits her words' standard meanings in order to say or assert something else. This is a view that various theorists, including myself endorse.² However, it cannot be Davidson's view, because he repeatedly commits himself to a significantly stronger interpretation of the thesis. Perhaps most obviously, he continues the passage above by adding: "And the special use to which we put language in metaphor is not – cannot be – to 'say something' special, *no matter how indirectly*. For a metaphor says only what it shows on its face" (WWM 43, emphasis added). Likewise, he writes that "[a] metaphor doesn't say anything beyond its literal meaning (*nor does its maker say anything*, in using the metaphor, beyond the literal)" (WWM 32, emphasis added).³

Despite the talk about metaphors underwriting description and assertion, then, Davidson is committed to a strong version of the central thesis, one which denies that metaphors express cognitive contents in any way. To get clear on just how strong his noncognitivism is, and why he endorses it, we need to distinguish two intertwined but distinct arguments he offers in its favor. The first argument is that metaphors lack the right *kind* of effects to count as meaning. Thus, he writes, "we must give up the idea that a metaphor carries a message, that it has a content or meaning (except, of course, its literal meaning)" (WWM 45).⁴ Similarly, he says, "metaphor" is not "a form of communication alongside ordinary communication [which] conveys truths or falsehoods about the world much as plainer language does"; it is not "a vehicle for conveying ideas" (WWM 32). Rather than telling us *that* things are a certain way, Davidson suggests, metaphors make us *see* things in a certain way:

If what the metaphor makes us notice were finite in scope and propositional in nature, this would not in itself make trouble; we would simply project the content the metaphor brought to mind onto the metaphor. But in fact there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention, and much of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in character. (WWM 46)

And again:

[The problem with a paraphrase is] not only that we can't provide an exhaustive catalogue of what has been attended to when we are led to see something in a new light; the difficulty is more fundamental. . . . Seeing as is not seeing that. (WWM 47)

The "wrong kind" argument thus relies on the assumption, common among philosophers, that meaning is an exclusively propositional matter. One might well question this assumption – indeed, in his seminal article "Meaning," Paul Grice only requires for an utterance-event to have nonnatural meaning that "some effect" be produced in the hearer in virtue of his recognition of the speaker's intention to produce that effect (Grice 1957: 385): he does not specify what form that effect must take, and even explicitly allows that "of course, it may not always be possible to get a straight answer involving a 'that' clause, for example, 'a belief that . . .'" (Grice 1957: 385). More importantly, Davidson's positive point here – that metaphors (typically) produce a kind of nonpropositional insight through seeing-as – is compatible with the possibility that they might also, at least sometimes, express propositional contents which would qualify as meaning. (I'll argue in Section 3 that this is indeed the case.)

Davidson's second argument cuts against the possibility of treating metaphors' effects, propositional or not, as instances of meaning, by arguing that those effects are not connected in the right *way* to the uttered sentence:

The various theories we have been considering mistake their goal. Where they think they provide a method for deciphering an encoded content, they actually tell us (or try to tell us) something about the *effects* metaphors have on us. The common error is to fasten on the contents of the thoughts a metaphor provokes and to read these contents into the metaphor itself. No doubt metaphors often make us notice aspects of things we did not notice before. . . . The issue does not lie here but in the question of *how* the metaphor is related to what it makes us see. (WWM 45, emphasis added).

To put the point in Gricean terms, it is generally assumed that in order to count as non-natural meaning, an utterance's effects must be connected to the utterance in a rational way: that is, as Grice says, the production of the intended effect "must be something which in some sense is within the control of the audience, or [such] that in some sense of 'reason' the recognition of the intention behind *x* is for the audience a reason and not merely a cause" (Grice 1957: 385). But with metaphor, Davidson seems to claim, the requisite rational structure is absent. Thus, at various points, he speaks of metaphors (along with similes and other analogical devices) as "inspiring" or "prompting" recognition of some fact or similarity (WWM 47), or as "inviting" or "bullying" hearers into drawing a comparison (WWM 40–41) – all verbs that suggest a causal rather than a rational mechanism of production. Similarly, he says that "Joke or dream or metaphor can, like a picture or a bump on the head, make us appreciate some fact – but not by standing for, or expressing, the fact" (WWM 46).⁵

In all of these cases, Davidson thinks, the metaphor, or perhaps the speaker, does something more like showing or pointing the hearer toward a situation – something, in Grice's terms, more like "deliberately and openly letting someone know" or "getting someone to think" than like "telling" or claiming (Grice 1957: 382). And the problem with treating showing as a case of nonnatural meaning, according to Grice, is that the hearer's recognition of the speaker's intention fails to play an essential role in producing the effect: the speaker's utterance at most prompts or causes him to notice something that he could have noticed on his own.⁶ Similarly, Davidson argues, with metaphor: any cognitive content a metaphor produces is something the hearer generates for himself, with the speaker merely exercising more or less force in aiding its production. This insistence on the hearer's autonomous interpretive role is reflected in the very first sentences of "What Metaphors Mean," where Davidson writes, "Metaphor is the dreamwork of language and, like all dreamwork, its interpretation reflects as much on the interpreter as on the originator . . . understanding a metaphor is as much a creative endeavor as making a metaphor, and as little guided by rules" (WWM 31).

Thus, while a metaphor's speaker might harbor certain hopes or expectations about the effects her utterance will have, these effects are not systematically predictable on the basis of the sentence uttered, because they depend too heavily on the particular hearer and the particular conversational situation. More importantly, on this view, those effects are not *constrained* by the speaker's expectations: the hearer is free to make of the metaphor what he will, by noticing whatever similarities or facts happen to be most interesting and notable to him.⁷

In effect, the “wrong kind” objection invokes at the level of speaker’s meaning an analogous criterion to that for linguistic meaning cited earlier. For any species of meaning, Davidson assumes, we should only posit meanings that play a substantive explanatory role, and purported meanings that are neither systematically predictable nor rationally justifiable fail to meet this requirement. If this is right, then the only theoretically useful notion of “meaning” associated with metaphor is that of literal sentence meaning. At least we know that sentences *have* these meanings, as a result of a compositional interpretive theory; further, we also know that we need to appeal to these meanings to explain metaphors’ effects, since they, and not the uttered sentences’ mere sounds or shapes, play a crucial role in causing those effects.

In Section 3, I’ll challenge both Davidson’s “wrong kind” and “wrong way” arguments. For now, by way of exegetical summary, I note that it doesn’t appear possible to render all of Davidson’s claims about metaphors and meaning in “What Metaphors Mean” consistent: in particular, the claim that metaphors can be assertions (WWM 43) appears to conflict directly with the central negative thesis. The most plausible overall reading, though, is a radically noncognitivist one, on which metaphorical utterances fail to have or otherwise express any (nonliteral) propositional, cognitive contents. Specifically, Davidson holds this because he assumes first, that speaker’s meaning must be propositional, and must involve a rational, intentional relation between utterance and effect; second, that the primary, distinctive work of metaphors is to produce a state of seeing-as; and third, that seeing-as violates both these criteria for meaning.

2. “A Nice Derangement of Metaphors”

Turning now to Davidson’s later paper, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” we can frame the primary exegetical challenge much as in Section 1. Here again, it is clear that Davidson advocates a fairly radical negative conclusion, now extended from metaphor to linguistic meaning across the board: “I conclude,” he says, “that there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed” (NDE 265). Again, though, this central claim might mean various things, depending on what Davidson means by “language” and “meaning.” Further, while his focus is not on metaphor per se, the discussion has direct, significant implications for the analysis of metaphor. As with “What Metaphors Mean,” I will work my way through a sequence of increasingly strong interpretations of the central negative thesis.

The weakest interpretation is that Davidson merely intends to claim that conventional meaning is not sufficient for communication, because all communication involves spontaneous, local, non-rule-governed coordination between speaker and hearer. In effect, on this interpretation, Davidson thinks there is no such thing as a language just because he takes Gricean interpretive processes to be so pervasive throughout the course of linguistic interpretation that we have “erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally” (NDE 265).

Davidson illustrates the insufficiency of conventional meaning for successful communication by appealing to malapropisms, appropriations, and neologisms: for instance, Goodman Ace’s sustained barrages of puns and twists, which Mark Singer describes as

a “baffle of wits,” or Archie Bunker’s invitation to “Lead the way and we’ll precede” (NDE 251). In all of these cases, speaker and hearer converge on a common, nonconventional interpretation of the speaker’s words, even when one or both parties is ignorant of, or ignores, the relevant expression’s conventional meaning. As Davidson says:

What is interesting is the fact that in all these cases the hearer has no trouble understanding the speaker in the way the speaker intends. It is easy enough to explain this feat on the hearer’s part: the hearer realizes that the “standard” interpretation cannot be the intended interpretation; through ignorance, inadvertence, or design the speaker has used a word similar in sound to the word that would have “correctly” expressed his meaning. . . . It seems unimportant, so far as understanding is concerned, who makes a mistake, or whether there is one. (NDE 252)

In this passage, we might say, Davidson invokes broadly Gricean reasoning to explain successful communication of nonconventional meaning, generalizing Grice’s account to encompass, first, cases in which the speaker’s departure from conventional meaning is unintentional, and second, cases where the departure involves the interpretation of specific uttered expressions rather than the generation of unsaid implicatures. The interpretive strategy in both cases is fundamentally the same as for classic Gricean implicature: the hearer assumes that the speaker is a basically rational agent who wants to produce some specific effect, and he puts what he knows about the utterance the speaker actually produced together with what he knows about the sort of person the speaker is, what she believes, and what her purposes might be, to identify her intended effect (Grice 1989).⁸

If the central negative claim of “Nice Derangement” was just that conventional meaning does not suffice for the successful assignment of values to a speaker’s words because it must be embedded within a more general interpretive machinery, it would not be particularly radical. But Davidson claims, further, that conventional meaning is also not *necessary* for successful communication, as illustrated by cases where the speaker invents an entirely new expression rather than “converting” an old word to a new use: “Sheer invention is equally possible, and we can be as good at interpreting it (say in Joyce or Lewis Carroll) as we are at interpreting the errors or twists of substitution” (NDE 259). Given this, Davidson concludes that conventions are altogether explanatorily otiose in a theory of communication:

what interpreter and speaker share, to the extent that communication succeeds, is not learned and so is not a language governed by rules or conventions known to speaker and interpreter in advance; but what the speaker and interpreter know in advance is not (necessarily) shared, and so is not a language governed by shared rules or conventions. (NDE 264)

Indeed, it seems we might use some of the arguments Davidson deployed in “What Metaphors Mean” against metaphorical meaning to go further: to undermine the very cases he invokes here as being instances of meaning at all. In “What Metaphors Mean,” Davidson argued that metaphorical meanings lacked “genuine explanatory power” because they could not “be assigned . . . apart from particular contexts of use” (WWM 33), and did not explain anything further that could be done with words. But if con-

ventional semantics is now being ruled out as otiose, then, the only viable species of linguistic or word meaning that remains would seem to be context-local speaker's meaning.⁹ Moreover, the way in which hearers arrive at these interpretations, Davidson now says, is nothing more than a "strategy," a "mysterious" and highly context-dependent process (NDE 264): "there are no rules for arriving at passing theories, no rules in any strict sense, as opposed to rough maxims and methodological generalities" (NDE 265). But if genuine meaning must be predictive and rule governed, as assumed in "What Metaphors Mean," then this criterion threatens to undermine all varieties of speaker's meaning – both intentional and unwitting, and both implicatures and word meanings.¹⁰ We thus appear to have a truly radical meaning skepticism on our hands.

This is emphatically not the conclusion of "Nice Derangement," however. On the contrary, Davidson says he "take[s] for granted . . . that nothing should be allowed to obliterate or even blur the distinction between speaker's meaning and literal meaning" (NDE 252). Indeed, he thinks we are driven to give up the very thing he once treated as explanatory bedrock – conventional, context-independent word meaning – precisely in order to preserve this distinction (NDE 252). So why, and how, does he stop short of wholesale skepticism? The answer, I think, is that where in "What Metaphors Mean" Davidson took conventional, context-independent word meaning as fundamental, and looked with suspicion on purported cases of meaning that failed to fit that model, by the time of "Nice Derangement," he has come to think that merely "strategic," broadly Gricean interpretive processes are sufficiently robust to provide an alternative theoretical groundwork. While the central negative thesis of "Nice Derangement" is that the pervasiveness of Gricean interpretive processes renders conventional meaning explanatorily otiose, this is complemented by a positive project of showing that a revised notion of compositional word meaning (of the sort Davidson himself spent much of his philosophical career developing) still plays a crucial role within the Gricean framework.

The crucial question, then, is how to understand this alternative, anticonventionalist notion of compositional word meaning. Davidson rejects talk of "literal meaning" as "too incrustated with philosophical and other extras to do much work," and offers "first meaning" in its place. "The concept," he says,

applies to words and sentences as uttered by a particular speaker on a particular occasion. But if the occasion, the speaker, and the audience are "normal" or "standard" (in a sense not to be further explained here), then the first meaning of an utterance will be what should be found by consulting a dictionary based on actual usage (such as *Webster's Third*). (NDE 252)

So far, this just says that first meaning is a lot like conventional meaning, except in those cases when it's not. A more helpful understanding, he suggests, comes from thinking of first meaning as "first in the order of interpretation," as determined by the speaker's communicative intentions: "The intentions with which an act is performed are usually unambiguously ordered by the relation of means to ends (where this relation may or may not be causal)" (NDE 253). As Davidson notes, "first meaning" is thus a species of Gricean nonnatural meaning. However, he also observes, as we noted in Section 1, that nonnatural meaning need not be distinctively linguistic:

Nothing said so far limits first meaning to language; what has been characterized is (roughly) Grice's non-natural meaning, which applies to any sign or signal with an intended interpretation. What should be added if we want to restrict first meaning to linguistic meaning? (NDE 254)¹¹

Davidson suggests two additional conditions to achieve linguistic meaning: first, the method for determining the intended interpretation must be *systematic*. That is, this particular utterance meaning must be related in a rule-governed way to the meanings of other potential utterances, such that the interpreter's assignments of values to this utterance's parts and their mode of combination forms part of an overall theory that enables him to interpret a wide range of other utterances (NDE 254). Second, the operative theory must be *shared* between the interlocutors: that is, they must converge upon a common understanding of the speaker's utterance using a sufficiently similar method (NDE 256). Davidson cautions, however, that this second requirement does not entail that the hearer would use the same theory either to produce his *own* utterances or to understand a different speaker in another context: all that "must be shared" for successful communication "is the interpreter's and the speaker's understanding of the speaker's words" (NDE 257). Nor, of course, is it necessary that speaker and hearer share this interpretive theory of the speaker's words *prior* to the conversation; this is the point of malapropisms and neologisms, and the central negative thesis. Perhaps we might sum up Davidson's view here in the slogan "All semantics (and syntax) is local."¹²

How does this context-local notion of "first meaning" avoid "obliterating" the distinction between word meaning and speaker's meaning? The answer should be intuitively obvious: given, for instance, that Archie Bunker's interpretive theory assigns as the semantic value for "precede" what I (and presumably you) would assign for "proceed," and given that we realize this fact about him, Archie can successfully use the sentence "Lead the way and we'll precede" to *implicate* something more to us – say, that it's time to go to the party. Further, we need to appeal to this context-local "first meaning" in order to explain Archie's overall speech act, including both the additional content that the hearer recognizes Archie intended for him to entertain, and the way in which Archie intended him to identify it.

While the basic distinction between first/word meaning and speaker's meaning and its explanatory utility are intuitively obvious, spelling out the distinction in a principled way, and especially making sense of Davidson's specific cases, is rather more difficult. In particular, returning to our central topic, the status of metaphor becomes particularly vexed on this view. Davidson only mentions metaphor once in "Nice Derangement," and only in passing, when he says that metaphor is an instance of something that is done "all the time," where a speaker "has said something true by using a sentence that is false" (NDE 258). The first point to make here is obvious: this represents a dramatic shift from the staunch noncognitivism of "What Metaphors Mean." Aside from the question of intertextual consistency, though, the remark raises a puzzle internal to "Nice Derangement": what conception of "first meaning" entitles Davidson to treat metaphor in this way? In particular, why does metaphor not count as a form of first meaning?

To see the puzzle, we need to compare two cases, both originally from Keith Donnellan, that together illustrate how Davidson is drawing the distinction between word and

speaker's meaning. The first is Donnellan's (1966) classic example motivating a distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions: Jones utters "Smith's murderer is insane" in order to talk about someone (say, George) who Jones believes falsely to have murdered Smith (perhaps George is on trial for the murder). Davidson here agrees with Donnellan that the speaker, Jones, successfully refers to George; but he insists, seemingly against Donnellan, that Jones's *words* refer to the actual murderer:

. . . the reference is none the less achieved by way of the normal meanings of the words. The words therefore must have their usual reference. All that is needed, if we are to accept this way of describing the situation, is a firm sense of the difference between what *words* mean or refer to and what *speakers* mean or refer to. . . . Jones has said something true by using a sentence that is false. This is done intentionally all the time, for example in irony or metaphor. A coherent theory could not allow that under the circumstances Jones' sentence was true; nor would Jones think so if he knew the facts. Jones' belief about who murdered Smith cannot change the truth of the sentence he uses (and for the same reason cannot change the reference of the words in the sentence). (NDE 258)

Davidson's reasoning here is just an instance of the standard Gricean machinery, generalized as we saw earlier to include cases where the hearer realizes that the speaker doesn't realize something, either about her words (as in the case of Mrs. Malaprop) or about the world (as here).

The second case is one in which Donnellan (1968) responded to an accusation by Alfred McKay that his description of the previous case showed that Donnellan "shared Humpty Dumpty's theory of meaning: 'When I use a word', Humpty Dumpty said, . . . 'it means just what I choose it to mean'" (NDE 257). (Earlier in his conversation with Alice, Humpty Dumpty had used the word "glory" to mean "a nice knockdown argument.") In response to McKay's accusation, Donnellan says,

If I were to end this reply to MacKay with the sentence "There's glory for you" I would be guilty of arrogance and, no doubt, of overestimating the strength of what I have said, but given the background I do not think I could be accused of saying something unintelligible. I would be understood, and would I not have meant by "glory" "a nice knockdown argument"? (Donnellan 1968: 213)

Donnellan's main point here is that while Humpty Dumpty could not succeed in meaning "a nice knockdown argument" by "There's glory for you" just out of the blue, Donnellan *can* successfully mean that in his current context, because the right sort of Gricean background is in place: specifically, Donnellan knows that McKay knows (that Donnellan knows, etc.) about Humpty Dumpty's failed attempt at meaning.

For Donnellan, then, the two examples, of Jones referring to George and of Donnellan saying he has a nice knockdown argument, are on a par: in both cases, the speaker succeeds in meaning or saying something even though he departs from his words' standard, conventional meanings. But Davidson treats the two cases very differently: in the case of "Smith's murderer," he thinks the words *retain* their standard meaning although the speaker uses them to refer to something else;¹³ while with "glory," he thinks, the words themselves take on new meaning:

When Donnellan ends his reply to MacKay by saying “There’s glory for you,” not only he, but his words, are correctly interpreted as meaning “There’s a nice knock-down argument for you.” That’s how he intends us to interpret his words, and we know this, since we have, and he knows we have, and we know he knows we have (etc.), the background needed to provide the interpretation. (NDE 260)

Given the structural similarity between Donnellan’s use of “glory” and the intentional malaprops deployed by Goodman Ace, we can see why Davidson would want to treat Donnellan’s “glory” as a case of context-local word meaning. However, recall that “first meaning” was also supposed to be literal meaning: it is *the* meaning the words have in that context. And this seems like an odd thing to say about “glory” here. In particular, with cases of intentional twists and appropriations like Goodman Ace’s and Donnellan’s, we would miss out on an important part of what’s funny – and thus an important part of the effect the speaker intends to produce – if we simply took the speaker’s ultimately intended word meaning as the words’ “first” meaning.

Putting aside brute intuitions about whether “glory” itself or only Donnellan as speaker means “a nice knockdown argument,” the more important question from a theoretical perspective is what differentiates “glory,” which Davidson does want to treat as a case of first, literal, albeit context-local word meaning, from metaphor, which he does not. For it is at least as plausible that the words take on a context-specific meaning in the case of metaphor, as it is with intentional twists like Donnellan’s use of “glory.”¹⁴ In particular, first, with metaphor as with “glory,” it is typically¹⁵ possible to identify a specific word or phrase as metaphorical while the other terms in the uttered sentence are used literally. Moreover, unlike with “glory,” it is typically possible to extend that metaphorical interpretation to related expressions, for instance through tense, pluralization, adjectivalization, colligation, and so on. Second, metaphor, even more clearly than an intentional twist like “glory,” permits echoic speech and attitude reports, anaphoric reference and (dis)agreement (e.g. “That’s true” or “She’s not that way at all”), and embedding within complex constructions like conditionals and attitude reports. And third, with both intentional twists and metaphor, the speaker’s contextually intended interpretation of her words can serve as input for implicature: for instance, by saying “She’s the Taj Mahal,” a speaker might implicate that he would like to date the woman in question (Tsohatzidis 1994; cited in Bezuidenhout 2001).

But if metaphorical assignments of values to particular expressions contribute to the compositional determination of sentence meanings which in turn serve as inputs to implicature, then it seems fairly clear that metaphor falls squarely within the domain of what Davidson calls “first meaning” – even as he also equates this with literal meaning:

Every deviation from ordinary usage, as long as it is agreed on for the moment (knowingly deviant, or not, on one, or both, sides), is in the passing theory as a feature of what the words mean on that occasion. Such meanings, transient though they may be, are literal; they are what I have called first meanings. (NDE 261; see also 252)

Thus, unless he can identify a principled basis for distinguishing metaphor from intentional twists like “glory,” it appears that Davidson has not merely “blurred” but “obliterated” the distinction between literal and speaker’s meaning after all. And in turn, it

appears that he also lacks the resources to claim that in speaking metaphorically, a speaker “says something true by using a sentence that is false”: rather, it seems he should hold that when all goes well, the sentence uttered is itself true, on the contextually operative interpretation. This would take us far from the view in “What Metaphors Mean,” indeed.

Although I think this is a real problem for Davidson’s view here, I also think the best basis for distinguishing the two cases relies on a feature of metaphor that Davidson himself cited in “What Metaphors Mean.” There, he argued that in a metaphorical utterance, the words’ literal meanings play a crucial role in producing the metaphor’s effects in two related senses. First, unless a hearer appreciates the change from literal to metaphorical use, “most of what is thought to be interesting about metaphor is lost” (WWM 37). Second, in the case of metaphor, “our attention is directed . . . to what language is about” (WWM 37), rather than to the language itself: we notice new features of Juliet, or Louis XIV, or Richard III, by thinking about them in comparison to the sun, and not just as falling within the extension of “the sun.” That is, it is the normal semantic *value* of the metaphorical expression, and not just the expression itself, which plays a central role in achieving the metaphors’ effects. Both of these features are missing from a genuine malapropism: precisely because the speaker is confused about the expression’s normal semantic value, she cannot intend for the hearer to play with that normal value in order to achieve some effect. In the case of Donnellan’s “glory,” the first feature is present – the utterance is supposed to be interesting because we know Donnellan knows the normal meaning of “glory.” But the second feature is still absent: there is no interesting connection between the two phenomena of glory and a nice knockdown argument in themselves; there is only the arbitrary connection that Humpty Dumpty attempted to create between the two *expressions* for them. Other cases, like Goodman Ace’s intentional twists and many puns, fall somewhere in between “glory” and metaphor here.

What this shows, I think, is that if Davidson wants to retain “first meaning” as a form of meaning that is both context-local and literal, he needs to appeal to more varieties of meaning than simply “prior” and “passing” word meanings and propositional “speaker” meaning. At a minimum, he needs to acknowledge that distinct theoretically relevant roles are played first, by each interlocutor’s “prior” lexical entry for a given expression (conventional or not); second, by the context-specific “passing” “first” word meaning, which both parties must converge on for successful communication; third, by any “secondary” context-specific expression-values which are parasitic on this initial passing meaning, such as metaphor and some sarcasm (and perhaps other phenomena like deferred reference); and finally, by classic Gricean implicatures. (Of course, in many cases two or even all of the first three species of meaning may coincide.) Only by taking seriously all of these varieties of word meaning can Davidson make good on his positive project of showing that an anticonventionalist theory can still reliably distinguish word from speaker’s meaning.

3. Evaluating a Hybrid Davidsonian View of Metaphor

At this point, it is time to step back from the details of the two papers, to ask what form a broadly Davidsonian view of metaphor, one that preserves the most important aspects of both papers, should take. I think we can identify four central and independently

plausible theses from each paper. From “What Metaphors Mean,” we get first, the claim that literal meaning plays a crucial role in the production of metaphor’s effects:

Whether or not metaphor depends on new or extended meanings, it certainly depends in some way on the original meanings; an adequate account of metaphor must allow that the primary or original meanings of words remain active in their metaphorical setting. (WWM 34)

Second, there are no clear rules for getting from literal sentence meaning to a metaphor’s effects: in this sense, metaphorical meaning is not strictly “calculable,” as Grice claimed implicatures to be. Third, meaning is propositional: it is a form of cognitive content, which is in turn analyzed in terms of conditions for truth or satisfaction. Finally, seeing-as constitutes an essential, inextricable aspect of what metaphors do, and is not itself reducible to seeing-that.

From “Nice Derangement,” we have the following claims. First, conventional meaning is neither necessary nor sufficient for successful communication. Second, the input to compositional construction (“word meaning”) is often context-local rather than conventional. Third, the process by which interlocutors develop “passing” interpretive theories from “prior” ones is highly context specific and strategic rather than strictly rule governed. Finally, accepting these three theses does not undermine the distinction between word and speaker’s meaning.

We can incorporate all eight of these theses to produce the following broadly Davidsonian view of metaphor, one which is both noncognitivist and anticonventionalist. Literal word meaning, which may itself be context-local serves as the input to a compositional interpretive theory and delivers a “passing” meaning for the uttered sentence. This meaning then serves as a springboard, via mysterious, non-rule-governed “strategies,” for the hearer’s seeing one thing in terms of another – in the simplest case, for seeing the object or situation denoted by the subject expression (e.g., Juliet) in the light of the object, situation, or quality denoted by the predicate (e.g., being the sun). This cognitive state is not itself a candidate for meaning because it is not propositional. It may, however, lead the hearer to notice that the two entities share interesting resemblances, and that the subject possesses heretofore unnoticed properties. Finally, a Davidsonian theory might perhaps allow that a speaker can exploit the anticipated-to-be-induced state of seeing-as to *implicate* (but not to say or assert) that the subject possesses these properties.

What should we make of this view? I think it has three important theoretical merits. First, its emphasis on the continued contextual relevance of “first,” literal meaning serves as an important corrective to the view of many contextualists,¹⁶ who argue that in metaphorical utterances, words take on *ad hoc* meanings, which are the only relevant, operative meanings of those words in that context. As Davidson says on such a view “there is no difference between metaphor and the introduction of a new term into our vocabulary: to make a metaphor is to murder it” (WWM 34). Second, at the same time, it pushes us to acknowledge that the literal meaning which serves as input for generating metaphorical effects need not itself be conventional. Thus, if I say “George is a primate,” intending to suggest that he is territorial, prone to violence, and not too smart, then the relevant literal meaning of “primate” is one which has already been

narrowed to exclude human beings as relevant instances (Camp 2008). Finally, Davidson's emphasis on the nonpropositional effects of metaphor, and specifically on the production of a rich, open-ended, often imagistic state of seeing-as, is a crucial corrective to the narrower, exclusively propositional focus of many philosophical discussions of metaphor and related uses of language.

However, what I think the contextualists get right, and what this Davidsonian view misses, is that metaphorical interpretation typically, perhaps always, also generates a speech act in which a proposition other than the uttered sentence's "passing" meaning is presented with assertoric or other illocutionary force. In this sense, I take metaphor to be importantly akin to "primary" propositional meaning (Recanati 2001), and distinct from implicatures. The speaker of metaphors like "She's the Taj Mahal," "Her hair is burnished copper," or even "Thou art a boil in my corrupted blood" has not merely intimated or suggested or pointed toward something: she has committed herself outright to some content, which can be false as well as true, and which can genuinely inform the hearer and not merely bring him to notice something he could have ascertained independently (Camp 2006b). Further, this content can itself in turn serve as the input for implicatures, or for sarcasm (Camp 2012). Finally, I take it that this content is identified by way of cultivating a state of seeing-as (Camp 2003, 2008).

Accepting these points would obviously involve abandoning Davidsonian non-cognitivism – though as we saw, Davidson himself abandons that view in "Nice Derangement." To adjudicate between the two positions, we need to evaluate Davidson's two strongest arguments for noncognitivism: that the effects produced by metaphor are of the wrong *kind*, and are connected in the wrong *way*, to count as meaning; I take the "wrong way" argument first.

The claim that neither seeing-as nor any propositions arrived at through it are governed by strict "rules" for metaphorical interpretation is certainly correct: as Davidson emphasizes in "What Metaphors Mean," metaphorical interpretation requires imagination and intuition – though as he also points out in both papers, this is also true of all communication to some degree. Nor, at least by the time of "Nice Derangement," does Davidson take a role for interpretive imagination to disqualify an effect as one of meaning. And this seems right: as many theorists have noted, the Gricean requirement of calculability needs to be construed quite loosely if it is to cover even canonical cases of implicature.

More importantly, in most if not all interpretive contexts, metaphorical interpretation is normatively constrained by the speaker's intentions in a manner characteristic of non-natural speaker's meaning. So, for instance, suppose a hearer interprets Romeo's utterance of "Juliet is the sun" in a way that employs the same perspective, and so attributes the same features, that he would have employed if he heard Achilles or Louis XIV described as the sun, or even as he would if he heard Romeo's friend Benvolio or his romantic rival Paris utter the very same sentence. I think it is intuitively clear that such a hearer would have *mis*interpreted Romeo's metaphor, in virtue of failing to take Romeo's interpretive intentions into account (Camp 2008). The view that metaphors are self-sufficient objects of contemplation, which simply draw the hearer's attention to features that he could have noticed on his own, is dubious enough in the context of lyric poetry, but clearly false in the case of conversation.

The objection that seeing-as, and any further cognitive effects it produces, are the wrong *kind* of entity to count as meaning is, I think, considerably more plausible. As I noted in Section 1, the assumption that speaker's meaning is inherently propositional is widespread, even if it is not part of Grice's influential definition. I myself am tempted by the thought that a nonpropositional perspective can be part of what a speaker means to communicate by her utterance, but I recognize that this is a controversial view. However, even if we reject seeing-as as a candidate for content, this does not establish that there are no other propositional candidates for illocutionary content in the offing. And it seems simply incredible to deny that speakers ever, or even often, commit themselves to contents by their metaphorical utterances. So, for instance, it seems clear that in the context of a conversation about who should be the next department chair, a speaker might utter "Sam is a bulldozer" and thereby claim, roughly, that Sam is forceful, determined, and not particularly considerate of others' feelings (Bezuidenhout 2001).

The natural response to this is to object, as Davidson does (echoing Max Black and Cleanth Brooks before him), that the effects produced by metaphor are still too indeterminate and open-ended to count as meaning: as he says, "When we try to say what a metaphor 'means' we soon realize there is no end to what we want to mention" (WMM, 46). Here again, I think Davidson's emphasis on indeterminacy and open-endedness is salutary. (Although it is also important to note that a speaker's metaphorical illocutionary content may be quite specific: for instance, when Ted Hughes writes in "Pike," about a fish lying on shore, "The gills were kneading quietly,"¹⁷ the metaphorical verb describes a quite specific action; likewise, the description of Sam earlier is fairly limited in its intended effect.

Once again, though, I do not think indeterminacy or even open-endedness should disqualify propositions as being meant, so long as the requisite Gricean intentions are in place: that is, so long as the speaker intends for her hearer to take her to be committed to this rough body of propositions, and to other related ones, and for this commitment to be achieved by way of the hearer's recognition of this very intention. Indeed, as Grice (1989: 58) notes, indeterminacy is typical of pragmatic communication; among other factors, it is rhetorically useful to have communicative methods that preserve the indeterminacy of our corresponding mental states (Camp 2006a). The primary difference in the case of metaphor is that there is no determinate, literal, conventionally determined "core" which is asserted. As the later Davidson insists, however, it is not clear that such a core is always present even for cases of literal meaning. Thus, I conclude that neither the wrong way nor the wrong kind arguments for noncognitivism succeed; we should allow that in speaking metaphorically, speakers do indeed "say something [potentially] true by using a sentence that is [usually] false" (NDE 258).

Before closing, I want to step back from the specific topic of metaphor to the broader question of conventional meaning. I think we should grant that conventional meaning is neither necessary nor sufficient for successful communication. But I believe we should reject Davidson's inference to the conclusion that conventions have no theoretical role to play in an account of meaning and discourse. Davidson claims that "error or mistake," in the sense of deviating from "what a good dictionary would say, or what would be

found by polling a pod of experts whose taste or training I trust,” “is not philosophically interesting” (NDE 252). I disagree: in addition to accounting for cases where hearers are sufficiently cognitively agile and charitably motivated to figure out what nonstandard meaning or effects the speaker must have intended to achieve with her utterance, a theory of meaning should also explain cases of communicative failure: why and how interlocutors respond as they do when hearers are too uninformed, lazy, or stupid to go the extra mile required to reconstruct the speaker’s communicative intentions, or when hearers do recognize what the speaker is trying to do, but refuse to let her “get away with it” (NDE 258). Speakers who diverge from conventional meaning do so “‘under license’ from other participants,” as Grice (1989: 45) says, and while hearers are typically willing to cooperate by “accommodating” a manifestly intended meaning (Lewis 1979: 340), this sort of charity goes above and beyond the minimal conditions on cooperative conversation.¹⁸ What Davidson rightly emphasized in “What Metaphors Mean” is that literal, conventional meaning provides a stable, cross-contextual “least common denominator” for communication: a basis for constructing meaning that both speakers and hearers are entitled to assume their interlocutor acknowledges. This common basis rarely coincides with utterances’ ultimate meanings, and speakers and hearers can indeed get along without it. And in any case, it needs to be embedded within a larger machinery of Gricean intention recognition. But if we ignore literal, conventional meaning altogether, we deprive ourselves of the resources to understand how speakers intentionally manipulate conventional meaning to nonconventional ends, for the sake of obfuscation, insight, or entertainment, and how hearers sometimes fight back against such manipulations.

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Notes

- 1 For recent dissension from pragmatic models, see Hills (1997) and Stern (2000).
- 2 Bergman (1982) and Camp (2008).
- 3 We could render Davidson’s claims here consistent by assuming a distinction between what a speaker *says* and what she *asserts*. Again, this is a position I myself endorse (Camp 2007a). If so, however, one would expect him to note this explicitly. More importantly, it is incompatible with the arguments for noncognitivism offered below. Finally, we cannot take him to endorse an interpretation of the central thesis on which the sentence the speaker utters, as well as what if anything she *says* and *asserts*, all have only their ordinary literal meanings, but she still puts forward a nonliteral meaning in some other way, such as implicating, hinting, or insinuating. It is true that Davidson says he has “no quarrel” with a view of metaphor summarized by Heraclitus’s statement about the Delphic oracle: “It does not say and it does not hide; it intimates” (WWM 46). And we might plausibly think of intimation as a form of Gricean implicature, as with Grice’s (1989: 33) classic letter of

recommendation. However, Davidson explicitly rejects intimation as a form of meaning: in discussing T.S. Eliot's poem "The Hippopotamus," which consists of series of contrasts between the hippopotamus and the Church, he says,

Here we are neither told that the Church resembles a hippopotamus (as in simile) nor bullied into making this comparison (as in metaphor), but there can be no doubt the words are being used to direct our attention to similarities between the two. . . . The poem does, of course, intimate much that goes beyond the literal meaning of the words. But intimation is not meaning. (WWM 41)

- 4 Specifically, he resists any attempt to "shrug [his arguments] off as no more than an insistence on restraint in using the word 'meaning.' This would be wrong. The central error about metaphor is most easily attacked when it takes the form of a theory of metaphorical meaning, but behind that theory, and storable independently, is the thesis that associated with a metaphor is a cognitive content that its author wishes to convey and that the interpreter must grasp if he is to get the message. This theory is false, whether or not we call the purported cognitive content a meaning" (WWM 46).
- 5 As Richard Rorty (1987: 290) says in elaborating Davidson, metaphors "do not (literally) tell us anything, but they do make us notice things. . . . They do not have cognitive content, but they are responsible for a lot of cognitions."
- 6 Note, however, that Grice actually makes this condition fairly weak. He rejects the case of Herod showing Salome the head of St. John the Baptist on a charger as one of nonnatural meaning because it is Salome's appreciation of the situation itself – the natural connection between a severed head and the death of the person whose head it is – which produces the effect in her; Herod's role is merely one of staging. However, in cashing out this requirement, Grice says only that "the [hearer's] recognition [of the speaker's intention to produce a certain belief in him] is intended by [the speaker] to play its part in inducing the belief, and if it does not do so something will have gone wrong with the fulfillment of A's intentions. Moreover, A's intending that the recognition should play this part implies, I think, that *he assumes that there is some chance* that it will in fact play this part, that he *does not regard it as a foregone conclusion* that the belief will be induced in the audience whether or not the intention behind the utterance is recognized" (Grice 1957: 384, emphasis added). As I argue in Section 3, it is plausible that a speaker's communicative intentions do satisfy this condition in the case of seeing-as produced by metaphor.
- 7 For a more recent defense of this view, see Lepore and Stone (2010). In effect, Davidson thinks of a metaphor as an object that is created by a speaker but then enters the world on its own. Davidson's stance here is strikingly similar to the New Critical view of poetry articulated by Wimsatt and Beardsley (1954): "The poem is not the critic's own and not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it)." Along similar lines, Davidson says,

The critic is, so to speak, in benign competition with the metaphor maker. The critic tries to make his own art easier or more transparent in some respects than the original, but at the same time he tries to reproduce in others some of the same effects the original had on him. In doing this the critic also . . . calls attention to the beauty or aptness, the hidden power, of the metaphor itself. (WWM 47)

- 8 Davidson might bolster the generality of the point that all communication involves broadly Gricean reasoning made earlier by noting, as Bach and Harnish (1979: 10) do, that even when an utterance's intended interpretation does fully coincide with its conventionally

- determined one, identifying this fact itself requires the hearer to employ the same nuanced, context-sensitive interpretive abilities as conversion and invention do.
- 9 Indeed, Davidson's skepticism about preestablished conventional meaning extends beyond semantics, to encompass syntax: thus, Davidson thinks we have good evidence that "internal grammars do differ among speakers of 'the same language,'" for instance in their rules for pluralization (NDE 263).
 - 10 One of Grice's key reasons for thinking that the connection between what is said and what is implicated is rational, and so counts as a case of nonnatural meaning, is that implicatures are "calculable" on the basis of what is said. In this sense, at least, Gricean implicatures are also classically assumed to be "rule-governed."
 - 11 Note that Gricean nonnatural meaning encompasses more than "first" meaning, contrary to what Davidson here appears to assume.
 - 12 Note that Davidson's two conditions – or even all three, including conventionality – do not suffice to distinguish linguistic meaning from other forms of "first" meaning, as he claims. Many nonlinguistic representational systems, most notably cartographic and diagrammatic systems, are systematic, shared, and conventional (Camp 2007b, 2009).
 - 13 It is difficult to determine whether Donnellan himself really does think the *words* change their meanings in either case; in particular, in his discussion of "glory," Donnellan only claims that *he* meant "a nice knock-down argument" by "glory." See Kripke (1977) for an argument that Donnellan must be committed to a semantic analysis of the referential/attributional distinction, and for a classic defense of the alternative pragmatic interpretation invoking the distinction between semantic and speaker's meaning.
 - 14 For advocacy of a word-based approach to metaphorical interpretation, whether semantic or pragmatic, see inter alia Bezuidenhout(2001), Carston (2002), Hills (1997), Levin (1977), Recanati (2001), Sperber and Wilson (1985), and Stern (2000). Further, note that some cases of sarcasm behave in much the same way (Camp 2012).
 - 15 The existence of phrasal and sentential metaphors, in which the entire unit serves as a vehicle for thinking about some other entity or situation, as in "I see storm clouds gathering over the hill," said in the context of an increasingly hostile conversation, constitute an important, and I think theoretically revealing, exception to this claim.
 - 16 For example, Bezuidenhout (2001), Recanati (2001), and Sperber and Wilson (1985).
 - 17 Ted Hughes, "Pike."
 - 18 For further discussion of interpretive antagonistic conversations and their implications for the theory of meaning, see Camp (2013).

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