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Davidson's Notions of Translation Equivalence

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Abstract

The paper analyses the relationship of semantic equivalence as described by Donald Davidson in his theory of meaning, showing its limits above all in respect to language use in the contextual situation. The notion of equivalence used by the “first” Davidson does not successfully explain why some biconditionals are simply true and why others, besides being true, offer the real translation of the source sentence. The paper argues that the main limits of the Davidsonian proposal, which lie in the very attempt to apply Tarskian theory of truth to natural languages, are partially overcome later by Davidson himself. Above all in his paper *A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs* (1986), Davidson rejects the very idea of an “invariance of meaning” and proposes a “second” notion of equivalence, described as the research of momentary and always changing points of convergence of interpreter and speaker, depending on contextual information. This convergence is possible because of a “deeper equivalence,” a common cognitive apparatus that allows communication to take place. At any rate, as the paper aims to demonstrate, this solution seems to simply shift the problem on to another level of explanation. Once this level of “deeper equivalence” is reached, there is too no explanation of exactly how a translator can understand contextual implications in order to grasp functional equivalence.

Keywords: translation equivalence, radical interpretation, translatability, meaning invariance

1. Semantic Equivalence in Davidson's Theory of Meaning

Davidson's early papers, collected in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (1984), attracted the attention of Translation Studies after a heated and often misleading debate on linguistic relativism and Quine's thesis on indeterminacy of translation, which denied the existence of any "plausible sort of equivalence relation however loose" among sentences (27). Davidson's famous argument on the very idea of a conceptual scheme showed the impossibility of a radical difference between speakers and a massive failure in translation, in accordance with the common sense of the practice of translation.¹ According to the principle of translatability, there is a "deeper equivalence", a wide common background that makes comprehension possible. This common base of communication relies on the fact that speaker and interpreter share the same cognitive apparatus. As Malmkjær noted, translation scholars discussed the Quinean thesis on the indeterminacy of translation in depth, but the later work by Davidson is largely unknown. His last papers, especially *A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs* (1986), as this paper will show, are remarkably interesting, because they propose a linguistic theory that can be used as a valid conceptual tool for the analysis of the translation process:

It is therefore good to see that references and reactions to Quine's indeterminacy thesis have begun to re-enter translation literature. Unfortunately, references to Davidson's more

¹ For a brief but insightful review of the role of analytical philosophy in translation theory, see K. Malmkjær (1998: 8-13).

optimistic view are rarer, and I do not believe that his later writings – absent even from Benjamin – have yet been absorbed by the community of translation scholars. This is a pity since the later work stresses difference and the fluidity of language to a degree which should make it impossible any longer to misread Davidson as seeking to establish “an original and archaic site of meaning” and “an unmediated access to the world” (Malmkjær 1993: 135).

At the same time, translation scholars were searching for a highly formalised model of translation that could provide a formal explanation of translation phenomena and could offer real laws of translation as tools for translation work. In order to do this, as Catford claimed, “it is clearly necessary for translation theory to draw upon a theory of meaning” (35). And Davidson’s *theory of radical interpretation* seemed to be able to answer the philosophical question on meaning, revealing the translation of any given sentence, whether expressed in another language or in the same language of the original sentence. The theory Davidson proposed, tried to get to the root of the problem of meaning, providing a radical interpreter with a *corpus* of information which is both necessary and sufficient to understand his own interlocutor. It must give an explanation of a potentially infinite number of sentences, starting from a *finite* basic vocabulary and *finite* set of rules to be used by an interpreter who has finite powers.² Davidson claimed that if a theory wants to have these features and be able to give for any given sentence *s* its equivalent sentence *p* in any other natural language, then it needs to

² “A satisfactory theory of meaning must give an account of how the meanings of sentences depend upon the meanings of words. Unless such an account could be supplied for a particular language, there would be no explaining the fact that, on mastering a finite vocabulary and a finitely stated set of rules, we are prepared to produce and to understand any of a potential infinitude of sentences” (Davidson 1984: 17).

adopt *Tarski's theory of truth* as formal model. Furthermore, the theory needed to be *empirically verifiable* and capable of giving a *holistic*, global explanation of how a natural language works.

The model of translation proposed by Davidson soon showed its limits with regards to the explanation of translation phenomena, precisely because of formal problems within the theory itself. Despite its interesting attempt to borrow the concept of equivalence from Tarski's theory of truth to define translation in natural languages, another problem with Davidson's theory was the real application of this concept of equivalence to translation in natural languages. In fact, the concept of equivalence borrowed from Tarski's theory of truth soon seemed too rigid to explain the various kinds of equivalence that Translation Studies pointed out in relation to the various features of natural language that remain constant in real cases of translation.³ For example:

(1) Chi non risica, non rosica. (Italian)

Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

(2) Ho preso due piccioni con una fava. (Italian)

I killed two birds with one stone.

Referring to the conditions of truth of these sentences does not explain why, in the first example, we can consider the second sentence a translation of the first, even though the translation does not respect an *acoustic equivalence*. Nor can it explain why in the second example we can consider the second sentence a translation of the first one, just because it respects a *functional equivalence*. In this theoretic context, we lost the possibility of explaining a great variety of translation phenomena linked to other kinds of equivalence of

³ For an introduction to the concept of translation equivalence, see Koller (1989: 99-104), Draskan (1986), Jäger & Neubert (1982), Newman (1994: 4694-4700), Snell-Hornby (1995: 13-22), Halverson (1977), and Kenny (1998).

some properties of natural languages that Davidson's theory cannot explain.

One of the greatest difficulties, as Tarski himself highlighted, is the fact that natural languages are too unstable, confusing and complex to apply formal methods to them. In natural languages, a single expression can have more than one meaning, a not-well-defined meaning, or it can contain some indexical terms that make it true or false depending on the context. So it would not be possible even to presuppose a complete dominion of the syntax of an object-language, which, as in any natural language, does not have clearly defined outlines. Furthermore, it is impossible to establish which new words might be added to the finite vocabulary of a natural language: natural languages are not "static" like formalised languages, instead they are in constant evolution, because new expressions or words can always be added. So the worry of translation scholars was, as Tarski had foreseen, that "the language of everyday life, after being '*rationalized*' in this way, would still preserve its *naturalness* and whether it would not rather take on the characteristic features of the formalized languages" (1956: 267). In order to apply an appropriate Tarskian analysis of natural languages, Davidson should have demonstrated *first* that Tarskian methods *can* actually be applied to natural languages.

Despite the fact that Davidson's theory did not include the explanation of many cases of translation equivalence in real translations, we could search for a theory that explains why a translation *is* a translation in general, without referring to the issue of a translation's degree of quality. In the previous cases, we can state that the first translation is a *bad* translation from the point of view of acoustic equivalence, while the second case is a *good* translation from the point of view of functional equivalence. But both of them *are* translations. Translation scholars needed to understand why such translations can be considered translations at all, irrespective of whether they are good or bad. Above all, they

wanted to understand why something can be considered a translation despite its apparent lack of sameness of meaning, as in the second case we considered.

Moreover, the Tarskian model helped Davidson give an explanation of the meaning and thus of the sameness of meaning *in terms of truth conditions*, avoiding intensional notions like those of meaning and synonymy (having the same meaning), which did not seem to “oil the wheels of a theory of meaning” (Davidson 1999: 20-21). In fact, the theory Davidson aimed to build can neither presuppose nor refer to meanings of sentences, because it has to provide an exact explanation of them, so what is required for a theory of meaning is a characterisation of the meaning of sentences by a strictly extensional formulation. At any rate, as this paper intends to demonstrate, Davidsonian theory of meaning failed to give an explanation of what translation is, even with regard to very simple sentences from a syntactic and a semantic point of view. According to his extensional approach to meaning, Davidson believed that the meaning of a sentence can be explained “in terms of truth,” indicating its truth conditions (Hacking 1975: 173). Because we cannot assume the sentence on the right side of a T-sentence has the same meaning (nor that it is a translation) of the sentence on the left side, the meaning of the sentence on the left side might be understood by indicating the truth conditions in the sentence on the other side. The radical interpreter can indicate the truth conditions in order to understand the meaning of foreign utterances, because he already has a certain understanding of the “ordinary” concept of truth. So he already knows when the T-sentences are true. But it was pointed out that in this way there could be some biconditionals the translator recognises as true and correct from an extensional point of view, even though they do not offer the translation of the sentence he wants to translate.⁴ To say that two

⁴ See criticisms in Hacking (1975: 142-145), Segal (1999: 48-56), and Foster

sentences that make up a true T-biconditional are *equivalent* means that they have *the same truth-value*. Two sentences which imply each other are equivalent. Sentences with the same meaning are equivalent, and yet equivalent sentences can differ in meaning!

Therefore the translator would know that *all* the following biconditionals are true:

- (3) “La neve è bianca” is true if and only if snow is white.
- (4) “La neve è bianca” is true if and only if grass is green.
- (5) “La neve è bianca” is true if and only if snow is white and $2 + 2 = 4$.

But the translator would know *only* that they are true biconditionals and, without knowing the meaning of the foreign sentences, he would not be able to say which biconditional effectively is the translation of the sentence “La neve è bianca”. He would not know how to translate it at all! The solution is not found by claiming that the correct biconditional on the right side provides the translation of the sentence on the left side, because we cannot presuppose the concept of translation.⁵ So the *corpus* of information, given by Davidson to the translator, would not be sufficient to guarantee the choice of the theory that implies the semantically valid T-sentence.

According to Davidson, we can recognise at least some analogies between the structure of the sentence “La neve è bianca” and the sentences in English “Snow is white” or “Grass is green”. Eventually we would prefer the biconditional that associates “La neve è bianca” to the sentence “Snow is white”, which “we have

(1976: 1-32).

⁵ “What we require, therefore, is a way of judging the acceptability of T-sentences that makes no use of the concepts of translation, meaning, or synonymy, but is such that acceptable T-sentences will in fact yield interpretations” (Davidson, 1984: 150).

good reason to believe *equivalent*" (1999: 26). If by the term "equivalence" we mean "*semantic equivalence*," it would be difficult for the translator as a radical interpreter to recognise this "equivalence" between the sentence on the right side and the one on the left side of the biconditional. In fact, from the beginning, Davidson presupposed that the translator does not know the meaning of the sentences, so he cannot say whether there is such an equivalence. But in a situation of radical interpretation, the interpreter cannot suppose even a *syntactic-grammatical equivalence* between the sentences of the foreign speaker and the sentences of his own language. In fact, the radical interpreter cannot draw any analogy in a situation like the following:

(6) "Skuppit gromper" is true if and only if rubies contain coal.

In this case, as pointed out by J. Heal, the radical interpreter could believe "Skuppit gromper" is a disordered set of sounds without meaning (1997: 175-195). He has no possibility of understanding in which sense the two sentences can be equivalent.

2. In Search of the Semantically Correct Equivalent

Davidson proposed to solve this specific problem by finding the biconditional that offers a *real equivalent* sentence in another language, the semantically correct T-sentences for any sentence of a language, through an *empirical verification* based on "facts about the behaviour and attitudes of speakers in relation to sentences" (1984: 133) He identified two different moments: a *verification before* the interpretation has begun and a *successive verification* led by the Principle of Charity. This passage was particularly interesting for translation scholars because it shows how the theory can be

verified in real cases of translation and how they can be generalised in order to obtain laws of translation which allows us to predict future cases. In any case, this attempt encounters another series of difficulties.

According to Davidson, empirical evidence available to a radical interpreter *before* the interpretation has begun is the *attitude of holding true a sentence* by a speaker *x* at a given time *t*. But is it possible to identify this attitude without referring to any theory of interpretation? It is not easy to establish *when* the interpretation *begins* if, as Davidson claims, the interpretation of sentences is strictly bound to the interpretation of beliefs and intentions of a speaker; or if it is part of a *single interpretative project* which unifies linguistic behaviour and intentional actions of a speaker through holistic criteria. If we adopt this point of view, the acknowledgement of a speaker's attitude of holding true a sentence *already* requires an interpretative act by the interpreter. If everything is holistically included in a single project, we cannot say that the interpreter can recognise a speaker's intentional attitude *before* the interpretation has begun. How is it possible then to say that a radical interpreter holds true a sentence without "having any idea of *what* truth" (Heal 1997: 135).⁶ is and without knowing what the sentence means and what the speaker's beliefs are?

To identify a single attitude of holding true a sentence, the radical interpreter must be able to distinguish voluntary from involuntary behaviour and linguistic from non-linguistic behaviour. He can only make these distinctions if he has some hypotheses that involve the speaker's beliefs and intentions. Furthermore, holding true a sentence is something that can be done within the background of a set of a community's linguistic (and non-linguistic) practices the radical interpreter does not know.⁷ So if we want to identify the

⁶ On the attitude of holding true a sentence, see Davidson (2001: 137-153).

⁷ See criticism in Picardi (1989).

attitude of holding true a sentence, we need to imagine a situation which differs greatly from that of Davidsonian situation of radical interpretation. The hypothesis of basing interpretation on the speaker's attitude of holding true a sentence is too weak for the interpreter to understand the speaker without knowing his language or beliefs.

Nevertheless, even if we assume a situation which is different from that of a radical interpreter, that is to say a situation which is more similar to a real translator, what remains to clarify is how to use this set of sentences held true by different speakers in different situations as evidence to support the semantically correct T-sentence, the real translation. If the successive verification is based on publicly available evidence, it is not possible to give an overall explanation of how natural language works, because we cannot consider many cases of linguistic utterances for which there is no publicly available data (e.g., "Gods live in Olympus"). At any rate, it is clear that even if the empirical check succeeds in a significant sample of cases, we can never be sure that the sentence placed on the right side of the T-sentence gives the meaning of the sentence placed on the left side. In fact, if a sample of n confirmed cases gives us the verification we are looking for, how can we be sure the next case ($n+1$) will also be confirmed? The constraints imposed on Davidson's theory do not guarantee the passage from the verification of n cases to the verification of the next case $n+1$. But the translator must be able to predict future cases to understand the meaning of a potentially infinite number of sentences the speaker may utter.

In Foster's opinion (1976), in order to guarantee that the theory offers us T-sentences which actually give the meaning of the speakers' expressions, it has to provide the interpreter with some prescience of the meaning of the sentences. But Davidson's theory comes with some biconditionals containing mere regularities which cannot be projected on to still unobserved cases. The biconditionals

do not establish a link of *nommic character* between the “left” sentence and the “right” one. From Foster’s point of view, if such biconditionals are not laws, they cannot support the appropriate counterfactuals. In the essay *Reply to Foster* (1976), Davidson accepts Foster’s remarks to solve the problem of extensionality. Both the biconditional (7): “‘La neve è bianca’ is true if and only if snow is white” and the biconditional (8): “‘La neve è bianca’ is true if and only if grass is green” are recognised as correct by Davidson’s extensional theory, even though only the first is semantically valid. In Davidson’s opinion, we could solve this problem by recognising the nomological character of T-sentences. In fact, the biconditional (8) is not a law, because it cannot support the appropriate counterfactuals. The counterfactuals in question would respectively be:

- (7) “La neve è bianca” wouldn’t be true if snow weren’t white.
- (8) “La neve è bianca” wouldn’t be true if grass weren’t green.

In the second counterfactual, there could be a possible different world, where grass is not green but snow is white. But the nomological solution also is not free from difficulties. For instance, there could be some worlds where “Snow is white” does not mean that snow is white, but that grass is green, because there are different linguistic conventions from ours. In such a case, the biconditional (8) would be correct.⁸ Even if we concede to Davidson that the biconditional (8) cannot be considered a law in his system, the problem of extensionality is not completely solved. In fact, by means of the nomological solution he did not succeed in eliminating another kind of biconditionals seen above:

- (9) “La neve è bianca” is true if and only if snow is white and $2 + 2 = 4$.

⁸ Compare the Introduction in Fodor & Lepore (1992: III).

Davidson's response to this objection was that his theory of interpretation, "being an empirical theory, favours simplicity, like any other empirical theory" (1999: 57). Therefore, according to Davidson, this last biconditional should be rejected, because by adding irrelevant clauses, the criterion of simplicity imposed on theory would not be respected. But who is to judge the simplicity of the biconditionals, and on what basis? The concept of simplicity is too relative, because it would involve the consideration of many different opinions and interests. The requirement of simplicity does not solve the problem; what "simplicity" might mean is too vague. Such a requirement would not be respected in any case, because we could build a T-sentence and thus a law for every sentence of an object-language. But as we know, Davidson proposed that sentences, though constructed with a finite vocabulary and system of rules, are *potentially infinite*. How could a theory that builds a law for every linguistic utterance of a speaker be "simple"? Davidson responds that the kind of theory he has in mind does not have to imply nomological T-sentences for every sentence of a language. But then he does not clarify which sentences of language have to possess their correspondent T-sentences being of nomological character and which, on the contrary, have to remain simple T-sentences. In this way, *any mere accidental regularity* and even *any single instance* could be a law! For example, we could build these two laws:

1. "All the bars of gold are less than one km long" is true if and only if all the bars of gold are less than one kilometer long.
2. "This bar of gold is less than a km long" is true if and only if this bar of gold is less than a kilometer long.

As we can see, any instance of what Davidson considers a law will in turn be a law! And we could build a law for a real physical law in the same way:

3. “All the uranium bars are less than a km long” is true if and only if all the uranium bars are less than a kilometer long.

As we know, a one-kilometer-long uranium bar cannot exist, because it would own a mass superior to the critical mass. According to physical laws, if uranium 235 overcomes its critical mass, a nuclear reaction follows. These three examples highlight different situations. Yet in Davidson’s opinion, all three biconditionals would be laws without distinctions. In this way, Davidson’s nomological solution places single instances and laws on equal level!

3. Prior and Passing Theories

Davidson, in the last part of *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (1984), *Limits of the Literal*, takes the limits of the application of his theory of meaning into consideration and recognises that “it is always an open question how well the theory an interpreter brings to a linguistic encounter will cope” (xix). According to Davidson, the field of application of his theory of meaning should be very wide to give a comprehensive explanation of how a language works. Yet at the same time it should be narrow enough to be rigorously formalised. However, missing in such a formalisation is exactly what helps us to apply the theory to a single case of interpretation, because it cannot be reduced to a clearly defined set of rules. In other words, an interpreter maintains the conversation by continually adjusting his theory of interpretation by means of his *ability* and *intuition*, but he is also aided by factors, such as *luck*, *taste* and *sensitivity*. But he cannot expect to succeed in formalising such considerations which lead to the adjustment of his theory in accordance with the latest incoming information.⁹

⁹ Cf. Davidson (1984: 279).

Interpretation is a gradual process led by the interpreter's ability to adjust his own solutions to what the speaker seems to believe and mean. This is the main thesis claimed in *Communication and Convention* (1981) and in *A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs* (1986). Here Davidson attempts to explain "how people, who already have a language manage to apply their skill or knowledge to *actual cases of interpretation*" (1986: 441). The search for equivalence is described as an attempt to continually bring into action our expectations in the single communicative encounter in accordance with incoming information, to obtain an actual and concrete agreement with our interlocutor in translation. This interpretive process is possible because of a common background, a "basic agreement" or a "deeper equivalence" expressed by Davidson's principle of translatability. According to this principle, translatability is guaranteed by a "basic cognitive apparatus" which is common to all human beings and enables the interpreter to detect the similarities in the speaker's utterances which make it possible for them to understand each other.

Interpretation is no longer a mechanical process governed by a clearly defined set of rules and conventions learned before their infinite cases of application. Davidson himself compares such theory to a "machine" that seems to make language a

complex abstract object, defined by giving a finite list of expressions (words), rules for constructing meaningful concatenations of expressions (sentences), and a semantic interpretation of the meaningful expressions based on semantic features of individual words. We tend to forget that there are no such things in the world; there are only people and their various written and acoustical products (2001: 107-108).

Now Davidson concedes that we never need this kind of language in our everyday communication with others, even though it

could still be interesting to philosophers, psychologists and linguists. We simply understand what other people tell us, and we manage to be understood without such an unobservable and unchangeable “object”. Davidson concludes “there is no such thing as what some philosophers (me included) have *called* a language” (1994a: 2). He questions the image of language he shared for a long time with most linguists and philosophers of language. Now he is more interested in phenomena such as *lapsus linguae* and *malapropisms*, which standard descriptions of linguistic competence do not take into consideration, because – according to Davidson – they are unable to explain how our communication succeeds, despite the presence of such phenomena.

Davidson should have abandoned the concept of equivalence he borrowed from Tarski’s theory of formalised languages, because this concept, while suitable for a complex and abstract language built on the model of languages of deductive sciences, is *not* suitable for spoken languages in everyday life. Nevertheless, Davidson does not want to refute his former theoretical programme with this more recent paper and its theses.¹⁰ On the contrary, he intends to claim that a theory of meaning, such as the one he elaborated previously, can be used to describe the linguistic behaviour of speakers in a systematic and coherent way, rather than to explain the link between such a theoretical “machine” and our practical interest in understanding and being understood in every single case of interpretation, even where the phenomena stated by the theory are divergent.

Davidson claims that the interpreter interprets a speaker with an interpretative theory (again based on Tarski’s model) called *prior theory*, which illustrates how the interpreter is already prepared to interpret the speaker (the *first* meaning). The *prior theory* always refers to a given speaker placed in a given situation, a speaker about

¹⁰ For criticism of Davidson, see Hacking (1986).

whom the interpreter knows little (for example, his dress, sex, etc.) – information acquired by an initial observation of his behaviour – or has deeper knowledge. Therefore there will be an infinite number of prior theories in accordance with the speakers, the interpreter's level of knowledge about the speaker's customs, socio-cultural situation and background. During this interpretative process, the interpreter will modify his initial theory in accordance with the entry information, building one or more *passing theories* which express how the interpreter *actually* interprets the speaker. Davidson quotes as an example the case of Mrs. Malaprop, who, by saying “a nice derangement of epitaphs,” actually meant to say “a nice arrangement of epithets”: her interpreter has to use a new theory assigning a new meaning to “derangement” and “epitaph”.

Yet simply because the interpreter applies a passing theory to understand the speaker, he cannot be certain that his accommodation of the prior theory will work for every other future utterance of that speaker, because, according to Davidson, a passing theory tells us only how we have to “interpret a particular utterance on a particular occasion” (1986: 443). So the prior theory will be continually modified with other passing theories, it will be improved through constant comparison with the speaker.¹¹ Ultimately, the interpreter will understand the speaker through this constant, progressive adjustment of his own theories. In this way, Davidson underscores the *interpreter's creativity*, which cannot be explained by a description of linguistic competence as a finite set of rules, conventions or uses determined by history, linguistic practices, etc., to apply to specific cases.¹² Davidson intends to abandon such explanation of linguistic competence to stress instead the central role of creativity in language use. In fact, he maintains that constant accommodation of a prior theory and the use of passing theories to

¹¹ Cf. Davidson (1986: 437).

¹² Cf. Davidson (1986: 443).

understand the speaker's utterances characterise not only those situations where we have to understand *lapsus linguae* or *malapropisms*, but every interpretation, because he thinks phenomena such as *lapsus linguae* or *malapropisms* are “omnipresent and pervasive” (1986: 433). Therefore every communication needs an accommodation of the prior theory and a constant change of passing theories. Understanding can also take place without rules, uses or shared practices; maybe it is facilitated by these conventions, but what makes it possible is the *creative dimension* of our linguistic use.

But linguistic phenomena such as *lapsus linguae* or *malapropisms* do not seem omnipresent; they are usually considered exceptional cases in our usual way of communicating. Speakers do not usually mistake their own words, they simply say what they mean. So we cannot totally abandon the descriptions of language that rely on rules and conventions, because these phenomena are not “rules” but “exceptions”. As Dummett claimed, conventions teach us:

what constitutes a social practice; to repudiate the role of convention is to deny that a language is in this sense a practice. In the exceptional cases there are indeed no rules to follow: that is what makes such cases *exceptional* (1986: 474).

On the contrary Davidson, emphasises the creative and productive power of language, giving as an example, in the paper *James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty*, Joyce's use of language. Joyce abandons his nationality, religion and language, not to annihilate his language, but to recreate it, putting his reader “in the situation of the jungle linguist trying to get the hang of a new language and a novel culture” (1991: 11). Joyce's “*radical reader*” somehow understands the meaning of what Joyce writes, even though he strays outside the rules and conventions of his own society and language. But we can also claim that Joyce's way of writing could be considered an

“exceptional” case and not a typical case of communication. It is not so easy to understand how, without any rules, conventions, or social practices, the interpreter can understand the speaker in a real case of communication.

However, Davidson does not believe that Joyce's language is absolutely without ties, as it was created *ex nihilo*. Davidson disagrees with Humpty Dumpty: “When *I* use a word it means just what I choose it to mean” (1991: 1), because he does not believe in the existence of a private language. As Wittgenstein claimed, without sharing one's own language with anybody else, the speaker cannot possibly know what the correct language use is. Instead the language created by Joyce is intersubjective, and – however detached from rules and conventions it may be – it opens “a hermeneutic space between the reader and the text” (1991: 12), which is shared by both speakers.

4. A “Deeper Equivalence”

In 1986, Davidson proposed a theory of meaning based on the notion of *linguistic use*, to explain many translation cases (such as those of “functional equivalence”) which remain unexplained by the previous Davidsonian theory. In the words of Malmkjaer: “The theory Davidson advocates provides a method and a concept of what meaning is, which allows us to make sense of the linguistic and other behaviour of other persons, and to see how their use of certain sentences relates to their use of certain other sentences” (2005: 56). The past usage of sentences could surely help the interpreter/translator, because they become a background against which linguistic items participate in semantic relationships formed by the momentary fusion of speaker, listener and contextual situation. Viewed from this perspective, we could describe translation as a process that occurs between the original text and a target text

through a series of convergences of passing theories. The bridge between the two sides of the process is the translator himself, who is the reader of the original text and the writer of the translation. In real cases of communication, functional equivalence becomes a momentary, always changing agreement between the interpreter or the translator and the speaker. In this sense, the translator's role becomes that of "a mediator whose task it is to facilitate convergence on passing theories for people who do not share what we normally think of as 'the same language'" (1993: 146).

But Davidson's attempt to describe functional equivalence seems to introduce a series of solutions *ad hoc*, rather than a real theory of meaning. Moreover, this solution does not avoid the problems of Davidson's original theory, as examined above. As we have seen, Davidson did not abandon Tarski's theory of truth at all, instead he tried to reconcile it with the new requirements for a theory of meaning. Moreover, the momentary convergence is only an equivalence of a long series of moments which constitutes the translation process, and it is made possible by a "deeper" agreement among speakers: the sharing of the same human mental dimension. It is this "more fundamental equivalence – Benjamin claims – which in turn engenders the possibility of the recognition of semantic equivalence" (1989: 64-65).

Davidson refuses any form of conceptual relativism, rejecting the distinction between conceptual scheme and empirical content. In the essay *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme* (1974), Davidson tries to demonstrate that relativism and in particular the thesis of the radical difference between conceptual schemes, is bound to fail on its own. The thesis of the incomparability of radically different conceptual schemes is belied, in Davidson's opinion, by the metaphor used by the advocates of conceptual relativism. According to this metaphor, we can compare conceptual schemes to points of view that give us a radically different vision of reality:

The dominant metaphor of conceptual relativism, that of differing points of view, seems to betray an underlying paradox. Different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability (1984: 184).

Davidson believes that it is possible to talk sensibly about the diversity of varying points of view (conceptual schemes) only if the latter can be placed into a "system of common coordinates" in which it is possible to compare them. Davidson concludes that, if these points of view have something in common, they cannot be so radically different! This means that the same recognition of similarity and difference which occurs in translation is made possible because of a fundamental cognitive identity among human beings. Therefore, translatability is guaranteed by the fact that *there is* human communication.

However, this solution seems to simply move the problem of explaining functional equivalence to another level of explanation. If this fundamental identity can explain the "deeper" equivalence by means of which translation is always possible, it is not sufficient to explain the evident differences in translation quality. In order to explain why some translations seem to be more adequate than others in a contextual situation, it is necessary to refer also to the fundamental difference and individuality of the subjects who translate, to the translator's creativity underscored by the "last" Davidson. In this way, however, what remains to be explained is exactly how the translator can create something new by grasping the functional equivalence of sentences of the source text and sentences of the target text. Although Davidson recognises the importance of the translator's creativity, he remains anchored to the relation of equivalence proposed in his theory of radical interpretation and is unable to fully explain the creativity of the relation between the

interpreter and the speaker. The fact of sharing a “basic cognitive apparatus” can certainly explain the fundamental reason why translation is always possible; however, it does not explain why translations differ one from the other, and why we consider some translations better and more creative than others.

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