The Structure of Truth: The 1970 John Locke Lectures, by Donald Davidson, edited with an introduction by Cameron Domenico Kirk-Giannini and Ernie Lepore. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 120.

Les neiges d'antan sont encore blanches

When I was a student in the mid-1980s, Donald Davidson loomed larger over the philosophical scene than any other living thinker. His writings figured prominently on reading lists in almost every area of the subject except for political philosophy. In metaphysics, even beginners had to come to terms with his conception of events as particulars and of causation as a relation between them. Central to debates in the philosophy of mind were his 'anomalous monism' and his accounts of rationality, first-person authority, and self-deception. Students of epistemology discussed whether Davidson's 'coherence' theory of truth and knowledge (a label he later regretted) adequately answered the sceptic. Moral philosophers puzzled over his explanations of weakness of will and (a few years later) of the objectivity of value. As for the philosophy of language, one could—*experto crede*—attain excellent marks on examination papers having barely read anything which was not by Davidson. Not only did he present an overarching account of the relationship between truth and meaning, he also proposed detailed analyses of such linguistic constructions as adverbial modification, direct and indirect quotation, non-assertoric moods, and metaphorical speech. Little wonder that many of us tyros back then thought of ourselves as learning philosophy in the age of Davidson.

Things are utterly different today. Even in Oxford—where his influence was, at its height, perhaps greater than at any of the universities which actually employed him—Davidson's name rarely comes up in seminar discussions. There are many reasons for this, but an important one is that the sort of systematic philosophizing he went in for is no longer encouraged. Today's students are told that an essential condition for professional survival is to master and then make one's mark on an 'area of the literature'. In their eyes, a writer who can propose a 'unified theory of thought, meaning, and action' (cf. Davidson 1980) in only sixteen printed pages must seem an alien figure from a distant era.

While Davidson was happy to sketch such grand theories, he was reluctant to develop them at book length. Although five volumes of his papers appeared during his lifetime, *Truth and Predication* (Davidson 2005) was published only posthumously—and it could be argued that it is two booklets rather than one book. (The first three chapters, which reproduce Davidson's Dewey Lectures of 1990, comprise a final attempt to knock into shape his account of the relationship between truth and interpretation, while the last four propose a solution to the related but distinct problem of the unity of the

proposition.) The present volume, then, is of special interest. It consists of the six John Locke Lectures which Davidson delivered at Oxford in May 1970 and which he wrote, as the editors put it, 'as a fully organized and coherent exposition of his program in the philosophy of language' (p. 2) as he then saw it. (Unadorned page references are to the volume under review.) The particular constructions with which the lectures deal—quotation (Lecture III), attributions of attitude (IV), and adverbs (V)—are given treatments which deviate in only minor ways from Davidson's published papers, although it certainly helps to have them presented explicitly as contributions to his wider semantic programme. What is most interesting about the new book, however, is the account of that programme given in the first two lectures, an account which differs both from the proposals Davidson had advanced three years earlier in 'Truth and Meaning' and from those he was to put forward in 'Radical Interpretation' three years later (Davidson 1967 and 1973). Accordingly, I shall devote this review to describing and evaluating what is distinctive about his 1970 conception of the semantic programme.

The first paragraph of these lectures succinctly states the central proposition of Davidson's philosophy of language: 'a theory of the conditions under which someone speaks the truth may serve as the foundation of a theory of meaning' (p. 21). This proposition was always hard to justify. There are, no doubt, connections between meaning and truth conditions. One might hold, for example, that 'Declarative sentence *S* means that *P* [or, perhaps better, says that *P*]' entails '*S* is true if and only if *P*'. Davidson's talk of a theory of truth conditions 'serving' as a theory of meaning, however, seems to require the converse entailment which is on its face implausible, especially if we follow him in reading 'if and only if' as a material biconditional. Under that reading, we may correctly assert—call this (*S*)—that the English sentence 'Snow is white' is true if and only if grass is green, but we cannot infer from (*S*) that the English sentence 'Snow is white' means (or says) that grass is green.

In 'Truth and Meaning', Davidson had hoped to get around this difficulty by appealing to a form of holism. A single statement in the form '*S* is true if and only if *P*'—a *T-sentence*, in the jargon—does not entail the corresponding *M-sentence*, '*S* means that *P*'. However, Davidson conjectured that a suitable selection of true *T*-sentences for a given language would correctly determine the meanings, or contents, of all its declarative sentences. More precisely, he thought that this determination would obtain if true *T*-sentences for the totality of declarative sentences of the relevant language were generated from axioms which assigned appropriate semantic values to their significant parts. 'The grotesqueness of (*S*)', he wrote, 'is in itself nothing against a theory of which it is a consequence, provided the theory gives the correct results for every sentence (on the basis of its structure, there being no other way). It is not easy to see how (*S*) could be party to such an enterprise, but if it were…then there would not, I think, be anything essential to the idea of meaning that remained to be captured' (Davidson 1967, p. 26). As Davidson (1976) acknowledged, however,

this 'bold conjecture' was refuted by John Foster in his essay 'Meaning and Truth Theory'. Foster sketched a truth theory for English among whose axioms are: the noun 'snow' designates snow; the predicate 'is white' is true of an object if and only if it is white and the earth moves. (See Foster 1976, p. 13; his actual example was the relational predicate 'is a part of'.) A truth theory built on Foster's lines yields a *T*-sentence for each declarative sentence of English on the basis of a (correct) account of how such sentences divide into their component words. Moreover, since the earth does move, and since 'if and only if' is to be read as a material biconditional, the axioms and theorems of Foster's truth theory are all true. The *T*-sentence which that theory delivers for 'Snow is white', however, says that it is true if and only if snow is white and the earth moves, and the clause which follows the biconditional clearly does not give the meaning, or the content, of 'Snow is white'.

In Lecture I of the present volume, 'Speaking the Truth', Davidson advances a very different justification for taking a systematic assignment of truth conditions to be the kernel of a semantic theory. He begins by drawing attention to a special feature of the act of speaking the truth: '[T]he question whether someone has done it on a particular occasion is wholly determined by systematic facts about the language that must be known to anyone who speaks or understands the language. Of course, this doesn't mean that anyone who knows the language always knows when a speaker has spoken the truth. Rather, what he knows, together with the way the world is, determines whether the truth was spoken. Thus someone who knows English knows that: an utterance of the sentence "Snow is white" is an occasion when truth is spoken if and only if snow is white' (p. 21). The first sentence just quoted is poorly drafted. I pass muster as a speaker of English, but there are many 'systematic facts' about English that I do not know, such as the meanings of the more obscure words in the *OED*. Consequently, for many declarative English sentences, *S*, I do not know under what conditions a user of *S* speaks the truth. Davidson would have done better to write: 'The question whether someone speaks the truth by uttering *S* is wholly determined by systematic facts about *S* that must be known to anyone who understands *it*'. We can make this emendation, however, without detracting from the contrast Davidson wants to draw between speaking the truth and linguistic acts such as making an assertion. In judging whether a speaker has asserted that *P*, one will have to assess whether he has committed himself to the truth of the proposition that *P*, and such an assessment will require knowledge of his intentions, and of the conversational context, which go far beyond what an understanding of the relevant type sentence can be assumed to bring. In making assertions, then, and for that matter in asking questions, giving orders, and so on, 'we necessarily operate beyond the reach of the conventions of language. Speaking the truth, on the other hand, is specially suited to systematic study just because the conditions for speaking the truth are a matter of linguistic convention' (p. 23).

To readers familiar with Davidson's other explanations of the goal of a theory of meaning for a language, two features of this one stand out. First, Davidson does not hesitate to ascribe actual knowledge of truth conditions to ordinary speakers. Anyone who understands 'Snow is white' will know that an English speaker who utters it speaks the truth if and only if snow is white (cf. the quotation from p. 21 above). Knowledge of truth conditions is 'plausibly explicit to a native speaker' (p. 34). This contrasts with the more guarded formulae he uses elsewhere. By 1973, Davidson had ceased to find it 'altogether obvious that there is anything we actually know which plays an essential role in interpretation' (Davidson 1973, p. 125), and he took to describing the goal of a theory of meaning to be that of 'explicitly stat[ing] something knowledge of which *would suffice* for interpreting utterances of speakers of the language to which it applies' (Davidson 1976, p. 171, emphasis added). So far as I know, Davidson never explained why he had ceased to find it obvious that ordinary English speakers know that 'Snow is white' expresses a truth if and only if snow is white. Unless one is adopting an artificially stringent sense of 'know', it seems wholly unexceptionable to say that they do know this. In the absence of such an explanation, the more guarded formula looks unnecessarily complex and indirect. Although surprising, then, this feature of his 1970 account is welcome.

That said, Davidson's formulations in these lectures of what a speaker knows need refining in ways which may at first seem pedantic but which turn out to matter. Here as elsewhere, he individuates spoken sentences purely phonetically, and he is aware that the same phonemes may constitute well-formed sentences in two languages and with quite distinct meanings. (Thus his example of 'Empedocles leaped' in (American) English and 'Empedokles liebt' in German at Davidson 1969, p. 98.) Since some English speakers also speak German, it makes no sense to ask under what conditions an English speaker who utters (the sounds) 'Empedocles leaped' speaks the truth. We have to ask instead: under what conditions does someone who utters the sounds 'Empedocles leaped' *as an English sentence* speak the truth? I shall return to this.

The second surprising feature of Davidson's 1970 account concerns the role played by conventions. By 1974, when he replied to Foster at the Oxford Philosophical Society, Davidson was applauding him for having eschewed them: '[J]ust as *Lear* gains power through the absence of Cordelia, I think treatments of language prosper when they avoid uncritical evocation of the concept of convention' (Davidson 1976, p. 171). I am not sure quite what he meant by 'uncritical' but, as we shall see, he later went further and denied that conventions have any significant role in a philosophical 'treatment of language'. Throughout these Locke Lectures, by contrast, we find Davidson unabashedly invoking them as he characterizes the task of a theory of meaning. The notion of speaking the truth, he tells us, 'is specially suited to systematic study just because the conditions for speaking the truth are a matter of linguistic

convention' (p. 23). Davidson does not spell out his grounds for that 'because', but the idea seems to be this. A theory of meaning for a language 'should give the meaning of every meaningful expression' in the language (p. 28), but that is just a minimum: there are 'reasonable demands on a theory of meaning' which go beyond the obvious requirement that it should accurately specify meanings for every meaningful expression (ibid.). One of these demands is that the theory should reconcile 'a desire to describe accurately the language we actually use, on the one hand, with a bent for logic and system on the other' (ibid.). The 'bent' for logic and system is more than a mere preference. The 'creative aspects of language, the fact that someone who can speak or decipher a language can cope with sentences he has never heard' (p. 29), are only possible because the conventions a competent speaker adheres to include conventions for combining words (whose designations are themselves fixed by convention) into complete sentences.

On Davidson's 1970 view, someone who understands a declarative sentence knows under what conditions its users speak the truth. This goes for hitherto unheard sentences as much as for others. I may never have heard the sentence 'Gold melts at 1063°C', but if I know the meanings of its component words, and understand how they combine, I shall know under what conditions someone who utters it as an English sentence speaks the truth. The explanation of this knowledge is not that I was expressly trained in the sentence's use. *Ex hypothesi*, I have never heard it before. Rather, what accounts for my knowledge of its truth conditions is my knowledge of relevant semantic properties of its component words and of its form. I know that the word 'gold', uttered as an English noun, designates gold. I also know that the words 'melts at 1063°C', uttered as an English predicate, are true of an object if and only if it melts at 1063°C. (This in turn rests on knowledge I have about the verb 'melts' and the adverbial phrase 'at 1063°C'.) Finally, I know that when someone utters a simple sentence in the form of noun + predicate, he speaks the truth if and only if the predicate is true of the object the noun designates.

All this, Davidson stresses, is knowledge of linguistic conventions, but it is not just that competent speakers of a language know things which are, in fact, conventions of that language. If they are even minimally reflective, some rudimentary notion of a convention must enter into the content of what they know. Davidson is not explicit about this, but it follows from premisses he grants. As noted earlier, question such as 'Under what conditions does someone who utters "Gold melts at 1063°C" speak the truth?' are elliptical. Spelled out, what is being asked is: 'Under what conditions does someone who utters "Gold melts at 1063°C" *as an English sentence* speak the truth?' A reflective speaker, then, must have some conception (however inchoate) of what it is to utter sounds *as* an English sentence, or *as* an English word. But what is it to do that? The only remotely plausible answer begins: it is to utter them as conforming to certain linguistic conventions. The conventions need not be expressly identified as those that constitute speaking English; they could be thought of simply as 'those that

prevail around here'. All the same, a minimally reflective English speaker knows that the activity of speaking English (or of 'speaking as people do around here') is partly constituted by the conventions of using the word 'snow' to designate snow, and of using the predicate 'is white' so that it truly applies to an object if and only if it is white. Such a speaker also knows that anyone who utters a sentence in the noun + predicate form speaks the truth if and only if the predicate truly applies to the designatum of the noun. Accordingly, he is in a position to know that someone who utters 'Snow is white' as an English sentence speaks the truth if and only if snow is white.

Although Davidson seems never to have put the pieces together, these elements of his 1970 account provide him with the conceptual resources he needs to give a simple and powerful reply to Foster. Foster's rogue truth-theoretic axiom—'The English predicate "is white" is true of an object if and only if it is white and the earth moves'—is true. However, the conventions which constitute the activity of speaking English do not include any which say that the predicate 'is white' may be truly applied to an object if and only if it is white and the earth moves. The truth on which Foster focuses follows from a linguistic convention together with a truth of astronomy; it is not a consequence of those conventions alone. By contrast,

> 'Snow is white', used as a sentence of English, is true if and only if snow is white

is more than just any old true *T*-sentence for 'Snow is white'. It is a *T*-sentence which follows from—indeed, which may be canonically derived from—truth-theoretic axioms which are not merely true, but which record the lexical conventions operative among those who are engaged in speaking English. (For the notion of a canonical derivation of a *T*-theorem, and its importance for Davidsonian truth theories, see Davies 1981, p. 33.) When the *T*-sentence '*S* is true if and only if *P*' may be canonically derived from axioms which are not merely true but which have this further attribute, we *can*, it seems, infer than *S* means that *P*. On this conception, sentence meanings are the canonical consequences of lexical conventions. The truth theory shows how those conventions combine so as to endow complete sentences with truth conditions, and those conventionally generated truth conditions give the sentences' meanings.

There is more than a hint of this view in Frege: 'Not only a reference, but also a sense, appertains to all names correctly formed from our signs. Every such name of a truth value [that is, every well-formed declarative sentence] *expresses* a sense, a *thought*. Namely, by our stipulations [*Festsetzungen*] it is determined under what conditions the name denotes the True. The sense of this name—the *thought*—is the thought that these conditions are fulfilled' (Frege 1893 §32, p. 50; emphases in the original). Frege's stipulations lay down that the sentence '$x=x$' denotes the True—that is, expresses a truth—if and only if every object is identical with itself. For Frege, as for Davidson,

'if and only if' is a material biconditional, so the sentence '$x=x$' expresses a truth if and only if every object is identical with itself and the earth moves. However, in determining *which* truth is expressed—that is, which thought is expressed—we look only to what canonically follows from the stipulations, ignoring what follows from them in tandem with other truths. Frege's stipulations constitute conventions which any user of his artificial language has to follow.

When applied to natural languages, this conception of sentence meanings, and of how a truth theory might provide them, needs refining and elaborating in various ways, but it offers a promising response to Foster's challenge. As remarked, though, Davidson never pursued it in his published writings. Why not?

The present volume suggests two explanations. The first is that between 1970 and 1974, Davidson's semantic project became more ambitious. In 1970, he disclaimed any goal of 'giving a radical explanation of linguistic meaning in terms of something simpler, or different' (p. 26). It was, then, fine to invoke the notion of a linguistic convention in explicating sentence meaning. Describing his project in 1974, by contrast, Davidson wrote that 'what I have tried to do is give an account of meaning (interpretation) that makes no essential use of unexplained *linguistic* concepts' (Davidson 1976, p. 176; emphasis in the original). That permits appeal to the general notion of a convention, for driving, dancing, and various forms of play are convention-guided activities, but it rules out any invocation of specifically linguistic conventions. All that needs to be said about this change, I think, is that the relevant tragedy is not *King Lear* but *Macbeth*. Like Shakespeare's Scottish anti-hero, Davidson succumbed to 'vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself, and falls on th'other'.

The second explanation goes deeper. As we have seen, Davidson had become wary of conventions by 1974, and in an essay of 1982, 'Communication and Convention', he gave arguments designed to show that they can bear little weight in an account of language. Another interesting feature of the book under review is that Davidson, in Lectures I and II, develops the very resources which are needed to answer the arguments he was to advance in 1982.

To appreciate these resources, we need to attend to the refinements Davidson makes to his key notion of speaking the truth. Having introduced it, and stressed its close connection with convention, he acknowledges that, in some perfectly legitimate senses of the expression, whether an individual speaks the truth is not simply a matter of linguistic convention (plus the relevant worldly facts). If Frankie was exceptionally generous, we may count Johnny as having spoken the truth when he says 'Frankie had a heart as big as a whale', even though no human in fact has or had such a heart (p. 25). To speak the truth, in the sense Davidson intends, is to speak the *literal* truth, or, as he prefers to put it, to produce *words* which are true (p. 24).

A further qualification emerges in Lecture II. Davidson wants truth conditions, in his preferred sense, to be attachable to sentences simply by applying the conventions of the relevant language. He recognizes, though, that conventions do not by themselves deliver the conditions in which a speaker utters a sentence and thereby speaks the truth. There are no conditions in which someone who utters 'I am now silent' as an English sentence thereby speaks truly, but this null result does not follow from the conventions of English alone. Rather, it follows from them in tandem with the fact that no one uttering a sentence can be silent. For this reason, Davidson switches to truth theories which axiomatize a three-place 'relation between a sentence, a speaker, and a time', viz. '*S* is true for *A* at time *t*' (p. 40). 'When this relation holds', Davidson explains, 'the sentence is *acceptable* for the speaker, in this sense: if he believed what what the sentence expresses for him, he would have a true belief' (ibid.). Thus 'I am silent now' is acceptable for a speaker *A* at a time *t* if and only if *A* is silent at *t*. This truth condition can be satisfied, and it is yielded by a truth theory which includes among its axioms the principles (1) that the word 'I', as it is potentially used as an English pronoun by a speaker *A*, designates *A*; and (2) that the words 'is silent now', as they are potentially used as an English predicate at time *t*, are true of an object *x* if and only if *x* is silent at *t*. That is, in more colloquial terms: (1) a speaker who uses 'I' as an English pronoun designates himself: and (2) the English predicate 'is silent now' is true of precisely those things which are silent at the time of utterance. Knowledge of these axioms may plausibly be attributed to English speakers.

Davidson's explanation of his three-place truth relation will not do as it stands. He needs the English sentence 'I never have beliefs' to be true for *A* at *t* if and only if *A* never has beliefs. In the event that *A* never has beliefs, though, it is not correct to say that, if *A* believed what the sentence expresses for him—viz. that he never has beliefs—he would thereby have a true belief. Davidson's mistake is to bring beliefs as such into the explanation of his truth relation, rather than their contents. What he should have said is that *S* is true for *A* at *t* if and only if what *A* would express by uttering *S* at *t* is actually true. For what *A* would express by uttering 'I never have beliefs' is that *A* never has beliefs. This account, though, would have affronted Davidson's prejudices. Like his teacher, Quine, he was suspicious of apparent singular terms like 'what *A* expresses by uttering *S* at *t*' (cf. pp. 41-2 of the present volume) and he abhorred the modal complexity displayed by 'What *A would* express by uttering *S* at *t* is *actually* true'. The moral I draw is that such prejudices are unsustainable. In explaining the extensional predicate '*S* is true for *A* at time *t*' which Davidson sets out to axiomatize, we need to draw upon intensional and modal notions.

As other examples show, we sometimes need to invoke features of context other than the identity of the speaker and the time of utterance before we can determine the conditions in which words are true. Davidson asks whether someone who utters 'Socrates was married to Xanthippe' speaks the truth (p. 24), but the fact (if it is a fact) that the name 'Socrates' is here

being used to designate a certain philosopher is not a 'systematic fact about English that must be known to anyone who speaks or understands it' (cf. p. 21). In some circles during my youth, and without any deviation from the conventions of English, the name was more commonly used to designate a member of the Brazilian national soccer team than the playmaker of the awkward squad in late fifth-century Athens. Before we can assign literal truth conditions to sentences containing proper names, we need to move from English as such to particular uses of its sentences—from *langue* to *parole*, as Jonathan Cohen aptly put it (Cohen 1980, p. 142). Whether the relevant features of *parole* are the speaker's intentions, or common knowledge between speaker and hearer (as Cohen thought: *op. cit.*, p. 160), cannot here detain us. But we may hope to identify those features without rendering Davidson's literal truth conditions too artificial, or letting them collapse into what the speaker means by his words.

If that hope is fulfilled, the refinements that will need to be added to the story Davidson tells in Lecture I will not compromise the proposed reply to Foster. There will still be conditions, canonically derivable from the conventions of the relevant *langue* accompanied (where necessary) by specific features of *parole*, for Davidson's three-place truth relation to obtain. Those conditions will yield sentence meanings. This is to the good, for the reply which Davidson actually gave to Foster in 1974 is unprepossessing: '[W]hat someone needs to know [to have mastery of a language *L*] is that some *T*-theory for *L* states that… (and here the dots are to be replaced by a *T*-theory)' (Davidson 1976, p. 174). This cannot possibly be correct as an account of what an *L*-speaker *needs* to know. Millions of people have a mastery of English while at most a few thousand even possess the concept of a *T*-theory. Perhaps the knowledge Davidson describes here *would suffice* for mastery of *L*, but that just brings out how far the project of delineating such knowledge has strayed from the original goal of saying what competent speakers of a natural language know.

The 1970 conception of the goal of semantic theorizing, though, leaves a large hostage to fortune. According to it, theories of meaning are precisely 'theories to the effect that there is a convention that ties individual words to an extension or an intension' (1982, p. 266). In 'Communication and Convention', Davidson advanced three arguments against assigning any such theory a foundational role in an account of meaning. If those arguments succeed, the John Locke Lectures are on quite the wrong track. An important question, then, is whether they do succeed.

> Davidson's objection is not that any theory which postulates conventional ties between words and meanings must be false. To the contrary. Commenting on David Lewis's conditions for a convention to obtain (Lewis 1969), he says that he will 'simply grant that something like Lewis's six conditions does hold roughly for what we call speakers of the same language'

> (1982, p. 276). He notes, though, that a convention in Lewis's sense involves regularity across time, and supposes that 'the only candidate for recurrence we have is the interpretation of sound patterns: speaker and hearer must repeatedly, intentionally, and with mutual agreement, interpret relevantly similar sound patterns of the speaker in the same way' (1982, p. 277). Again, Davidson does not directly challenge the truth of this claim. Rather, he expresses doubts,both about the clarity of the claim and its importance in explaining and describing communication. The clarity comes into question because it is very difficult to say exactly how speaker's and hearer's theories for interpreting the speaker's words must coincide. They must, of course, coincide *after* an utterance has been made, or communication is impaired. But unless they coincide in advance, the concepts of regularity and convention have no definite purchase. (1982, pp. 277-8; emphasis in the original)

As for the importance of conventions in communication, knowledge of linguistic conventions is no more than 'a practical crutch to interpretation, a crutch we cannot in practice afford to do without—but a crutch which, under optimum conditions for communication, we can in the end throw away, and could in theory have done without from the start' (1982, p. 279). Knowledge of linguistic conventions is theoretically dispensable because we could in principle have interpreted the speaker *ad hoc* rather than as a member of a known linguistic community, applying the canons of 'radical interpretation' to make maximal sense of his utterances as those of a rational being.

What should we make of these arguments? As to the first, I accept that we have a convention only where we have a regularity which persists across time. *Contra* the Davidson of 1982, though, I do not see that the speech of deviant or eccentric speakers undermines that persistence. On the view presented in the Locke Lectures, a truth theory spells out the referential conventions that constitute a natural language, and those conventions are not threatened by occasional deviations from them. The notion of a convention allows for cases in which someone fails to conform to it, or deliberately flouts it. We may also agree with Davidson that 'intuition, luck, and skill' (*op. cit.*, p. 279), rather than knowledge of conventions, play an 'essential role' in determining what a speaker means, and that assignments of speaker meaning will often involve new and unexpected interpretations of 'apparently familiar' words. Lecture I, though, already makes the distinction that is needed here. Intuition, luck, and skill are vital in the task of divining what *the speaker* means, but it is conventions (albeit those operative in a particular context of *parole*) which determine what his *words* mean and, consequently, what sentences composed of those words mean.

As to Davidson's second argument, we should grant that there are instances of communication which do not involve conventions at all. Following Grice (1957), it is plausible to hold that *A* tells *B* that *P* when *A* produces an utterance intending to get *B* to believe that *P*, and *B* recognizes that *A* has produced the utterance with precisely that intention. There are indeed successful instances of telling (in this sense) when the relevant 'utterance' is a one-off happening, and

hence not something to which any conventional significance has been assigned. Thus Mary might tell Jane that John's behaviour is boorish by pointing first to John and then to a pig which happens to be passing by. However, while it is of some theoretical importance that we can get messages across in this improvised and *ad hoc* way, such cases are precisely not instances of *linguistic* communication. Moreover, whilst we can ask what Mary meant by her gestures on that occasion, it makes no sense to ask what her words meant, for she uttered none. Cases of this kind, then, fall outside the scope of the theories of linguistic meaning we are concerned with.

Even when we are dealing with linguistic communication, Davidson claims that knowledge of conventions is dispensable in 'optimum conditions'. By this, he has in mind face-to-face conversations that are sufficiently extensive for his radical interpreter to set to work. Much of our actual communication, though, is not of this kind. In particular, the Davidson of 1982 overlooks the way in which the invention of writing opened up radically different modes of communication. Like many theorists of language, he treats writing simply as a way of recording speech. That is why he can describe linguistic conventions as assigning extensions or intensions to repeatable 'sound patterns', with no mention of the visual patterns we learn to read. While writing may have originated in that way, it has long been emancipated from its origins and now provides modes of communication whose 'optimum conditions' are very different from face-to-face speech encounters. Thus many people communicate by writing newspaper articles and scientific papers, and even philosophers occasionally succeed in getting a clear message across in print. In general, the writer of a paper or article cannot assume anything about his readers apart from the fact that they will understand the language in which it is written. With no prospect of any face-to-face interaction, nor any knowledge of idiosyncracies in a reader's understanding (as one may have when penning a private letter), all the writer has to go on are the operative linguistic conventions. Experienced authors adhere to these, knowing that deviations are likely to generate misunderstandings. Of course, linguistic conventions change over time and from place to place, but in these modes of communication, which are both common and important, knowledge of the conventions which are then and there operative is not even theoretically dispensable.

Precisely because it diverges in important ways from the rest of the Davidsonian corpus, the position sketched in this new book demands careful study. In particular, it suggests a promising 'road not taken' on the Foster problem. Even if Davidson himself could not travel both roads, we can. The foundational questions about meaning which exercised him were never properly settled, for all that discussion of them has fallen out of fashion. I hope that reflection on this book may inspire renewed work on them. Meanwhile we should all thank Professors Kirk-Giannini and Lepore for putting Davidson's John Locke Lectures into print, a full half century after they were delivered.*

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https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzab019

* For their comments on a draft, I am much indebted to five survivors of the Davidsonic boom years at Oxford: Jonathan Barnes, Cheryl Misak, Christopher Peacocke, David Wiggins, and Crispin Wright.

