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A Deranged Argument Against Public Languages

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ABSTRACT *Are there really such things as public languages? Are things like English and Urdu mere myths? I urge that, despite an intriguing line of thought which may be extracted from Davidson's 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', philosophers are right to countenance such things in their final ontology. The argument rebutted, which I concede may not have been one which Davidson himself ultimately embraced, is that knowledge of a public language is neither necessary nor sufficient for successful conversational interaction, so that such shared languages are explanatorily otiose. In particular, the ability of interlocutors to communicate in the face of linguistic novelty and error seems to support this conclusion. I respond with two main points. First, initial impressions aside, knowledge of things like English and Urdu is explanatorily necessary. Second, even if successful conversation could be explained without positing such knowledge, we have other reasons to take public languages ontologically seriously. The ultimate result is that what I label a 'deranged argument against public languages' is unsound.*

I. Introduction

I will be centrally concerned with question **Q**, namely: *Are there really such things as public languages?* Phrased in ordinary parlance, are public languages real or are they mythical? Are they genuinely part of our world, or are they posits of lay superstition and (some embarrassingly naïve) social scientists? Giving the question a more philosophically loaded explication, should we admit public languages into our ontology, or should we sophisticated theorists be Eliminativists about them? This speaks to the 'are there really such things' part of **Q**. What is meant by 'public languages' therein?

There are ever so many hallmarks of public languages: they have not just morphosyntax but phonology; they have a history, and belong to families (such as

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Bantu, Indo-European, Romance, and Slavic); they may have a corresponding writing system and literary tradition; etc. I want to underscore three hallmarks that will be especially central below. A public language in the sense I have in mind is *systematic*: there is a family of interrelated expressions which stand in logical relations. Linguistic primitives, of which there exist a finite number, have meanings; these recombine in highly constrained ways; and the meaning of any whole depends on what its parts mean and how they are put together. Because of these features, a competent interpreter who knows the language can understand a massive quantity of expressions, most of which she has never encountered before. Indeed, any given public language contains an infinite number of sentences. Another feature of public languages, in the sense to be defended here, is that they are *autonomous*. Linguistic facts are not just further facts about the world, as ‘footwear facts’ or ‘pet facts’ might be. To put the point psychologically, knowledge of language is a discrete body of information, learned and stored separately from general-purpose information; and linguistic processing is not merely another instance of general-purpose reasoning. The foregoing twin features also characterize idiolects. Unlike idiolects, languages in the sense I intend are *conventional*: they are both shared—the property of collectives rather than individuals—and previously established, learned in advance.

Examples of public languages include Armenian, English, Ewe, German, Guaraní, Igbo, Italian, Japanese, Mohawk, Nahuatl, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish, Swahili, Tok Pisin, and Urdu. So-called ‘dialects’ also count as languages in their own right, in the sense that concerns me: e.g. if any of Cantonese, Rioplatense, Schweizerdeutsch, or Tuscan are ‘really real’, rather than mythical, then the correct answer to **Q** is ‘Yes’.

I have addressed my central question before, defending a positive answer in the face of two sorts of argument. Some philosophers, and even various linguists, have proposed that ontological scruples stand in the way of positing public languages (e.g. because they would combine abstract, mental, physical, normative, and social aspects, and no real object could do this.) Some philosophers, and even various linguists, have proposed that there cannot be a serious science of public languages, and that this ought to be our touchstone for ontological commitment. As argued in my ‘In Defense of Public Languages’ and ‘Philosophy of Linguistics’, neither consideration carries the day. The kind of ontological scruples that would rule out public languages are far too stringent, since they would equally exclude: the country of Norway, the city of Oslo, the journal *Inquiry*, you the reader, and this very article. And the sense of ‘science’ such that ‘there can be no science of public language’ is also far too austere, excluding such perfectly viable disciplines as ecology, economics, epidemiology, sociology, and social psychology. In the present paper, I take up the issue once again. Specifically, Donald Davidson’s rich and exacting paper ‘A Nice

Derangement of Epitaphs' seems to offer novel considerations in favour of Eliminativism about public languages, based on some fascinating empirically attested phenomena. Goes the idea, a speaker and hearer may converse effectively in certain non-standard cases—using malapropisms, neologisms, etc. In these cases, nothing systematic, autonomous and conventional is either necessary or sufficient. This shows that things like Armenian, Cantonese, English, Guaraní, Tuscan, etc., are explanatorily otiose, and hence one shouldn't countenance them in the final ontological catalogue.

Many readers will rush to protest that this is not Davidson's conclusion at all. What he says, they will stress, is this:

I conclude that there is no such thing as a language, *not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed*. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases.¹

The conditional nature of the claim may suggest that Davidson's target is far more narrow, and not directed at public languages in the sense I have just sketched. In fact, Davidson's later work in response to critics convinces me that he himself ultimately doubted that the considerations in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' could justify a negative answer to my question. (See Davidson, 'The Social Aspect of Language'.) Nonetheless, I am mostly going to set exegesis aside, largely confining my remarks on this front to a few footnotes. My reasons are these. Reasonable interpreters disagree on what Davidson meant to be doing in his now infamous paper: some have taken Davidson to be pressing Eliminativism therein, while others have insisted the opposite.² In fact, to paraphrase the old joke, it seems that for every two readers of the paper, there are three interpretations of its core argument. Most importantly, I consider the substantive issue—i.e. whether considerations in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' genuinely threaten public languages as explicated immediately above—to be of far greater moment than what Davidson had in mind at the time. An incautious reader can easily be swayed by what Davidson writes therein into

¹Davidson, 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', 446. My emphasis.

²Compare Bar-On and Risjord, 'Is there Such a Thing as a Language?', Dummett "'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs": Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking', Hacking 'The Parody of Conversation' and Pereda, 'Is there Such Thing As A Language?', who take Davidson to be attacking public languages as ordinarily understood, to Pietroski, 'A Defense of Derangement' and Lepore and Ludwig, *Meaning, Truth, Language and Reality*, who do not. See also Cook, 'Is Davidson a Gricean?'.

embracing far-reaching substantive conclusions that, say I, are not in fact supported.³

II. A Deranged Argument in Brief

My focus throughout the paper will be a line of thought to the effect that public languages are explanatorily otiose, so that one should be an Eliminativist about them. In this section, I present the argument in brief, offer some clarificatory remarks, and then explain why, in light of ‘A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs’, the premises look *prima facie* plausible. The remainder of the paper will be devoted to my objections.

Here is the argument:

Premise 1: Knowledge of a public language is not sufficient for successful conversational interaction.

Premise 2: Knowledge of a public language is not necessary for successful conversational interaction.

Premise 3: If knowledge of a public language is neither necessary nor sufficient for successful conversational interaction, then public languages are explanatorily otiose.

Conclusion C: Public languages are explanatorily otiose.

A few remarks on the formulation of the argument. First, it is natural to worry that couching things this way, with three succinct premises, risks constructing a straw man. The point is well taken. Nonetheless, the pay-off in terms of clarity in exposition and evaluation strikes me as worth the risk. In any case, exegesis is not a central concern.⁴ Second, and regarding the term ‘conversational interaction’, one might prefer wording which was less vague and idiosyncratic. Why not choose, say, ‘linguistic communication?’ My rationale is that the nature and extent of both language and communication are under debate. I thus

³I mention in passing another (rather sloppy) argument against public languages. Though it won’t reappear below, it arises so frequently in conversation that it merits mention. It is said, for example, that English has various contrasting dialects—e.g. the English word ‘boot’ refers to a part of an automobile in some, but to an item of footwear in others. From this undeniable observation, it is concluded, quite absurdly, that there is no such thing as English, its dialects, or the English word ‘boot’. (One might as well infer from the disparate variety of beetles that there is no such thing as the beetle, nor sub-varieties of it.)

⁴What’s more, my little reconstruction does fit with several things that Davidson says. Consider a sentence from p. 110 of his ‘The Social Aspect of Language’: ‘What I denied [in “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs”] was that such sharing is sufficient to explain our actual communicative achievements, and more importantly, I denied that even such limited sharing is necessary’. (See also his ‘Communication and Convention’, 265, 271 and 279.).

opt for these more neutral terms. Finally, I will grant for the sake of argument that the genuinely otiose has no place in our ontology: I don't intend here to confute Ockham's Razor. I will accept, then, that if conclusion **C** is true, the correct answer to **Q** is 'No'.

Why suppose, however, that public languages *are* explanatorily otiose? P1 and P2 are supported by two kinds of cases from 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs'. On the one hand, successful communication does not seem to be hindered by the use of novel terms, be they merely unfamiliar to one participant, a new coinage (such as a newly introduced nick name), or sheer innovation of the kind found in Lewis Carroll or James Joyce. Obviously the hearer's knowledge of language isn't sufficient for these; that's part and parcel of being novel. On the other hand, there are cases of speech error: garbled sounds or incomplete speech, or slips of the tongue. Examples include malapropisms, where the speaker uses a word ridiculously because of confusion with a similar-sounding term, but also things like: blends (from 'shame' and 'pity' to 'shitty', from 'people' and 'person' to 'purple'); substitution errors based on related meanings ('good morning' uttered as one turns out the lights at night, or 'there's no right or wrong answer' becoming 'right or left answer'); and metathesis (transposing two sounds in a single word, as in 'revelant' for 'relevant', or 'frevent' for 'fervent', or switching two sounds within a complex phrase, as per 'wig bin' for 'big win'). Again, presumably we do not store the meanings of such mistakes, so something beyond knowledge of language is required in these cases.

What most deeply threatens P1 (and also P2, as we'll see) is not just a list of such hard cases, but an alternative picture in which knowledge of a public language is neither sufficient nor necessary. 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' suggests just such a picture. Instead of a shared public language, there are two 'theories' at work. The hearer's Prior Theory, as Davidson calls it, expresses how dialogue participant H is prepared in advance to interpret utterances of speaker S. The hearer's Passing Theory, in contrast, describes how H in fact should interpret S's utterance. Looking at things from the speaker's point of view, and simplifying, the speaker's Prior Theory consists in what S believes H's Prior Theory to be. In contrast, the speaker's Passing Theory is the theory that S intended H to use in this case. As Davidson puts things:

Here is a highly simplified and idealized proposal about what goes on. An interpreter has, at any moment of a speech transaction, what I persist in calling a theory. (I call it a theory, as remarked before, only because a description of the interpreter's competence requires a recursive account.) I assume that the interpreter's theory has been adjusted to the evidence so far available to him: knowledge of the character, dress, role, sex, of the speaker, and whatever else has been gained by observing the speaker's behavior, linguistic or otherwise. As the speaker speaks his piece the interpreter alters his theory, entering hypotheses about new names, altering the

interpretation of familiar predicates, and revising past interpretations of particular utterances in the light of new evidence.⁵

Neither the prior theory nor the passing theory describes what we would call the language a person knows, and neither theory characterizes a speaker's or interpreter's linguistic competence.⁶

To illustrate with a lovely example adapted from Marga Reimer's 'What Malaprops Mean: A Reply to Donald Davidson', suppose a mother and young son are shopping for a birthday present for the father, who happens to be very fond of surrealist art. The son points at Munch's *The Scream* and utters 'That is sure realistic'. The mother's Prior Theory would assign, as the truth conditions, a proposition about the displayed painting to the effect that it surely is realistic. That is how the mother is prepared in advance to interpret such an utterance. This, however, seems an incorrect interpretation. By Davidson's lights, the actual truth conditions are about the famous painting to the effect that it is surrealistic. For that assignment of truth conditions, a different theory is required, the Passing Theory. Crucially, the Passing Theory includes all the information that the mother needs to draw upon—which cannot be limited to what one would pre-theoretically call her linguistic knowledge. That is, the mother's Passing Theory is sufficient for understanding the son's words as used on this occasion. Turning to the speaker's point of view, the son intended the mother to use not the theory that 'sure realistic' is true of things that surely are realistic, but rather the theory that 'sure realistic' is true of things that are surrealistic.

One last point. There is a link between P1 and P2 that bears emphasis. I have presented them as separate, but in fact that misses an element of the dialectic. What speech errors and novelties seem to show is that knowledge of a public language is not sufficient. That is P1. Davidson thus posits twin theories which are sufficient. However, once those twin theories are in place, knowledge of a public language—systematic, autonomous, conventional—no longer has any role to play. Hence P2. It is this link which (seemingly) provides a reason for thinking that public languages are explanatorily otiose, and hence eliminable.

I turn now to each premise.

III. On Premise 1

For reasons that will emerge below, I wholeheartedly endorse P1. It merits serious attention nonetheless. Addressing the premise at length will clarify what the argument for conclusion **C** on p. 4 above is not. It will also allow me to come at the main conclusion from a slightly different vantage point. Finally,

⁵Davidson, 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', 441.

⁶Ibid., 444.

this is as good a moment as any to introduce some ideas which will prove vital in what follows.

Consider three massively simplified models of communication. Paraphrasing from the first chapter of Sperber and Wilson's *Relevance*, I will term the first *the semiotics model*. In this view, a public language is a code. Consonant with my description of languages above, the code consists of a finite base of lexical items with recursive rules for combining these. The essential feature of the semiotics model is that conversation is entirely a matter of the sender encoding her message and the receiver, using the same code, decoding it to arrive at the message sent. The model is attractive for several reasons. Most obviously, it easily explains the novelty, systematicity and productivity of human speech. It also guarantees success, if the code is shared, known to be so, etc. These attractions notwithstanding, it is ultimately unpromising because of pragmatics. On the one hand, natural languages contain context-sensitive items (pronouns like 'it' and 'he', verb tense, demonstratives like 'that' and 'there', etc.), and the code itself cannot tell the receiver how to interpret those. Granted, there might plausibly be an algorithm applicable to certain kinds of context-sensitive items—'I', 'now', 'here', 'today'—but too many others look to involve robustly inference-involving notions like saliency and the speaker's communicative intentions. And robust inference is just what decoding is not. On the other hand, and speaking of such intentions, pragmatics comes in also in Grice-style one-off cases, such as in particularized conversational implicatures. It is wholly implausible that sender and receiver share a code for all of these. (Recall Grice's case of a letter of reference which reads 'Mr. X's command of English is excellent and his attendance at tutorials has been regular'. One cannot expect any pre-set code to yield *Mr. X is a crappy philosophy student*.)

This takes me to a second model, one which strikes me as much closer to an approach that Davidson himself once endorsed. Let us call this *the code-oriented hybrid*. The model builds in, from the get-go, that the hearer's code itself cannot make clear what symbol is being sent. It emphasizes that some kind of non-determinate, general-purpose, holistic inference must be at play to disambiguate. Such 'pragmatic processes' are also permitted a limited role in construing overtly context-sensitive items, such as 'that' and 'he'. Finally, pragmatics is required for non-literal content: in such cases, meaning is not arrived at by blindly applying compositional and lexical rules to linguistic strings.⁷ It is in these respects that the second model diverges importantly from the first. I call this second model 'code-oriented', however, because, plus or minus just a little, knowledge of the code does suffice for finding literal speech act content. Here is Davidson, describing something very much along these lines:

⁷Cf. Davidson, 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', 436.

The interpreter thus has a system for interpreting what he hears or says. You might think of this system as a machine which, when fed an arbitrary utterance (and certain parameters provided by the circumstances of the utterance), produces an interpretation. One model for such a machine is a theory of truth, more or less along the lines of a Tarski truth definition. It provides a recursive characterisation of the truth conditions of all possible utterances of the speaker, and it does this through an analysis of utterances in terms of sentences made up from the finite vocabulary and the finite stock of modes of composition. I have frequently argued that command of such a theory would suffice for interpretation.⁸

Before highlighting the failings of the code-oriented hybrid, I want to introduce a third model. The semiotics model occupies one extreme of a continuum. According to it, the code does it all. At the other extreme lies *the inference model*, to again borrow terminology from Sperber and Wilson's *Relevance*. It sees no need for coding/decoding. Whereas the hybrid allocated a limited role to non-determinate, holistic inference, this model would have inference and general-purpose knowledge about the world do all the work. Goes the slogan, 'It's all pragmatics'. Of course, the knowledge would have to include information about what people tend to mean by their sound-patterns, and the inferences would pertain to this too. But, to revisit a point I made at the outset about autonomy, this knowledge would be comparable to knowledge of 'footwear facts' and 'pet facts'. Put otherwise, there would be no interesting difference in kind between so-called knowledge of language and knowledge of the world. What's more, on this inference model it is not just that finding speaker's meaning involves something very like scientific theorizing. Rather, that is the heart of the matter in literal cases as well.

With the three models in place, I move to their import. A first lesson pertains to how one should not interpret P1. Malaprops, blends, metathesis, new coinages, etc. are not required to show that the semiotics model is inadequate. As noted, much more routine phenomena do that. For P1 to be even initially plausible, 'knowledge of public language is sufficient for successful conversational interaction' must be interpreted in a restricted way, which allows a certain limited role for pragmatics. In brief, the novel threat is that even setting aside the exceptions countenanced under the code-oriented hybrid, knowledge

⁸Ibid., 437–38. Two exegetical observations. First, when discussing contrasting models it is worth recalling that Davidson himself does not make psychological claims. In a way consonant with both behaviorism and instrumentalism, he is content to describe rules which, if the speaker knew them, would lead to the observed behavior. (See Davidson, 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', 438. More on this below.) Second, revisiting the first quotation from him, including especially the italicized conditional, a very plausible reading of 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' would have it that what Davidson is rejecting is precisely this second model of literal conversation, rather than (as it has appeared to many) the very existence of conventional languages such as Armenian, Cantonese, English, Guaraní, Igbo, Italian, Japanese, etc.

of the public language isn't sufficient. That is, the code-oriented hybrid—which was crafted precisely to overcome obvious objections to the semiotics model—remains subject to non-sufficiency worries involving speech errors and novelities. Such cases are different from the familiar pragmatics-involving ones, and not accounted for, because they are not just a matter of disambiguation or filling pre-set slots, yet they involve *literal* meaning. (For more on this notion, see the introductory essay of Ezcurdia and Stainton's *The Semantics-Pragmatics Boundary in Philosophy*.) To explain with some examples, in the Gricean case, though the speaker means *Mr. X is a crappy student*, the speaker's words don't mean this. This is not the literal meaning. In contrast, consider 'That is sure realistic'. Davidson would of course grant that what the speaker meant was *that is surrealistic*. He would also maintain, however, that what the boy's words mean in this instance is *that is surrealistic*. Or again, Goodman Ace intends his sound 'clowning achievement' to mean *crowning achievement*, and Keith Donnellan, in his famous reply to Alfred MacKay, intends the ink marks 'There's glory for you' to mean *that's a nice knock-down argument*. So, for Davidson, the latter cases invoke what he calls 'first meaning' as well.

The initial lesson, then, is this: the right way to understand 'conversational interaction' in P1 is as *literal* conversational interaction. And what Davidson's novel cases seem to show is that P1 is true even so read:

And it is in fact a major contention of my paper ['A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs'] that we do know, and use, much more, even in grasping just the literal meanings of a speaker's words, than our mastery of any fixed set of rules would allow us to grasp.⁹

A second lesson pertains to an alternative path to C. Think of the transition from the first to the third model as the progressive loss of confidence in codes/conventions. The semiotics model seems to promise a conversational paradise. As long as the hearer knows which symbol was sent, and as long as she knows which code the speaker is using, she is guaranteed to arrive at the correct meaning. Two kinds of pragmatic intrusion—into speaker's meaning, and via context-sensitive items—force one to make a minor retreat, opening a space for pragmatics. But only a small space. The result is Davidson's preferred model from the 60s to 70s, the code-oriented hybrid. When one notices malaprops and the like, however, codes can seem to afford only a broken promise. One searches in vain for something that 'satisfies the demand for a description of an ability that speaker and interpreter share and that is adequate to interpretation'.¹⁰ The final, radical, step is to move to the third model, which

⁹Davidson, 'The Social Aspect of Language', 114.

¹⁰Davidson, 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', 444.

essentially abandons coding/decoding altogether. Given such a model, we theorists ‘have abandoned not only the ordinary notion of a language, but we have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally’.¹¹

The obvious connection to conclusion **C** is this. On the first two models, there seems a great deal of explanatory work for public languages, the codes, to do. In sharpest contrast, on the inference model, public languages really do look explanatorily otiose. To repeat, there remains knowledge of ‘language facts’, but there isn’t anything systematic and autonomous. Hence, in light of **C**, we sophisticated theorists should eschew public languages.

Let us briefly take stock. My overarching question is **Q**: *Are there really such things as public languages?* To reiterate my own answer, I believe firmly in public languages such as Cantonese and English, and have attempted to rebut various arguments against them. Here I am addressing a novel one, which, though arguably not attributable to Davidson himself, can be extracted from ‘A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs’. Phrased slightly differently, the argument runs as follows. Public languages are supposed to be systematic, autonomous and conventional (hence pre-learned). And they are supposed to be both necessary and (*modulo* some minor exceptions) sufficient for literal conversational interaction. Now, on the one hand, there is something vaguely reminiscent of a public language at work in conversational interaction, something systematic and pre-learned, namely the Prior Theory. However, this theory cannot by itself account for successful conversational interaction in the face of certain speech errors and novel usages. On the other hand, there is something both necessary and sufficient for successful conversational interaction in these *recherché* cases, namely the Passing Theory. It, however, is not pre-learned, and is designed to apply only here and now. Related to this, because the Passing Theory is arrived at by ‘wit, luck and wisdom’—discovering the best one is like coming up with scientific hypotheses, or crafting art works—the calculation of utterance meaning does not look like the deployment of a code, a public language. Finally, once such Passing Theories are introduced, they apply not just to these special cases, but in general. And this leaves nothing for a public language to explain.

In the remainder of the paper, I will respond.

IV. On Premise 2

The key idea of P2 is that public languages aren’t ‘necessary’, ‘basic’, ‘essential’, ‘fundamental’ or ‘required’. Davidson writes, for instance, that the standard concept of language is not ‘very important in understanding what is essential to verbal communication’.¹² He adds: ‘The theoretical possibility of

¹¹Ibid., 445–46.

¹²Davidson, ‘The Social Aspect of Language’, 110.

communication without shared practices remains philosophically important because it shows that such sharing cannot be an essential constituent in meaning and communication'.¹³ In this section, I will first disentangle various claims that one might intend with such terms. (Pursuant with how P2 is phrased above, I will use 'necessary' as the cover term.) In particular, moving from the most to the least stringent, I will survey four construals of 'necessary'. I feel certain that there are others, but the lesson I want to draw can be arrived at with these alone. This bit of disambiguation behind me, I will consider the upshot for **Q**.

To say that x is necessary_K for y is to say that x is an a priori, transcendental precondition on the very possibility of y . (This of course brings Kant to mind, hence the subscript.) As I will explain below, this notion leaves me a bit at sea. But here are a few quick examples of (alleged) necessity_K. The existence of an external reality might be claimed to be a precondition, discoverable by a priori philosophical reflection, on the very possibility of representation. It might be suggested that a unified subject is a transcendental precondition on the very possibility of a unified experience. Finally, to offer an example that is directly apposite, maybe we can discover a priori that charitable attribution of intentions is a Kantian precondition on the very possibility of communication.

The second construal is much more straightforward. To say that x is necessary_{sqn} for y is to say that x is a sine qua non. Not only does one never encounter y without x , but at no possible world is there an instance of y where there isn't a corresponding instance of x . Time is necessary_{sqn} for change. Size is necessary_{sqn} for shape. Possibly warm blood is necessary_{sqn} in mammals. And so on.

The next notion I want to introduce is necessity_E. This is the hardest to explicate briefly—which is unfortunate because it is also the variant on 'necessity' which matters most for present purposes. Here are several stabs at the idea. Setting aside outliers—special exceptions—one never encounters y without x . A familiar case in point of necessity_E is where there is a nomological connection between x and y —where, crucially, an *exception* to a generalization is not a *counterexample* to it. Or again, x is at the heart of the matter when trying to understand y : x is necessary to explain y (hence the 'E' in my label). Though much more should be said, including about how the various aspects of necessity_E interrelate, I will content myself with some illustrations of it. In one perfectly reasonable sense of the term, neither engines nor wheels are necessary for transportation; caffeine is not a necessary ingredient in coffee; and grapes and alcohol are not necessary elements of wine. But, to underscore the sense of 'necessity' that I have in mind, it would be an obvious mistake to deny engines/wheels, caffeine and grapes a serious and basic explanatory role

¹³Ibid., 119.

in theorizing about the respective domains. A theory of coffee which omitted mention of caffeine, for instance, would be fundamentally inadequate in ever so many ways, missing the very heart of the matter. Thus, engines and wheels are necessary_E for transportation. And caffeine is a necessary_E ingredient in coffee. And so on.

Finally, x is necessary_P for y where x is practically indispensable for achieving y . That is, to use a word that Davidson sometimes employs for this, x is a ‘crutch’. To give an example, in a perfectly reasonable sense, some means of conveyance is necessary for getting from Cuba to Florida: a boat, a plane. Specifically, a means of conveyance is necessary_P for getting from Cuba to Florida. Nonetheless, such a means of conveyance is not necessary_{SQL}: Diana Nyad swam it in 2013.

The next step is to consider whether P2 is plausible on each of the four senses scouted above.

Do we ever find an instance of successful conversational interaction without a shared public language (in the rich sense of ‘public language’ described at the outset)? Undoubtedly. Nor need we appeal to such *recherché* cases as *mala-propos*. As Endre Begby insightfully points out in ‘Language from the Ground Up’, Homesign provides an example, as does the case of two strangers, each knowing (as one would colloquially say) some phrasebook French, and using that knowledge to coordinate action. So, P2 is plausible when read as ‘knowledge of a public language is not necessary_{SQL} for successful conversational interaction’.

Is P2 plausible in the broadly Kantian sense of ‘necessary’? Actually, that is not obvious. For reasons that will emerge below, I suspect that our full-blooded notion of literal meaning, and with it the contrast between merely conveying a message and genuinely asserting it, demands conventional meanings as a precondition. (I suspect that conventional meanings are equally required to capture the related distinction between merely misleading and lying. For extended discussion, see my paper ‘Full-On Stating’.) Nor do I see clearly how one can so much as single out errors and novel coinages, if there aren’t contrasting cases of conventionally correct and long-standing usages. Nonetheless, given how puzzling necessary_K can be, rather than debate further, I’ll grant for the sake of argument that public languages are not necessary_K for successful conversational interaction. For, as I will now explain, the issue is orthogonal to **Q**.

Consider what my dual concessions entail with respect to the existence of public languages. Start with necessity_{SQL}. That one sometimes finds y without x patently does not entail that x is explanatorily otiose with respect to y . Still less does it suggest that y fails to exist. For instance, the swim bladder is an extremely common organ across fish species, which allows them to control their buoyancy. By increasing or decreasing the amount of gas in the bladder, a fish can control its depth, and remain upright, without having to expend energy swimming. Thus, this organ plays an important explanatory role.

However, there exist pathological cases of individual fish born without one. More than that, the whole class of cartilaginous fish (e.g. rays and sharks) lacks swim bladders: they achieve the same effects differently. Analogously then, insofar as the issue is **Q**, the non-necessity_{SQL} of knowing a public language can be set aside. (Surely, Davidson himself would have agreed.) The same point applies to the neo-Kantian notion. However much it may have mattered to Davidson, whether public languages are a transcendental condition on successful conversational interaction is not the least bit probative with respect to the issues that concern us here.

Is P2 plausible in the sense of unnecessary in practice? Surely not. Conversational interaction, especially of the rich sort we actually engage in, would be extremely difficult without public languages. (In fact, Davidson agrees. He adds, however, that this isn't 'philosophically important'. Here we seem to part ways. Say I, at least when the issue is **Q**, practical indispensability matters. True, one can grant that *belief* in such-and-such is practically necessary, while insisting that such-and-such is a myth; but one cannot grant the practical necessity of the actual thing and embrace Eliminativism about it.)

Consider now the necessity_E of knowledge of public language for successful conversational interaction. This issue is the most important because necessity in this fourth sense is so closely tied to explanation. (It is also what matters most to those of us who are naturalistically inclined.) Unsurprisingly, I will urge that P2 is false when 'knowledge of public language is not necessary' is read in this way. A first reason is offered by Reimer in her 2004 paper. That interlocutors both know the same public language helps explain the *ease and efficiency* of conversational interaction. That is, even if conventions aren't required for the very existence of successful conversational interaction, they are required to explain humans' seamless conversational success. That I know some public languages but not others explains, e.g., why I am very effective at conversing in Toronto, Paris and Buenos Aires, but very much less so in Zhangzhou or Volgograd. The sharing of some but not all public languages also explains why the obnoxious tourist, who speaks English loudly and slowly wherever he goes, and somehow gets by, is nonetheless going wrong. A second related reason. In the *usual case*, public languages carry a massive explanatory load. Yes, there is a kind of hermeneutic process that people sometimes engage in which looks very much like scientific theorizing. The reader forms a hypothesis about what Pablo Neruda intends by 'My voice tried to find the wind to touch her hearing'; she tests it against other things he writes in *Poema 20*, and against other things she knows about Neruda; the reader eventually settles on the hypothesis which fits best with all the data points she can muster; still, she recognizes that further evidence could override it. This does occur. But such a process is by no means the norm. To the contrary, conversational interaction is mostly automatic and straightforward—and knowledge of

a shared public language remains essential for explaining this latter kind of talk.¹⁴ In short, Davidson's 'twin theories' approach is inapt for a wide swath of conversational exchanges, and predicts a level of effort and risk that simply is not present.

Having stressed a lack of commonality between the special cases and the usual ones—having, in effect, rejected the view that all linguistic comprehension is of a piece—I come now to a methodological defense of the necessity_E of knowledge of public language. On p. 167 of 'Locating Literary Language', Davidson explicitly suggests that literature is 'a prime test of any view of the nature of language ...'. To my mind, it is a methodological wrong turn to make things like poetry and literature such a prime test. I see a similar wrong turn in emphasizing so heavily malaprops and the like. Davidson maintains that such things happen all the time, are even ubiquitous.¹⁵ Myself, I think he overstates things somewhat (and may well overestimate too the extent to which one finds a genuine kind here). In any case, it is important to recognize that these are outliers, exceptions. And, especially when the issue is the explanatorily essential and fundamental, one shouldn't mistake the special for the paradigm case. Outliers notwithstanding, for instance, the boundary between knowing one's way around in the world and knowledge of language is not blurred *in the normal course of events*. To be clear, I am happy to grant that the atypical matters. I myself will appeal to it below. However, what looks inessential, when one focuses on such rarified examples as Joyce's novels, can turn out to be methodologically central. Karen Green makes roughly the same point, but much more eloquently, when she asks:

But is Davidson right when he says, 'Joyce takes us back to the foundations and origins of communication'? Or has Joyce, rather, lifted us up into the gargoyles and spires of language, which are only possible in virtue of a foundations of conventional rules...?¹⁶

¹⁴Lepore and Ludwig offer a very helpful comparison which echoes my points here. Pursuing an analogy between epistemology and philosophy of language, they write: 'Philosophical understanding of the epistemic position of an omniscient being, a being with direct knowledge of everything (assuming it is possible), has no need for an account of how such a being could come to know things about its environment on the basis of, for example, sensory experience. So, one might say, an account of how sensory experience plays a role in *our* knowledge of our surroundings should not be thought of as pertaining to the *essence* of knowledge. It is for us merely a crutch, in principle dispensable. Suppose all of that is true. Nonetheless, we would not have an adequate philosophical understanding of *our* epistemic position if we did not pay attention to the central role sensory experience plays *for us* in gaining knowledge of the world. Similarly, we would not have an adequate philosophical understanding of *our* communicative abilities if we did not pay attention to the central role that mastery of public languages plays *for us* in enabling us to communicate with one another successfully' (*Meaning, Truth, Language and Reality*, 297).

¹⁵Davidson, 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', 433.

¹⁶Green, 'Davidson's Derangement: Of the Conceptual Priority of Language', 243. The embedded quote is from Davidson, 'James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty,' 11.

Allow me to illustrate the general lesson with a real example which connects closely to the topic at hand. Broca's area is the part of the brain most centrally implicated in grammatically complex speech production. It also plays a role when using intricate syntax for comprehension. However, there are rare patients who have had Broca's area surgically removed, yet have retained sophisticated linguistic abilities. As Plaza et al. describe these cases, 'slow tumor evolution allows for compensatory mechanisms to develop, with the brain recruiting other areas for the processing of the endangered functions'.¹⁷ It turns out, then, that Broca's is not necessary_{SON} for successful conversational interaction. (I suppose it is obvious that it isn't necessary_K.) Nonetheless, it would be a methodological disaster to ignore Broca's area when trying to understand human speech and comprehension. A methodological disaster, that is, to treat these highly unusual patients as other than, well, highly unusual. Even more obviously, one should not conclude that Broca's area is explanatorily otiose.

The foregoing leads me to an important aside about terminology. That creative, charitable hermeneutics is ubiquitous is a major theme in Davidson's philosophy of language. In 'James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty', for instance, he writes that all reading is interpretation, and that all interpretation demands some degree of invention. As Dummett, Hacking and Pereda, all stress, however, his choice of the word 'interpretation' is unhappy because it has the potential to be highly misleading. In particular, there is a serious risk of equivocation between two uses. On what I will label the 'thin' sense, to say that 'interpretation is always at work in conversational interaction' is merely to say that cognitive effort is always required; it is to say that what the hearer understands will always be defeasible; in particular, linguistic understanding is always non-monotonic, as new evidence can show that the hearer got it wrong. In a word, to endorse the claim so read is of a piece with the rejection of the semiotics model. In sharp contrast, on the 'thick' sense, 'interpretation is always at work in conversational interaction' entails: that there is always hypothesis formation and testing at work; that an all-things-considered inference to the best explanation, of the sort one finds in scientific theory construction, is inevitably present; that the hearer is always 'figuring out' what was meant, using wit, luck and wisdom; that the only major difference between reading a yogurt label and ordering a coffee, on the one hand, and interpretation of the kind one finds in reading poetry, in biblical hermeneutics and in philosophical exegesis, on the other, is that the former is fast and unconscious. In a word, it is to say that all linguistic comprehension is of a piece. Given these contrasting senses, to say simply that 'interpretation' is ubiquitous is unfortunate—because, though most everyone will agree that thin-interpretation is happening all the time, it would be a fallacy to infer what that interpretation in the thick sense is. To the contrary, the most natural view is that things

¹⁷Plaza, Gatignol, Leroy and Duffau, 'Speaking without Broca's Area after Tumor Resection', 295.

manage to go so smoothly in the usual case precisely because interpretation in the thick sense is *not* taking place. (A comparison with visual perception may help to reinforce the threat of equivocation. In one perfectly reasonable sense, vision is always interpretation: it is defeasible and non-monotonic. However, it would be a mistake to move from this near truism to the very robust and controversial empirical hypothesis that, say, there is no such thing as the autonomous visual system, and that seeing is cognitively penetrated to the extent of resembling scientific theory construction.)

I stress this terminological point because of a direct application to our present concerns. Equivocating on ‘interpretation is always at play’ may blind us to the differences between the usual case and the *recherché* ones; it may lead us to downplay the ease and efficiency of the former; and we may thereby fail to notice that knowledge of public language plays an essential explanatory role. More generally, incautious use of ‘interpretation’ can make the inference model look more widely applicable than it really is.

I would sum up this section by drawing attention to an emerging pattern. There are multiple ways of construing ‘essential’, ‘fundamental’, ‘necessary’, ‘required’, etc. I highlighted four. What developed was this. On some senses, P2 is implausible. In particular, public languages are practically necessary; and, in the usual course of events, they lie at the very heart of the matter. One cannot, therefore, appeal to non-necessity in these senses to establish C. On some senses, however, P2 seems attractive. In particular, there really do seem to be cases of successful conversational interaction without a shared public language; and, at least *pro tem*, I am willing to grant that shared knowledge of a public language is not a transcendental precondition. The thing is, on the senses wherein P2 looks plausible enough, P3 is clearly false. For instance, that *x* is not an *a priori* precondition on the very possibility of *y* patently doesn’t show that *x* is explanatorily otiose. Hence, one cannot appeal to non-necessity in these senses to establish C: non-necessity holds, but is not probative. My prediction is that we will not find any sense of ‘necessary’ such that both P2 and P3 are true.

Speaking of P3, I turn now to the last part of my defense of public languages.

V. On Premise 3: Non-sufficiency

Premise 3 says that if knowledge of a public language is neither necessary nor sufficient for successful conversational interaction, then public languages are explanatorily otiose. I will break my reply into two parts. In this section, I address non-sufficiency, insisting that it is a red herring: once one has the proper take on the role of public languages in conversation, non-sufficiency becomes wholly unsurprising and unproblematic. The next section addresses the alleged implications of non-necessity.

Let us quickly revisit the three models of communication introduced above. On the semiotics model, all communication is a matter of a speaker encoding a message in an external signal and a hearer decoding it. Such a model was a non-starter because of pragmatics: not just blind decoding, but also appeal to evidence is involved in discovering both literal and non-literal speech act content.¹⁸ The second model I introduced was the code-oriented hybrid. It opened a space for pragmatics: the code certainly doesn't fix speaker's meaning; and a limited number of contextual inputs are required to fix even literal meaning. That said, the model was very much code centric, because of how meagre the space for inference is. The specific phenomenon of malaprops, and the general phenomenon of novelty and error, scotched the idea that this second model was adequate. I added that, given the failings of these two, one might in desperation be tempted by a radical code-free variant, the inference model.

Crucially, these three are not the only options. I now introduce a fourth. It was developed originally by Sperber and Wilson, drawing on Chomsky and Fodor, on the one hand, and Grice, on the other. Goes the idea, all linguistic exchanges involve an interaction effect of a module specific to language with numerous other cognitive capacities:

It is true that a language is a code which pairs phonetic and semantic representations of sentences. However, there is a gap between the semantic representations of sentences and the thoughts actually communicated by utterances. This gap is filled not by more coding, but by inference.¹⁹

As a result, knowing a 'linguistic code' is (almost?) never sufficient, even for arriving at the literal content of the speech act. It is not even sufficient give or take a little. To describe the spirit of this fourth model in another way, consider two senses of the word 'creativity'. In the first, it has to do with cleverness and insight; in the second, it has to do with the application of a set of rules that generate novel strings. The heart of the Relevance Theoretic model is that both senses of 'creativity' are at play, even in ordinary literal exchanges. What's more, there is much in human conversational interaction that is not a matter of encoding a precise message for a receiver, who must recover the identical content: metaphor, poetry, literary style and loose talk do not work that way.

¹⁸Sperber and Wilson capture this contrast insightfully and succinctly: 'Inferential and decoding processes are quite different. An *inferential process* starts from a set of premises and results in a set of conclusions which follow logically from, or are at least warranted by, the premises. A *decoding process* starts from a signal and results in the recovery of a message which is associated to the signal by an underlying code. In general, conclusions are not associated to their premises by a code, and signals do not warrant the messages they convey' (*Relevance*, 12–3). Let me add that this distinction stands even if, as per certain computational theories of mind, inference is realized by formal algorithms.

¹⁹Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, 9.

The proper take on the role of public languages in conversation, in sum, is as one autonomous cause among many. Those familiar with Chomsky's competence/performance distinction may be helped by an analogy. Looking at things from the hearer's point of view, the decoding part of language use draws solely on linguistic competence. Finding not just what the speaker meant, but also what she literally stated/asked/commanded, is very much a linguistic performance. As a result, it is entirely unsurprising that competence fails to come close to yielding literal speech act content. To expect otherwise is comparable to expecting the competence to yield acceptability judgements: to tell us the facts about which sentences 'sound good'. The import for **Q** should be clear: on this fourth and final model, it is wholly unsurprising that knowledge of public language doesn't suffice. The lack of sufficiency, which seems to so exercise Davidson, has no probative force. It doesn't begin to show that there is nothing systematic, autonomous and conventional at work in successful conversational interaction. Still less does it raise doubts about the genuine existence of Armenian, Cantonese, Guaraní, Igbo, Italian, Japanese, etc.²⁰

VI. On Premise 3: Non-necessity

It may seem that P3 is present in the argument only for aesthetic reasons, to render the whole deductively valid. This impression evaporates immediately when a question is posed: Don't public languages have explanatory roles beyond the domain of successful conversational interaction? There are twin points here: there may be explananda that do not (at least straightforwardly and immediately) pertain to successful conversational interaction; and the explanans might be public language *tout court*, rather than knowledge of public language. The remainder of this section will survey several examples of such explanatory roles for public languages. For reasons of space, each must be sketched briefly, but a clear pattern emerges. The overarching result, contra P3, is that even supposing (counterfactually) that knowledge of public languages were wholly unnecessary (in every sense) for successful conversational interaction, it would not follow that public languages are explanatorily otiose.

²⁰Why would anyone have taken non-sufficiency to be problematic? It seems obvious, after all, that instead of looking for one monolithic cause of the effect to be explained (here, conversational interaction), one should, as in scientific explanation generally, recognize that effects always have multiple causes. First of all, there is a reason specific to Davidson. In the 1960s and 70s, he characterized a theory of truth for a language as *that which would allow a user to interpret utterances*. This line of thought, ultimately traceable to Davidson's agnosticism about actual cognitive mechanisms, by definition makes a language sufficient. Secondly, there is a reason that would be shared by many other linguists and philosophers of language. If either the first or the second model of linguistic interaction were correct, one could explain, using tools that are familiar from natural language syntax, behavior that looks intractably intelligent ('creative' in my first sense) by means of something formally tractable (something merely 'creative' in the second sense). That is, a certain methodological stance seems to demand something close to sufficiency: a formally tractable code.

Before moving ahead, a word about the forthcoming dialectic is in order. At the outset, I emphasized three features of public languages. They are both systematic and autonomous. Public languages are uniquely compositional and productive; they are composed of a standing lexicon and grammar; and, coming at things cognitively, they are not sub-served by general intelligence, general-purpose reasoning and domain-general memory. To know a language is not to know a collection of sundry facts about the world. In addition, public languages are conventional, the long-standing property of a community. As an individual, I serve myself to the communal language as it exists. What I want to acknowledge is that some of my examples will illustrate only the first pair of features, while some will illustrate only the third. Put otherwise, a limitation of the discussion below is that public languages are not the only thing which exhibit systematicity and autonomy: Chomsky-style internalist idiolects also do so. Nor is it the case that only public languages would explain my observations about certain community-involving linguistic phenomena. Scattered externalist facts about a community's sound-meaning pairings, not stored autonomously, might equally turn that trick. Importantly, however, idiolects cannot account for all of the cases to follow; and previously learned 'worldly knowledge about words' cannot do so either. What's more, the illustrations below can easily be multiplied: the three features show up jointly in explanations of language acquisition and loss; of the cognitive enrichment that learning a language endows; of language evolution; of the contrasts among unilingual, bilingual and multilingual speakers; etc. Hence, the best explanatory posit remains a genuine public language.

The first unheralded explanandum pertains to two varieties of content (or maybe, two bearers of content). To make the point, we will need a fourfold contrast. There are two kinds of content that 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' clearly does allow. Davidson insists that one recognize both what a speaker intends to get across, and the contrasting notion of what, on that occasion, she intends her words to mean. We may label the first 'speaker's meaning' and the second, following Davidson, 'first meaning'. Importantly, I myself would add two others. There is the conventionally fixed standing meaning of the word/phrase/sentence in the language, which I will label 'type meaning'. And there is token meaning, the content of the item produced, in its specific context. To anticipate, I will urge that public languages are required to explain these latter two.

The fourfold contrast may be illustrated by revisiting Reimer's example. It is clear what the child intends to convey, namely that he and his mother should buy the reproduction of *The Scream*. This is the speaker's meaning. We can also agree that what he intends his words to mean is *That is surrealistic*. This is Davidson's first meaning. What about the type? Being myself influenced by Austin and Strawson, I would characterize it as something like: *Used to say of a salient object x relatively distant from the speaker that x is surely realistic*. To know the meaning of this English sentence is, I suggest, to know something along those lines. Happily, the details don't matter here, since it suffices that

there be such a thing as type meaning. As for the token meaning, I agree with Green and Reimer: the token does not mean that the painting is surrealistic, but rather that it is surely realistic. For, this is the result of applying the type meaning to the salient artwork.

If these latter two kinds of meaning are real and important, then public languages have explanatory work to do—because it is precisely the standing meaning *in the shared tongue* which fixes them. My burden, then, is to establish their centrality. I will begin with type meaning, and then move to token meaning.

Someone who is skeptical about public languages will be prone to deny that there is any such thing as the standing meaning of ‘That’s sure realistic’ or of any type. The issue is a large one, and I can only mention a defense of type meaning which I have pressed elsewhere. (See my ‘Philosophy of Linguistics’.) It pertains to twin essential facts about language. First, it is simply not the case that there is a potential infinity of token sentences: no set of concrete physical utterances could be equinumerous with one of its proper subsets. Strict infinity is only exhibited by expression types. Second, for reasons introduced already, and which will re-emerge below, the ‘semantics’ or ‘truth conditions’ of tokens is not exhaustively determined by the meaning of parts and how those parts are syntactically combined. That is, pragmatics plays such a large role in fixing the meaning of tokens that only the meaning of types is genuinely compositional. So, unless one wishes to abandon not just standing meaning but claims of infinity and compositionality, types must be countenanced. A third reason for believing in type meaning is that it plays a role in fixing token meaning—such that the latter may differ from both what the speaker meant by her words, and from what she herself meant. This takes me to a defense of the reality and importance of the (autonomous) meaning of tokens.

There are at least two classes of cases in which, in addition to speaker meaning and Davidson’s first meaning, one needs to recognize token meaning. The first are instances in which there is a speaker who means something by the words, but what her token words mean deviates from her intentions. For instance, if a sad-sack landscaper says, in a verbal contract, ‘I will plant two elms in your backyard’, having beeches in mind while speaking, or just being confused about the difference between the two sorts of trees, he cannot complete the contract by planting two beeches. His partial ignorance of the language, or his slip of the tongue, do not alter what he commits himself to. That is because, whatever he wished the sounds coming from his mouth to mean, what they actually meant was that he would plant two elms.²¹ Recall too John

²¹Those familiar with Anglo-Saxon common law will know that there are, in fact, certain precedents in which a confused state of mind gets a speaker off the hook. But it’s enough for my purposes that frequently, or even just sometimes, what the person intended by his words is not what those words legally commit him to; instead, the legal commitment is often enough fixed by what the words mean in the shared language. (One famous Canadian case even hung on where a comma was placed in a signed contract, and what said placement conventionally meant. See *AMJ Campbell vs. Kord Products Inc.* (2002).).

Searle's American soldier, who intends to convince some Italians that he is a German officer by uttering 'Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühen?' Whatever the soldier's intentions, because of the standing meaning of the sentence in the communal German language, what his token words meant was *Do you know the land where the lemon trees bloom?* Given the salience of the examples, let me also say my piece about Humpty Dumpty and Mrs. Malaprop. Though Humpty Dumpty can speaker-mean *There's a nice knockdown argument* if he can frame the right intentions, he cannot, I insist, make his token utterance of 'There's glory for you' mean this—barring those words eventually acquiring an additional conventional meaning. What the sentence token literally means is just what traditional semantics predicts.²² And, I would add, Mrs. Malaprops' 'That's a nice derangement of epitaphs' did not have, as its token meaning, *That's a nice arrangement of epithets*. True, she meant that; and arguably she even intended that her words mean that; but they simply don't.²³

A natural worry here is that something must fix, metaphysically determine, what item was tokened, and that only the speaker's intentions can do so. If that is right, however, then how could the token words mean something other than what their metaphysical-determiner intended? On the one hand, the producer of a token can intend a symbol on the basis of its form, such that he may fail to (fully) recognize its meaning. In fact, this happens all too regularly. The tough young man selects a Chinese tattoo, thinking that it means something like 'Fierce warrior'; in fact, the characters he has selected mean 'Mad diarrhea'. (Sadly, this is an attested example.) A young Hindu couple recite their wedding vows in Sanskrit; they thereby undertake dozens of commitments. At his bar mitzvah, a thirteen-year-old boy reads aloud, in Ancient Hebrew, a selection from the Torah. In all three cases, there are tokens of specific symbols produced, but which ones they are is fixed by means of intentions about *form*. The sad-sack landscaper is just another case in point: he intentionally uttered the form 'elm', and that can be enough to commit him to planting elms rather than beeches. On the other hand, it is not inevitably the speaker's intentions which do the fixing. Even if language users must play a crucial role in metaphysically settling whether there is a token present, and if so which one, it can

²²In their otherwise exceedingly helpful discussion of 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', Lepore and Ludwig suggest that which thing one calls the literal meaning—Davidson's first meaning, my token meaning, or my type meaning—is a 'verbal quibble' (Lepore and Ludwig, *Meaning, Truth, Language, and Reality*, 267). That may be so with respect to Davidson's own aims, about which I have mostly remained agnostic. It is incorrect, however, when the issue is **Q**. For, once it is granted that literal meaning is an essential explanatory posit, and once it is noticed that it cannot be explicated merely in terms what a given speaker had in mind, then public languages become explanatorily essential for accounting for literal meaning.

²³For a similar take on these examples, see Green, 'Davidson's Derangement: Of the Conceptual Priority of Language', 246 ff. Both Green and Reimer also note that if one applied Davidson's attractive theory of metaphor from 1978 to his malaprops, one would get precisely this result: as in metaphor, what the malaprop means is simply what the words ordinarily mean.

be (potential) consumers who do this, not just their producers. This leads me to the second class of cases.

There are curious examples, outlier cases to be sure, in which one finds tokens without a speaker who intended to create them. A first example is provided by the 'postmodern generator', available online, which creates 'essays' that sound very much like postmodern literary scholarship. Here, at random, is an instance of its output:

In the works of James Joyce, a predominant concept is the distinction between ground and figure. In a sense, textual libertarianism implies that government is dead, but only if Jacques Derrida's essay on pretextual dematerialism is valid; if that is not the case, narrativity is capable of significant form. The masculine/feminine distinction which is a central theme of *Ulysses* emerges again in *Finnegan's Wake*, although in a more self-referential sense.

Or consider finding the words 'Bless Jesus Christ' burnt onto a piece of toast, or eroded onto a rock. In these cases, no speaker deployed either a Passing or a Prior Theory. And we, as readers, have no idea for whom we might need to construct a 'theory of interpretation'. Nonetheless, the tokens are meaningful: the names 'James Joyce' and 'Jacques Derrida' refer to the famous writers, and 'Jesus Christ' refers to the religious figure; 'if', 'only if' and 'is not the case' are logical connectives with their usual content; 'essay' is true of essays; and so on.²⁴ (One might object that the programmers had meaning-intentions. But, first, this is not obviously relevant because there are only general intentions, none about this token; and, second, this clearly does not apply to the marks on the toast/rock.)

A final explanatory role for token meaning is to account for how language consumers respond in these *recherché* cases. Were there no literal token meaning, it would be a mystery why Mark Singer's examples are so entertaining and clever. As Reimer notes, in examples like 'baffle of wits', 'wrecking his brain' and 'clowning achievement', the humour arises precisely because we think of both what the speaker meant by her words *and what the words actually mean in English*. If what these malaprops meant were exhausted by the former, this effect would be lost. Similarly, we find Freudian slips interesting only because we recognize dual meanings: what the person wanted to say, and

²⁴Am I here in sharp disagreement with Reimer, who seemingly maintains that such productions would be mere shapes or noises that 'say' nothing? (She urges the same about Humpty Dumpty's initial use of 'There's glory for you'. See Reimer, 'What Malaprops Mean,' 329ff.) Given how closely my views dovetail with hers, and given how clearly mistaken this seems to me, this would be surprising. I suspect, however, that any 'disagreement' is merely verbal, pertaining to the use of 'say'. In holding that nothing is 'said' in such cases, she may merely intend that nothing is stated/asserted/claimed by, e.g. the pattern of erosion on the rock. With this, I entirely agree. What I reject is that there simply is no meaning-bearing token.

what she, despite herself, actually said. (Compare here a case where a person invents a new symbol out of whole cloth, so that what it means really is fixed by the speaker's intentions. None of these phenomena—surprise, cleverness, amusement, embarrassment—can arise in such a case.) And if one contends that what appears on the toast or the eroded rock are mere squiggles, one misses that there is here a fun coincidence, worthy of tabloid news, etc.

So far I have presented two objections to P3. I suggested that once we adopt the right approach to conversational interaction, namely the Relevance Theoretic model, non-sufficiency does not at all support C. Rather, non-sufficiency is precisely what someone who takes public languages in all seriousness would expect. I have also suggested that even if knowledge of a shared public language were not necessary (in any sense of that term) for successful conversational interaction, that would not entail that public languages are explanatorily otiose. In particular, we need them to explain two kinds of content: the meaning of the type in the language, and the literal meaning of the token in the actual context of utterance. I continue now with several other explanatory roles for public language which equally show that P3 is false.

Perhaps the most famous idea in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' is that speech errors seem to pose a threat to public languages. It is thus ironic that speech errors provide a reason for embracing autonomous and systematic linguistic knowledge. Turning the tables on Davidson, it turns out that there are aspects of speech errors that are not explicable in terms of personal-level speaker's intentions. Specifically, speech errors almost always follow consciously unavailable structural rules of the language. For instance, they typically respect constituency: in phonological errors, the substitutions almost always correspond to onset, nucleus or coda segments within a syllable. (For instance, one readily finds things like *squeeze* and *fresh* yielding *freeze*, with substitution of the onset of the second for the onset of the first, but not 'fresquish' as a blend of the former two words.) The morphosyntactic category of the constituent tends to be respected too: in cases where a slot is filled by the wrong filler, a slot for a noun will be filled by an incorrect noun, not by a verb or a preposition. Thus one frequently encounters errors like 'go to my [calculator] and get my [locker]', but not 'go [locker] my [to]'. In addition to such structural constraints on errors, there are also lexical constraints. Elmar Unnsteinsson, following Levelt, points to the lexical bias effect, viz. that erroneous productions tend nonetheless to be actual lexical items in the language in question, not just some arbitrary noise. Unnsteinsson also notes that the erroneous word typically shares many properties with the target word, including number of syllables and stress pattern. (In fact, there is even more systematicity at work because even the rare exceptions to these generalizations obey deeper ones. For the fascinating details, see Laubstein's 'Two Constraint Types: Slots and Percolation' and 'Word Blends as Sublexical Substitution Errors'.)

Yet another explanandum pertains to young children and those with cognitive deficits. Their linguistic competence is quite impressive, and autonomous

knowledge of language helps explain this: the usual story is that they have quite sophisticated knowledge of the language around them, despite weaknesses in other cognitive domains.²⁵ To come at the issue another way, it is wildly implausible that small children and people with severe cognitive deficits construct and deploy Prior and Passing theories. They do not have the cognitive wherewithal for such high-powered intentions about their interlocutors, nor for such sophisticated theory construction. (This is not to say, by the way, that such language users are bereft of pragmatic abilities. As the discussion of the semiotic model made clear, an agent couldn't converse at all without some quite substantial abilities of that kind. What seems to be the case, rather, is that their pragmatic abilities, though intact to a degree, are impoverished compared to neurotypical adults. What they exemplify, then, is not zero modular interaction but rather reduced modular interaction.)

Here is a final explanatory social-normative role for public languages. The points have been made frequently, so I will be extremely brief. (See, for instance, the previously cited works by Bar-On and Risjord, Dummett and Hacking.) Speakers allow themselves to be corrected. More deeply, when they readily grant that they have made a mistake, they are right to do so. There is such a thing as the (in)correct use of a word. People also jealously guard their languages, promoting them politically, resisting attempts at suppression, etc. While Davidson seems to dismiss such phenomena as philosophically uninteresting (at p. 434 of 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs'), this strikes me as a serious mistake, at least insofar as the issue is Q.

Before ending my discussion of P3, I want to address a pair of potential *tu quoque* objections. It can seem that I am twice over hoist on my own petard. Above, I introduced a fourth model of communication, the Relevance Theoretic model. I needed it, it will be recalled, to establish that non-sufficiency was unproblematic. It may reasonably be objected, however, that this model commits an error I myself identified above. According to Sperber and Wilson, not just decoding, but also inference is always at play. This, however, seems to make all talk of a piece. In particular, it seems to make all of it involve wit, luck and wisdom. Whereas, I say elsewhere, analysing a sonnet and doing philosophical exegesis contrast sharply with the norm. Second objection. I have urged that it is a methodological misstep to focus on the outlier. The point was essential to establishing that, even though there are exceptions, it remains the

²⁵Another example which suggests itself are speakers with William's Syndrome. As the lore would have it, persons so diagnosed have such sweeping general-purpose cognitive impairments that their fluent linguistic production cannot be attributed to high-powered intentions. (See, e.g. Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, 52ff.) In fact, the situation is far more complicated, and many people with this so-called 'Chatterbox Syndrome' are cognitively quite high functioning. Best, then, not to rest the argument on this (alleged) pragmatic impairment. That said, the area of clinical pragmatics offers a veritable treasure trove of cases in which comparatively fluent language use and various higher cognitive functions dissociate. See Cummings, *Clinical Pragmatics* and Perkins, *Pragmatic Impairment*.

case that knowledge of a public language plays a crucial explanatory role. And yet I myself appeal to exceptional cases. In particular, just above, I appealed to the speech of young children and people with severe cognitive deficits, and to pieces of toast with ‘Bless Jesus Christ’ burnt onto them. In both cases, the reply is really a matter of clarifying my position. With regards to the first objection, it rests on a natural misunderstanding of the Relevance Theoretic model. The idea is not that full-blown inference of the kind we find in scientific theorizing always accompanies decoding, though sometimes subconsciously and with great speed. Rather, the model has it that multiple peripheral and central system modules work together during speech and comprehension. The second worry traces to a misunderstanding as well. My methodological complaint was that one not overemphasize the outlier. The usual case matters; and the exceptional case should not be taken as the paradigm. (E.g. however fascinating the manta ray, one shouldn’t take it to be the paradigm fish.) In short, it is consistent to both: (i) embrace the Relevance Theoretic model and (ii) deny that all ‘interpretation’ is of a piece in invoking full-blooded inference. And it is consistent to both: (i) recognize that seamless and straightforward talk exchanges are important, and should not be assimilated to biblical and literary hermeneutics, while (ii) granting the evidential relevance of abnormal linguistic episodes.

To sum up this section, public languages, and our knowledge of them, have a role to play in explaining quite a number of phenomena not immediately connected to everyday conversational interaction. There are surprisingly systematic features of speech errors. There are *recherché* varieties of content: where speaker’s intentions and actual token content bifurcate, and where there simply are no speaker’s intentions. There are atypical usages, whether in young children or those with cognitive deficits. There are practices of self-correction, facts about correct usage and various social phenomena. And more besides. Thus P3 is implausible.

VII. Summary

My focus in the foregoing has been **Q**: *Are there really such things as public languages?* I have addressed an argument for a negative answer, extracted from Davidson’s ‘A Derangement of Epitaphs’. The argument appealed to an empirically attested phenomena—namely, novelty and speech errors in successful conversational interactions—to show that knowledge of public language is neither necessary nor sufficient. Thus public languages have no explanatory role. Continues the idea, one should substitute in place of the convention-centric public language picture an alternative, with Prior and Passing theories. Put in terms of the three models of Section III, one should displace not just the semiotics model, but also the code-oriented hybrid—embracing instead a radical, holistic alternative, the inference model.

My first rebuttal was that there are senses in which knowledge of public language is necessary, and that where there is lack of necessity, this is not probative with respect to **Q**. The second rebuttal was that once a fourth model of conversational interaction is recognized and endorsed, namely the Relevance Theoretic model, non-sufficiency ceases to be an objection as well. Finally, I urged that public languages have explanatory roles to play that have little to do with quotidian conversational interaction.

The ultimate result: the deranged argument against public languages which has been my focus, and which one may extract from Davidson's famous paper, is unsound.

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