CONVENTION AND ASSERTION

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Let me take you to a courtly world of social science fiction where there is a conspicuous lack of what Davidson calls ‘truthful, sober, assertive playmates and parents’. Mind you, this is not just a matter of statistical frequency, my imagined society is not merely populated by a vast majority of jesters and crooks. Rather, we have to think of a community of speakers operating within a wholly different ‘frame’ of reality — there ‘assertions’ are typically made because of the beauty or the weirdness of sound-pattern or vocabulary (‘The king is about to abscond’); and every expression of alliance is ironic, every declaration of love a joke: In this strange land, Frege’s assertion sign would seem to be sorely needed, on those occasions when information is to be passed on, when language is asked to do what may be thought to be its proper work. ‘Forget about the bloody sound pattern’, an inhabitant of this strange country might exclaim, ‘the king is taking off!’ Since there is nothing to prevent the audience from admiring the sound patterns of this utterance, instead of reacting in a way that — on this occasion — seems more appropriate to the speaker, a mutually understood marker of seriousness would come in really handy. But what would it look like? And how could it work?

Many additional questions spring from this fantasy — how, for example, would children be socialized into these rules of communication and interaction? I will return to these questions. The example given is a variation of Davidson’s charming example of the actor who faces the problem of warning his audience of a real fire. In this connection, Davidson rightly claims ‘that the assertion sign would do no good, for the actor would have used it in the first

place, when he was only acting'. But there is no 'similar reasoning' that will convince me that 'it is no help to say that the stage, or the proscenium arch, creates a conventional setting which negates the convention of assertion. For if that were so, the acting convention could be put into symbols also; and of course no actor or director would use it.' One would have thought that, if anything at all is conventional, the symbolic contrivances of the theatre are; and, surely, actors and directors exploit them and toy with them, as Brecht and countless others have done. Consider the following example. What is taken to be a travelling troupe of comedians arrives in a small town and starts to perform what is taken to be an impromptu play. Somehow, the actors manage to incorporate a bank-robbery into their faked performance — they make off with their loot, their spectators remaining behind, with comprehension slowly dawning upon them.

It is undeniable that these bank-robbers would eagerly seize upon the conventions available to create the impression that they are actors; and such conventions, of course, abound, starting with the way the person handles his voice. It is also clear that a different kind of actor, the con-man, would do what Davidson falsely ascribes to the people of the theatre, namely take great care to dissemble the fact that he is 'acting'. 'The Sting', a film of more sociological interest than ten ponderous French works of art, illustrates this to perfection — there, betting offices and police stations are created and peopled by masses of plausible personnel, in order to dupe the victim of a fraud. It is these people who have a concern for 'naturalism' which is quite unlike the concern of the most naturalistically inclined actor or director. The creation of a pseudo-world obviously differs from the performance of a play; the difference can be neatly mapped into that between lying and story-telling and analyzed along Gricean lines.

Davidson's remarks about the theatre rest — surprisingly enough — on a confusion of these quite obvious distinctions and a (perhaps more subtle) equivocation over the notion of 'acting'. It strikes me

3. Ibid.