DAVIDSON ON ASSERTION, CONVENTION AND BELIEF

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Much community of agreement is needed to provide a basis for disagreement in detail. Although I find myself in disagreement with the main conclusion which Davidson reaches regarding the issue of assertion and assertoric force, I agree with many of the premises and intermediate steps of his argument. My failure to appreciate the soundness of his argument as a whole may be due to my putting an inadequate construal on the notions of “belief” and “believing” featuring in Davidson’s picture of meaning and communication. But even if I cannot manage to persuade you that Davidson’s account of radical interpretation stands in need of supplementation by an account of the act of assertion, my talk will have reached its purpose if it succeeds in clarifying some of the (too) many duties the notions of “believing” and “belief” are supposed to fulfil in Davidson’s theory of meaning.

My paper has two parts. In the first part I argue that the order of explanatory priority should be reversed to the advantage of the linguistic act of assertion over the non-linguistic act of “holding a sentence true” or “taking it to express belief”. In the second part I discuss Davidson’s positive characterization of what a speaker who utters a sentence with assertoric force takes himself to be doing, viz. “representing himself as believing what he asserts” (“Communication and Convention”, p. 270). This structure of my talk also has a chronological basis. In the first part I address Davidson’s views as put forward in his earlier papers “Radical Interpretation” (RI, 1973), “Belief and the Basis of Meaning” (BBM, 1974) and “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” (ICS, 1974), where the justification of the priority allotted to the act of believing over that of asserting mainly rests on arguments taken from a general theory of action into which also linguistic activity must somehow fit if it is to be intelligible. In the second part I address a later thesis put
forward in "Moods and Performance" (= M&P, 1979) and "Communication and Convention" (= C&C, 1982). The argument here offered for Davidson’s attribution of priority rests on the thesis of the "autonomy of meaning" (C&C, 274), which as a corollary yields the dispensability of the notion of force conceived as a conventional indicator of the use to which a speaker intends to put his words. In Davidson’s opinion there is no convention of assertoric force that “can link what our words mean — their literal semantic properties, including truth — and our purposes in using them, for example, to speak the truth” (C&C, 271).¹

My view is that utterances of the assertoric type are better understood by adverting to their public role, rather than to the speaker’s beliefs and intentions. It may very well happen that in giving an account of what is characteristic of the act of assertion we will not be able to cite any convention of assertoric force, but this, in itself, speaks just as little against the relevance of the notion of assertion as the impossibility of citing a convention of the use of the word “good” speaks against the need of looking for a systematic account of its contribution to the truth conditions of various types of sentence in which it may occur. Besides, even if assertoric force could be said to be “conventional” only in the narrow sense in which a picture or a poem can be said to be so, it would still be worth spelling out what it is that we are trying to characterize in applying that adjective. Since the lack of any such convention linking public utterances and speaker’s intentions is one of Davidson’s reasons for denying that in trying to understand the notion of truth the linguistic act of assertion provides our main clue, this point deserves scrutiny. In Davidson’s own words: “If the concept of assertion is to provide a conventional bridge between purpose and truth, two things must hold: there must be a convention governing assertion, and there must be a convention linking assertion to what is believed true. I think neither of these claims hold” (C&C, 268).

¹. All page-references are to Donald Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1984.