DAVIDSON ON SHARING A LANGUAGE
AND CORRECT LANGUAGE-USE

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In recent years, Donald Davidson has developed a very original and interesting account of the social character of language, or at least he has made his own position on this topic more explicit. Davidson does not deny that language has a social dimension; rather, he rejects the widely shared thesis that successful communication requires that speaker and hearer share a language. This thesis is shared by philosophers like Wittgenstein, Dummett and Kripke. I will argue (II) that Davidson’s arguments against this thesis are not convincing. Then (III) I will enter a more systematic discussion by trying to show that Davidson’s account raises Wittgensteinian objections. It cannot satisfactorily explain the very important contrast between correct and incorrect language-use. Davidson’s theory cannot indicate convincing criteria for the correct use of a language that only one speaker speaks. All this does not imply that the thesis Davidson attacks is right but only that his attack on the thesis does not succeed. There are at least two reasons why Davidson’s attack is worth discussing in some detail. On the one hand, it is very original and throws a particular light on Davidson’s own theory of meaning. On the other hand, his attack shows us what severe problems a Wittgensteinian or Dummettian position has to solve. Let us begin (I) with what Davidson denies and what he does not deny.

1. Cf. A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs; Moods and Performances; Communication and Convention; The Social Aspect of Language; The Second Person; The Conditions of Thought; Epistemology Externalized; Three Varieties of Knowledge.
I. *What Davidson says*

It is a truism that language is essentially social. Many philosophers try to specify this general idea by saying that successful communication requires speaker and hearer to share something: a language, a set of rules, norms or conventions, a praxis (e.g., of rule-following), customs or institutions, a theory of meaning, or a basic linguistic competence. Davidson, however, maintains that it is neither necessary nor sufficient for successful communication that speaker and hearer share any of those things. He concludes: "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."

This assertion and the corresponding thesis has provoked more harsh critique than approval. As the second part of his conclusion


4. A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs, 446.

5. One of the main critics is Dummett (cf. 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs': Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking, 459ff.); for Davidson's answer to Dummett cf. The Social Aspect of Language; for Dummett's second reply to Davidson cf. Reply to Davidson. For Dummett's insistence on the social character of language and the conceptual primacy of a shared language to the idiolect cf. What is a Theory of Meaning? (I), 28, 29ff., Reply to Davidson, 257, 265. Other critics of Davidson's thesis that communication does not presuppose a shared language are: Hacking, The Parody of Conversation, 447ff.; Apel, Comments on Davidson, 19ff. (commenting on similar theses in Davidson, Communication and Convention); Jutronic-Tihomirovic, Davidson on Convention, 121ff.; Eldridge, Metaphysics and the Interpretation of Persons, 501; Bar-On/Risjord, Is there such a thing as a Language?, 163ff. Bar-On and Risjord agree with Apel that Davidson's thesis constitutes a break with his former philosophy (cf. Bar-On/Risjord, Is there such a Thing as a Language?, 163; Apel, Comments on Davidson, 19). Stüber, *Donald Davidsone's Theorie sprachlichen Verstehens*, 172f. argues, against Davidson, that understanding a speaker presupposes that we see his behavior as rule-governed. Cf. also: Kemmerling, The Philosophical Significance of a Shared Language, 85ff.; Evnine, Donald Davidson, 107f.; Engel, Davidson et la philosophie du langage, 126ff. Palma, *On a Propensity to Interpret*, applies Davidson's theory to a discussion of Freud's interpretation of dreams.