# Hacking Davidson

TIMOTHY OTCHY

I N his renowned article, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," Donald Davidson argues against the logical possibility of conceptual schemes. Believing it a remnant of the incomplete eradication of dogma in the empiricist tradition, Davidson wishes to undermine what he believes is the source of talk of conceptual relativism: the third dogma of scheme-content duality. Building on Quine, he constructs an argument intended to illustrate the peculiar paradox of being a conceptual scheme: it must be simultaneously translatable and untranslatable into a familiar tongue. Claiming that the translation dichotomy is indefensible, he concluded that the very notion of *a* conceptual scheme, much less *multiple* schemes, is unintelligible. In this article, I cursorily review Davidson's argument with particular attention to his discussion of the criteria for languagehood. I turn next to the Quinean project that underlies Davidson's work and note a crucial flaw that I believe is also present in Davidson's work. I conclude with a Hacker-inspired discussion of Davidson's confusion of language and grammar.

*Timothy Otchy received undergraduate degrees in philosophy and mechanical engineering from Georgia State University and the Georgia Institute of Technology, respectively. At the time of publication, he resides in Boston and, in the fall of 2005, will begin his Masters in Philosophy at Tufts University. His current research interests include metaphysics, language, and their intersection with social philosophy.*

## I. Davidson's Argument

Davidson's target of attack is what he sees as the third and final dogma of empiricism: the dualism of scheme and content. As a student of W. V. O. Quine in the 1940s, he had come to embrace the first crucial steps his mentor had taken in correcting meaning and truth by rebutting the first and second "metaphysical articles of faith"[1] (the analytic/synthetic distinction and reductionism, respectively). However, he felt that even Quine's radical empiricism was tainted in that it allows for a relativism due to the underdetermination of theory by empirical evidence.

As the second of a dual-pronged offensive against moderate empiricism, Quine rejected the notion of sentences as the basic unit of meaning. Continuing the work of Pierre Duhem, he suggested that empirical statements must "face the tribunal of sense experience" not one-by-one, but as a complete system. Furthermore, having previously rejected the analytic/synthetic distinction of statements that necessitated the indubitable truth of certain sentences alienated from experience, he made accurately "fitting" or "predicting" the "evidence" of the external world the sole criterion for the truth of any and all statements. Thus, if a particular statement (or set of statements) that is held true is found to conflict with experience, the truth and coherence of the system as a whole may be salvaged by revising the statement, *or others supporting that statement*, in such a manner that they conform to the new evidence. Discussing this belief structure that would develop into the web of belief, Quine famously asserted, "Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system . . . no statement is immune to revision."[2] Insofar as any inconsistency between experience and the statements held true may be remedied by revising either the statement in direct conflict or any other relevant statements, it is at least logically possible that two or more different systems of statements could adequately describe the given evidence. It is this possibility of multiple sufficient theories that

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[1] "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" 45.

[2] Ibid. 51.

Davidson finds unacceptable. Rather than attempt to argue the impossibility of pluralism, he focuses on the idea of scheme-fitting or organizing experience.[3]

Before continuing with Davidson's argument, however, a term used throughout this paper must be clarified: "theory." As a result of dismissing the analytic/synthetic distinction, Quine (and Davidson) must also dismiss the notion of meaning being separable from experience. To rephrase: all meaningful statements have empirical content. Additionally, since all statements about experience may be true or false (as determined by experience), they are all equally candidates for belief. But what are beliefs? Aren't they simply expectations or predictions about the nature of reality? Judgments we make as to how experience "is?" If so, "theory" seems appropriate for such a set of statements. Davidson has a tendency to move seamlessly between language, theory, and scheme, even when there do appear to be significant differences among them. In this essay, I accept Davidson's convention, though his practice is certainly open to serious objection.

Davidson approaches the question of alternative conceptual schemes as an investigation into the criteria for translation from one language to another. The justification for this form of argument is his contention that *having* or *knowing a language* is intimately related to *having a conceptual scheme*: where there are differences in conceptual scheme, so are there differences in language. Failure to recognize the correlation, according to Davidson, forces us to claim that either the mind operates with its own unique organizational scheme or the mind is able to perceive reality without the use of concepts and categories. Thus, we are forced to the conclusion that "the mind is divorced from the traits that constitute it."[4] Seeing this as impossible, he declares that the capacity for speech, belief, and reason are indicative of a capacity to interpret and be open to interpretation by others; having a conceptual scheme is no more than having a language.

But, of course, it is an empirical fact that there are a plethora of languages in use at any one time. Are we to assume that each unique

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[3] Bearn 211.

[4] "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" 185.

language is indicative of a correlative unique conceptual scheme or that they are all calibrated to the same scheme? Davidson asserts that sameness of conceptual scheme[5] is marked by the intertranslatability of one scheme's associated language into the other's associated language. Similarly, differences in schemes would be indicated by the impossibility of translation between the two.

Having established the language-scheme connection and the sameness-by-intertranslation property, Davidson turns to the criteria for languagehood. He begins by considering what he believes to be the origin of conceptual relativism, the dissolution of the analytic/synthetic distinction as devised by Kant:

> But whatever be their origin or their logical form, there is a distinction in judgments, as to their content, according to which they are merely *explicative*, adding nothing to content of knowledge, or *expansive*, increasing the given knowledge. The former may be called *analytical*, the latter *synthetical*, judgments.[6]

Notions of "explicative" and "expansive" are often metaphorically described in terms of a containment of meaning. Thus, the classic example, "all bachelors are unmarried," is analytic because the meaning of the predicate is entirely contained in the subject. Conversely, "Michael Jackson is a bachelor" can only be synthetic because nothing about the subject (divorced from our own empirically-based beliefs about the King of Pop) necessarily contains the meaning of the predicate. Kant envisioned that "a statement is analytic when it is true by virtue of meanings and independently of fact."[7] To repudiate such a distinction is to claim that there are no truly analytic statements that describe necessary or *a priori* truths; rather, all statements derive their meaning and truth value by virtue of their relation to experience.[8]

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[5] Davidson uses "language" and "scheme" in near synonymy throughout his piece.

[6] Kant **§**2a.

[7] "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" 32.

[8] This is not to claim that all sentences are synthetic. It is more accurate to say that the very idea of identifying a statement as being analytic or synthetic is meaningless; there is no method by which to determine analyticity or syntheticity and, more to the point, there is nothing to determine.

As a consequence of this dismissal, some have asserted that we must give up the idea that we can draw a clear distinction between language and theory. As Davidson pleasingly phrases a notion espoused by many philosophers of science, "meaning . . . is contaminated by theory . . . by what is held to be true."[9] What does it mean to have "contaminated meaning"? Insofar as Quine stipulated a system of revisable statements, accountable only to experience and internal coherence, he necessarily allowed for changes to the assigned meanings of individual terms, in addition to changes of individual and sets of statements, to accommodate conflicting evidence. The meaning of terms is not static, but continuously modified and adjusted in an attempt to retain the coherence of the system of statements (or theory) held to be true. Furthermore, because there is great latitude in choosing how to adapt the system to impinging experience (i.e., whether to modify a term's meaning or the truth value of a theory or both, which terms or theory to alter, etc.), it is impossible to discern a separation between meaning and the accepted theory. Thus, meaning is contaminated by the theory held to be true because they are indistinguishable.

This unfinished project of exterminating the dogmas of empiricism, according to Davidson, is the source of all of this nonsense about conceptual schemes. "Meanings gave us a way to talk about categories, the organizing structure of language, and so on; but it is possible, as we have seen [in the work of Feyerabend and Kuhn], to give up meanings and analyticity while retaining the idea of language as embodying a conceptual scheme."[10] This is the error attributed to Feyerabend, Kuhn, and even Quine. As Quine and Davidson had previously stipulated, meaning in "post-dogma" empiricism is solely a function of empirical content (experience, sensation, etc.). Thus, we are left with the untenable third dogma: "We can attempt to distinguish content from scheme, the content of a theory being something given which needs organizing, and the scheme being a language which does the organizing."[11]

[9] "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" 187.
[10] Ibid. 189.
[11] Hacker 293.

In this light, Davidson rephrases the project of conceptual realism:

> The idea then is that something is a language, and associated with a conceptual scheme, whether we can translate it or not, if it stands in a certain relation (predicting, organizing, facing, or fitting) experience (nature, reality, sensory promptings).[12]

We have arrived then at a criterion for language that demands a relation to experience, but it remains unresolved what exactly that relation is. Having surveyed the metaphors provided by the likes of Quine, Duhem, Feyerabend, and Kuhn, Davidson seizes upon two for further scrutiny: organizing and fitting experience. "Organizing" empirical content cannot be correct, for such a concept implies a plurality of objects or essences to "organize" while experience is but one thing. In what sense could one organize a single, non-composite object (i.e., the "stream of experience")? It seems, he concludes, that the "cutting-up" or subdividing of experience into multiple objects for organization is a characteristic of *our* language, but not necessarily a *requirement* for language in all its possible forms. Additionally, if we accept the organization metaphor as a criterion for languagehood, we commit ourselves to a language or scheme that individuates experience in much the same way that our language does. This commonality is exactly what we wish to avoid if we are to find alien schemes. Any language that organizes as our language (or French, German, Zambi, Etruscan, Linear B, etc.) does will be translatable into English and thus cannot provide evidence of a different scheme. We need a more general relation that allows for at least the logical possibility of alternative schemes.

Turning to the Quinean idea of language "fitting" the evidence, Davidson finds a more appropriate metaphor. Whereas "organization" implies the term-by-term assignment and justification of meaning (the Lockean proposal, continued by the targeted moderate empiricists), the "fitting-predicting" metaphor shifts the referent of meaning to whole sentences. Moreover, sensory experience (and nothing more) provides all the possible evidence for the acceptance as true (or rejection as false) of any given sentence or theory. Thus, a sentence or theory

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12 "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" 191.

"fits" if it "successfully faces the tribunal of experience, predicts future experience, or copes with the pattern of our surface irritations, provided it is borne out by the evidence."[13] But, he notes, isn't fitting all possible sensory experience just an overly elaborate way of saying something is true?

Davidson laments, however, that such a conception of "fitting the facts" appears to contribute nothing to the discussion of what it is to be a true conceptual scheme. "Fitting the facts" is not an additional qualification to be tacked on a long list entitled "Criteria for Truth." Rather, it *is* the qualification.

> Nothing, however, no *thing*, makes sentences and theories true. . . . *That* experience takes a certain course, that our skin is warmed or punctured, that the universe is finite, these facts, if we like to talk that way, make sentences and theories true . . . The sentence, "My skin is warm" is true if and only if my skin is warm.[14]

Thus, something is an acceptable conceptual scheme or theory if it is true. Updating the previous standard, the new criterion for something being a foreign conceptual scheme is that it is true, but not translatable.

In the final section of his argument against total untranslatability, Davidson examines the relation between truth and translation. Making an appeal to Tarski's Convention T and T-sentences,[15] he links the truth of a sentence to a requirement that it be borne out in reality as well as be translatable into English or a familiar tongue (if it is not already). The latter claim is a convenient requirement of Davidson's holding that truth is a metalinguistic property of *sentences*, not a judgment of *what is expressed by sentences*. In Tarski's Convention T, Davidson sees justification that "uninterrupted formal systems are not languages *through lack of meaning*."[16] This is a shocking statement: it implies that symbols that we can not translate into an understood language (perhaps ancient Etruscan, which has never been translated into

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13 Ibid. 193.
14 Ibid. 194.
15 "In Defense of Convention T" 67.
16 Ibid. 71, my emphasis.

any modern language) have no meaning, regardless of what the func-
tion of those symbols may have been. Davidson has left us to wonder
why and how the Etruscans were using a "meaningless" language.
From these premises, he reasons that if a "language" or "sentence"
(if they can be called that) has no meaning, it cannot be said to be true
(or false for that matter). Hence, the untranslatable sentence, theory,
or scheme cannot be true.

Davidson has now completed his argument against the very idea
of a conceptual scheme. The notion of an alternative scheme is caught
in the paradox of having to be simultaneously translatable into English
to qualify as a scheme and untranslatable to qualify as a scheme different
from our own. In summary, his argument is:

1. Conceptual schemes are not odd Platonic entities, they
   are languages.

2. Intertranslatability establishes sameness of conceptual
   schemes.

3. Translatability into our language is the criterion for
   somthing's being a language.

4. An "alternative conceptual scheme" would have to be
   simultaneously *both*:

   a. A conceptual scheme, and hence (by 1) a language,
      and hence (by 3) translatable into our own language

   b. An alternative to our conceptual scheme and, hence
      (by 2) not translatable into our own language

5. The idea of an alternative conceptual scheme is a
   self-contradiction.

6. "If we can not intelligibly say that schemes are different, neither can we . . . say that they are one."

7. Therefore, the very idea of a conceptual scheme is unintelligible.[17]

## II. Discussion and Critique

As Bertrand Russell once quipped, it is the hallmark of any serious work of philosophy to begin with premises no one can deny and arrive at conclusions no one can accept. Davidson has no doubt created a serious work of philosophy. Though Davidson's is a complex argument with numerous issues that demand comment, I will focus my discussion and critique primarily on a problem arising from the dissolution of the analytic/synthetic distinction for Davidson's argument and a possible grammatical solution.

Central to Davidson's argument is the continuation of Quine's work to remove the untenable dualisms of empiricism, the first of which is the infamous analytic/synthetic distinction. Maintaining the denial is crucial to Davidson in that it is the foundation by which he (and Quine) can claim that a statement's truth must be evaluated against experience (or evidence or empirical content) and nothing else (i.e., rational intuition or "necessary" truth). To admit of such a distinction would be to erect a wall between the metaphysical and the natural, and thus retreat from the pragmatism that characterizes our study of the natural (science). Furthermore, it would lend great support to the dominant metaphor of conceptual relativism because it would seem to lend greater credence to the possibility of the subjectivity of experience.

In "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," Quine begins his attack on the distinction by challenging the more moderate empiricists to elucidate "analyticity." His own response to this challenge degenerates into what has become known as the circle of terms argument: there exist a certain

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[17] Bearn 210.

family of terms related to "analyticity" (such as "necessity," "definition," and "synonymy" among others) that are definable solely in terms of each other or related concepts. This Quine takes as evidence that these concepts are not clearly definable and thus the related dualism is unjustified. Such a conclusion, however, seems itself unjustified. Numerous very useful concepts are only definable by appeal to synonymy, one of the very concepts Quine rejects. Are we then to assume that Quine is demanding *definiens* using only words and concepts *unrelated* to the *definiedum*? Such a request seems at the least unreasonable, if not absurd. However, this, the first prong of his attack, is hardly his strongest assault on this dualism of truth.

The Quine-Duhem thesis, as the second prong is known, asserts that our statements do not face confirmation (or infirmation) by experience as isolated entities, but rather as a corporeal whole. Drawing from the philosophy of science, Duhem had noted that the empirical testing of any statement or proposition by means of experiment, observation, or testimony depends in large part on another set of background assumptions and claims that serve to establish the relevance of such data to the statement under consideration. The consequence is that if the test statement fails to bear the weight of experience, it could, in principle, always be retained by revising any of the supporting background assumptions.

This claim presents a far greater obstacle to both analyticity and meaning. If *every* sentence is open to rational revision, then even sentences of the *a priori* and analytic type are revisable to bring them into line with experience. This second claim goes much further than his first: even if Quine is incorrect and it is possible to separate analytic from synthetic sentences, the second argument undermines the very significance of such a distinction.[18] For Quine, the analytic/synthetic distinction is based upon the idea that each individual truth involves both a "linguistic" and a "factual" component, and that in the case of

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[18] Analytic statements and *a priori* truths were of interest because they were true "come what may" of experience. Quine, though, appears to have found such statements to be "non-contingent" only by the choice of the believer.

the analytic the "factual" component is null.[19] The Quine-Duhem thesis and the corresponding holism that followed are meant to illustrate the impossibility of separating these components from individual sentences. Consider the following:

(A) War is ongoing in Iraq.

(B) War is war.

While both of these statements are undoubtedly true (at least in 2004), they appear to be true for entirely different reasons. In keeping with Quine's phrasing, sentence (A) is true by virtue of its "fitting the facts." Had the facts been different (i.e., were we not at war), (A) would not have been true. Sentence (B), however, presents us with what seems to be a very different issue of truth. We are tempted to say that (B) is true non-contingent to any set of facts or experience, that it is true by virtue of the eternal meaning of the logical operator "is" (in this particular instance, to express identity). But for Quine, this cannot possibly be the case, because all propositions are to be held accountable to experience. That we hold (B) to be true is not the result of some necessary truth, but is instead true subject to considerations of holistic integrity. If, as Davidson claims, "we can hold, if we want, that *all* sentences have empirical content,"[20] then we may claim that (B), too, has empirical content—perhaps it is hidden behind the period. If so, we would be perfectly in the right to assert that "not (B)" or "war is not war," provided it sufficiently "maintained" the integrity of our holism. Such notions of identity lead one to question whether Quine's holism can survive the weight of its own implications.

This I believe to be confused and the source of a grave error that Quine overlooked and his loyal student Davidson carried throughout the latter's discussion of schemes and content. In this essay, I do not wish to contest the refutation of the analytic/synthetic distinction or reductionism per se. I rather doubt either attack actually has a significant impact on the "idea of a conceptual scheme." Quine failed to take

[19] Glock 206.
[20] "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" 189.

seriously the possibility of the negation of a "necessary truth" (though he never would have referred to them as such) and the implications, namely that it allows *everything expressible in language, regardless of logical possibility*, to be held true if drastic enough concessions are made elsewhere in the system. This was the unavoidable result of shunning any notion of normative statements that would set the limits of meaning variance and the sensible; without such limits, all is allowable. This "inherited" error is evident in Davidson's appeal to language and theory to adjudicate meaning and his assertion that something is an acceptable conceptual scheme if its true—that the corresponding language, construed as the totality of sentences held true, fits all possible evidence. To quote Hacker, "this seems unhappy."[21] Rather than appealing to language, through which can be constituted infinitely many true and false theories that predict how the world *may* or *may not* be according to the evidence, Davidson ought have been appealing to what the limit of sensible expression and meaning are independent of empirical considerations. Had he been able to do so, he would have found that differences in what it *makes sense to say* in a language are far more indicative of differing schemes than the translatability of a T-sentence. While it was the destruction of analyticity that led down this false path, its resurrection will not save Davidson either. What is needed is some idea of the limits of empiricism.[22] To that end, I contend that there does in fact exist a demarcation in statements and language that rests on lines vaguely similar (and yet far from identical) to that of the purported analytic/synthetic distinction. I am referring to the Wittgensteinian division between grammatical and empirical propositions. Davidson (and perhaps Quine) incorrectly included the grammar/empirical distinction in the list of unsupportable dualisms.

Loosely construed, empirical propositions make an assertion or proposition about the world. "The cat is on the mat," is the paradigmatic example. Grammatical propositions, however, express something quite different: a linguistic or grammatical rule, a logical necessity.[23]

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[21] Hacker 297.

[22] Baker and Hacker 37.

[23] Or, at the least, a candidate for a linguistic rule or necessary truth.

But this is no ordinary, schoolhouse grammar. Philosophical grammar contains many types of propositions that are not traditionally considered grammatical: arithmetic equations, geometrical propositions, and analytical propositions.[24] Insofar as empirical propositions and synthetic statements pertain to reality or experience, and grammatical propositions and analytic statements do not, there are vague congruencies (and even these are often overstated). However, they go little further.

One of the key differences here is that a grammatical proposition, unlike an empirical proposition, is not descriptive, but normative. Stating "2 + 2 = 4," "triangles are figures with three sides," or "all bachelors are unmarried" says nothing more about the world than do the rules of chess. It is descriptive of nothing in the world and is impossible to verify empirically. I must confess that I would have no idea *where to begin* to verify that "2 + 2 = 4." The intention of employing a grammatical proposition then is to assert some norm of representation or description of reality. Thus, "a bachelor is unmarried," "nothing that is circular is square," or "you are either coming or going" are normative; *they define what it makes sense to say*. If something is a bachelor it can be correctly characterized as unmarried, and to claim to the contrary is not to be empirically wrong, but to abuse language, to *not make sense*. Grammar defines the logical space of a language and limits what is possible to sensibly say within that language.

Additionally, grammatical rules validate and prohibit transformations and translations between empirical propositions and concepts. Thus, I am able to confidently move from asserting "a yield sign is a figure with three sides" to "a yield sign is a triangle" if and only if I understand the appropriate grammatical rule. These rules of necessity, as Baker and Hacker put it in summarizing Wittgenstein's view, "fix concepts. They are expressions of internal relations between concepts which are themselves used in stating truths about the world."[25] In this respect, grammatical propositions are the ways in which we make comparisons.[26] If we understand the grammatical propositions of

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[24] Glock 202.
[25] Baker and Hacker 269.
[26] Ibid.

identity and transitivity, we can adequately make sense of the empirical propositions "X is p, Y is q, p is not q," and perhaps even translate to the deduced proposition, "X is not Y." It is through the use of grammatical rules that Davidson could assess the predictability of experience by scheme, were he to admit of philosophical grammar's role in defining what makes sense. Pointing to exactly what Davidson was fallaciously attempting to locate in language and theory, Glock commented:

> Grammar in [Wittgenstein's] *functional* sense . . . determines the network of connections between our concepts and thus constitutes our form of representation, or way of seeing things . . . They provide a way of making sense of experience, of making predictions and of dealing with recalcitrant experiences . . . This means that changes to our norms of representation may be far from trivial as concerns their grounds and their results. The result of conceptual change is not mere renaming, but a new way of speaking and theorizing about the world.[27]

Inasmuch as different conceptual schemes denote difference in what is logically possible and of how an individual expresses judgment and belief about the world, it is grammar, not language or theory, which is unique to a conceptual scheme. This point was illustrated by Kuhn in his discussions of Newtonian physics and the move to Einsteinian physics: the possibilities of what was sensible increased after the revolution, though the English language largely remained the same. The change was due not so much to a redefinition of terms, but to an alteration of the grammar governing the use of words like mass, momentum, and length. During that paradigm shift, a new conceptual scheme emerged within the domain of science as the rules of grammar were altered.

### III. Conclusions

In his renowned article, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," Donald Davidson argues against the logical possibility of conceptual schemes. Believing it a remnant of the incomplete eradication

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[27] Glock 215.

of dogma in the empiricist tradition, Davidson wishes to undermine what he believes is the source of talk of conceptual relativism, the third dogma of scheme-content duality. Building on Quine, he constructs an argument intended to illustrate the peculiar paradox of being a conceptual scheme: it must be simultaneously translatable and untranslatable into a familiar tongue. Asserting that the translation dichotomy is indefensible, he concluded that the very notion of *a* conceptual scheme, much less *multiple* schemes, is unintelligible.

In putting the third dogma to sleep, Davidson unapologetically embraced Quine's dismissal of language distinctions; I, as well as others, have taken issue with this embrace. Davidson's failure to allow for grammatical propositions that establish norms of representation and the limits of sensibility have lead him (and Quine) to the indefensible position of having no unrevisable statements or truths upon which to rest meaning. I have further suggested that Davidson is misguided in asserting that the differences in conceptual schemes are correlated to the non-intertranslatability of languages. Taking Wittgenstein's cue, I propose that it is the incompatible grammar of two languages (at least with respect to a single domain) that denotes difference in conceptual scheme.

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