Title: Logical Form and the Davidsonian Explanation of First-Person Authority

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Abstract:

- ## The problem of first-person authority

2 truisms: when I think that I believe something, I usually know that I believe it (i.e. it is true that I believe it, and I am justified in thinking so)

when I utter something, I usually do mean what I think I mean

Assumption 1: we need an explanation of the truisms (the sceptic can provide the need)
Assumption 2: explaining the latter helps explaining the former

Desideratum 1: show that "interpretation" means the same in "self-interpretation" as in "third person interpretation"
Desideratum 2: get interpretation to come out objective, i.e. when I am interpreting myself, saying that I am mostly right entails that others can interpret me the same way

- ## Davidson's Solution

The difference [between my knowing what I mean and your knowing what I mean] follows, of course, from the fact that the assumption that I know what I mean necessarily gives me, but not you, knowledge of what belief I expressed by my utterance. It remains to show why there must be a presumption that speakers, but not their interpreters, are not wrong about what their words mean. The presumption is essential to the nature of interpretation – the process by which we understand the utterances of a speaker. This process cannot be the same for the utterer and for his hearers. (Davidson ([1984] 2001 p. 12))

The reason why the two processes cannot be the same is the following:

The speaker, after bending whatever knowledge and craft he can to the task of saying what his words mean, cannot improve on the following sort of statement: 'My utterance of "Wagner died happy" is true if and only if Wagner died happy'. An interpreter has no reason to assume this will be *his* best way of stating the truth conditions of the speaker's utterance. (Davidson ([1984] 2001 p. 13))

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- ## Davidsonian Interpretation

Here is an example of an interpretive process, drawn from Davidson ([1973] 2001a, p. 136). Assume Jane wants to understand a new language, but has none of the usual clues (dictionaries, words similar to the ones in her own language, even cultural similarities).

1ˢᵗ step: take as much of the logic of her language (first-order quantification plus identity) as possible and try to fit it onto the new language; she basically assumes that the logical structure of the new language does not need to be discovered; it is a given.

2ⁿᵈ step: deal with indexicals; this provides important clues about the meanings of predicates, through sentences such as "This is red".

3ʳᵈ step: deal with the rest of the words, trying to make as many sentences as possible come out true (the "principle of charity").

The result of this process is (roughly) a theory, whose theorems are T-sentences, of the form "s is true-in-L iff p", where "s" is the name of a sentence, and "p" is that sentence or its translation into the metalanguage.

The Role of Logical Form

First point: the 1ˢᵗ step seems unnecessary in self-interpretation. And, arguably, so do the other ones. This places us in agreement with the sceptic: there actually are 2 different processes.

Second point: given that we accept the need for the 1ˢᵗ step, the speaker may turn out to be wrong about what he means. Furthermore, nobody has thus far claimed to be explicitly right about logical form.

Third point: The objectivity of meaning assignments is given by the clues that the speaker is giving the interpreter (for Wittgensteinian reasons). What happens, then, in the case where the interpreter has a better theory of the logical form of the speaker's language than the speaker himself?

Conclusion.

... rejecting the combination of these three elements:

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My arguments could be viewed as rejecting the combination of these three elements:
a) a Davidsonian theory of meaning

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The Role of Logical Form

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Conclusion.

My arguments could be viewed as rejecting the combination of these three elements:
a) a Davidsonian theory of meaning
b) a Davidsonian answer to the problem of first-person authority
c) acceptance of the idea that the objectivity of meaning requires that third- and first-person interpretations usually coincide, and consequently that one may sometimes be wrong about his own beliefs / utterances

Logical Form and the Davidsonian Explanation of First-Person Authority

[Handout]

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