

Davidson's Explication of Meaning

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1. The *s*-means-that-*p* requirement

In *Donald Davidson: Meaning, Truth, Language, and Reality* (Lepore and Ludwig 2005) Ernie Lepore and Kirk Ludwig present a systematic alternative to a view that often goes without saying, but is widely shared by previous interpreters of Davidson—the view that Davidson's attitude toward traditional and commonsense ideas of meaning is similar to W. V. Quine's. Quine regards traditional and commonsense ideas of meaning as obscure and without explanatory force. He proposes that we replace them for scientific purposes by a notion of empirical meaning characterized holistically in terms of a speaker's dispositions to assent to or dissent from sentences under various prompting stimulations. Similarly, according to the view in question, Davidson regards traditional or commonsense ideas of meaning as obscure and proposes that we replace them by a notion of meaning characterized holistically in terms of an empirically testable truth theory for a given speaker's language. For reasons that will become clear below, I shall call this the explicational reading of Davidson's approach to constructing empirically adequate theories of meaning, or the explicational reading of Davidson, for short.

Ernie Lepore and Kirk Ludwig reject the explicational reading of Davidson. They argue that Davidson does not regard ordinary concepts of meaning as obscure or otherwise in need of replacement. In their view, Davidson's goal is "to illuminate the

ordinary concept of meaning,” where this amounts to expressing what they call “the ordinary concept of meaning” as accurately and clearly as possible without thereby altering or replacing it. (For reasons I will explain in detail below, the clause “without thereby altering or replacing it” is not redundant here.) According to Davidson, as Lepore and Ludwig interpret him, we are to “think of ourselves as operating with an independent conception of meaning, and aiming to show that placing constraints on a truth theory can help us achieve our goal of specifying meanings in that sense for all sentences in an infinitary language.” (Lepore and Ludwig 2005, 96)

At the heart of Lepore’s and Ludwig’s reading of Davidson is their characterization of Davidson’s Convention T, which they take to imply what I shall call *the s-means-that-p requirement*:

The s-means-that-p requirement: A truth theory for a context sensitive natural language L can serve as a meaning theory for L only if it entails every instance of

[T] For any speaker S , time t , s for S at t is true in L iff p .

for which the corresponding instance of

[M] For any speaker S , time t , s for S at t means in L that p .

is true. (Lepore and Ludwig 2005, 83-84)

Lepore and Ludwig take the *s-means-that-p requirement* to place a substantive constraint on any truth theory for L that is to serve as a meaning theory for L —we are not to think of an [M]-sentence as trivially implied by a [T]-sentence together with our decision to *replace* “means in L that” by “is true in L iff”, but as an expression of a theory-

independent judgment about meaning to which a truth theory for L that is to serve as a meaning theory for L must be faithful.¹

Lepore and Ludwig acknowledge that there are several passages by Davidson that apparently support the explicational reading and thereby also apparently show that Davidson does not accept the s -means-that- p requirement. They offer an explanation of why Davidson sometimes appears to reject the s -means-that- p requirement, despite what they take to be his commitment to it. They also cite numerous passages by Davidson that they take to support their claim that he is committed to the s -means-that- p requirement.

For formal semanticists and philosophers of language who assume that the goal of a semantic theory for a natural language L is to construct a compositional semantic theory for L which yields [M]-sentences that fit with and explain our ordinary pre-theoretical judgments about what the sentences of L mean, Lepore's and Ludwig's reading of Davidson will seem natural and welcome—an invitation to see an important and influential philosopher as “one of us”. In addition, Lepore and Ludwig present their reading in direct, clear prose, and divide their complex subject matter into numerous short, easily-digested chapters, including a superb one (Chapter 3) in which they explain Davidson's reasons for rejecting compositional semantic theories that ascribe entities as semantic values of linguistic expressions.

Despite these attractions and virtues of Lepore's and Ludwig's book, I am not convinced by their arguments for their central claim that Davidson is committed to the s -means-that- p requirement. I shall argue that their explanation of why Davidson sometimes appears to reject the s -means-that- p requirement, even though, in their view,

¹To save words, I follow the usual conventions of using '[T]-sentence' as short for 'sentence of the form [T]', and '[M]-sentence' as short for 'sentence of the form [M]'.

he is committed to it, is at best only partly successful. To fill in the gaps left by their explanation, Lepore and Ludwig would need to make a very strong case for their claim that Davidson is committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement. In fact, however, as I shall try to show, the passages that Lepore and Ludwig cite in support of their reading actually support a sophisticated version of the sort of explicational reading that they reject.

The structure of the paper is as follows. I start in §2 by highlighting several passages by Davidson that raise doubts about Lepore's and Ludwig's reading. I sketch Lepore's and Ludwig's strategy for explaining these appearances away, and argue that it is at best only partly successful. By the end of §2 it is clear that it would be reasonable to accept Lepore's and Ludwig's reading only if there are passages by Davidson that provide substantial support for it. In §§3-5 I examine passages that Lepore and Ludwig take to support of their reading of Davidson. I argue that when the passages are viewed in a context that includes other passages by Davidson, as well as writings by Rudolf Carnap and W. V. Quine to which Davidson took himself to be responding, the passages that Lepore and Ludwig take to support of their reading actually support a sophisticated version of the explicational reading. In §6 I compare Davidson's proposal that we take a truth theory for a natural language *L* that satisfies certain formal and empirical constraints to serve as meaning theory for *L* with Tarski's Convention T. I cite passages by Davidson that show he was keenly aware that Tarski's Convention T selects some of our ordinary uses of 'true', and ignores the others. I argue that if we view Davidson's proposed formal and empirical constraints on taking a truth theory for *L* to serve as a meaning theory for *L* as methodologically similar to Tarski's Convention T, as Davidson's own use of the word "convention" invites us to do, then we should prefer the explicational reading to Lepore's

and Ludwig's reading of Davidson. I end in §7 by briefly summarizing the explicational reading that I develop in §§2-6 and explaining what options it leaves us for evaluating Davidson's work on meaning.

2. Lepore's and Ludwig's strategy for accommodating passages by Davidson that appear to conflict with their reading

Anyone who has read some of Davidson's papers about meaning will recall passages in which he apparently rejects the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement. Here is one such passage:

A theory of truth entails, for each sentence *s* of the object language, a theorem of the form '*s* is true if and only if *p*'. Since the sentence that replaces '*p*' must be true (in the metalanguage) if and only if *s* is true (in the object language), there is a sense in which the sentence that replaces '*p*' may be called a translation of *s*; and if the metalanguage contains the object language, it may be called a paraphrase. (These claims must be modified in important ways in a theory of truth for natural language.) But it should be emphasized that paraphrasis or translation serves no purpose here except that of giving a systematic account of truth-conditions. There is no further claim to synonymy, nor interest in regimentation or improvement. A theory of truth gives a point to such concepts as meaning, translation, and logical form; it does not depend on them. (Davidson 1980, 143-144; cited in Lepore and Ludwig 2005, 96 n 86, my underlining)

Davidson's acceptance of the underlined sentences in this passage strongly suggests that contrary to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement, a theorem of the form [T] may "give the meaning" of a sentence *s* even if a corresponding claim of the form [M] would appear

doubtful or false when judged relative to the sort of ordinary, theory-independent standards that Lepore and Ludwig take to be expressed by the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement.

Lepore and Ludwig cite the above passage in a footnote, and concede that it apparently conflicts with their reading of Davidson. Commenting on the passage, they write, “we confess that it is just not obvious to us that Davidson had clearly in mind the connection between a truth theory and a meaning theory we have identified.” (Lepore and Ludwig 2005, 96 n 86) They add that “If it is not what Davidson had in mind, *it should have been.*” (Lepore and Ludwig 2005, 96 n 86, emphasis in the original) I take Lepore and Ludwig to be implying here that Davidson was committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement, even if he forgot or was momentarily confused about this commitment when he wrote the passage above.

The passage is not exceptional, however. There are many other passages in which Davidson seems to reject the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement for similar reasons. At one point in his seminal paper “Truth and Meaning,” for instance, Davidson considers the prospects of a compositional theory that states the meanings of sentences by using sentences of the form ‘*s* means that *p*’. The problem with this approach, he notes, is that “in wrestling with the logic of the apparently non-extensional ‘means that’ we will encounter problems as hard as, or perhaps identical with, the problems our theory is out to solve.” (Davidson 1984, 22) His proposed solution to this problem is, as he says, “radical.” (Davidson 1984, 22) In a crucial paragraph of “Truth and Meaning,” he presents the first version of his proposal as follows:

[a] The theory will have done its work if it provides, for every sentence s in the language under study, a matching sentence (to replace ' p ') that, in some way yet to be made clear, 'gives the meaning' of s . One obvious candidate for matching sentence is just s itself, if the object language is contained in the metalanguage... As a final bold step, let us try treating the position occupied by ' p ' extensionally: to implement this, sweep away the obscure 'means that', provide the sentence that replaces ' p ' with a proper sentential connective, and supply the description that replaces ' s ' with its own predicate. The plausible result is

(T) s is T if and only if p .

What we require of a theory of meaning for language L is that without appeal to any (further) semantical notions it place enough restrictions on the predicate 'is T ' to entail all sentences got from schema T when ' s ' is replaced by a structural description of a sentence of L and ' p ' by that sentence. (Davidson 1984, 23)

This passage seems incompatible with Lepore's and Ludwig's claim that Davidson is committed to the s -means-that- p requirement. First, if Davidson were committed to the s -means-that- p requirement, then it seems he would be willing to use [M]-sentences to state his constraint on an adequate theory of meaning. To state his constraint, however, he first proposes that we "sweep away the obscure 'means that'" which occurs in [M]-sentences. Second, if Davidson were committed to the s -means-that- p requirement, then it seems he would be willing to use [M]-sentences to state the meanings of object language sentences. Yet he does not do so. Why not?

Davidson gives a partial answer to this question in his paper "Semantics for Natural Languages," published three years after "Truth and Meaning". He explicitly

considers the proposal that we interpret the words “if and only if” in the [T]-sentences that issue from a truth theory for a natural language L as meaning ‘means that’. “So construed,” he writes, “a sample sentence might then read ‘ “Socrates is wise” means that Socrates is wise’.” (Davidson 1984, 60) He writes that

This way of bringing out the relevance of a theory of truth to questions of meaning is illuminating, but we must beware lest it encourages certain errors. One such error is to think that all we can learn from a theory of truth about the meaning of a particular sentence is contained in the biconditional demanded by Convention T. What we can learn is brought out rather in the proof of such a biconditional, for the proof must demonstrate, step by step, how the truth value of the sentence depends upon the recursively given structure. (Davidson 1984, 61)

This passage is superficially compatible with Lepore’s and Ludwig’s reading, according to which the central goal of a Davidsonian truth theory is to display the recursive structure of a sentence in a way that meets the s-means-that-p requirement. So far, so good, it seems.²

²In comments that expand on the above passage, however, Davidson writes:

There is a sense, then, in which a theory of truth accounts for the role each sentence plays in the language in so far as that role depends on the sentence’s being a potential bearer of truth or falsity; and the account is given in terms of structure. This remark is doubtless far less clear than the facts that inspire it, but my purpose in putting the matter in this way is to justify the claim that a theory of truth shows how ‘the meaning of each sentence depends on the meaning of the words’. Or perhaps it is enough to say that we have given a sense to a suggestive but vague claim; there is no reason not to welcome alternative readings if they are equally clear. (Davidson 1984, 61, my underlining)

It is not clear exactly what claim Davidson is referring to in this last sentence; the two most obvious candidates are (a) what he identifies in the previous sentence as “the claim that a theory of truth shows how ‘the meaning of each sentence depends on the meaning of the words’,” or (b) the claim expressed by the sentence ‘the meaning of each sentence depends on the meaning of the words’. I think (b) makes most sense of the paragraph as a whole. In any case, Davidson’s talk of “giving a sense to a suggestive but vague claim” does not fit well with Lepore’s and Ludwig’s reading of Davidson’s project of exactly capturing some pre-theoretical concept of meaning; it suggests, on the contrary, that Davidson does not aim at synonymy, but at improvement, hence replacement of the vague sentence by the clearer one. His use of the article “a”, in “given a sense”, not the definite article “the”, and his claim that he would welcome

The problem is that if we adopt Lepore's and Ludwig's reading of Davidson, we will make the *second* error that Davidson warns against in "Semantics for Natural Languages":

[b] We might be misled by the remark that the biconditionals required by

Convention T could be read as giving meanings, for what this wrongly suggests is that testing a theory of truth calls for direct insight into what each sentence means.

But in fact all that is needed is the ability to recognize when the required

biconditionals are true. This means that in principle it is no harder to test the

empirical adequacy of a theory of truth than it is for a competent speaker of

English to decide whether sentences like ' "Snow is white" is true if and only if

snow is white' are true. ... A more radical case arises if we want to test a theory

stated in our own language about the language of a foreign speaker. Here again a

theory of truth can be tested, though not as easily or directly as before. The

process will have to be something like that described by Quine in chapter 2 of

Word and Object. (Davidson 1984, 61-62)

Davidson's point here is that even in the case in which the metalanguage contains the object language, we need not test a theory of meaning by asking whether [M]-sentences are true. The constraint we must satisfy is that the biconditionals of the theory are true, not that they state the meanings of sentences. His criteria for constructing and testing theories of truth that are to serve as theories of meaning do not appeal to or presuppose notions of synonymy or translation. This is crucial to his project of explaining how to give empirical content to truth theories for languages that we do not yet know. For if we

alternative readings if they are equally clear also suggest that he does not aim at a uniquely correct account of *the* sense of the original vague claim.

do not yet know what the sentences of a language mean, we are in no position to judge the truth or falsity of [M]-sentences. And in Davidson's view there is no better way to judge the adequacy of a truth theory that is to serve as a meaning theory for a language we do not yet know than to employ the empirical tests and satisfy the constraints that he proposes:

What no one can, in the nature of the case, figure out from the totality of the relevant evidence cannot be part of meaning. (Davidson 1984, 235)

When one reads this passage in light of passage [b], it is natural to conclude that Davidson rejects the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement, according to which our pre-theoretical judgments about the truth values of [M]-sentences place substantive, independent constraints on the acceptability of a truth theory that is to serve as a meaning theory—constraints that are prior to and independent of Davidson's proposed method for figuring out from the totality of the relevant evidence which truth theories can serve as meaning theories.

This reading of passage [b] fits well with the second paragraph of passage [a], which looks like a preliminary statement of Davidson's requirements on a truth theory that is to serve as a theory of meaning for an object language that is contained in the metalanguage of the truth theory. Here, also, as I briefly suggested above, Davidson is apparently not committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement. He apparently requires, instead, that an adequate theory of meaning place restrictions on the predicate 'is *T*' that do not appeal to any semantical notions other than truth, as explicated by the predicate 'is *T*'. But the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement, in particular clause [M], uses the semantical phrase 'means that', and thereby expresses a restriction on the predicate 'is *T*' of the sort

that Davidson's requirement rules out. Hence if, as it seems, the second paragraph of passage [a] is a preliminary statement of Davidson's requirements on a truth theory that is to serve as a theory of meaning for an object language that is contained in the metalanguage of the truth theory, then Davidson is apparently not committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement.

This appearance is strengthened by a passage from "Truth and Meaning" that comes just a few paragraphs after passage [a],

[c] ... the definition works by giving necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of every sentence, and to give truth conditions is a way of giving the meaning of the sentence. To know the semantic concept of truth for a language is to know what it is for a sentence—any sentence—to be true, and this amounts, in one good sense we can give to the phrase, to understanding the language. (Davidson 1984, 24, my underlining)

The explicational reading fits well with the underlined phrase, which suggests that Davidson aims to give a good new sense to the old phrase "understanding the language."

Lepore and Ludwig argue that passages [a]-[c] do not support the explicational reading, or show that Davidson is not committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement.

They emphasize that in passage [c], for instance, Davidson is still assuming that the metalanguage contains the object language, and hence

the expression 'truth conditions' in the passage [c] must be read as something more than what is expressed by a sentence extensionally equivalent to the sentence which is used to give what we may call merely extensionally adequate truth conditions." (Lepore and Ludwig 2005, 95)

From the fact that Davidson is assuming that the metalanguage contains the object language, and hence that there is a formal criterion for translation, or sameness of meaning, of the sentence mentioned on the left hand side of the biconditional and used on the right hand side of it, Lepore and Ludwig infer that passages [a], [b], and [c] are compatible with their claim that Davidson accepts the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement.

Here it is crucial to distinguish between two questions that it is all too easy to conflate. The first question is whether the notion of meaning that Davidson aims to articulate is purely extensional, so that any two extensionally equivalent truth theories for a language *L* would, according to Davidson, serve equally well as meaning theories for *L*. The second question is whether Davidson accepts the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement. One should not assume that if the answer to the first question is “no”, then the answer to the second question must be “yes”. For reasons that will become clear below, I grant that the notion of meaning that Davidson’s theory of meaning aims to articulate is not purely extensional.³ What I find doubtful is Lepore’s and Ludwig’s claim that passages [a]-[c], for instance, are compatible with their claim that Davidson accepts the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement.

My doubts about their reading of passages [a] and [c] are based both on the wording of these passages, but also on other passages in “Truth and Meaning” that should constrain our readings of passages [a] and [c]. In a footnote to the paragraph that contains passage [c], Davidson cites with approval Quine’s view (in “Truth by Convention”) that “in point of *meaning*... a word may be said to be determined to whatever extent the truth or falsity of its contexts is determined.” (Quine 1936, 89, cited in Davidson 1984, 24).

³The same is true of Quine’s holistic empirical theory of meaning, so what I am granting here does not distinguish Davidson’s approach from Quine’s.

This quotation from Quine expresses an extensionalism about meaning of the sort that Lepore and Ludwig say Davidson rejects—a sense of “meaning” that, as Quine emphasizes when in a part of the passage that Davidson omits, is “distinct from connotation” (Quine 1936, 89). That Davidson omits this clause may perhaps be taken to suggest that he aims to capture something like “connotation” in his theory of meaning. Even when it is read in this way, however, the omission would not vindicate Lepore’s and Ludwig’s view that Davidson is committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement, since it would not establish that Davidson aims to be faithful to some ordinary pre-theoretical notion of “connotation”. And there is strong textual evidence that he does not aim to be faithful to such a notion. For example, two paragraphs after he quotes Quine on meaning, Davidson emphasizes that the fact that in his preliminary statement of a truth theory for a part of English, the metalanguage contains the object language

ought not to con us not into thinking a theory any more correct that entails
 “ ‘Snow is white’ is true if and only if snows white’ than one that entails instead:
 (S) ‘Snow is white’ is true if and only if grass is green,
 provided, of course, we are assured of the truth of (S) as we are of that of its more
 celebrated predecessor. (Davidson 1984, 26)

To highlight the point, he writes that

[d] if... (S) followed from a characterization of the predicate ‘is true’ that led to the invariable pairing of truths with truths and falsehoods with falsehoods—then there would not I think be anything central to the idea of meaning that remains to be captured. (Davidson 1984, 26)

These passages are apparently incompatible with Lepore's and Ludwig's suggestion that Davidson is committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement.

Lepore and Ludwig recognize that several of the passages quoted above pose an apparent problem for their claim that Davidson is committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement. They offer an explanation of how the passages could be seen to be compatible with their claim. Their explanation depends on another substantive claim—the claim that Davidson pursues two different projects, an initial project and an extended one. According to Lepore and Ludwig, Davidson's *initial project* is to give an “account of how the meanings of sentences depend upon the meanings of words.” Since the initial project is characterized in terms of the meanings of sentences, to pursue it we must presuppose that [M]-sentences are clear and relatively easy to evaluate independently of any proposed account of how the meanings of sentences depend upon the meanings of words. But it is not part of the initial project to shed any light on the meanings of words. In contrast, according to Lepore and Ludwig, Davidson's *extended project* “involves not only explaining the meanings of complex expressions on the basis of their structure and the meanings of their significant parts, but also illuminating what it is for any words, including semantical primitives, to mean what they do.” (Lepore and Ludwig 2005, 22)

Lepore and Ludwig grant that when Davidson's introduces his approach to meaning in passage [a], it appears that he is not committed to the initial project, at least when it is taken to be compatible with assuming that [M]-sentences are clear and relatively easy to evaluate independently of any proposed account of how the meanings of sentences depend upon the meanings of words. Since they assume that Davidson was at least at some point committed to the initial project, they interpret the appearance just

described as one of *abandoning* the initial project. But, they argue, “any appearance that he abandons the initial project arises because he combines it with [the] more ambitious one”. (Lepore and Ludwig 2005, 22) Their interpretive strategy is to argue that any passage in which Davidson appears to be uncommitted to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement is actually an expression of Davidson’s endorsement of his extended project, which they take to be constrained by and to presuppose the initial project. They argue that in all the problematic contexts noted above—when Davidson proposes that we “sweep away the obscure ‘means that’”, when he requires that an adequate theory of meaning place restrictions on the predicate ‘is *T*’ that do not appeal to any semantical notions other than truth, when he agrees with Quine that “in point of meaning... a word may be said to be determined to whatever extent the truth or falsity of its contexts is determined,” and when he writes that “we might be misled by the remark that the biconditionals required by Convention T could be read as giving meanings, for what this wrongly suggests is that testing a theory of truth calls for direct insight into what each sentence means”—Davidson should be interpreted as expressing his *conjecture* that by satisfying the restrictions and constraints he lays down, we thereby satisfy the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement.

This is an ingenious interpretative strategy. There are two serious problems with it, however. First, the strategy does not by itself provide any textual support for the Lepore’s and Ludwig’s claim that Davidson is committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement, for the simple reason that to attribute either project to Davidson is to *presuppose* that he is committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement. Lepore and Ludwig introduce the distinction between the two projects to try to explain how the problematic

passages such as [a]-[d] may be read as compatible with their claim that Davidson is committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement. The distinction itself does not provide us with any textual evidence that Davidson is committed to that requirement.

Second, even if we waive this textual difficulty and grant for the moment that Davidson is committed to the two projects that Lepore and Ludwig attribute to him, we will not be able to make sense of all of what Davidson says. We will not be able to make sense, for instance, of Davidson's central claim, crucial to a proper understanding of passage [b] above, that "What no one can, in the nature of the case, figure out from the totality of the relevant evidence cannot be part of meaning." (Davidson 1984, 235) For Davidson the relevant evidence for testing a truth theory for a natural language *L* that is to serve as a meaning theory for *L* does *not* include our pre-theoretical judgments of the truth values of [M]-sentences. The problem for Lepore's and Ludwig's reading is that even when Davidson is articulating and defending the most radical and counter-intuitive consequences of his theory of meaning, such as the inscrutability of reference and the indeterminacy of meaning (see, for instance, Davidson 1984, essays 15 and 16), he insists that we have no grip on meaning that is firmer than, or independent of what one can figure out from the totality of the relevant evidence.

The problem could perhaps be averted if we had evidence that Davidson believes that despite our entrenched beliefs to the contrary, in fact, by our own, pre-theoretical standards for evaluating [M]-sentences, reference is inscrutable and interpretation is indeterminate. When Davidson explains and defends his claims that reference is inscrutable and interpretation is indeterminate, however, he does not argue that this view of the semantic features of language is faithful to our pre-theoretical standards for

judging [M]-sentences.⁴ His reasoning is based on his proposed constraints for a satisfactory explication of meaning, not an inquiry into our ordinary evaluations of [M]-sentences. In defense of indeterminacy, for instance, he emphasizes that

The meaning (interpretation) of a sentence is given by assigning the sentence a semantic location in the pattern of sentences that comprise the language. Different theories of truth may assign different truth conditions to the same sentence (this is the semantic analogue of Quine's indeterminacy of translation), while the theories are (nearly enough) in agreement on the roles of the sentences in the language.

(Davidson 1984, 225)

Davidson makes no attempt here (or elsewhere, as far as I know) to show that his theory respects or even aims to be faithful to our pre-theoretical standards for assessing [M]-sentences.

Lepore and Ludwig do not directly acknowledge this problem with their strategy for explaining away such passages as [b]. Instead, they try to discredit the parts of Davidson's theory of meaning that lead to the problem. They concede that according to Davidson, given his account of the evidence available to an interpreter, "if from public clues an interpreter cannot recover a supposed semantic feature of a speaker's words, there cannot be any such feature" (Lepore and Ludwig, p. 383). But they argue that this assumption of Davidson's theory of meaning is unacceptable. One main problem with

⁴One apparent exception to this claim is Davidson's assertion that "since every speaker must, in some dim sense, know this [that reference is inscrutable], he cannot even intend to use his words with a unique reference, for he knows that there is no way for his words to convey this reference to another." (Davidson 1984, 235) It would be a mistake, however, to take this to show that Davidson aims to be faithful to our pretheoretical standards for evaluating sentences of the form [M]. Davidson's claims about what "every speaker must, in some dim sense, know" are consequences of his theory of meaning, and do not provide any independent support for it. In particular, they are consequences of the role in his theory of meaning of a highly artificial, theory-driven account of what a speaker intends to convey by her words. The artificiality of the account is evident from the strange interpretations that Davidson takes it to support. See, for instance, Davidson 1986.

the assumption, they argue, is that it implies that “the content of the object language sentences is less ‘fine-grained’ than that of the metalanguage’s sentences.” (Lepore and Ludwig, p. 382) They conclude that “the procedure of the radical interpreter cannot always recover the semantic distinctions in an object language.” (Lepore and Ludwig, p. 382) For this reason, among others, they reject Davidson’s assumption that if from public clues an interpreter cannot recover a supposed semantic feature of a speaker’s words, there cannot be any such feature.

To reject this assumption, however, is to reject one of the central assumptions of Davidson’s account of meaning. Hence even if Lepore’s and Ludwig’s arguments against the assumption are successful, the arguments do not solve the problem for their reading that I raised two paragraphs above—the arguments do not give us any reason to conclude that Davidson believes we have some grip on meaning that is firmer than, or independent of what one can figure out from the totality of the evidence that he regards as relevant. Hence the arguments do not explain away the appearance that Davidson rejects the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement. In fact, by attributing the assumption that if from public clues an interpreter cannot recover a supposed semantic feature of a speaker’s words, there cannot be any such feature to Davidson, while pointing out that this assumption is incompatible with the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement, Lepore and Ludwig themselves show, in effect, that Davidson is committed to rejecting the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement. It follows that on their reading, in his extended project, Davidson is both committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement and committed to rejecting it. The only way for them to defend this consequence of their reading would be to claim that Davidson’s commitment to rejecting the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement flows from a *conjectural* part of Davidson’s

extended project, and does not undermine what they take to be Davidson's more fundamental, independent commitment to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement. To make this reading plausible, however, they would have to present very good textual evidence that Davidson is independently committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement, and that he simply fails to see that his conjectures about the nature of meaning conflict with this supposedly independent commitment. I shall consider whether there is such evidence in §§3-6.

A related problem with Lepore's and Ludwig's strategy for explaining away Davidson's apparent rejection of the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement is that the strategy does not provide a satisfactory reading of passage [d], in which Davidson claims that if "Snow is white" is true if and only if grass is green followed from a truth theory for English that satisfies his proposed constraints, then "there would not... be anything central to the idea of meaning that remains to be captured." (Davidson 1984, 26) Lepore and Ludwig try to explain this away by pointing out that Davidson "assumed that, once we realized that the theory must get the right results of the truth of sentences with indexicals and demonstratives, we would see that powerful additional constraints are being placed on the theory." (Lepore and Ludwig, 96) Their point, supported by a footnote to "Truth and Meaning" that Davidson added in 1982 (Davidson 1984, 26 n10), is that Davidson did not believe that a theory that meets his constraints would entail that "Snow is white" is true if and only if grass is green.

Let us grant that Davidson did not believe that a theory that meets his constraints would entail that "Snow is white" is true if and only if grass is green. The problem for

Lepore and Ludwig is that this does not solve the fundamental textual problem posed by passage [d], which, to repeat, reads as follows:

[d] if... (S) followed from a characterization of the predicate 'is true' that led to the invariable pairing of truths with truths and falsehoods with falsehoods—then there would not I think be anything a central to the idea of meaning that remains to be captured. (Davidson 1984, 26)

It makes little sense to take this as an indicative, truth-functional conditional that is true by dint of a false antecedent. On the most natural and plausible reading, Davidson is asserting that if, contrary to what he takes to be so, (S) followed from a well-confirmed theory of truth for English that led to the invariable pairing of truths with truths and falsehoods with falsehoods, then there would not be anything central to the idea of meaning that remained to be captured. The point of passage [d], as I read it, is to express Davidson's commitment to his theory, even in cases where it would violate the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement. On the reading the Lepore and Ludwig favor, however, this cannot be the point of passage [d], since, according to their reading, Davidson is committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement, which the biconditional (S) violates. How then are we to understand passage [d]? If we take [d] as a subjunctive conditional, it seems we must see Davidson as confused or mistaken about whether (S) satisfies the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement. According to that requirement,

(S) 'Snow is white' is true if and only if grass is green,

is an acceptable consequence of a truth theory that is to serve as a meaning theory for English only if

[m] 'Snow is white' means that grass is green.

Yet if Davidson were committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement, he would have no difficulty seeing that to accept a theory that entails (S) is to commit oneself to [m]. Moreover, like anyone else, Davidson should not have any difficulty seeing that according to our ordinary standards, pre-theoretical standards, [m] is false. But, on the subjunctive reading we are now considering, it follows from Lepore's and Ludwig's interpretation of Davidson that despite his supposed commitment to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement, he failed to see that by our ordinary, pre-theoretical standards, [m] is false.

The problem, too, could perhaps be averted if we allow that our ordinary, pre-theoretical standards for evaluating [M]-sentences may be confused or false to such a degree that despite our strong belief to the contrary, [m] is true—'snow is white' means that grass is green. But Lepore and Ludwig do not allow this, except perhaps as a mere logical possibility. And, in any case, the only ground that Davidson offers for suggesting we can imagine discovering that 'snow is white' means that grass is green is that it could turn out that *by the standards of his theory of meaning*, the biconditional "'snow is white' is true if and only if grass is green," is well-confirmed. Davidson says nothing that suggests that he thinks this is a reason for concluding that by our ordinary pre-theoretical standards for evaluating statements of the form [M], it may be that 'snow is white' means that grass is green. In fact, what he does say—that if the biconditional "'snow is white' is true if and only if grass is green" were a consequence of a well-confirmed truth theory for English, then "there would not I think be anything a central to the idea of meaning that remains to be captured"—strongly suggests that he aims to replace "the idea of meaning" with a clearer notion that captures what he takes to be central to it.

In short, then, on the subjunctive reading of [d], according to Lepore and Ludwig, Davidson is committed to constructing theories of meaning that are faithful to our ordinary pre-theoretical standards for evaluating [M]-sentences, and, like the rest of us, he grasps those standards well enough to evaluate [M]-sentences, but, for some reason, unlike the rest of us, he does not see that according to these ordinary standards [m] is false. This consequence of Lepore's and Ludwig's reading of Davidson is unattractive. In defense of their reading, one might revisit the suggestion that [d] is an indicative, truth-functional conditional that is true by dint of a false antecedent. But this suggestion is at best legalistic, and plainly implausible. Another possible defense would be to dismiss [d] as confused. If we dismiss [d] as confused, however, we will have to dismiss passage [c] as confused, or read it as saying something quite different from what [d] says.⁵ These options are also unattractive. To support them, and to try to address the related problem with Lepore's and Ludwig's attempt to explain away such passages as [b], we would need strong, unequivocal textual evidence that Davidson is committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement. Is there any such evidence?

3. Passages that Lepore and Ludwig cite in support of their interpretation.

⁵We would also have to see Davidson as confused in the following passage from "Radical Interpretation":
 If truth values were all that mattered, the T-sentences for 'Snow is white' could as well say that it is true if and only if grass is green or $2+2=4$ as say that it is true if and only if snow is white. We may be confident, perhaps, that no satisfactory theory of truth will produce such anomalous T-sentences, but this confidence does not license us to make more of T-sentences. (Davidson 1984, 138)

The puzzle for Lepore's and Ludwig's reading is why Davidson should be so tentative here. Why say "we may be confident, perhaps", if he accepts the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement? Surely Davidson does not wonder whether, by our ordinary pre-theoretical standards, 'Snow is white' means that grass is green or $2+2=4$. On the Lepore's and Ludwig's reading, Davidson should have said, categorically, that no satisfactory theory of truth for English that is to serve as a meaning theory for English will entail the T-sentence "'Snow is white' is true if and only if grass is green or $2+2=4$ ". Why doesn't he say this? The reason, I suggest, is that he is not committed to it, contrary to what Lepore and Ludwig claim.

One passage that Lepore and Ludwig cite in support of their claim that Davidson's approach to the theory of meaning is fundamentally different from Quine's is the following:

[e] The task of a theory of meaning as I conceive it is not to change, improve, or reform a language, but to describe and understand it. (Davidson 1984, 29)

Lepore and Ludwig take Davidson in this passage to be saying that his project is to provide a description of natural languages and the semantic properties of expressions—not to provide a reconstruction of them, or the ordinary categories in terms of which we understand our talk. ... This is... in contrast to Quine, who rejects the ordinary concept of meaning as unclear and inadequately explicated, and offers in its place a concept intended to be of greater scientific respectability. (Lepore and Ludwig 2005, 8)

In fact, however, as I shall now argue, Davidson's use of the word 'describe' in passage [e] does not support Lepore's and Ludwig's reading.

To see why, note first that to say that one aims to describe something is not to say that one aims to use only ordinary concepts in one's description of it. For instance, we may describe a wind by saying it has Force 5, or by saying it is quite strong, but not overpowering. The latter description—'quite strong, but not overpowering'—makes use of ordinary words, whereas the former description does not—'Force 5' is a term of art introduced to regiment descriptions of wind speed. We nevertheless still *describe* the wind when we say it has Force 5. As this example shows, one cannot infer solely from Davidson's use of 'describe' in [e] that he does not intend to use in his description of

language a concept that he takes to have more clarity or respectability than any of our ordinary unregimented notions of meaning.

This simple point about the meaning of ‘describe’ in [e] takes on more significance when one reads it in the context of the following passage from Davidson’s paper, “Semantics for Natural Languages”:

[f] it would be misleading... to conclude that there are two kinds of language, natural and artificial. The contrast is better drawn in terms of guiding interests. We can ask for a description of the structure of a natural language: the answer must be an empirical theory, open to test and subject to error, and doomed to be to some extent incomplete and schematic. Or we can ask about the formal properties and the structures we thus abstract. The difference is like that between applied and pure geometry. (Davidson 1984, 59-60)

The distinction that Davidson draws here between describing the structure of a natural language and asking about the formal properties and structures we thus abstract is like Rudolf Carnap’s distinction between descriptive and pure semantics—a distinction that would have been well-known to readers of “Semantics for Natural Languages” when it was first published in 1970.⁶ In his classic and widely read book *Introduction to Semantics*, Carnap explained the difference between descriptive and pure semantics as follows:

By **descriptive semantics** we mean the description and analysis of the semantical features either of some particular historically given language, e.g. French, or of all historically given languages in general. . . . Thus, descriptive semantics describes

⁶ That Davidson himself studied Carnap’s work in semantics in detail is evident in Davidson 1963, Davidson’s contribution to the Library of Living Philosophers volume on Carnap.

facts; it is an empirical science. On the other hand, we may set up a system of semantical rules, whether in close connection with a historically given language or freely invented; we call this a semantical system. The construction and analysis of semantical systems is called **pure semantics**. The rules of a semantical system *S* constitute . . . nothing else than a definition of certain semantical concepts with respect to *S*, e.g. ‘designation in *S*’ or ‘true in *S*’. Pure semantics consists of definitions of this kind and their consequences; therefore, in contradistinction to descriptive semantics, it is . . . without factual content. (Carnap 1942, 11-12)

As Carnap explains, a given semantical system of pure semantics may be set up “in close connection with a historically given [i.e. natural] language”. In such cases, we can use the system of pure semantics to describe the semantical properties of a natural language—or, in Davidson’s words, to construct an “empirical theory” of “the structure of a natural language”—a theory that is “open to test and subject to error.” (For Carnap’s own sketches of how this is to be done, see Carnap 1939, 1955, and 1963.) To construct such a theory is to do something like what Carnap calls descriptive semantics. Hence I suggest that in passage [e] Davidson uses the word “describe” in something like Carnap’s sense.

If this reading of passage [e] is correct, then Carnap’s views can shed light on Davidson’s claim that the difference between describing the semantical properties of a natural language and examining the consequences of the structures thus abstracted “is like that between applied and pure geometry” (Davidson 1984, 59-60) According to Carnap,

in semantics . . . the relation between the pure and the descriptive field is perfectly analogous to the relation between pure or mathematical geometry, which

is a part of mathematics . . . , and physical geometry, which is a part of physics and hence empirical. (Carnap 1942, 12)

I suggest that when Davidson writes in passage [e] that the difference between describing the semantical properties of a natural language and examining the consequences of the structures thus abstracted “is like that between applied and pure geometry” (Davidson 1984, 59-60) he is echoing Carnap’s view that the relation between descriptive and pure semantics is “perfectly analogous” to the relation between descriptive and pure geometry.⁷

When [e] is seen in this historical context, it provides no support for Lepore’s and Ludwig’s claim that there is a sharp contrast between Davidson’s and Quine’s attitudes towards ordinary notions of meaning. It is well known that Quine’s aim is to describe the empirical content of languages, not to improve on or reconstruct that content. (Quine 1969, 75, 89) Hence Quine’s theory of empirical meaning and translation falls squarely under the Carnapian category of descriptive semantics. To describe the empirical content of languages, Quine proposes that we replace the vague commonsense notion of meaning with one that more clearly articulates a notion of empirical content—roughly, the associations of sentences with other sentences and with impacts at one’s nerve endings by the mechanism of stimulus-response. He describes the semantical properties of a language *L* by explaining the empirical constraints on a proper translation of *L* into our own language. For Quine, the point of the empirical constraints is to preserve all speech dispositions. This would not be all there is to the notion of meaning if we were aiming to capture the commonsense notion of meaning. Nevertheless, relative to our interest in empirical meaning, as Quine characterizes it, we can describe the empirical meanings of

⁷ I explain this analogy in chapter 4 of Ebbs 1997.

sentences of a natural language, in just the sense of “describe” that Davidson, following Carnap, uses in passages [e] and [f].

I conclude that Davidson’s use of the word “describe” in [e] does not support Lepore’s and Ludwig’s reading of Davidson. To describe the semantical properties of a natural language *L*, in the Carnapian sense of “describe” that I explained above, is to ascribe some semantical properties or other to sentences of *L* on the basis of empirical evidence about how speakers of *L* use *L*’s sentences. The semantical concepts that the theorist uses for this semantical description need not be identical with ordinary semantical concepts. Hence if Davidson means by “describe” roughly what Carnap does, then Davidson’s emphasis on description rather than improvement or reconstruction does not support Lepore’s and Ludwig’s claim that Davidson does not aim to replace or clarify our ordinary notions of meaning.

4. Explication and Illumination

Lepore and Ludwig write that “Davidson aims to illuminate our ordinary concept [of meaning]” (Lepore and Ludwig, p. 2). Here and in many other places in their book they assume that the singular term ‘the ordinary concept of meaning’ picks out a unique concept of meaning. (Lepore and Ludwig 2005, 8) But the word ‘meaning’ has many different ordinary uses, and hence the phrase ‘the ordinary concept of meaning’ must be disambiguated or clarified before we can take it to pick out a unique concept.

One might think this is just a matter of choosing from some pre-existing concepts that are ambiguously associated with the word ‘meaning’. Clearly there *are* some words

in English that are ambiguous between two or more ordinary concepts. Consider ‘bank’, for instance. The sentence “John went to a bank today” is ambiguous between, “John went to a river bank today,” and “John went to a money bank today.” If someone utters the sentence “John went to a bank today” and the context of utterance leaves it unclear which of these two ordinary meanings the speaker has in mind, it makes sense to ask her; her answer will ordinarily make her meaning clear. If she says she meant “John went to a river bank today,” one can then go on to ask what a river bank is, and cite ordinary dictionary definitions or give examples of river banks that in some sense illuminate the ordinary concept of a river bank without replacing it by a concept that finds clearer or otherwise more tractable.

Lepore and Ludwig apparently believe that the word ‘meaning’ is in this way similar to the word ‘bank’—that among the ordinary concepts we express with the word ‘meaning’, there is an ordinary concept of which it is true to say, as Davidson does in passage [c] above, that “to give truth conditions is a way of giving the meaning of the sentence,” and that we can in some sense clarify or illuminate without replacing. Even if there is such an ordinary concept of meaning, however, I see no reason to think that Davidson aims to illuminate that concept without replacing it by a concept that has different or sharper boundaries. Philosophers of language use the term “truth conditions” in many different, incompatible ways. Some take the truth conditions of a sentence *s* to be given by a Fregean thought that *s* expresses, others take the truth conditions of *s* to be given by a Russellian proposition, and yet others take the truth conditions of *s* to be given by a set of possible worlds. Davidson himself regards the phrase “truth conditions” as misleading, at best. Strictly speaking, in his theory there are no such things as truth

conditions; instead, he explains what he means by “truth conditions” by emphasizing that if we know a properly confirmed Tarski-style truth theory for the language *L* that contains *s*, and we know all the proofs of the T-sentences that follow from this truth theory, including the T-sentence for *s*, then we know “the place of the sentence in the language as a whole,” “the role of each significant part of the sentence,” and “the logical connections between this sentence as others.” (Davidson 1984, 138-139) It is doubtful that all of these sophisticated notions of truth conditions—the Fregean, Russellian, set-theoretical, and Davidsonian notions—are among the ordinary concepts, if any, expressed by our motley of uses of the word “meaning”. Many (perhaps even all) of the philosophers’ notions of truth conditions are terms of philosophical art. To ask a question about the truth conditions of a sentence of a natural language, where “truth conditions” is understood in one of the philosophically refined ways, is to go beyond selecting from concepts expressed by ordinary uses of “meaning,” and in effect to *replace* some such ordinary concepts of meaning with a different concept or notion characterized by one’s philosophical theory of meaning.

Under what conditions is it reasonable to accept such a replacement? According to Quine, whom Davidson follows on most methodological matters, this is a question about explication. To *explicate* a linguistic expression *e* that one finds useful in some ways yet problematic in others is to decide to use, *in place of e*, a different linguistic expression *e'* that preserves and clarifies what one takes to be useful about *e*, yet avoids what one takes to be the problems with *e*. (Quine 1960, §53; see also Carnap 1956: 8) The procedure for a proper explication of a linguistic expression *e* is (first) to lay down constraints on its explication, usually in the form of a general statement of those uses of

the term that we wish to preserve in our explication of it—and (second) to provide a particular replacement for e that satisfies those constraints. For instance, according to Quine, an explication of the notion of an ordered pair is subject to two constraints. First, the explication should satisfy the postulate

If $\langle x, y \rangle = \langle z, w \rangle$ then $x = z$ and $y = w$.

and second, it should imply that ordered pairs are values of quantified variables (Quine 1960, 258). As Quine explains, this leaves room for alternative explications that satisfy both of these constraints, yet differ on which objects are identified with $\langle x, y \rangle$, for instance. (Quine 1960, 259). The differences are “don’t cares” (Quine 1960, 182, 259). In general, relative to a given explicational goal, what counts as a “don’t care” depends on our list of constraints on the explication. If we find that our list of constraints leaves out some important use of the term, we may later revise the list, and provide a new explication that satisfies a different list of constraints. This may even look like a correction of our previous explication. But it is a correction only in the sense that the new explication captures more of what matters to us in the use of e than the previous explication does.

If we understand explication in this way, then to explicate a linguistic expression e is to decide to use a different linguistic expression e' in place of e . To explicate a particular use of “meaning” in terms of Quine’s theory of empirical meaning, for instance, is to use Quine’s notion of empirical meaning in place of that use of “meaning”. And to explicate a particular use of “meaning” by a philosophically refined account of truth conditions is to use that philosophically refined notion of truth conditions in place of that use of “meaning.” On this understanding of “explication”, if Davidson offers an

explication of some ordinary use of the phrase “meaning”, he is by definition deciding to use in its place a different notion that suits his purposes better.

Davidson writes, “I want to illuminate the concept of translation by assuming a partial understanding of the concept of truth.” (Davidson 1984, 172-173) How does this fit with the claim that he aims to explicate the concept of translation, in the sense of “explicate” just described? Note first that to speak of “illuminating a concept” is to speak metaphorically. Even for those who believe there are concepts, concepts are not items that we can illuminate, in any literal sense of the word “illuminate”. For Davidson, however, who, following Quine, does not believe there are any concepts, it is even more obvious that there cannot be any literal sense in which we can “illuminate a concept”. When Davidson uses the word “concept”, he is speaking loosely of the contribution of a word or phrase to the truth or falsity of sentences in which it occurs, where that contribution is at least partly revealed by the satisfaction clause for the word or phrase in a well-confirmed truth theory for the language that contains it.⁸ (Davidson 2001, 16, 50-51, 71, 85, 123-125)

With these points in mind, I suggest that one good sense that Davidson can give to the phrase “illuminate a concept” is “explicate a word or phrase,” in the Quinean sense of explication that I explained above. This counts as “illuminating the concept” expressed by our uses of the word or phrase insofar as (a) it makes clear which uses of the word or phrase are important to us and (b) it captures, in clear terms to our liking, all the uses of the old phrase that are important to us, and hence we can use it in place of the old word or phrase. I shall return to this crucial point below.

⁸The qualification “at least partly” is important: according to Davidson, the concept of truth cannot be fully revealed by any particular truth theory, since it must be presupposed in the application of the theory.

Lepore and Ludwig say that Davidson seeks an “explication” of what they call “the ordinary concept of meaning,” but that he is not interested in replacing the supposed ordinary concept of meaning by some other concept of meaning. Hence, as Lepore and Ludwig use the word “explication”, an explication is not a replacement of one term for another, as it is for Carnap, Quine, and, as I argued above, Davidson. Instead, according to Lepore’s and Ludwig’s use of the word “explication,” to explicate a concept (if any) expressed by particular uses of a word or phrase is to express that concept as accurately and clearly as possible without thereby altering or replace it.⁹ In this sense of “explicate”, one might explicate the phrase “money bank” by citing examples of money banks, dictionary definitions for “bank,” and perhaps even theories of banking. But this works only for words or phrases for which there are standard senses from which we may choose when we seek to disambiguate a particular utterance. For reasons I explained three paragraphs above, however, Davidson’s sophisticated notion of the truth conditions of a sentence *s*—very roughly, what we know about *s* when we know a properly confirmed Tarski-style truth theory for the language *L* that contains *s*—is not to be found among any of the supposed notions expressed by our ordinary uses of the phrase “meaning” or “means that”. Davidson’s notion of truth conditions cuts across boundaries that our motley of uses of “means” and “means that” draw. Yet Davidson does not qualify his proposal by saying that it gets meaning only partly right, or only partly illuminates it. And to suggest that according to Davidson, our ordinary assumptions

⁹ I get the word “illuminate” from Lepore’s and Ludwig’s characterization of Davidson’s extended project as “involv[ing] not only explaining the meanings of complex expressions on the basis of their structure and the meanings of their significant parts, but also illuminating what it is for any words, including semantical primitives, to mean what they do.” (Lepore and Ludwig 2005, 22) Lepore and Ludwig also say that “The project of radical interpretation aims to shed light on the concept of meaning.” (Lepore and Ludwig 2005, 3)

about meaning are confused, and so our ordinary evaluations of [M]-sentences are doubtful, and should be corrected by a truth theory that serves as a theory of meaning in the way he describes, is to reject the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement, according to which our ordinary evaluations of [M]-sentences place substantive, independent constraints on our construction of a truth theory that is to serve as a meaning theory. Hence to view Davidson's explications as attempts to express ordinary concepts as accurately and clearly as possible without thereby altering or replacing them is to see Davidson as mistaken or confused about the relationship of his proposals to the ordinary concepts that they are supposed to illuminate. To ground an attribution to Davidson of this sort of mistake about his own proposal, however, one would need strong textual evidence that he is committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement—evidence we have not yet not found.

Lepore and Ludwig sometimes seem to assume that Davidson's willingness to use phrases of the form "*s* means that *p*" is evidence that Davidson is not proposing that we replace this phrase by another phrase that we find clearer and more tractable. For instance, Lepore and Ludwig take the following passage by Davidson to support their claim that Davidson is committed to the *s* means that *p* requirement:

[g] Someone who can interpret English knows, for example, that an utterance of the sentence 'Snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white; he knows in addition that this fact is entailed by a translational theory— that it is not an accidental fact about the English sentence, but a fact that interprets the sentence. Once the point of putting things in this way is clear, I see no harm in rephrasing what the interpreter knows in this case in a more familiar vein: he knows that 'Snow is

white' in English *means that* snow is white. (Davidson 1984, 175, my underlining)

In fact, however, this passage does not support the claim that Davidson is committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement. For there is no incompatibility between the explicational reading of Davidson that I have outlined and his willingness to use [M]-sentences, as long as we do not take Davidson to regard his uses of those sentences as providing an independent constraint on his theory of interpretation. And in passage [f] there is ample reason *not* to take Davidson to regard his uses of [M]-sentences as expressions of independent constraints on his theory of interpretation. As the underlined phrase suggests, Davidson is saying that if we accept his explication of “means that”, then *there is no harm in affirming*

(*) Someone who knows that ‘Snow is white’ is true in English if and only if snow is white, and who knows that “this fact is entailed by a translational theory”— i.e. that “it is not an accidental fact about the English sentence, but a fact that interprets the sentence,” in Davidson’s special sense of “interpret”—knows that ‘Snow is white’ in English *means that* snow is white.

As I read Davidson, he is suggesting that there would be harm in affirming (*) if we supposed that the claim that ‘Snow is white’ in English means that snow is white were an independent constraint on the correctness of the theory. For Davidson, as I read him, it is reasonable to affirm (*) only if we keep in mind that we are just using an old phrase— “means that”—as short for our new explication of it.

Here again, in a certain respect, Davidson follows Quine. Quine points out that if a proposed explication *e'* of a problematic term *e* satisfies our constraints on an

explication of *e*, “we are likely to view the latter form of expressions [namely, *e*] as an explicans of the old [word *e*], and, if it is longer, even abbreviate it by the old word [*e*].” (Quine 1960, 261) As Quine then quickly adds, however, “[T]his is merely a way of phrasing matters...” (Quine 1960, 261) This methodological observation is fully general, and hence applies in particular to Davidson’s explication of meaning. Davidson may be willing to affirm the sentence “‘Snow is white’ in English means that snow is white”, but not as a statement of an independent condition on the adequacy of his theory of interpretation. Davidson takes this sentence to be merely a way of phrasing matters, and at most an abbreviation for the full statement of what an interpreter knows, according to Davidson’s holistic explication of meaning.

5. When does a theory of truth yield interpretations?

In support of their reading of Davidson, Lepore and Ludwig also cite a number of passages by Davidson about when a theory of truth yields interpretations. Davidson writes, for instance,

[h] A theory of truth will yield interpretations only if its T-sentences state truth conditions in terms that may be treated as ‘giving the meaning’ of object language sentences. Our problem is to find constraints on a theory strong enough to guarantee that it can be used for interpretation. (Davidson 1984, 150; cited in Lepore and Ludwig, 94 fn 85)

Lepore and Ludwig stress the second of these sentences. They take this sentence to express Davidson’s commitment to the requirement that a theory of meaning for a natural

language *L* yield *interpretations* of *L*'s sentences, where the word "interpretation" expresses an ordinary, pre-theoretical notion of interpretation.

One problem with this reading of Davidson is similar to a problem I raised above for the term "truth conditions": the notion of "interpretation" that Davidson has in mind in passage [h] is arguably not part of ordinary language at all, and has no pre-theoretical meaning. Davidson explains his notion of an interpretation by contrasting it with a translation from one language to another, which tells us, for instance, that 'La neige est blanche' translates 'Der Schnee ist weiss', but does not give the meaning of either sentence. This still leaves it unclear, of course, what it is to "give the meaning" of a sentence. And Davidson's brief explanation of his notion of "interpretation" does not by itself shed any light on this question. In a characteristic passages, he writes: "... we can know which sentences of the subject language translate which sentences of the object language without knowing what any of the sentences of either language mean (in any sense, anyway, that would let someone who understood the theory interpret sentences of the object language)." (Davidson 1984, 129) Even if we assume that interpretation is to be contrasted with translation in this way, it is not clear that we have any grip on the sense of "interpretation" relevant to passage [h] apart from a particular philosophical theory of interpretation. But if we need a philosophical theory to define what the relevant sense of "interpretation" is, then passage [h], which Lepore and Ludwig take to support their reading of Davidson, actually supports the sort of explicational reading of Davidson that they reject.

Lepore and Ludwig cite a number of other passages from Davidson in support of their reading. Here is a characteristic passage, taken from Davidson's paper "Radical Interpretation":

[i] If we knew that a T-sentence satisfied Tarski's Convention T, we would know that it was true, and we could use it to interpret a sentence because we would know that the right branch of the bi-conditional translated the sentence to be interpreted. Our present trouble springs from the fact that in radical interpretation we cannot assume that a T-sentence satisfies the translation criterion. What we have been overlooking, however, is that we have supplied an alternative criterion: this criterion is that the totality of T-sentences should (in the sense described above) optimally fit evidence about sentences held true by native speakers. The present idea is that what Tarski assumed outright for each T-sentence can be indirectly elicited by a holistic constraint. If that constraint is adequate, each T-sentence will in fact yield an acceptable interpretation. (Davidson 1984,139; my emphasis)

Lepore and Ludwig take the last sentence of this passage to support their reading of Davidson. Their idea is that "yielding an acceptable interpretation" is a constraint on a theory of truth that is to serve as a theory of interpretation. That constraint is reflected in Lepore's and Ludwig's claim that Davidson accepts the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement, according to which a [T]-sentence yields an acceptable interpretation only if a corresponding [M]-sentence is true. If Davidson were proposing a replacement of some ordinary notion of interpretation or meaning, Lepore and Ludwig reason, he would not

allow that his holistic constraint may not actually yield acceptable interpretations of object language sentences.

We have already seen several reasons why Davidson's assertion that if his constraints are adequate, each T-sentence will in fact yield an acceptable interpretation should not be understood to place a substantive independent constraint on Davidson's theory of meaning. As I noted above, we do not have an unequivocal ordinary understanding of the word "interpretation". Any precise understanding of it will involve some regimentation. In other words, the notion of interpretation itself requires explication, in the Quinean sense of "explication" that I explained above. In order to produce an explication we must identify the contexts in which we find applications of the word "interpretation" useful. The task of our explication must be to preserve those contexts and clarify them. We may find that we have overlooked an important use of the notion of interpretation, and, in the light of this discovery, change our list of holistic constraints on a truth theory that is to serve as a theory of interpretation. But this is not to say that there is some single notion of interpretation that a given explication can be right or wrong about. Hence there is no conflict between passage [i] and a sophisticated explicational reading of Davidson. Here then is another passage that does not support Lepore and Ludwig's reading of Davidson more than it supports the sophisticated explicational reading that I have sketched.

According to Lepore and Ludwig, there are many passages in which Davidson corrects one of his earlier proposals about how to explicate the notion of meaning, and proposes new, improved constraints on a theory of truth that is to serve as a theory of

meaning. (For their list, see Lepore and Ludwig, 95) In his “Reply to Foster,” for instance, Davidson writes

I am in general agreement with Foster that I have yet to give a completely satisfactory formulation of what it is, on my approach, that it suffices to know in order to be able to interpret a speaker’s utterances. (Davidson 1984, 172)

In particular, Davidson credits Foster with helping him to see that

A [truth] theory that passes [Davidson’s] empirical tests is one that in fact can be projected to unobserved and counterfactual cases.... (Davidson 1984, p. 174)

Davidson presents this reformulation as a response to Foster’s observation that if we allow only purely extensional constraints on constructing a Davidsonian truth-theory for English, then

(a) ‘a is a part of b’ is true in English if and only if a is a part of b and the Earth moves.

and

(b) ‘a is a part of b’ is true in English if and only if a is a part of b.

are theorems of two equally acceptable truth theories for English. (Foster 1976, 13-14)

Foster claims, however, that only (b) gives the meaning of ‘a is a part of b’, so Davidson’s constraints are not adequate to yield interpretations, or to imply true corresponding statements of the form ‘*s* means that *p*’.

Davidson’s response to Foster’s objection shows that he is searching for constraints on a truth theory that is to serve as a meaning theory. Lepore and Ludwig take this to support their reading. They claim that “the search for such constraints presupposes a target that has not been hit” (Lepore and Ludwig, 95) and conclude that the

search both discredits the explicational reading of Davidson and supports their view that Davidson accepts the *s*-means-that-*p* constraint. But the fact that Davidson is searching for adequate constraints on a truth theory that is to serve as a meaning theory does not decide between Lepore's and Ludwig's interpretation, on the one hand, and the sophisticated explicational reading that I have sketched, on the other. If Davidson follows Quine in seeking an adequate replacement for and clarification of some ordinary notions of meaning or interpretation, then he employs the strategy of explication that I sketched above. And this strategy is compatible with revising one's list of constraints on an adequate explication. The revisions need not be understood as guided by some antecedently grasped notion of meaning or interpretation. They may be viewed instead as attempts to identify some new subset of the present motley of applications of "meaning" and "means that" that we now wish to preserve and clarify. Hence Davidson's response to Foster does not show that Davidson accepts the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement.¹⁰

¹⁰Foster's objection is often associated with a related, but different objection, according to which even Davidson's revised requirement that theorems of a meaning theory express laws—the requirement that the theorems "can be projected to unobserved and counterfactual cases" (Davidson 1984, p. 174)—fails to capture our ordinary pre-theoretical judgments about what our sentences mean. The objection may be formulated as follows. If (b) expresses a law, then so does
 (b') 'a is a part of b' is true in English if and only if a is a part of b and $2+2=4$.
 But the corresponding meaning sentence, namely
 [m'] 'a is a part of b' means in English that a is a part of b and $2+2=4$.
 is false by our ordinary pre-theoretical standards. Hence even Davidson's revised requirement that theorems of a meaning theory express laws fails to fit with our ordinary pre-theoretical judgment that [m'] is false. If Davidson were committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement, this objection would be just as compelling as Foster's original objection. Davidson was surely aware of this kind of objection to his theory, since various versions of it were raised and discussed repeatedly by Soames (see Soames 1992) and others when Davidson was alive. Yet as far as I know, Davidson never discusses this objection in print. Why not? One possible answer is that Davidson believes the reply is obvious: given Davidson's constraints on a satisfactory explication of meaning, if (b') is a canonical consequence of a well-confirmed theory of truth for English, then it "gives the meaning" of 'a is a part of b' just as well as the more familiar theorem (b) does. This answer fits well with other radical positions that Davidson takes about meaning, including Davidson's agreement with Quine that reference is inscrutable (Davidson 1984, essays 15 and 16). The answer is speculative, however. There may be other answers to the objection that are compatible with the explicational reading of Davidson, hence compatible with Davidson's rejection of the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement.

6. What is a Convention?

To deepen these doubts about Lepore's and Ludwig's reading of Davidson, it helps to examine what a convention such as Davidson's Convention T is supposed to do for us. Davidson apparently uses the term "convention" in the same way that Tarski does when he lays down his (Tarski's) Convention T. A "convention," in the sense that Tarski used that word, is not a *definition* of a term t , but a statement of necessary and sufficient conditions on a satisfactory definition of t . We can relate this to our understanding of explication as follows. A convention states constraints—necessary and/or sufficient conditions—on an adequate explication e' of a term e that is already in use. Tarski's Convention T, for instance, states necessary and sufficient conditions on an adequate explication, 'true-in- L ', of certain ordinary applications of 'true' to sentences of L .

Tarski does not explain exactly why he uses the word "convention" in the name of his statement of necessary and sufficient conditions for defining truth.¹¹ I suggest, however, that a convention for defining or explicating a given term t , such as "true" or "means that", is so-called because its correctness or incorrectness is not uniquely determined by our current or previous uses of t . Tarski himself rejects the assumption that for each term, such as "true", there is a uniquely correct definition of the term:

¹¹In Tarski 1936, when Tarski first introduces his Convention T, he says it expresses a "postulate" that he laid down earlier in the article. In mathematical contexts, the word "postulate" sometimes has the significance of "convention". Except for his use of "convention" in his famous phrase "Convention T," it is not clear from the context that Tarski meant the word "postulate" in this way. The word "convention" is of course a translation from the Polish and German version of Tarski's paper "The Concept of Truth in formalized Languages". But Tarski himself checked and approved the translation (see Tarski 1983: xiv), and used the word "convention" in Tarski 1944, which was published in English.

I do not have the slightest intention to contribute in any way to those endless, often violent discussions on the subject: “What is the right conception of truth?” I must confess I do not understand what is at stake in such disputes; for the problem itself is so vague that no definite solution is possible. In fact, it seems to me that the sense in which the phrase “the right conception” is used has never been made clear. In most cases one gets the impression that the phrase is used in an almost mystical sense based upon the belief that every word has only one “real” meaning (a kind of Platonic or Aristotelian idea), and that all the competing conceptions really attempt to catch hold of this one meaning; since, however, they contradict each other, only one attempt can be successful, and hence only one conception is the “right” one.

Disputes of this type . . . occur in all domains where—instead of an exact, scientific terminology—common language with its vagueness and ambiguity is used; and they are always meaningless, and therefore in vain. (Tarski 1944, 355)

By adopting a convention for defining or explicating a term *t*, we avoid this kind of controversy about what *t* “really” means. A convention for defining or explicating a term *t* in effect specifies the uses of *t* that we find clear, unproblematic, and worth preserving. A convention in this Tarskian sense is not right or wrong, but more or less useful to us. We might revise a convention simply because our interests have changed, and we wish to preserve some aspect of the use of a term that our previous convention left out. Thus viewed, a convention is needed precisely when one seeks to *replace* a term already in use with another one that is expressed in terms we find clearer or in other ways more to our liking.

I suggest that Davidson understands Tarski's convention T in this way, yet rejects it as an explication of truth. He argues that "since it is obvious that he [Tarski] has not defined the general concept of truth, we can ignore the suggestion that his stipulative definitions capture all there is to that concept." (Davidson 1990, 296) According to Davidson, the underlying problem with Tarski's Convention T is that it presupposes the notion of translation, which is "far more obscure than that of truth." (Davidson 1990, 296) The problem is that "aside from our grasp of translation, convention-T gives us no idea how to tell in general when one of Tarski's truth predicates applies to a particular language." (Davidson 1990, 296) Davidson aims to avoid this problem with Tarski's Convention T, yet make use of its formal structure:

[j] Like Tarski, I want a theory that satisfies Convention T, but where he assumes the notion of translation in order to throw light on that of truth, I want to illuminate the concept of translation by assuming a partial understanding of the concept of truth. (Davidson 1984, 172-173)

[k] Our outlook inverts Tarski's: we want to achieve an understanding of meaning or translation by assuming a prior grasp of the concept of truth. What we require, therefore, is a way of judging the acceptability of T-sentences that is not syntactical, and makes no use of the concepts of translation, meaning, or synonymy, but is such that acceptable T-sentences will in fact yield interpretations. (Davidson 1984, p. 150)

I've argued that Davidson understands Tarski's aim, which is to explicate 'true-in-L' by assuming an understanding of meaning or translation. In passage [k], Davidson says his outlook "inverts" Tarski's. But to invert Tarski's approach is to explicate 'means' or

‘translates’ by assuming a prior grasp of the concept of truth. It is not to take our pre-theoretical judgments about the truth values of [M]-sentences as constraints on a satisfactory theory of meaning, as Lepore and Ludwig assume. Hence, when Davidson says “I want a theory that satisfies Convention T” he is not endorsing Tarski’s uncritical reliance on our evaluations of [M]-sentences. On the contrary, what Davidson seeks is a set of constraints on an empirical truth theory that is analogous to the simple biconditionals that Tarski places as constraints on his explication of ‘true-in-L’. In contrast with these simple biconditionals, our pre-theoretical judgments about the truth values of [M]-sentences are not clear enough to serve as constraints on an explication of the notion of meaning, especially if we suppose, as Davidson does, that we need to explicate the notion of meaning not only for our own language, but also for languages we do not yet know. As Davidson says in passage [k], “What we require, therefore, is a way of judging the acceptability of T-sentences that is not syntactical, and makes no use of the concepts of translation, meaning, or synonymy”. (Recall passage [b], which, as I argued in §2, also expresses Davidson’s commitment to this basic methodological point.) Thus the aim of Davidson’s truth-theoretical account of meaning is to take the notion of truth as a primitive, and—without presupposing the obscure notion of meaning or translation—to lay down constraints on a Tarski-style theory of truth for a particular language *L* that is to serve as a theory of the meanings or interpretations of sentences of *L*. Like Tarski’s constraints on a satisfactory definition of ‘true-in-L’, Davidson’s constraints on a truth theory that is to serve as a meaning theory are to some extent arbitrary. But Davidson hopes that an empirically tested truth theory of the sort he outlines captures all that matters to his readers about the notions expressed by their uses of “interpretation”,

“translation”, or “meaning”, and thereby qualifies for his readers as an explication of these terms, in the Quinean sense of “explication” that I described in §4.

Consider in this light Davidson’s claim in passage [j] that he “want[s] to illuminate the concept of translation by assuming a partial understanding of the concept of truth” and his claim in passage [k] that “we want to achieve an understanding of meaning or translation”. The wording of these claims may seem to favor Lepore’s and Ludwig’s reading of Davidson. It should now be clear, however, that the wording of the claims is natural and unproblematic on the explicational reading of Davidson. For, as I explained in §4, one good sense that Davidson can give to the phrase “to illuminate a notion or concept expressed by a phrase already in use” is “to select those aspects of the phrase’s use that we find particularly useful and propose an explication of it that preserves and clarifies those uses.” Hence, in particular, one good sense Davidson give to the phrases “to achieve an understanding of meaning or translation” is “to select those aspects of our use of the terms ‘meaning’ and ‘translation’ that we find particularly useful and propose an explication of it that preserves and clarifies those uses.” Moreover, if we accept such a convention for explicating the term “interpretation,” for instance, it becomes an objective question—a question of fact—whether or not a given explication of interpretation satisfies the convention, and hence, there is a point to saying, as Davidson does in passage [k], that “acceptable T-sentences will in fact yield interpretations.”

Let us consider this last point in more detail, drawing on a passage from Davidson’s paper “Radical Interpretation.” Davidson asks, “If we know that the theory of truth satisfies the formal and empirical criteria described, can we interpret utterances of the language for which is a theory?” Lepore and Ludwig understand this question in

such a way that it presupposes that we have a substantive independent grasp on whether a given theorem of the truth theory interprets utterances of the language for which it is a theory. But Davidson's answer to the question casts doubt on this reading of it. For Davidson does not try to show that a truth theory that meets his criteria gives the meanings of object-language sentences, relative to some theory-independent standard of "giving the meanings". Instead, he points out that

we can interpret a particular sentence provided we know a correct theory of truth that deals with the language of the sentence. For then we know not only the T-sentence for the sentence to be interpreted, but we also 'know' the T-sentences for all other sentences; and of course, all the proofs. Then we would see the place of the sentence in the language as a whole, we would know the role of each significant part of the sentence, and we would know about the logical connections between the sentence and others. (Davidson 1984, pp. 138-139)

Here Davidson tries to make vivid what we know if we know a correct theory of truth for a language. He invites us to conclude that if we have this sort of knowledge, there is a sense in which we can 'interpret' the sentences of L. But he does not try to show that his sense of 'interpret' is an ordinary one, or that it meets some theory-independent standard for being an interpretation.

At the end of the next paragraph Davidson writes that "If [this] holistic constraint is adequate, each T-sentence will in fact yield an acceptable interpretation." Lepore and Ludwig take this to support their claim that Davidson is committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement. But it should now be clear that there is a better reading of Davidson's conditional ("If [this] holistic constraint is adequate, each T-sentence will in fact yield an

acceptable interpretation”), according to which its point is simply to invite readers to accept Davidson’s constraints. On this reading, Davidson sees his constraints as methodologically similar to Tarski’s Convention T, and hence as conventional in the sense explained above. In short, he *knows* he cannot prove they are correct. He can therefore at most *propose* that we accept them. His goal is not to convince himself and his readers that they capture some antecedently grasped relation of translation or meaning, but just that they preserve what matters to us in our unregimented uses of ‘translates’, ‘means that’, or ‘interprets’.

7. Davidson’s contribution to the philosophy of language

I conclude that Davidson is not committed to the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement. Instead, he aims to *explicate* the problematic terms ‘translates’, ‘means that’ or ‘interprets’—to articulate, in ways that we find clear, those aspects of our uses of these terms that are most important to us.¹² At the root of his method lies an invitation to adopt his proposals, not an implicit assertion that the proposals are correct relative to a theory-neutral standard of the sort that the *s*-means-that-*p* requirement is supposed to provide. We may judge Davidson’s proposals on their own terms, by exploring their consequences and asking if they are consistent with each other, or we may judge them relative to our own evolving estimates of which uses of “translates”, “interprets”, and “means” we wish

¹²This is not to say, however, that Davidson’s application of the method of explication is in all ways exemplary. In one crucial respect Davidson application of the method is not as explicit as I would have liked: he says little about why he thinks his constraints capture what matters to us in our unregimented uses of ‘translates’, ‘means that’ or ‘interprets’. In this respect, Tarski and Quine both do better. But even they offer only a few hints as to why the constraints they adopt are adequate.

to capture, and why we wish to do so.¹³ To evaluate Davidson's work in this second way, we must think carefully about whether we need an explication of these problematic terms at all, and if we do, which of our ordinary uses of the terms an explication of meaning should preserve and, perhaps most important of all, how the explication of those uses of the terms should be related to our understanding of truth. Davidson's great contributions to philosophy of language are to challenge us to face these fundamental methodological questions and to offer us ingenious and fruitful new answers to them.¹⁴

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¹³I have found it fruitful to engage with Davidson's philosophy at this methodological level. See Ebbs 2002 and 2009.

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