Swampman, response-dependence, and meaning

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Toward the end of their chapter “Externalism and the Impossibility of Massive Error,” Lepore and Ludwig (2007a, pp. 335–42) explain—correctly, I think—that the privileged position that Davidson grants the radical interpreter in being able to determine all things semantic suggests that his externalism is synchronic and physical. They clarify: “Synchronic externalism holds that our thought contents depend only on our current environment and our dispositions to respond. . . . Physical externalism holds that our thought contents are determined in part by our relations to our physical, nonsocial environment” (p. 336). They might have added that Davidson’s externalism concerns thought and talk. But their point is clear enough.

Lepore and Ludwig then observe that Davidson’s externalism is in fact physical and diachronic. “He holds . . . that there is a historical element to thought content” (p. 337). They contend that Davidson’s argument for diachronism is his Swampman thought experiment:

Suppose lightning strikes a dead tree in a swamp; I am standing nearby. My body is reduced to its elements, while entirely by coincidence (and out of different molecules) the tree is turned into my physical replica. My replica, Swampman, moves exactly as I did; according to its nature it departs the swamp, encounters and seems to recognize my friends, and appears to return their greetings in English. It moves into my house and seems to write articles on radical interpretation. No one can tell the difference.

But there is a difference. My replica can’t recognize my friends; it can’t recognize anything, since it never cognized anything in the first place. It can’t know my friends’ names (though of course it seems to); it can’t remember my house. It can’t mean what I do by the word “house,” for example, since the sound “house” Swampman makes was not learned in a context that would give it the right meaning—or any meaning at all. Indeed, I don’t see how my replica can be said to mean anything by the sounds it makes, nor to have any thoughts. (Davidson 2002, p. 19, his emphasis)
As Lepore and Ludwig observe, no one would deny that before its creation Swampman could not have cognized anything, so it cannot now recognize anything. Nor would anyone deny that at its creation Swampman cannot remember anything. Nonetheless, Lepore and Ludwig are right that Davidson qua radical-interpretation theorist should reject the claim that without causal history Swampman’s “house” means nothing. “Indeed,” they write:

there seems to be a tension between the intuitions that Davidson has about this thought experiment and his view that the procedures of the radical interpreter are the fundamental standpoint from which to consider questions of thought and meaning. The Swampman certainly has all it takes to be radically interpreted (if any of us does). Why should it matter how long he has been around? (p. 338)

Lepore and Ludwig are right to ask that question. They are wrong to ask it only of Swampman. That is because they are wrong to localize Davidson’s diachronism—let alone his argument for it—to this one thought experiment. Davidson argues for diachronism in two decades’ worth of articles concerning language learning and the role played in it by triangular interactions among teacher, learner, and environment.¹

As the thought experiment is presented, Swampman makes vivid Davidson’s later linkage of meaning to language learning. As it functions in Davidson’s views overall, Swampman illustrates that this later linkage is in tension with Davidson’s earlier linkage of meaning to radical interpretation.

My aim is to describe Davidson’s competing linkages so as best to identify the tension between them and then to improve on Lepore and Ludwig’s handling of that tension. I argue that Lepore and Ludwig fail to see the extent of Davidson’s tension, and so do not handle it adequately, because they fail to appreciate that Davidson’s thought experiment can be understood as pitting two incompatible response-dependent accounts of meaning against one another. I take an account of meaning to be response-dependent just in case it links the meaning of terms in an a priori manner to the responses that a suitable subject under suitable conditions could or did have to those terms. As I understand Davidson, according to his account of radical interpretation, terms in a language mean what they do just in case a radical interpreter could respond to those terms by interpreting them to have that meaning. According to Davidson’s account of language learning, terms in a language mean what they do just in case someone who learned the language did respond to those terms by learning that they have that meaning. The problem with Swampman is that Davidson offers accounts on which Swampman’s terms turn out both to have and to lack meaning.

¹ See Goldberg (2009b) for more on triangulation, and Goldberg (2008) and §6 below for triangulation’s connection to radical interpretation.
I proceed as follows. In §1 I consider traditional varieties of response-dependence; in §2 I show that Davidson’s account of radical interpretation can be understood as one response-dependent account of meaning; and in §3 I show that his account of language learning can be understood as another response-dependent account of meaning. In §4 I recast Lepore and Ludwig’s analysis of the tension in Davidson’s views in these terms; in §5 I consider their handling of the tension; and in §6 I resolve the tension myself.

1 Response-dependence

Notions of response-dependence trace to John Locke’s (1979) account of secondary qualities. Consider the paradigmatic secondary quality of red. As I read Locke, something is red just in case a suitable subject under suitable conditions would respond to it by perceiving it as red. For Locke, a suitable subject under suitable conditions just is a normal human being under normal conditions of observation. The perceptual processes of such a subject pick out just those objects that are red, because to be red just is to be connected in particular ways to those responses. Further, as I read Locke, this claim about something’s being red is not meant to be open to empirical confirmation or disconfirmation. Rather, it is meant to be a priori insofar as it stipulates or defines what it is for something to be red. Because of their essential link to responses, Locke’s secondary qualities are response-dependent. Locke can be understood as providing a response-dependent account of secondary-quality concepts too. For him the concept (his “idea”) RED is linked to the responses that a normal human being under normal conditions of observation would have to red objects. These responses involve the subject’s conceiving of the objects as RED. Nor is this claim about something’s falling under RED meant to be open to empirical confirmation or disconfirmation either. It is instead meant to be a priori insofar as it stipulates or defines what it is for something to fall under RED.

Contemporary philosophers have offered response-dependent accounts inspired by Locke. Mark Johnston (1989, 1993) has provided a response-dependent account of both value and VALUE like Locke’s account of secondary qualities and secondary-quality concepts, respectively. Crispin Wright (1988, 1993, 1999) has also offered a response-dependent account of value, though for him the relevant responses are judgments. Michael Smith (1989) has likewise described a response-dependent account of rightness. John McDowell (2001, essays 6, 7, and 10) and David Wiggins (1998, essays 3 and 5) have treated ethical and esthetic properties, concepts, and terms as response-dependent. Finally, according to Philip Pettit (2005, part I), all concepts and terms referring to ostensible properties, as RED and “red” do, are response-dependent; all other concepts and terms are defined via response-dependent ones.²

² See Goldberg (2009a) for more on Pettit.
Now, response-dependence is more malleable than these theorists have appreciated. In particular, response-dependent accounts need not connect properties, concepts, or terms with the responses of a suitably situated subject. As I understand them, Davidson’s accounts of radical interpretation and language learning connect the meaning of terms with the responses of a suitable subject under suitable conditions, here a radical interpreter under conditions of radical interpretation and language learner under conditions of language learning, respectively. Next I show that Davidson’s account of radical interpretation can be understood as one response-dependent account of meaning. After that I do the same for his account of language learning. Only then can we see the root cause of the tension that Lepore and Ludwig identify.

2 Radical interpretation and response-dependence

As Lepore and Ludwig observe, Davidson (2001c, essay 9) officially introduces radical interpretation in an essay by that name. Nonetheless, “radical interpretation” first appears in his earlier essay (2001c, essay 2) in which he contends that constructing a Tarski-style truth theory for a natural language amounts to constructing a theory of meaning for, and so interpreting, that language. Davidson’s idea is that for an interpreter to interpret a language she must systematically correlate all of its sentences with conditions under which each is true. The systematic correlation, generated by something akin to Alfred Tarski’s (1944) own recursive method, is meant to ensure that individual terms in each sentence make similar semantic contributions regardless of the sentence in which they occur. Davidson can then treat individual terms as having meaning in virtue of their compositional role in sentences.

Davidson soon realized, however, that systematically correlating truth conditions is by itself insufficient to limit the possible number of truth-condition assignments to a language’s sentences to provide plausible interpretations. Thus in “Radical Interpretation” he explains how an idealized interpreter, a radical interpreter, could construct truth theories based on the observable behavior of a speaker of the language given the speaker’s observable environment. To do so, the radical interpreter relies on the principle of charity. Davidson eventually (2002) explains that in the most basic cases—those concerning ostensible objects—a radical interpreter correlates a speaker’s sentences with truth conditions that describe what from the interpreter’s perspective are perceptually salient features of the environment. In non-basic cases the truth theory is meant to match the speaker’s sentences with their truth conditions recursively.

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3 Johnston (1991, pp. 171–3) and Byrne (1998) argue that Davidson’s account of radical interpretation is a response-dependent account of belief, though see note 7. Neither says anything about meaning or language learning.

4 See Davidson (2001c, essay 8) and Lepore and Ludwig (2007b, ch. 12) for sentences that are not statements.

5 See Lepore and Ludwig (2007a, pp. 185–92) for their reading of Davidson’s principle of charity. See Goldberg (2004b) for Davidson’s earlier formulations.
in a way modeled on Tarski’s. Either way the principle of charity adds an externalist element to interpretation. Interpretation now succeeds just in case truth conditions are correlated with a speaker’s sentences by respecting the formal constraints imposed by a Tarski-style truth theory and the empirical constraints imposed by the principle of charity. Hence when I discuss a “radical interpreter under conditions of radical interpretation” I mean an idealized interpreter whose evidence is limited to the sort just described, whose conditions of interpretation allow her to perceive that evidence (her senses are unobstructed, the speaker’s behavior is overt, and so on) and who can construct a charitable, Tarski-style truth theory given that evidence (she has the requisite memory, combinatorial abilities, and so on).

What does this have to do with response-dependence? Suppose that some speaker utters “La neige est blanche,” and that by responding to this and other of the speaker’s sentences given her environment the radical interpreter could construct a charitable, Tarski-style truth theory according to which the radical interpreter interprets “La neige est blanche” to mean that snow is white.6 On Davidson’s view “La neige est blanche” then means that snow is white. For “La neige est blanche” means that snow is white just in case a suitably situated interpreter could, given the speaker’s environment, interpret it to have that meaning. And by determining what a sentence means, the radical interpreter ultimately determines what its component terms mean.

What evidence is there that Davidson holds this response-dependent view? On the one hand, Davidson maintains, if a radical interpreter could interpret a speaker to mean something, then that is what the speaker does mean. He explains: “What a fully informed interpreter could learn about what a speaker means is all there is to learn” (2002, p. 148, my emphasis).7 A fully informed, or ideal, interpreter would be a radical interpreter—the only sort of interpreter about whom Davidson writes. Elsewhere he elaborates: “[T]here can be no more to meaning than an adequately equipped person can learn and observe; the interpreter’s point of view is therefore the revealing one to bring to the subject” (2005a, p. 62). Again, if a radical interpreter could interpret a speaker to mean something, then that is what the speaker does mean. On the other hand, Davidson urges, “[a]s a matter of principle, then, meaning, and by its connection with meaning, belief also, are open to public determination” (2002, pp. 147–8) and “[m]eaning is entirely determined by observable behavior” (2005b, p. 56, my emphasis). Meaning therefore has to be open to public determination by the radical interpreter, who interprets based on publicly observable behavior, and determinable by the radical interpreter, for whom

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6 Claiming that a radical interpreter could construct a theory according to which she interprets “La neige est blanche” to mean that snow is white accommodates Davidson’s indeterminacy-of-interpretation thesis. See note 8.

7 Byrne (1998, p. 203) takes the continuation of this quotation—“the same goes for what the speaker believes”—to show that Davidson holds a response-dependent account of belief. The quotation, however, establishes only one direction of the biconditional.
observable behavior given observable circumstances is sufficient input for interpretation. Hence only if a radical interpreter could determine that a speaker means something by her terms does the speaker mean it. Davidson can therefore be understood as maintaining this:

\[ \text{(RI) For any term in } L, \text{ the term means what it does just in case a radical interpreter under conditions of radical interpretation could interpret it in } L \text{ to have that meaning.}^8 \]

Finally, (RI), as schematizing a response-dependent account of meaning, is not meant to be open to empirical confirmation or disconfirmation. It is instead meant to be a priori in the sense of stipulating or defining how radical interpretation and meaning relate. This is the most natural way of understanding Davidson. As we heard, Davidson takes the connection between meaning and radical interpretation “[a]s a matter of principle” rather than, presumably, one of fact. Nor does he ever constrain the radical-interpretive thought experiment by empirical findings or present it as vulnerable to empirical results. Rather, Davidson (1994, p. 121; 2004, p. 128) claims that radical interpretation has less to do with exhibiting actual interpretation than with describing conceptual connections among meaning, belief, desire, truth, interpreter, and speaker. For these and other reasons Lepore and Ludwig themselves take Davidson to be making a priori claims about meaning and related phenomena generally.\(^9\) I agree.

3 Language learning and response-dependence

Davidson’s account of language learning can also be understood as connecting meaning with the responses of a suitable subject under suitable conditions, though the connection—and subject—differ. Because Davidson’s account of language learning relies on triangulation,\(^10\) we begin there. Davidson describes triangulation as involving two or more creatures with shared similarity spaces responding in a coordinated manner to the same objects of the world. Creatures with shared similarity spaces are disposed to group objects in roughly the same way based on qualitative similarities of those objects. Two gorillas, generally grouping snakes into a single salient class, respond to the snake in their presence by calling to one another. According to Davidson, the object of their

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8 (RI) does not maintain that the term means what it does because a radical interpreter under conditions of radical interpretation could interpret it to have that meaning. I agree with Johnston (1993, appendix 3) and Byrne (1998, p. 204) that response-dependent accounts need only include the logical biconditional, though see Wright (1999, appendix to ch. 3). Further the “could” in (RI) accommodates Davidson’s indeterminacy-of-interpretation thesis: a radical interpreter could in principle interpret a term to mean \(x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_n\), given compensatory differences elsewhere, and any of these interpretations would be correct.


responses is the snake, rather than the snake’s effects on their senses, because the snake is the common cause of those responses. Likewise my mother and I, generally agreeing on what counts as a tie, respond to the tie on the rack by talking to one another about how I should buy it for my brother. According to Davidson, the (public) tie, rather than our (private) experiences of it, is the object of our responses, for the tie is their common cause. For Davidson, in each case the object of each triangulator’s response stands at the intersection of causal lines connecting co-triangulators to the world.

Though Lepore and Ludwig (2007a, pp. 404–12) discuss triangulation, they limit themselves to Davidson’s use of it when arguing that thought requires language. Conspicuously absent from their discussion is Davidson’s further point that triangulation is essential to language learning. Regardless Davidson has us imagine basic cases of language learning like this.\(^{11}\) When a teacher thinks that a learner is looking at a table, the teacher utters “table” and ostends to the table. The learner watches the table and her teacher both, correlating utterances of “table” with her teacher’s ostensions. The triangle is now complete. Davidson explains:

> The teacher is responding to two things: the external situation and the responses of the learner. The learner is responding to two things: the external situation and the responses of the teacher. All these relations are causal. Thus the essential triangle is formed which makes communication about shared objects and events possible. But it is also this triangle that determines the contents of the learner’s terms and thoughts when these become complex enough to deserve the term. (2002, p. 203, my emphasis)

Already we see some of the connection that Davidson draws between language learning and meaning. Davidson reveals more when he maintains that his account is not just a story about how we learn to use words: it must also be an essential part of an account of what words refer to, and what they mean. . . . [I]n the simplest and most basic cases, words and sentences derive their meaning from the objects and circumstances in whose presence they were learned. (2002, pp. 43–4, my emphasis)

This suggests that Davidson’s account of language learning can itself be understood as a response-dependent account of meaning. Employing triangulation to learn how to use words “must be an essential part of an account of what words . . . mean.”

Before we formalize the connection that Davidson draws between language learning and meaning, however, we should note two features of his account of language learning. First, because the triangle determines content or meaning, Davidson again recognizes that meaning has an external element. In fact, he explicitly accepts lessons of Putnam’s (1998) physical externalism, according to which the meaning of one’s terms is connected to the physical environment in which those terms were learned. Nonetheless, he explicitly rejects lessons of Putnam’s (1998) and Burge’s (1979) social externalism, according to which the meaning of one’s terms is automatically inherited

\(^{11}\) Davidson (2002, essay 2) first uses triangulation in this context. See also Davidson (2001a; 2002, essays 3, 14).
from experts in one’s linguistic community according to some division of linguistic labor. For Davidson the learner’s own “table” means table just in case she herself learned that it means table. Learners learn the meaning of their own terms, though co-triangulators help. For Davidson, though there is massive overlap between the contents of different individual’s terms, every language user speaks a language that is strictu dictu unique.12

Second, Davidson does not maintain that every term in one’s language is learned directly via triangulation. His descriptions of language learning concern only the “simplest and most basic cases” (Davidson 2002, p. 44). Not every term would then have meaning directly via triangulation either. Nonetheless, Davidson explains that “for someone to think or say that the cat is on the mat”—or anything else—“there must be a causal history of that person that traces back, directly or indirectly, to the triangular experiences” (2001a, p. 293, my emphasis). The causal history would be direct insofar as the learner learned any of her terms via triangulation. That is how our above-imagined language learner learned “table.” The causal history would be indirect insofar as the learner learned any of her terms by appealing to terms that she learned via triangulation—and so in the above case by appealing to terms like “table.” Nonetheless, for Davidson, because a speaker’s language is her own, a term can enter that language only if the speaker herself learned it.

Thus, when I discuss a “language learner under conditions of language learning” I mean a language learner who has adequate perceptual and other cognitive abilities, has shared similarity spaces with her teacher, and can learn what a term means either by being in a triangular situation with her teacher or by appealing to terms learned in such a situation. Now, for Davidson, if a speaker learned that her terms have a certain meaning, then they have that meaning in her language. Think of our language learner and “table.” Likewise for Davidson, only if a speaker learned that her terms have a certain meaning do they have that meaning in her language. The conditional in this direction is implicit in Davidson’s talk about how learning is an “essential part of an account of what words . . . mean” (2002, p. 43, my emphasis). Furthermore, Davidson presupposes this direction with Swampman. According to Davidson, Swampman never learned what any of its terms mean, from which he concludes that Swampman’s terms mean nothing. It follows that Swampman’s terms could have meaning only if Swampman had learned what they mean. Hence Davidson can be understood as being committed to this:

(LL) For any term in L, the term means what it does just in case a language learner of L under conditions of language learning learned that the term has that meaning.13

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13 (LL) does not maintain that the term means what it does because a language learner under conditions of language learning learned that the term has that meaning. Nor need (LL) do so to schematize a response-dependent account; see note 8. (LL) is also consistent with the indeterminacy of interpretation. For Davidson, the radical interpreter could in principle interpret a term that the language learner learned to
Finally, like (RI), (LL) is not meant to be open to empirical confirmation or disconfirmation. It is instead meant to be a priori in the sense of stipulating or defining how language learning and meaning relate. Thus (LL) is understood to capture an “essential part” of meaning. Furthermore, it is alien to Davidson’s (2002, essay 2) anti-social analysis of meaning and rejection of rigid designation\footnote{Davidson claims not to “know a rigid designator when I see one” (2002, p. 29).} to think that we could empirically discover that the meaning of our terms is not what we learned them to mean. Nor if we take his thought experiment seriously could we empirically discover that Swampman’s utterances themselves have meaning. By stipulation, and independent of empirical considerations, they mean nothing; and our a priori intuitions are meant to agree. Moreover, just as Davidson invokes his radical-interpretive thought experiment to make conceptual points about meaning and radical interpretation, I take him to be invoking the language-learning scenario to do much the same about meaning and language learning. As I said above, I agree with Lepore and Ludwig when they understand Davidson to be offering a priori analyses of meaning and related phenomena generally.\footnote{See note 9.}

4 Swampman revisited

The tension that Lepore and Ludwig identify now becomes clear. Swampman “can’t mean what I do by the term ‘house’,” Davidson writes, “. . . since the sound ‘house’ Swampman makes was not learned in a context that would give it the right meaning—or any meaning at all” (Davidson 2002, p. 19). It was not learned directly via triangulation or indirectly via appealing to terms learned via triangulation. By (LL), Swampman’s “house” then lacks meaning. If, however, as Davidson stipulates, no one can tell the difference between Swampman and Davidson himself, then no radical interpreter can tell the difference between them either. Now, on Davidson’s view a radical interpreter could interpret his “house” to mean house. Because Davidson and Swampman exhibit the same observable behavior in the same observable circumstances, a radical interpreter could then interpret Swampman’s “house” to mean house also. By (RI), Swampman’s “house” then has meaning. That is, to put it mildly, a tension.

Generalizing beyond Swampman, we can see that connecting meaning with the responses of a language learner and a radical interpreter entails that any term as uttered by anyone at any time can both lack and have meaning. Generalizing further, we can also appreciate an asymmetry affecting Davidson’s views that escaped Lepore and Ludwig’s notice. Every term that has a meaning according to (LL) has that meaning according to (RI), but not vice versa. Here is why.

\footnote{mean $x_1$ to mean $x_1, x_2, \ldots, \text{or } x_3$, given compensatory differences elsewhere, and any of these interpretations would be correct; again see note 8.}
Every term that has a meaning according to (LL) has that meaning according to (RI), because if a speaker learned what her terms mean, then a radical interpreter could interpret those terms in her language to have that meaning. That is because language learning consists precisely in learning how to use terms in two ways. First, they are to be used systematically. If a term plays one role in one sentence, then it must be able to play a similar role in others lest it not have the same meaning—and so the use of the term was not truly learned. Now, systematic use of terms is just what is required to construct a truth theory for the language in which the term figures. Second, in basic cases terms are to be used in ways that reflect what is happening in the speaker’s environment. Language is not used in a vacuum; empirical goings-on influence what speakers say. And precisely this empirical responsiveness is captured by the radical interpreter’s using the principle of charity to construct her truth theory. Hence a speaker’s learning what her terms mean ensures that she make utterances that are systematic and in basic cases environmentally responsive. This in turn ensures that the radical interpreter could systematically and charitably correlate her utterances with conditions under which they are true. Thus suppose that a language learner of a language under conditions of language learning learned that “house” means house. By (LL), her “house” means house. Now, Davidson maintains that language learners are in principle also speakers. He also maintains that past learning informs present practices; terms that a speaker speaks, and so the linguistic behavior that she exhibits, are based on terms that she learned. Davidson is himself disposed to utter “house” when asked what he calls a house because that is what he learned to call a house. But then the radical interpreter could interpret his “house” to mean house. By (RI), his “house” also means house.

Nonetheless, it is not the case that every term that has a meaning according to (RI) has that meaning according to (LL). Speakers could (in principle) use terms systematically, and in basic cases environmentally responsively, without ever having learned what those terms mean. Thus suppose that a radical interpreter under conditions of radical interpretation could interpret “house” in a speaker’s language to mean house. By (RI), her “house” means house. Suppose, however, that, like Swampman, the speaker was never herself a language learner under conditions of language learning who learned that “house” means house. By (LL), her “house” this time means nothing.

This asymmetry between (RI) and (LL) is the root cause of the tension within Davidson’s views. Swampman points the way toward it, but the tension runs deeper than this one thought experiment. It runs all the way down to two competing response-dependent accounts of meaning. Next we consider how to resolve it.

5 Lepore and Ludwig’s suggestion

Though not recognizing its root cause, Lepore and Ludwig suggest a resolution concerning Swampman itself: “It would not be inconsistent to add to the a priori requirements on agency a requirement that an agent have been in causal interaction in the past with enough things to ground his thought about things in general” (2007a,
p. 338). The most natural way to do so would be to require that the agent had engaged in past triangulation with a teacher. “In this case,” Lepore and Ludwig continue, “the interpreter would just impose this historical requirement on the grounding of an interpretation theory on top of everything else.”

So far, Lepore and Ludwig’s suggestion is ambiguous between two possibilities. The first is to retain

(RI) For any term in \(L\), the term means what it does just in case a radical interpreter under conditions of radical interpretation could interpret it in \(L\) to have that meaning.

assume that the speaker of \(L\) has engaged in past triangulation, and expand the data available to the radical interpreter to include such triangulation. The second possibility is to combine (RI) and (LL) into a single account of meaning:

(RI & LL) For any term in \(L\), the term means what it does just in case a radical interpreter under conditions of radical interpretation could interpret it in \(L\) to have that meaning, and a speaker of \(L\) under conditions of language learning learned that the term has that meaning.

Because Lepore and Ludwig go on to explain that the additional requirement on agency does not “emerge from reflection on what must be so for success in radical interpretation” (2007a, p. 338), the second suggestion must be what they have in mind. They must want to keep the radical interpreter’s data limited to the synchronic but require that such an interpreter’s determinations be definitive of the meaning of terms only if those terms are spoken by someone whose relation to the terms are diachronic.

Nonetheless, Lepore and Ludwig conclude, adding this historical or diachronic element, as (RI & LL) would, “undercuts the view that the radical interpreter’s standpoint is basic” (2007a, p. 338). They therefore dismiss their own suggestion. They do not think that Davidson should add any such diachronic element to radical interpretation. Though they do not make explicit just how adding this element would undercut the primacy of radical interpretation, it is worthwhile for us to do so. Recall that any term that has a meaning according to (LL) has that meaning according to (RI), but not vice versa. Any term that has a meaning according to (LL), then, has that meaning according to (RI & LL) also. After all, (RI & LL) is the conjunction of (RI) and (LL), and any term that has a meaning according to (LL) has that meaning according to (RI) and (LL). Conversely, it is not the case that any term that has a meaning according to (RI) has that meaning according to (LL)—or therefore the conjunction of (RI) and (LL).

In fact, resolving the tension by replacing (RI) and (LL) with (RI & LL) turns out to be effectively equivalent to simply surrendering (RI) in favor of (LL). Reconsider Davidson and Swampman. On (RI & LL), Davidson’s “house” means house: both a radical interpreter could interpret it to mean house, and Davidson learned that it means
house. Conversely, Swampman’s “house” means nothing: although a radical interpreter could interpret it to mean house, Swampman did not learn that it means house (or anything at all). In each case this is the same result that (LL) renders. Thus (RI & LL), like (LL) itself, is inconsistent with Davidson’s view that in semantics the position of the radical interpreter is explanatorily basic.\(^{16}\)

Lepore and Ludwig are therefore right to dismiss their suggestion of imposing an historical or diachronic requirement on the grounding of any interpretation theory. Unfortunately, beyond disagreeing with the conclusion that Davidson draws from Swampman, and footnoting (2007a, p. 339, n. 260) that perhaps Davidson should not have taken the thought experiment too seriously, Lepore and Ludwig simply drop the issue. They leave the tension unresolved. Presumably that is because they regard Swampman as independent of Davidson’s other views. We have seen, however, that Swampman illustrates (LL), which contrasts with (RI). Davidson should therefore take Swampman as seriously as he takes the link between meaning and language learning. Since Davidson does take the link seriously, we should take Swampman seriously on his behalf.

6 Resolving the tension ourselves

Since we agree with Lepore and Ludwig that Davidson should not combine (RI) and (LL) into (RI & LL), what should he do? For starters, he should not surrender (RI) and retain (LL). As we heard, surrendering (RI) has the same effect as replacing (RI) and (LL) with (RI & LL). Both de-privilege the position of the radical interpreter. If Lepore and Ludwig’s suggestion deserves rejection, then so does this one.

Perhaps Davidson should disjoin (RI) and (LL):

\[(RI \lor LL)\]

For any term in \(L\), the term means what it does just in case a radical interpreter under conditions of radical interpretation could interpret it in \(L\) to have that meaning, or a speaker of \(L\) under conditions of language learning learned that the term has that meaning.

While (RI & LL) effectively reduces to (LL), (RI \(\lor\) LL) effectively reduces to (RI). Again, every term that has a meaning according to (LL) has that meaning according to (RI), but not vice versa. So (RI) obtains when either disjunct in (RI \(\lor\) LL) obtains. On (RI \(\lor\) LL) Davidson’s “house” means house: both a radical interpreter could interpret it to mean house and Davidson learned that it means house. Conversely, Swampman’s

\(^{16}\) Replacing (RI) and (LL) with (RI & LL) also threatens to disqualify three further sets of views that Davidson rests on (RI). The first are his (2001, essay 13) arguments against the very idea of a conceptual scheme, conceptual relativism, and empiricism, about which I have written elsewhere (2004a). The second is his (2002, essay 10) argument against skepticism about the veracity of our basic utterances and beliefs, about which I have written elsewhere (2003) also. (See Goldberg and Rellihan (2008) for whether Davidson’s first and second set of views are consistent.) The third is his (2004, essays 8, 10; 2005b, ch. 3) attempt to use radical interpretation in a unified theory of meaning, thought, and action.
“house” also means house: either a radical interpreter could interpret it to mean house or Swampman learned that it means house.

Because replacing (RI) and (LL) with (RI ∨ LL) has the same effect as surrendering (LL) and retaining (RI), suppose that Davidson did just that. Suppose that he simply surrendered (LL) and retained (RI). This is more promising. Without (LL) one no longer needs to have learned what one’s terms mean for them to have that meaning. With (RI), terms still mean what they do just in case a radical interpreter under conditions of radical interpretation could interpret them to have that meaning. What loss would Davidson suffer? Obviously his response-dependent link between meaning and language learning would be severed. Unless Davidson were to make clear how his particular account of language learning can function only as an account of language learning and not also one of meaning, he would be out an account of language learning too. Finally Swampman would become a meaner.

It is not obvious, however, that anything else in Davidson’s views would change. Admittedly Davidson makes triangulation central to language learning, and triangulation remains central to Davidson’s other views too. Lepore and Ludwig (2007a, pp. 404–13) examine how Davidson argues from triangulation to the claim that language is necessary for thought: the normative nature of thought is meant to be secured by the in-principle interpretability, via triangulation, of terms expressing that thought. Triangulation also figures in Davidson’s (2002, essay 14) argument against skepticism about other minds and an external world: the existence of another mind and an external world, two vertices of the triangle, is meant to be guaranteed by the necessary radical interpretability of my terms, originating from the third vertex—namely, me. Nonetheless, in both cases triangulation is part of the story of radical interpretation not language learning. Surrendering (LL) would leave those arguments unscathed.

Nonetheless, surrendering (LL) while retaining (RI) apparently would have a negative consequence concerning Swampman itself. Recall that by hypothesis Swampman neither learned what its terms mean nor was created knowing what they mean. This would be so even though Swampman utters its terms in precisely those situations in which Davidson would utter them, and Davidson does know what his means because (unlike Swampman) he did learn what they mean. Surrendering (LL) while retaining (RI) would therefore transform Swampman into an epistemic zombie. Like their phenomenal cousins, epistemic zombies are behaviorally indistinguishable from their non-zombie counterparts. Unlike phenomenal zombies, however, who differ from their non-zombie counterparts by having no inner phenomenal states, epistemic zombies differ from their counterparts by not knowing what their terms mean. And

\[17\] See Lepore and Ludwig (2007a, pp. 404–13) for the texts of Davidson’s that they have in mind.
zombies of all sorts are *ceteris paribus* undesirable. Surrendering (LL) while retaining (RI) would to that extent be undesirable too.

I am afraid that Swampman’s being an epistemic zombie is the price that Davidson has to pay to resolve the tension in his views. Fortunately for him, there are four reasons to think that this price is not exorbitant. First, Swampman is not the sort of creature whom we are likely to encounter anytime soon. Thought experiments are just that, and though zombies are theoretically frightening, this consequence is practically benign.

Second, the price of Swampman’s being an epistemic zombie is no greater than the price of the alternative were Davidson to surrender (RI) and retain (LL) instead. That would result in Swampman’s being a zombie of a different sort. Without (RI) Swampman’s terms would lack meaning, while with (LL) Davidson’s own terms would have meaning and Davidson is Swampman’s doppelganger. Thus, surrendering (RI) instead of (LL) would transform Swampman into a *semantic zombie*. Like their epistemic cousins, semantic zombies are behaviorally indistinguishable from their non-zombie counterparts. Unlike epistemic zombies, however, semantic zombies differ from their counterparts by uttering terms that lack meaning. So either way Swampman is a zombie. It is just a matter of taking our pick.

Third, Swampman’s zombiehood, epistemic or semantic, has as much to do with Davidson’s thought experiment as it does with our resolution of his views. Swampman is a strange creature. One of its equally strange properties turns out to be the tendency toward zombiehood. That Swampman torques our intuitions in various ways given various accounts of meaning should not be alarming. Would we expect anything less from a creature born in a swamp when lightning struck a tree?

And fourth, Davidson himself has resources to put the price of epistemic zombiness in particular into perspective. Davidson already urges that “[t]here is a presumption—an unavoidable presumption built into the nature of interpretation—that the speaker usually knows what he means” (2002, p. 14). He could therefore urge that there is an unavoidable presumption that if Swampman’s terms are radically interpretable, which they are, then Swampman usually knows what its terms mean also. We cannot help then but act as if Swampman knows what they mean. Furthermore, this presumption would serve us well in any dealings with Swampman, since by hypothesis Swampman’s behavior is perfectly consistent with its knowing what its terms mean. Questions concerning whether Swampman in fact knows what its terms mean would probably never arise, and Swampman and its interlocutors would be none the worse off.

By focusing on Swampman rather than the view that it illustrates, Lepore and Ludwig fail to realize that Davidson can be understood as offering two incompatible response-dependent accounts of meaning. They therefore fail to appreciate just how deep the tension in Davidson’s views is and consequently to take it seriously enough to see that tension through to a resolution. Of course, it remains unanswered whether meaning is response-dependent in either way in which Davidson proposes. This much, however, is
clear. Davidson should offer at most one response-dependent account of meaning. And (RI) should be it.18

References


18 See Goldberg (2008) for Lepore and Ludwig’s take on Swampman in the context, not of Davidson’s response-dependent accounts of meaning, but of his multifarious uses of triangulation.

Thanks go to Matthew Burstein, Mark LeBar, Charles Lowney, Kirk Ludwig, James Petrik, Matthew Rellihan, Ásta Sveinsdóttir, and Amy White for generous comments, and to the Office of the Provost, Washington and Lee University, for generous financial support in the form of a Lenfest Summer Grant.


