

# Can, or Should, Dummett Solve the Delivery Problem?

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*Abstract:* Michael Dummett has long argued that we should ascribe implicit knowledge of a meaning-theory to speakers, and that the task of a theory of meaning is to tell us what such knowledge consists in. But he also sees it as a problem that how implicit knowledge is actually used, that is, how a speaker's metalinguistic knowledge of a meaning-theory issues or delivers the speaker's knowledge of meanings of utterances (the delivery problem). In this paper I argue that Dummett's instrumental construal of implicit knowledge *does not* and *cannot* solve the delivery problem. However, I do not suggest Dummett to modify or abandon his instrumental construal; rather, I think he can *dissolve* the delivery problem by recognizing that knowledge of semantics for a language is not a necessary condition for mastering a language. I shall argue this point through Davidson's attitude towards the role of linguistic knowledge and his thesis in his (in)famous paper "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs."

It is widely held in contemporary philosophy of language and linguistics that linguistic competence *requires* knowledge of a formal semantic theory, such as Davidsonian truth-conditional semantics or Chomskyan linguistic theory. Michael Dummett also subscribes to such a meaning-theoretic account of linguistic competence.<sup>1</sup> He has long argued that we should ascribe (implicit) knowledge of a meaning-theory to speakers, and that the task of a theory of meaning is to tell us what such knowledge consists in. One way to tackle this task is to construct an articulated, correct, meaning-theory for a language, on the one hand, and give an account of the epistemic/cognitive relation mediated between the contents of the meaning-theory and a competent speaker of the language, on the other. Higginbotham wrote that Dummett dubbed

the difficulty of achieving the second part of the task the *delivery problem* for implicit knowledge, namely: "how [implicit] knowledge is actually used, that is, by what route it issues in the judgments that we make."<sup>2</sup> We can have a clear idea of how a meaning-theory derives its semantic theorems. But once we put epistemic operators into consideration, the clearness in theory derivation does not transmit to knowledge derivation. For example, we can see how Davidson's truth-conditional semantics derives its theorems in the form " $s$  is true if and only if  $p$ ", but once we ask how a speaker's linguistic knowledge of the meaning of  $s_1$  issues from the speaker's metalinguistic knowledge of the semantic theorem " $s_1$  is true if and only if  $p_1$ " and the semantic axioms in the theory's base, we run into problems. Most actual speakers do not consciously know any theory of language, let alone Davidsonian (or Dummettian) semantics, which are systematic and technical. Some may say that actual speakers possess knowledge of semantics *implicitly* or *tacitly*. But appealing to the notion of implicit or tacit knowledge merely postpones the inevitable; the idea of implicit knowledge of semantics still requires substantial construal. In his later writings, Dummett seems to abandon any hope of appealing to implicit knowledge for an explanation of linguistic ability or competence: "[K]nowledge explains an ability only in so far as it *delivers* relevant information at necessary moments; [but] we have no account of the deliveries of such implicit knowledge or of the means of eliciting them."<sup>3</sup> But this does not imply that the delivery problem is settled. The aim of this paper is not to go further to solve the problem on behalf of Dummett. Rather, I shall argue, first, that Dummett *cannot* solve the delivery problem, and second, that the delivery problem is a pseudo problem—pseudo, if the problem is trying to figure out how speakers process (implicitly or explicitly) knowledge of semantics in mastering a language and communicating with others. I shall argue the second point through constructing a thought experiment based upon Davidson's discussion of the phenomenon of malapropism, and my aim is to show that knowledge of formal semantics is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for linguistic competence and communication. So construed, there is no theoretical reason to pursue the information processing between knowledge of semantics and knowledge of meanings of utterances.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In §1 I explain why Dummett thinks that we should ascribe knowledge of semantics to speakers, and the mode of the knowledge is implicit, rather than pure theoretical, pure practical, and unconscious. In §2 I explore Dummett's substantial account of what implicit knowledge is, which I shall call the instrumental construal of implicit knowledge. I argue that such construal (and his constraints on the notion of knowledge of language) *does not* and *cannot* solve the delivery problem. In §3 I first highlight Davidson's notion of linguistic knowledge, and then introduce a thought experiment to show, by discussing the phenomenon of malapropism, that knowledge of semantics is neither necessary nor sufficient for linguistic competence and communication. In the conclusion I will give my suggestion to Dummett.

### Dummett's Notion of Implicit Knowledge

There are several hints that speakers have certain linguistic knowledge. For example, a native speaker of a natural language *L* can effortlessly intuit grammaticality or acceptability of *L*-sentences presented to him. Or, when two different monolingual speakers of, say, English and Chinese are shown simultaneously the same sounds of Chinese, both speakers are assumed to have the *similar* auditory perception; however, only one is capable of receiving information, the other merely noises. To explain these linguistic phenomena we accordingly think that a speaker has linguistic knowledge of his language. But sometimes the linguistic knowledge that a speaker has goes beyond what the speaker himself can conceive of. For instance, if a speaker knew the meaning of two sentences "*a* is *F*" and "*b* is *G*", then he is (probably) capable of knowing the meaning of a sentence that he had never encountered before, say, "*b* is *F*." How could this be the case? For theorists of language, it is because the speaker implicitly knows the components "*a*", "*b*", "... is *F*", and "... is *G*" when he understands "*a* is *F*" and "*b* is *G*", and a combination rule. This knowledge, ascribed to the speaker by the theorists in explaining his understanding of "*b* is *F*", may be unaware of by the speaker himself. The degree of unawareness or implicitness would be higher and higher when the theory that the theorists ascribe to the speaker becomes more and more complex

and technical, such as a Davidsonian meaning-theory (or a Chomskyan grammatical theory). From a theorist's point of view, speakers cannot understand a language without having knowledge of a meaning-theory for that language; in a word, metalinguistic knowledge is what the speaker should have (possess, cognize, or whatever) when he knows the language.

Dummett's reason for speakers' having linguistic knowledge is rather philosophical. He has long insisted that *speech is a rational activity*. A rational activity, traditionally speaking, distinguishes itself from a movement or regularity by its involving intention, motive, purpose, etc. Dummett elaborates the distinction further by saying that: "intention or motive in performing an action is always based upon *knowledge*: it cannot relate to anything the agent did not know about the character, significance, or likely effects of the action"; on the contrary, a "mere practical ability does not . . . provide sufficient grounding for a purpose or intention, because one may be able to do something without knowing how one does it."<sup>4</sup> Speaking a language, as a rational activity, then must have to do with knowledge, and such knowledge, in Dummett's construal, is and should be *conscious* in principle.

Dummett also uses his "speech as a rational activity" thesis to support the claim that knowledge of language cannot be pure practical. In daily lives, when we say that someone *can* speak a natural language, we mean that he *knows how* to speak that language. But for Dummett, "knowing how to speak a language" is not a mere idiomatic equivalent of "can speak the language";<sup>5</sup> we should take "knowing" in the phrase "knowing how to speak a language" seriously. That is, knowing how to speak a language can be distinguished from knowing how to swim or ride a bicycle—although they all are practical knowledge—by its being an intention-based activity.

But the further question is: if knowledge of language is not pure practical, can it be a kind of propositional knowledge, which can be articulated or verbalized? We should notice that here the notion "knowledge of language" does not indicate knowledge of orthography or a natural language grammar, but knowledge of a meaning-theory for a natural language. A speaker may know a lot when he knows a language. For example, an illiterate knows how to pronounce words, ask questions, make commands, tell lies, etc.,

although he is unable to read or write. A normal speaker knows, in addition to what the illiterate knows, how to spell words, recognize grammatical sentences, etc. A teacher of a given natural language, say English, knows more than a normal speaker in her having knowledge of English grammar. Knowledge of orthography or a natural language grammar can be learnt and then articulated explicitly under appropriate educating and being prompted. However, these kinds of linguistic knowledge are not essential in explaining language understanding. What interests philosophers most is rather a speaker's knowledge of *meaning* (of utterances), which should be pursued through the speaker's metalinguistic knowledge of a meaning-theory (which is capable of deriving meaning-specifications for every actual and potential utterances of the speaker).

Dummett's answer to the question whether knowledge of a meaning-theory can be explicit (articulated, or verbalized), is negative, since he thinks that "it is obvious that the speakers do not in general have explicit knowledge of a theory of meaning for their language; if they did, there would be no problem about how to construct such a theory."<sup>6</sup> Such a response, however, merely describes or states a fact. Dummett goes further to argue that knowledge of language *cannot* be explicit or verbalized by what I shall call the *argument from dilemma*. Assume that a speaker's knowledge of a meaning-theory for a language can be taken as an explicit knowledge, i.e., the speaker can state or code the content of the knowledge.<sup>7</sup> If the knowledge of a meaning-theory is coded by the language that the meaning-theory tries to explain, then the mastery of the language is still unexplained. This commits a fallacy of vicious circle in explanation.<sup>8</sup> If the knowledge of a meaning-theory is not coded by the language that the meaning-theory tries to explain, the knowledge must be coded by *a* language. This new language then needs *a* meaning-theory as well. But knowledge of this new meaning-theory still needs to be coded by *a* language. This commits a fallacy of infinite regress in explanation.<sup>9</sup> *Therefore*, if knowledge of a meaning-theory for a language can be coded, then the explanation of the full (rather than partial) understanding of the language is either circular viciously or regressive *ad infinitum*. To avoid the dilemma, knowledge of a meaning-theory cannot be coded or explicit.

If we should ascribe knowledge of a meaning-theory to speakers, but the knowledge cannot be articulated, then is it possible that the knowledge is unconsciously possessed by the speaker? Crispin Wright once gave a neutral description of the relation between the content of a meaning-theory and the competence of speakers (though his aim is to interpret Dummett):

[S]peakers' competence is subserved by their *knowledge*, in some deep implicit sense, of the contents of such a formal theory: they are to be thought of as deploying the information which such a theory states in the ways mirrored by the deductive articulation of the theory, which is why they are able, for instance, to understand novel utterances which they have never heard before.<sup>10</sup>

The "information" that a competent speaker deploys *could be* open to interpretation, perhaps psychologically construed. We can *psychologize* a Davidsonian finitely-axiomatized meaning-theory by associating each truth-theoretic axiom with a speaker's subpersonal computational mental processes. This suggestion is attractive because the implicitness of knowledge of the meaning-theory can be explained (away) due to its inaccessibility to consciousness, the main feature of the subpersonal mental process. Further, the meaning-theory so constructed is empirically grounded, testable, and can be determined by empirical evidence if need be. Such a psychological realist construal of tacit knowledge was proposed by Peacocke and Davies respectively;<sup>11</sup> however, it was not adopted by Dummett. For Dummett, "[a] meaning-theory should not . . . aspire to be a theory giving a *causal* account of linguistic utterances, in which human beings figure as natural objects, making and reacting to vocal sounds and marks on paper in accordance with certain natural laws. We have no need of such a theory."<sup>12</sup> He offers several different arguments against unconscious knowledge to be a legitimate notion of knowledge of language.<sup>13</sup> But I will not pursue these arguments here. Once we accept his "speech as a (conscious) rational activity" thesis, it is easy to figure out why he refuses to take unconscious cognitive construal of linguistic knowledge.

### Dummett's Instrumental Construal of Implicit Knowledge

In the preceding section I have explained, following Dummett, the reasons why we should ascribe knowledge of language to speakers, and the mode of knowledge of a meaning-theory must be implicit, rather than pure practical, pure theoretical, and unconscious. Now the question we are intended to pursue is: What exactly is this knowledge? Notice that we are not asking what the *content* of such linguistic knowledge is; this question can be answered relatively easily. For instance, an articulated Davidsonian meaning-theory with some suitable, substantial, alterations (or to put it straightforwardly, an articulated Dummettian verificationist meaning-theory) could be the option. Rather, we are inquiring into *what knowledge of language consists in*—the question that is ubiquitous in Dummett's writings. To answer this question, we have to see how Dummett substantiates the epistemic relation between a meaning-theory and a speaker.

In Dummett's mind, the picture of what a meaning-theory looks like, and the structure of the epistemic relation between a meaning-theory and a speaker, can be shown as follows:

A theory of meaning will . . . represent the practical ability possessed by a speaker as consisting in his grasp of a set of propositions; since the speaker derives his understanding of a sentence from the meanings of its component words, these propositions will most naturally form a deductively connected system. The knowledge of these propositions that is attributed to a speaker can only be an implicit knowledge. In general, it cannot be demanded of someone who has any given practical ability that he have more than an implicit knowledge of those propositions by means of which we give a theoretical representation of that ability.<sup>14</sup>

In his later writing, *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics*, Dummett expresses a similar view:

If linguistic competence could be straightforwardly classified as a practical ability, we could say . . . that in framing a meaning-theory we are giving a theoretical representation of a practical

ability—the ability to speak the language. We are representing this complex ability as consisting in the knowledge of a theory, that is, of an articulated structure of propositions. On this account, we are analyzing a complex of practical abilities by feigning to attribute to one who has these abilities a knowledge of the theory.<sup>15</sup>

These two passages are the representatives of Dummett's view about implicit knowledge of language. There are five points that can be derived from the passages:

- (i) The aim of a meaning-theory is to *theoretically represent* a speaker's linguistic competence of, say, understanding novel sentences.
- (ii) A meaning-theory is constituted of a set of *propositions*.
- (iii) A meaning-theory is formed as a *deductively connected* system (such as a Davidsonian, compositional, meaning-theory).
- (iv) A speaker's practical ability in speaking a language consists in his *grasp* of a set of proposition exhibited in the meaning-theory for that language.
- (v) A speaker's grasp, or knowledge, of these propositions is *attributed* by theorists of language.

The first three (i-iii) are concerned with a meaning-theory, i.e., a meaning-theory's aim, component, and structure, respectively; and the remainders (iv and v) are concerned with the relation between a speaker and a meaning-theory. Among these five points, (iii), (iv), and (v) seem to be less controversial; if there is still something uncomfortable, it is mainly because a vague term is used (such as "grasp" in (vi)), or something debatable is presupposed (such as the notion of compositionality in (iii)). For me, the real controversial issue lies in whether Dummett treats knowledge of language as propositional knowledge, as what (ii) shows. I shall discuss (ii) through (i).

In effect, if we force Dummett to reach a decision to locate his notion of knowledge of language in *either* knowledge-that *or* knowledge-how, he will put it, although reluctantly, under, or close to, the category of knowledge-how. Straightforwardly speaking,

understanding a language, for Dummett, is a kind of *highly complex practical ability*, a practical ability *plus* knowledge. Here knowledge is introduced merely to reflect the very nature of such ability. The aim of a meaning-theory, as (i) states, is to give a *theoretical representation* of this complex practical ability. This theoretical representation is expressed propositionally, but we should notice that, according to Dummett, it is merely an *expedient* without absurdity:

. . . the idea was that we can describe the articulation of this highly complex practical ability—the ability to speak a particular language—by representing it as a possible object of propositional knowledge, while acknowledging that it is in fact not propositional or theoretical, but practical, knowledge. The idea is not absurd in itself . . .<sup>16</sup>

The rationale that the *mode* of linguistic knowledge is non-propositional lies in the argument from dilemma: a speaker's *knowledge* of a meaning-theory cannot be explicit, otherwise the explanation of mastery of a language is either circular viciously or regressive *ad infinitum*. But this argument does not imply that the *content* or *object* of the knowledge—a meaning-theory—cannot be expressed propositionally. Moreover, an articulated meaning-theory *assists* a meaning theorist in analyzing and theorizing a speaker's linguistic competence; just like in describing "playing a musical instrument, we may need to enunciate some propositions as a preparation for saying what that ability involves doing."<sup>17</sup> This is why Dummett proposes that "we are analyzing a complex of practical abilities by feigning to attribute to one who has these abilities a knowledge of [an articulated structure of propositions]."<sup>18</sup> Here I shall formulate Dummett's notion of the relation between understanding a language *L* and knowing a meaning-theory for *L* as an equation:  $U(L) = K(T(L))$ , where *T* is a variable, or a schema for a correct, articulated, theory of meaning to substitute.

Let us turn to (ii). Several philosophers<sup>19</sup> have interpreted Dummett's notion of knowledge of language as propositionally constructed. However, as we have seen, Dummett never characterizes a speaker's *knowledge* of language as "propositional know-

ledge"; further, were it the case, it would contradict the conclusion drawn from the argument from dilemma.

For Dummett, a speaker's knowledge of language could have nothing to do with propositional knowledge; a speaker's having a language is merely constituted by his being capable of manifesting or using that language. However, the aim of a theory of meaning in general is not to faithfully record what a speaker said or behaved, but to *render his linguistic behaviour intelligible*.<sup>20</sup> One possible way to achieve this aim is to construct an articulated systematizing (usually compositional) meaning-theory, to *represent* a speaker's ability to speak a language *as if* he possesses or knows the theory. The main work for a meaning theorist then is to expound the form and content of a meaning-theory which can best represent a speaker's linguistic behaviour and competence. We can merely treat a speaker's seeming possession of a meaning-theory as theoretically *ad hoc* and harmless.

One may rejoinder that such "seeming possession" is not a genuine possession, and hence it is possible that a speaker does not *really* have a particular theory that meaning theorists ascribe to him. However, this rejoinder, if correct, merely states that a speaker may have *no theory* for a language; the rejoinder does not deny that *the speaker possesses certain linguistic knowledge*. That is, the rejoinder merely forces us to blank our aforementioned equation as follows:  $U(L) = K(?(L))$ .

Further, the rejoinder is uninteresting. For even though we admit that a speaker's *implicit knowledge* of a meaning-theory is merely *seemingly possessed*, the theory ascribed to the speaker cannot be arbitrary,<sup>21</sup> that is, some theories cannot be a solution to the equation  $U(L) = K(T(L))$ . For instance, when we substitute a truth-conditional meaning-theory,  $T_{TC}$ , for  $T$ , to get a statement  $U(L) = K(T_{TC}(L))$ , then, from Dummett's point of view, the statement is false. It is because for Dummett  $U(L) \neq K(T_{TC}(L))$ , i.e.,  $T_{TC}$  does not and cannot explain how a speaker understands a language. At any rate, the point is that there is still an interesting, nontrivial, work for a theory of meaning to achieve, that is, to give a solution to the equation  $U(L) = K(T(L))$ , rather than blank it as  $U(L) = K(? (L))$ .

With the equation  $U(L) = K(T(L))$  in hand, we can test the correctness of each meaning-theory (i.e., theoretical representa-

tion of a speaker's complex practical ability) by substituting it for *T* in the right-hand side of the equation. It is obvious that the left-hand side, a speaker's understanding of a language, can be treated as a checkpoint. The question that whether a meaning-theory represents (or misrepresents) a speaker's knowledge of a language can be pursued by inquiring into whether the theory mirrors the speaker's understanding of the language. It is Dummett's methodology for determining a meaning-theory.

Readers soon notice that Dummett's attitude towards implicit knowledge is instrumental. The aim of ascribing knowledge of a systematic meaning-theory to speakers, for Dummett, is to render linguistic behaviour intelligible. His constraints on the notion of linguistic knowledge—knowledge of language cannot be (a) pure practical and (b) unconscious—restrict him in giving a more psychologically realistic account of linguistic knowledge. Without the constraint (a), a speaker's implicit knowledge of semantic axioms could be construed by the speaker's behavioural dispositions (such as Evans's dispositional construal of tacit knowledge).<sup>22</sup> Without (b), the knowledge can be construed by the speaker's subdoxastic mental processing (such as Peacocke's computationalist construal of tacit knowledge).<sup>23</sup> Either Evans's dispositional construal or Peacocke's psychologically realistic construal can tell us how implicit knowledge is actually used. On the contrary, Dummett's construal cannot. However, it seems that Dummett has never intended to liberate his notion of implicit knowledge from the constraints, or quitted pursuing what knowledge of language consists in. He merely expressed his faith that linguistic competence requires linguistic knowledge, but despaired of figuring it out: "I believe it to be a mistake to think that a full account of linguistic understanding has been provided when its manifestations in the use of language have been described, . . . for that in effect reduces mastery of a language to possession of a practical ability: . . . I believe it to be more than that, but something exceedingly difficult to describe."<sup>24</sup>

So far I have argued that Dummett *does not* solve the delivery problem. Further, he *cannot* solve the problem, if he refuses to adopt a psychologistic approach. But I do not suggest Dummett to adopt these alternative approaches. Three reasons. First, if we

adopt a psychologist approach, then we have to abandon the rationality requirement, which is well defended by philosophers.<sup>25</sup> Second, the psychologically realistic construals of tacit knowledge proposed by Peacocke and Davies respectively are based upon a computational theory of cognition, which has its own problems and troubles.<sup>26</sup> Third, the delivery problem should not be a problem; it can be *dissolved*. To argue this, in what follows I shall introduce Davidson's view about linguistic knowledge.

### Davidson's View about Linguistic Knowledge

From an implicit or tacit knowledge theorist's point of view, a substantial account of what speakers' knowledge consists in can be given through studying the transmission-epistemic, cognitive, or whatever-between a speaker's knowledge of a language's meaning-theory and his knowledge of the meanings of utterances in that language. We can, as Wright puts it, "think of *actual* speakers as equipped with the information codified in the axioms of a successful Davidsonian theory, and as prone to deploy that information in ways reflected by the derivations of meaning-delivering theorems afforded by the theory."<sup>27</sup> However, Davidson has never accepted such a proposal. He reminds us that:

You will notice that I do not speak of implicit knowledge here or elsewhere: the point is not that speaker or hearer has a theory, but that they speak and understand in accord with a theory—a theory that is needed only when we want to describe their abilities and performance.<sup>28</sup>

Davidson's concern about implicit knowledge is similar to John Foster's. Foster wondered, "[i]s it not unnatural, even incoherent, to ascribe states of knowledge to which the subject himself has no conscious access?"<sup>29</sup> Of course, such an inquiry is based upon a commonsensical, or epistemic-internalist, notion of knowledge, and has been demystified more or less by tacit knowledge theorists' efforts to clarify the notion "tacit knowledge."<sup>30</sup> But Foster did not suggest that theorists conquer the difficulty within the programme of tacit knowledge meaning-theory. His suggestion was far more radical: "Rather than ask for a statement of the know-

ledge implicit in linguistic competence, let us ask for the statement of a theory whose knowledge would suffice for such competence."<sup>31</sup> Davidson gladly and explicitly accepted such a proposal.<sup>32</sup>

To repeat: Davidson evades the issue concerning *actual speakers' knowledge*, especially their "knowledge of a meaning-theory for a natural language" in explaining linguistic competence by, first, reading the claim "a speaker/interpreter has knowledge of a meaning *theory* for a natural language" *literally* (that is, he understands it as stating that the speaker or interpreter has *propositional* knowledge of a meaning theory), and then rejecting the very claim by its being incompatible with the fact that "no one now has explicit knowledge of a fully satisfactory theory for interpreting the speakers of any natural language."<sup>33</sup> It is true that no actual speaker has any theoretical or propositional knowledge of a formal meaning-theory for the language he or she speaks, but it is controversial whether we should read the claim *literally* as Davidson did. But let us just *assume* Davidson's attitude towards the *role* of linguistic knowledge in a meaning-theory is correct; i.e., "All we should require of a theory of truth for a speaker is that it be such that, *if* an interpreter had explicit propositional knowledge of the theory, he would know the truth conditions of utterances of the speaker."<sup>34</sup>

The next question to consider is whether a speaker's knowledge of formal semantics for a language, whether explicit or implicit, is a necessary and sufficient condition for him to master the language. Let us imagine a speech community which I shall call the  $\alpha$ -community. All members of the  $\alpha$ -community speak English, and can consciously access the information-processing between a meaning-theory for English and the understanding of utterances. That is, every  $\alpha$ -speaker has explicit, theoretical, or propositional knowledge of a meaning-theory for English, and is capable of articulating the derivation process of the meaning-theory when asked to explain how he knows the meanings of sentences uttered by other  $\alpha$ -speakers. In such a scenario we ask whether an  $\alpha$ -speaker's knowledge of the meaning-theory is a necessary and sufficient condition for him to master English.

To answer the question I shall make use of Davidson's "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs." In that paper Davidson lists three principles concerning "first meaning" (roughly speaking, "literal meaning"<sup>35</sup>), namely that it is systematic, shared, and governed by learn conventions or regularities.<sup>36</sup> Let me rephrase them. It is wildly held in the philosophy of language that to have a language  $L$  is to possess knowledge of the contents of a meaning-theory for  $L$ . This is because possessing a meaning-theory for  $L$  explains how it is possible for a speaker to be capable of (i) learning  $L$ , (ii) knowing infinite or novel utterances of  $L$ , and (iii) successfully communicating with other  $L$ -speakers.

A Davidsonian meaning-theory's *compositionality* addresses the first two issues in that a compositional meaning-theory is *recursive* and has a *finite* base. These features have to do with a human being's *finiteness* in his or her knowledge store and *infinite* capability for linguistic understanding. The concept of compositionality shows how first meaning is systematic (or structural): a speaker's knowledge of the first meaning of an utterance is *structurally* derived from his implicit knowledge of a denotation axiom for the proper name, a satisfaction axiom for the monadic predicate in the utterance, and a combination rule.

To answer (iii), a meaning-theory for  $L$  (or to put it mildly, as Davidson did, a "systematic method of interpretation") has to be *shared* by each member in a conversation: "The sharing comes to this: the interpreter uses his theory to understand the speaker; the speaker uses the same (or an equivalent) theory to guide his speech."<sup>37</sup> Merely to have a *certain* meaning-theory for  $L$  does not guarantee successful communication. It is possible that a natural language  $L$  might have two different, incompatible, meaning-theories, say,  $M_1$  and  $M_2$ . For the same sentence  $s_1$  in  $L$ ,  $M_1$  derives the theorem " $s_1$  is true iff  $p_1$ ", while  $M_2$  " $s_1$  is true iff  $p_2$ ." And the case can be generalized to all sentences in  $L$ . When two (so-called)  $L$ -speakers, who possess  $M_1$  and  $M_2$  respectively, begin to talk to each other, we will find how difficult it will be for them to "communicate." In addition, the speakers will doubt whether they are speaking the same language though they are both familiar with the sounds issuing from their mouths. Thus, to communicate successfully there seems to be a requirement that the meaning-

theory possessed by each party be the same or extensionally equivalent (i.e., be capable of deriving the same set of semantic theorems). Since a meaning-theory or theory of interpretation is shared by both speaker and hearer, their knowledge of such theory may then be called *conventions*. What a speaker or hearer knows is not merely *a* meaning-theory, but a *shared* theory.

Let us turn back to our thought experiment. Is an  $\alpha$ -speaker's knowledge of a (conventionalized) meaning-theory a necessary and sufficient condition for him to master a language? Here to master a language is the same thing as being able to interpret or communicate with others, since a speaker's linguistic competence, an ability to *know meanings of every (actual or potential) sentence of a language*, can be rephrased as being able to *interpret every (actual or potential) sentence uttered by a speaker of that language*. So the original question can be rephrased as well: Is an  $\alpha$ -speaker's knowledge of a (conventionalized) meaning-theory a necessary and sufficient condition for him to interpret or communicate with another  $\alpha$ -speaker? I admit that a shared meaning-theory does assist an interpreter in understanding his speaker's utterances, but this does not mean that a shared theory is a *condition* for interpretation. In this regard, Davidson invited us to consider the phenomenon of malapropism. When Mrs. Malaprop uttered the sentence "That is a nice derangement of epitaphs", an interpreter (as an  $\alpha$ -speaker) should derive the following theorem:

(Th) "That is a nice derangement of epitaphs" is-true-in-English iff  
That is a nice derangement of epitaphs.

to interpret her utterance. But it is possible that the interpreter uses this alternate "theorem":

(Th\*) "That is a nice derangement of epitaphs" is-true-in-English iff  
That is a nice arrangement of epithets.

The interpreter is supposed to take (Th) to interpret Mrs. Malaprop, for, in this case, (Th) is the only information that the meaning-theory for English can proffer. But then the interpreter fails to communicate with Mrs. Malaprop. As to (Th\*), it is not derived

from the meaning-theory for English; strictly speaking, it is not *derived* at all. The interpreter could refuse to consider any theorem that does not derive from the theory for English, including (Th\*), and treat Mrs. Malaprop as irrational when he hears Mrs. Malaprop utter the sentence like "Sure, if I reprehend anything in this world, it is the use of my oracular tongue, and a nice derangement of epitaphs."

Or, the interpreter could take (Th\*) and other "deviant theorems" (in effect, again, they are not theorem at all) to interpret Mrs. Malaprop, and keep communicating with her. Most of time, malapropism can be understood; otherwise, the thing called malapropism would not be recognized as such. The problem is: what allows the interpreter to construe (Th\*)? How does (Th\*) spring to the interpreter's mind, if it is not derived?

In such a situation the theory that the interpreter prepares in advance to interpret his speaker is called by Davidson the *prior theory*, and the theory that the interpreter *does* in fact use is called the *passing theory*. In the case of interpreting Mrs. Malaprop, (Th\*) is the interpreter's passing theory. According to Davidson, a prior theory is not, and should not be, shared by interpreter and speaker;<sup>38</sup> a shared passing theory is what is required for communication. But this observation of successful communication does not imply that possessing a passing theory and the (modified) meaning-theory from which the passing theory is derived *constitutes* a language-user's linguistic competence, an argument based on two reasons. First, when successfully communicating, an interpreter's and an interpretee's passing theories (and the meaning-theory from which the passing theories are derived) "must, of course, coincide *after* an utterance has been made. . . . But unless they coincide in advance, the concepts of regularity and convention have no definite purchase."<sup>39</sup> Second, though an interpreter, in order to interpret a particular speaker, can modify his (prior) meaning-theory by accommodating the passing theories, knowledge of such a modified meaning-theory, however, would be insufficient for the interpreter to interpret *another* idiosyncratic speaker. So, what is our linguistic ability? For Davidson, a speaker's linguistic competence is his ability to converge on passing theories, and "there are no rules for arriving at passing theories,

no rules in any strict sense, as opposed to rough maxims and methodological generalities."<sup>40</sup> There is much to be said about Davidson's (new) notion of linguistic competence. But I will not elaborate it further. Davidson's criticism of orthodox notions of linguistic competence and communication would be enough for me to address my point. Knowledge of a shared prior theory is neither necessary nor sufficient for understanding a speaker, neither is knowledge of the formal semantical theory that derives the prior theory. Knowledge of a conventionalized meaning-theory is not *sufficient* for understanding a speaker, since it is possible that an interpreter possesses the very knowledge (e.g., knowledge of the meaning-theory for English) while he still does not understand a speaker's utterances (e.g., Mrs. Malaprop's utterance "That is a nice derangement of epitaphs"). Further, sharing knowledge of a meaning-theory in advance, i.e., having conventions or regularities, is not *necessary* for understanding a speaker, since an interpreter is capable of understanding or interpreting a speaker without conventions or sharing knowledge of the meaning-theory with his *interpretee* (i.e., an interpreter is capable of assigning meanings, say, *arrangement* and *epithet* to the words "derangement" and "epitaph" respectively, the very assignment is different from one the interpreter possesses in advance).<sup>41</sup>

If Davidson's thesis is correct, then implicit or tacit knowledge meaning-theorists' attempts to solve the delivery problem seem to be misguided. Recall our  $\alpha$ -speaker, who knows *consciously* a meaning-theory for a language and all the delivery process between the meaning-theory and the interpretation of utterances of his speaker. The condition for the  $\alpha$ -speaker to communicate with others, if the meaning-theoretic account is right, would have to be good luck: all the speakers that he intends to interpret or understand must have the same knowledge and ability as he. But actually, the  $\alpha$ -speaker *can* interpret and understand those who did not prepare the same knowledge and ability. (This point can be defended further by the possibility of radical interpretation.) Thus, if linguistic competence does not consist in speakers' knowledge of formal semantics, the delivery problem is accordingly pseudo; the problem presupposes a false account of linguistic competence.

### Conclusion

In this paper I have shown why Dummett pursues the notion of implicit knowledge (§1), and why he does not, and cannot, give an account of how implicit knowledge is actually used (§2). In §3 I argue further, via Davidson's thesis, that Dummett's attempt to solve the delivery problem is misguided, since the problem presupposes a false notion of linguistic competence, and then is pseudo. To pursue the delivery problem cannot cast any theoretical light on the notions of linguistic competence and communication.

Since Davidson published "A Nice Derangement", it has been discussed from a variety of points of view in a number of journal articles (and book chapters, and dissertations). In my judgement, "A Nice Derangement" encapsulates Davidson's later philosophy of language,<sup>42</sup> including his views on the nature of linguistic competence, linguistic communication, and language, and the task of a theory of meaning. Most of the commentators of "A Nice Derangement" dedicate themselves to criticism (though a few express support).<sup>43</sup> For example, several philosophers suspect that Davidson's thesis in "A Nice Derangement" conflicts with his programme of truth-conditional semantics proposed in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. They see a conflict between two Davidsons: a Tarskian Davidson and a Wittgensteinian Davidson.<sup>44</sup> But this supposed issue would not undermine my analysis above unless it has been proven or well-argued that the conflict *does* exist and is irreconcilable, and further, that the Tarskian Davidson is correct.<sup>45</sup>

There is no suggestion in this paper that Dummett had better abandon either his constraints on the notion of linguistic knowledge, or his instrumental construal of knowledge of language. What I want to do is to push him to realize that the delivery problem is not a genuine problem and then not a threat to his semantic programme. In pursuing a formal semantic theory, I suggest Dummett to adopt Foster's and Davidson's *attitude* to the role of linguistic knowledge in a theory of meaning. In this setting, Dummett's verificationist meaning-theory and Davidson's truth-conditional meaning-theory are then commensurable.<sup>46</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A precise formulation of the account is that linguistic competence requires knowledge of a *compositional* meaning-theory. The reason I leave out the modifier in the main text is that the notions “meaning-theory” and “formal semantics” mentioned in this paper *must be* compositional, otherwise it cannot account for the features of a human speaker (i.e., a speaker is “finite” in his knowledge store, and “infinite” in his linguistic understanding). The meaning-theoretic account of *linguistic competence* can be transformed into an account of *linguistic communication*, once we treat a language-user’s linguistic competence to understand every actual and potential sentences in a particular language as the same thing as his communicative competence to understand every actual and potential utterances made by a sincere speaker of that particular language. And if so, the meaning-theory that the language-user possesses has to meet further constraint beyond compositionality, that is, the conventionality constraint: both parties of the communication share the same compositional meaning-theory prepared in advance. So, the complete formulation of the meaning-theoretic account of linguistic (or communicative) competence is this: linguistic competence and communication requires knowledge of a *conventionalized* meaning-theory. See §3 for further discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Higginbotham 1995:130 and fn.23.

<sup>3</sup> Dummett 1993a:161.

<sup>4</sup> Dummett 1993b:x; italics mine. See also Dummett 1978 (104-5), 1991 (88-92), and 1993a (158).

<sup>5</sup> Dummett 1978:96.

<sup>6</sup> Dummett 1978:101.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. “Explicit knowledge is manifested by the ability to *state* the content of the knowledge” (Dummett 1978:101).

<sup>8</sup> See e.g., Dummett 1978 (101), and 1991 (104).

<sup>9</sup> Dummett 1975:217.

<sup>10</sup> Wright 1991:135.

<sup>11</sup> Peacocke 1986; Davies 1987.

<sup>12</sup> Dummett 1991:92.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Dummett 1981a and 1989, where his target is Chomsky’s notion of knowledge of language. I think Dummett’s arguments also suit to Peacocke’s (1986) and Davies’s (1987) computationalist construals of tacit knowledge.

<sup>14</sup> Dummett 1976:36.

<sup>15</sup> Dummett 1991:105.

<sup>16</sup> Dummett 1993a:159-60.

<sup>17</sup> Dummett 1993a:160.

<sup>18</sup> Dummett 1991:105.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Baker & Hacker 1984 (239-40), Devitt 1997 (270-5), and Miller 1997 (147-52).

<sup>20</sup> Dummett 1981b:681-2.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. "[W]e are analyzing a complex of practical abilities by feigning to attribute to one how has these abilities a knowledge of the theory. The analysis will fail . . . if it does not at the same time explain the method of representation, by saying how the knowledge of each proposition of the theory is manifested" (Dummett 1991:105).

<sup>22</sup> Evans 1981.

<sup>23</sup> Peacocke 1986. See also Davies 1987.

<sup>24</sup> Dummett 1993a:161.

<sup>25</sup> Such as Wright 1986, Lepore 1997, and Weiss 2003.

<sup>26</sup> See, in particular, Searle 1997, and McDowell 1994.

<sup>27</sup> Wright 1986:206; italics mine.

<sup>28</sup> Davidson 1994:113.

<sup>29</sup> Foster 1976:2.

<sup>30</sup> See especially Davies 1989.

<sup>31</sup> Foster 1976:2.

<sup>32</sup> See Davidson 1976. Dummett clearly detects Davidson's position: "In [Davidson's] earlier essays, he was disposed to attribute to actual speakers an implicit knowledge of a correct meaning-theory for their language. In later writings, he forswore this attribution, claiming only that the meaning-theory constituted a body of knowledge whose possession by a subject would enable him to speak the language" (Dummett 1991:103).

<sup>33</sup> Davidson 1986:96.

<sup>34</sup> Davidson 1990:312.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. "[First meaning] corresponds roughly to what is sometimes called literal meaning, but since this latter phrase has associations I do not want I have coined my own jargon" (Davidson 1993:173).

<sup>36</sup> Davidson 1986:93.

<sup>37</sup> Davidson 1986:96.

<sup>38</sup> Davidson 1986:103-4.

<sup>39</sup> Davidson 1984:278.

<sup>40</sup> Davidson 1986:107.

<sup>41</sup> As to the thesis of "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," see especially Davidson 1994, 1998, and 1999.

<sup>42</sup> See in particular Davidson 1984, 1989, 1993, and 1994.

<sup>43</sup> For example, Ramberg 1989.

<sup>44</sup> See especially Bar-On & Risjord 1992, Pereda 1998, and Rorty 1998.

<sup>45</sup> With respect to Davidson's response to the conflict, see Davidson 1998 and 1999.

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