Speaking Without Interpreting  
-A Reply to Bouma on Autism and Davidsonian Interpretation- 

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1. Introduction 

In her paper “Radical interpretation and high-functioning autistic speakers,” Hanni Bouma raises a number of insightful challenges to Andrews (2002). While we agree that some of these criticisms are warranted, we nonetheless believe that the existence of certain individuals on the autistic spectrum presents a challenge to Davidson’s theory of meaning.¹ 

There are two central issues in Bouma’s paper that we will focus on. The first involves the connections between the Davidsonian concepts of interpretation and triangulation and the psychological concepts of joint attention and theory of mind (ToM). Both Andrews (2002) and Bouma move too quickly from psychological claims about joint attention and ToM to philosophical conclusions about interpretation and triangulation. The later Davidson is also guilty of a fast and loose use of language, as Bouma points out (Bouma 2006, 15). We hope to clarify the relationships between the Davidsonian and psychological concepts in Section 2. 

The other central issue at stake is whether the empirical evidence suggests the existence of a person who speaks but does not interpret in the Davidsonian sense. Bouma is right to point to the methodological problem with Andrews’s reliance on control group studies over populations. In such studies, the goal is to determine general properties of a population, rather than to accurately describe individuals. The existence of only one person who uses language but who does not interpret would create a problem for Davidson’s account, but the kinds of group studies found in the autism literature cannot help us establish the existence of such a person.² 

¹ Other arguments that autistic speakers create a problem for Davidson can be found in Glüer and Pagin 2003 and Schwitzgebel 1997. However, Glüer and Pagin don’t think that this kind of critique results in a challenge to Davidson’s larger theory of meaning. 

² Note also that the group studies Bouma presents in 2.2.1 that people with autism *in general* “have a far more robust theory of mind” (Bouma 2006,17) doesn’t directly undermine the much weaker claim that there (likely) exists at least one autistic speaker without such skills. Regardless of the amount of evidence, it isn’t plausible to conclude that “high-functioning autistic speakers do eventually participate in the
Given the problems with the data from group studies in establishing the existence of a single case, we now think that the best place to look for a challenge to Davidson’s theory is in the clinical literature. In Section 3 we will present evidence from the therapy literature that such a person likely exists. In that section we will also respond to Bouma’s claim that Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) therapy can help children “overcome” (Bouma 2006, 10) the interpretative deficits associated with autism.

The author ends with a brief discussion on whether Davidson’s theory is subject to empirical counterexample. Despite her claims, we believe that Davidson’s explication of the concept of meaning must be sensitive to what is going on in the world. We will present this argument in Section 4.

2. Definitions

Given the different ways in which certain technical terms are used and defined in philosophy and psychology, we must briefly revisit the notions that are key to the current discussion. We will argue that despite the claims of both Bouma and Andrews (2002), neither joint attention nor ToM (understood as passing ToM tests) should be identified with a successful triangulation or with interpretation. Rather, these psychological categories are more properly seen as necessary precursors to the development of interpretative abilities.

2. a. Davidsonian concepts: Interpretation and triangulation

Recall that for Davidson, an interpreter is able to “say what a speaker’s words mean” (Davidson 1973, 141). This requires having a truth theory, which in turn requires being able to apply the principle of charity reasonably well. Charity requires that an interpreter will only attribute false beliefs to someone when she understands why that person should have a false belief. That is, an interpreter will optimize the number of true beliefs she can attribute to others, or minimize the false ones. This means that an interpreter will see others as rational agents whose behavior is caused by reasons, and that in order to understand why someone has a false belief, an interpreter needs to have some knowledge of the other’s background beliefs and experiences.

Note that this is a very strong requirement. The ability to utilize a truth-theory and the knowledge of how to optimize others’ true beliefs requires having the concept of belief, and also the concept of truth, because the axioms of the truth theory appeal to these concepts. Belief and truth are not analyzed, but are left basic in the axioms of the truth-theory. So, to be able to interpret, one must have some pre-theoretical grasp of such concepts.

Necessary conditions for being an interpreter include the ability to attribute a large number of true beliefs to others, and to be able to attribute false beliefs given sufficient evidence. In her discussion of what is required for Davidsonian interpretation,
Bouma notes that one requirement is for an interpreter to “discern some but not all of the speaker’s attitudes toward certain sentences on the basis of behavior” (Bouma 2006, 24). While this is accurate, the question that remains is how many attitudes are enough to count as interpretation? If the person is largely wrong about the other’s attitudes, she will fail to interpret. An interpreter doesn’t have to be a perfect mindreader, but must be able to attribute enough true beliefs to others such that the beliefs form a coherent whole picture, and can be used to explain others’ behaviors.

Triangulation, on the other hand, is more basic than interpretation. It is the source of the knowledge of other minds and knowledge of an external world, and it is the tool that allows us to ascribe content to others’ beliefs. Only with the ability to triangulate comes an understanding that others have beliefs, that others can be mistaken, and that there is a contrast between truth and falsity (Davidson 1975). Successful triangulation involves a conjoining of self-knowledge, other-knowledge, and world-knowledge (Davidson 1991). Triangulation can give rise to both the notion of objective truth, and the notion that others have beliefs, since “someone cannot have a belief unless he understands the possibility of being mistaken” (Davidson 1975, 22).

Note that while a successful triangulation can be used to interpret others, being a triangulater alone isn’t sufficient for being an interpreter. Davidson writes:

If the two people now note each others’ reactions (in the case of language, verbal reactions), each can correlate these observed reactions with his or her stimuli from the world. The common cause can now determine the contents of an utterance and a thought. The triangle which gives content to thought and speech is complete. (Davidson 1991, 160).

Davidson describes the process in the quote above: if two triangulaters note one another’s reactions, then they can use their observations to determine content. The claim is not that ascription of content necessarily follows from an act of triangulation, but only that it may. However, Davidson also suggests that triangulation is necessary for having a concept of belief, but only a successful triangulation, one that results in interpretation, is sufficient for it.

2.b. Psychological concepts related to interpretation and triangulation

Turning now to the psychological concepts, we hope to show that there is not a clean connection between interpretation and ToM, or between a successful triangulation and joint attention. While joint attention is likely necessary for interpretation and a successful triangulation, it is not sufficient.

Joint attention

In the psychological literature joint attentional scenes (Tomasello 1999) or formats (Bruner 1983) are usually characterized as the scenes in which the child and the caregiver attend to the same object or event. Joint attentional scenes “are triadic in the sense that they involve infants coordinating their interactions with both objects and people, resulting in a referential triangle of child, adult, and the object or event to which they share attention” (Tomasello 2003, 21).
Given this definition, joint attention is possible between humans and nonhuman animals, and it is possible between adults and prelinguistic children. A well-trained dog will look from his food to his owner, and the owner will look from the animal to the food. However, for Davidson this joint attention to the food will not count as a successful triangulation, because the dog does not understand that the human has a belief about the food that may be the same or different from his own belief about the food. The necessary conjoining of self-knowledge, other-knowledge, and world-knowledge is not in play.

The same goes for the prelinguistic child. At the end of the first year of life, before they can talk, infants start reading other people’s communicative intentions by following gaze (Baron-Cohen 1991; Leslie 1994). They also start engaging in social referencing; i.e. they start seeking out the information provided by the adult’s facial expressions in order to figure out what to do or how to feel in ambiguous or unknown situations (Klinnert 1984; Sorce et al. 1985). In the second year of life infants start using these intentional signs to infer the meanings of words (Baldwin 1991, 1993). It has been shown that toddlers reject possible meanings of words if their caregivers indicate that the object that the child picked up (or pointed to) is not what the caregiver had in mind (Tomasello and Cale-Kruger 1992). These findings indicate that the ability to make use of other people’s communicative intentions is of great importance for the child’s first steps into language. This does not mean, however, that the child who is able to make use of communicative intentions also understands that other people have knowledge that is different from her own, or that the child is able to conjoin the other knowledge with her self-knowledge in order to determine facts about the world. Thus, merely having joint attention isn’t sufficient for successful triangulation.

While it is true, as an empirical matter, that “joint attention would constitute a crucial first step towards learning to correlate reactions to the world with another person” (Bouma 2006, 15), joint attention doesn’t constitute successful triangulation. If any sharing of reactions to common stimuli did count as successful triangulation, Bouma would be correct when she says ABA therapy engages children’s attention in order to teach them how to triangulate. In Section 3 we will argue that the kind of joint attention required for successful ABA therapy does not need to be a successful triangulation that leads to an understanding of the content of others’ beliefs.

Theory of mind

Just as joint attention should not be identified with successful triangulation, ToM should not be identified with interpretation. ToM is standardly defined as the ability to attribute beliefs and desires in order to predict and explain behavior (Premack & Woodruff 1978). The discussion in Andrews (2002) and Bouma (2006) focused on ToM as interpretation. We now think there is good reason to suspect that passing ToM tests is neither necessary nor sufficient as an indication of having the ability to interpret others behavior by accurately (enough) attributing beliefs to others. Our primary reason for seeing a distinction between ToM operationalized as passing certain ToM tasks and interpretation is that people with autism who pass these tasks nonetheless often fail to act as interpreters outside of the experimental setting.

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3 Here we take Bouma’s point that the claim in Andrews (2002) that children with autism do not demonstrate joint attention is too strong.
That is, despite their ability to perform well in the ToM tests, many people on the autistic spectrum are still profoundly impaired as social agents; i.e., “they are often unable to use their understanding of mental states in real life contexts” (Happé 2000, 215; see also Ozonoff & Miller 1995). In order to account for this deficit, Happé and Frith have hypothesized that due to weak central coherence (the ability to take into account the context when interpreting social as well as non-social situations), children with autism cannot use their knowledge of other minds in everyday life, despite the fact that they can use this knowledge in context-free and limited experimental settings (Frith et al. 1994; Happé 1994). This discrepancy between what ToM tests show and the level of general social understanding of some autistic individuals indicates that we are in need of a much more subtle understanding of what it means to say that someone has a concept of belief, desire, and other mental states.

For Davidson’s purposes, we must answer this question in the negative. A person who is unable to attribute mental states on a regular basis and in naturalistic social settings is not a person who can reliably say what a person’s utterances mean, because she is not able to reliably apply the principle of charity. Such a person does not count as a Davidsonian interpreter, and if she uses language, she serves as a challenge to his account of meaning. The next stage of our argument is to demonstrate that such a person exists.

3. Critique of ABA as evidence of real interpretation

One of Bouma’s central arguments against the claim that there exists an autistic speaker who does not interpret is that the therapies used to teach language to autistic individuals require joint attention. She argues that either ABA therapy allows children to overcome or deal with their deficits, or it trains them to behave “robotically” as if they were interested in the external world. Since the second disjunct is implausible, she argues that ABA must succeed in leading children to interpret. We think that the situation is more complex than that. However, we also think that some therapy does teach children to merely “go through the motions,” and we will rise to Bouma’s challenge and suggest that there are empirical ways to establish this fact. First, a few words about the different therapies used with children on the autistic spectrum.

3a. ABA therapies

Within the main theoretical framework of ABA, several different language therapies have been developed. For all ABA therapies, the goal is to change undesirable or disruptive behavior. To do so, traditional behavioral therapy starts with the assumption that we need to clearly identify the behavior, the circumstances in which it occurs, and the results that it brings about. Furthermore, we need to determine the particular function of that behavior in order to be able to replace undesirable behavior
with more desirable ones that will play the same function for a child. It is not surprising
that when the child engages in a certain undesirable behavior she usually wants:

a) to indicate the need for help or attention
b) to escape from stressful situations and activities
c) to obtain desired objects
d) to protest against unwanted events/activities
e) to obtain stimulation

Indeed, the standard way to help a child to adopt more socially acceptable ways of
expressing her desires is to try to teach her language or some augmentative system of
communication. While sign systems such as The Makaton System (Walker 1980) have
been used to improve communication in children with autism and children with other
learning disabilities, it seems that pictorially based systems such as the Picture Exchange
Communication System (PECS) work best (Bondy and Frost 1996). The goal of this kind
of therapy is to teach a child to ask for objects or activities by using particular pictures or
symbols, in the hope that the communication will eventually turn into spoken language.
Over a number of sessions, and by the use of prompting and repetitions, a child might
make an association between a picture or a symbol and the desired object or activity.
Once this connection is made the pictures can be used to increase both the child’s
expressive and receptive language (Quill 1995). The question is how much this process
resembles the normal process of language acquisition. In other words, are the
psychological processes that the autistic child needs to mobilize in these sessions the
same as the processes that a normal child employs in the course of language acquisition?

3b. ABA therapies and interpretation

Bouma’s discussion of ABA therapy focuses on the results of a successful therapy,
rather than on the methods taken to achieve those results. Her claim is that despite the
differences in acquisition, children who undergo ABA therapy will develop a “natural
interest” in social interaction and will learn to engage with others “spontaneously”
(Bouma 2006, 16). She suggests that the joint attention that arises during ABA therapy
results in successful triangulation and interpretation.

Our view is rather different. We suspect that children who graduate from ABA
therapy don’t utilize the same psychological processes for social interaction as do normal
children, and that autistic children rarely develop anything like a natural interest in social
interaction, if “natural” is taken to mean “like the typical case”. First, there are a number
of language based therapies that aim to improve social interaction and social
understanding of high functioning children with autism, despite the fact that these
children already went through ABA therapy, speak language, and are quite often placed
in the classroom with normally developing children. Second, such therapies involve
explicit explanations of socially relevant concepts such as friendship, causes of different
emotions, emotional expressions, and the like. This means that while normally
developing children have intuitive grasp of these concepts, these same concepts have to
be broken down and analyzed to a child on the autistic spectrum. Both of these points
require further unpacking.

First, note that if ABA language therapy did cause children to have a natural
interest in and understanding of social interactions, there would be no need for a second

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4 The list is taken from Howlin (1998, p. 311).
round of therapy for autistic speakers. However, once they become proficient speakers it is quite normal for children to graduate from ABA therapy to some variety of cognitive behavioral therapy developed to facilitate their social cognitive abilities. 5 Cognitive therapies are used to teach children ToM (e.g. Hadwin et al. 1997; Ozonoff & Miller 1995; Swettenham 1996) and social understanding (e.g. in Carol Gray’s social stories paradigm). The main assumption that these theories start with is that “social problem solving and recognition of emotions can be thought cognitively and can influence behaviour” (Bauminger 2002, 286). It is important to keep in mind that all of these therapies are language based therapies. That is, they presuppose that children for which they were specifically designed already have advanced language. The intervention strategies can vary in form (adult vs. peer training), content (the particular social behaviors they focus on, such as the child’s ability to read external social cues or initiation and maintenance of social interaction) and intensity (frequency).

However, all of them have the same goal, namely to teach a child what certain socially relevant concepts mean. So, the therapist (teacher, parent, or a peer) usually explains to a child e.g., what a friend is, what friends usually do together, why they listen to each other, what it means to listen to a friend and so on. Furthermore, these therapies usually involve explicit teaching of simple emotions (sad, happy, afraid, angry) and how to recognize these emotions in self and others by identifying the ways people usually express these emotions. If the child is to make use of these explicit instructions about what to do and how to make sense of social situations, the child needs to have advanced syntax as well as vocabulary.

Furthermore, ABA and cognitive behavioral therapies as described also suggest that understanding belief in the normal and the autistic case differ radically. For children who learn about attributing beliefs through such therapies, the concept of belief is not basic. Rather, it is analyzed for them, and taught to them through therapies such as PECS or social stories. In ABA therapy, the child is reinforced to use symbols in the correct situations, but given the developmental differences there is no reason to suspect that the mechanisms involved in the behaviors are similar to those used by a child who develops language normally. There is no evidence that a child with autism who shares interest in an object with another person after intensive ABA therapy has learned to conjoin self-knowledge, other-knowledge, and world-knowledge.6 Though she may learn how she

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5 Although cognitive-behavioral therapies are widely used by therapists there has been limited number of empirical studies dealing with the intervention outcomes. Some of these studies (see e.g. Bauminger 2002) suggest that children do improve in the areas of socio-emotional understanding and social interaction after cognitive behavioral intervention.

6 This isn’t to disagree with the author’s claim that the psychological notion of joint-attention is necessary for a child to learn a language. Recall that joint attention, as understood in psychology, amounts only to two individuals coordinating their interactions with one another and with an object in such a way that they share attention. The expectation is that shared reference to that object will emerge, but the behavior that indicates joint attention is the coordination of behavior surrounding some object. Bouma’s appeal to Garfiels, Peterson, and Perry’s (2001) research on language acquisition doesn’t indicate the existence of successful triangulation or interpretation, but only joint attention.
ought to behave, and how others should behave, there is reason to think that she doesn’t understand why she ought to act in this way. Without the ability to give reasons for one’s own or others’ actions, a child cannot get started with the project of applying the principle of charity. In order to overcome this problem cognitive behavioral therapies try to teach high functioning autistic children why people behave the way they do by providing them with explanations about why we feel sad or happy, why we keep our promises, and so on. However, the very need for explicit teaching indicates that autistic children who undergo ABA do not acquire basic intuitions about other people’s or their own mental life.

3c. Empirical evidence that some children do simply “go through the motions”

The behavior of a high functioning person with autism is markedly different from the behavior of people without autism. Students with autism are typically very disruptive in the classroom, and adults with autism report on their own social difficulties. The phenomenological first-person reports we get from high-functioning people with autism confirm the second person observations. One autistic youth says, "I really didn't know there were people until I was seven years old…I then suddenly realized there were people. But not like you do. I still have to remind myself that there are people" (Hobson 2004).

First-person reports also confirm what researches have found about different styles of learning in children with autism. While some therapies can help children modify their behavior appropriately, it seems that the children do not fully understand why they should so modify it. For this reason they have a hard time generalizing across different cases. This is true of nonsocial properties as well as social ones. The fact that some children come to learn how to apply a general category after intensive therapy suggest that the mechanisms they use to make the generalizations are very different form the normal case. Thus, in order for a child to generalize, she must be shown many different kinds of situations in which a particular behavior is appropriate. This is not unlike how animals are trained, as Temple Grandin reports from both her first-person and third-person study of autism:

It's just like teaching a guide-dog for the blind what an intersection is. If you just taught him on an intersection that had a white-painted cross-walk, the dog wouldn't know what to do on one with no cross-walk. So in order for the dog's brain to understand that concept, you gotta show him many many different types of intersections with different markings, different curbs, and different lights. Then, when you take him to a strange city he's gonna know what to do. Now with a severely autistic child you have to do exactly the same thing. You have to teach him not to run across the street in many many many different places” (Grandin 2006).

Therapists who work with children on the autistic spectrum put forward third-person evidence that the social interactions of some people with autism are markedly different from the interactions of people without autism.
different from the normal case. Features of a situation that are transparent to normal people can be invisible to people with autism. The creator of Social Stories Therapy, Carol Gray, presents a case that demonstrates this difference quite well. Eric was a high-functioning high school student, who was doing well in ABA therapy and so was mainstreamed into the general classroom. However, a serious problem emerged. Eric would consistently interrupt teachers during lectures, and was disrupting the other students. Gray had been working with Eric for some time, and none of the therapy was helping to stop this behavior. In therapy sessions, Eric acknowledged that he was interrupting, and pledged not to interrupt, but the next day he would interrupt all the same. Note that while Eric was diagnosed with autism, he was highly verbal, able to read and write, and held conversations with his therapist.

Gray’s breakthrough with Eric came after an incident during a class assembly that was videotaped. As the speaker got on stage and began his presentation, Eric interrupted. He shouted over the speaker, “Yesterday they confused the schedule yesterday. Yesterday they confused the schedule—yesterday.” The speaker stopped and looked at Eric. “Yeah?” he said. Eric continued, “Yesterday [inaudible] confused the schedule.” The speaker replied, “Yeah? How many of you are confused? Several people. Teachers are confused. We have a number of us who are confused.” The auditorium was in an uproar with people laughing.

Gray used this videotape to try to figure out why Eric was interrupting. In their next therapy session, she showed him the tape. What follows is a transcript of a portion of that session:

CG: We have?
E: A speaker. Because I interrupted.
CG: An—oh, you are ahead of me now. And the speaker is talking to whom?
E: I don’t know.
CG: Talking to…?
E. Me.
CG: You. Right.
E: Yeah.
CG: Anybody else? Is he talking to anybody else?
E: No.
CG: He is, Eric.
E: Talking to anybody else.
CG: Yeah, he’s talking to about 500 students and you are one of the 500 students.

CG: And the speaker is talking to…who is he talking to?
E: Mr. [inaudible.] Eric?
CG: Eric. But he’s also talking to who else.
E: Ummm. Brenda?
CG: Right. How many people is the speaker talking to?
E: Me.
CG: One? Is he talking to just one person?
E: Yeah.
CG: No Eric, he is talking to about 500 students.
E: Yeah.
CG: Not just Eric.
E: Excuse me.

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CG: How many people?
E: Think hard?
CG: Yup. How many people were at that assembly? Lots?
E: Lots of people.
CG: OK.
E: I’ll write it down.

……
CG: Listen and tell me if you hear people laughing.
Plays video.
CG: Listen.
CG: Tell me if you hear people laughing.
-Laughing-
CG: Are people laughing?
E: No. Yeah.
CG: You think?
E: Yeah?
CG: Do you think they laughed because you interrupted or did they laugh because there were changes in schedule?
E: They laughed because--because they cannot change--because they felt the same.
CG: OK, they laugh because they felt the same as you did?
E: Yeah.
CG: OK.

……
CG: A bunch of kids and 30 adults and Eric interrupted and everybody laughed, and the reason they laughed is because they felt the same as Eric did.
E: Yeah.
CG: OK, I’m going to explain the situation now to you, OK? And I want you to listen and see how my description is different.
E: Can I do it?
CG: No I’m going to describe it. I’m going to write it.
E: All right.
CG: (writing) You have kids…Eric interrupts…OK, and I think that everybody laughed because--
E: (interrupting) They felt the same.
CG: (writing) Eric interrupted and it’s not right to interrupt a speaker at an assembly.
CG: OK there’s your opinion, you think they laughed because they felt the same, but Eric I think they laughed because you interrupted. And they thought that was kind of funny.
E: (hesitating) Yeah, well, I can stop it (Gray 1996).

This interaction demonstrates that Eric does not recognize basic facts about his social environment. He doesn’t know that there are other people in the auditorium, and
he doesn’t realize that the speaker isn’t directing his remarks to only him. It isn’t even clear whether Eric realizes what Gray means when she says “No, Eric he is talking to about 500 students.” Even if he does recognize truth and falsity, Eric has problems saying what speakers’ words mean. For example, though he was trained using ABA techniques not to interrupt, and though he promised not to interrupt, from this incident Gray realizes that Eric doesn’t understand the meaning of “interrupt.” He can’t understand it, in part because he doesn’t see the distinction between a one-on-one conversation and a lecture to an audience.

Eric is also unable to attribute mostly correct beliefs to others. When pressed to attribute a belief at all, he attributes his own belief to others: if the others laughed, they must have laughed because they felt like he did. And if he can’t attribute correct beliefs to others when those beliefs differ from his own, he certainly won’t be able to optimize the number true beliefs he attributes to others, or to minimize the false ones. Eric doesn’t seem to be an interpreter. Yet, Eric speaks.

4. On analytic and empirical claims

Bouma concludes her paper with a brief discussion of why Davidson’s conceptual analysis is not subject to any empirical constraints. When Davidson says that a creature cannot have a belief without having a concept of a belief, i.e. without understanding that beliefs can be true or false, or when he adds that the concept of belief can emerge only in the context of interpretation, he certainly does not describe (nor does he intend to describe) what people do when they communicate. His goal is instead to prescribe what it means to say that so-and-so has a belief. In other words, he is not occupied with empirical research and observation, but with the conceptual analysis of the concept ‘belief’. So, Bouma is right to notice that his analysis is not intended “to serve as a description of how all people actually behave” (Bouma 2006, 32), but to provide us with the criteria that need to be fulfilled in order for us to grant that a creature (child, adult, or ape) has beliefs, is able to interpret others, or speak language.

However, the question is whether or not analysis of this kind should be insensitive to what people actually do when they communicate. Given that conceptual analysis of concepts such as ‘belief’, ‘interpretation’, ‘language’, ‘communication’ and the like is substantially different from logical analysis of mathematical concepts, it seems unlikely that such analyses can ever be unrelated to what people do and what they do not do. That is, what people usually do when they communicate and what people with certain deficiencies cannot do is of great importance to us if we are to cast more light and deepen our understanding of the criteria for linguistic communication or social understanding. While we can (along with Davidson) decide up front what counts as language based on our initial intuitions about what one must have in order to utter meaningful sentences, it does not seem prudent to stick to the initial definition without regard to possible borderline cases. Cases such as autism can in fact help us sharpen our criteria. That is, we shouldn’t be trying to understand these cases so that they fit the initial criteria come what may. Instead, we should recognize when it's time to revise the criteria.

Indeed, if we reject the idea that conceptual analysis needs to be sensitive to empirical facts about the way we use the terms, then it is impossible for there to be a language user that does not interpret. As Bouma points out, those who score high on the
tests for receptive and expressive language but who are unable to interpret are either not really using language, or are not really interpreting.

Consider again Eric. He uses language, but is not a natural attributor of generally correct beliefs to others. Given the two options, Bouma suggests not that we reject the claim that he is a language user. Rather, she suggests we should conclude that he actually interprets. In order to make sense of this claim, there needs to be an account of what it might mean to say that Eric interprets, given his large variation from the typical case and his inability to apply the Principle of Charity.

Bouma could try to account for Eric as an interpreter by roughly following Glüer and Pagin’s (2003) suggestion. If we consider radical interpretation at the level of a community of interpreters, as opposed to the level of the individual, perhaps we can make sense of autistic speakers as (non-radical) interpreters who understand what is being said, even though they cannot radically interpret in the Davidsonian sense. (That is, even though they cannot engage in what Glüer and Pagin call a “methodologically proper” interpretation.) Glüer and Pagin’s argument is that, “If normal speakers speak and interpret by or in accordance with charity, and if normal speakers can successfully interpret and be interpreted by autistic speakers, then autistic speakers too interpret in accordance with charity (as far as normal and literal language use is concerned), and speak so that they are successfully interpretable by way of charity” (Glüer and Pagin 2003, 46). Given a background in which meaning is properly determined by charity (i.e., that if the community of speakers end up with interpretations that the principle of charity would predict), we might think of meaningful communication between two people as sufficient for them both to be interpreters (in this weaker, methodologically improper sense of interpreter).

There is one problem with this strategy, namely, it leads to conclusions that Davidson would not be so inclined to accept. The claim that we successfully communicate with autistic speakers rests on a rich tapestry of behavioral attributes. We can cooperate with autistic speakers, we can predict their behavior, and thus we conclude that the beliefs we attribute to them are accurate. However, the same can be said for prelinguistic children and some nonhuman primates. As long as the requirement for being an interpreter depends on the community’s decision that the best way to describe the pattern of behavior is to ascribe propositional content, then it is not only autistic speakers who are allowed into the circle of interpreters. And this is a conclusion that Davidson would want to reject.8

All conceptual analysis starts with some empirical information, whether it be one’s own introspection or more extensive experience with the world. We suggest that Davidson’s conceptual analysis fails because he refuses to take into account the interesting cases on the edge of the concepts, and instead hopes to find necessary and sufficient conditions for core cases.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that we cannot arrive at an understanding of what it means to speak language, communicate, and understand other people without paying close attention to the so-called fringe cases such as prelinguistic children, autistic

8 On the other hand, Glüer and Pagin’s modification of Davidson’s theory is quite welcome to us.
individuals, or some nonhuman primates. We recognize that this is not the way analytic philosophers of the 20th century (including Davidson) have approached these questions. The traditional analysis of such concepts usually aims to put forth the conditions for what language or social understanding is on an a priori basis, and to provide direction on how to classify individuals based on these explications. In contrast, we hold that such a procedure might, in fact, deepen rather than avoid confusions about the nature of language and social understanding. We have argued that if conceptual analysis is to have any value at all, it must rely on real-life typical cases as well as fringe cases. This is not to say that empirical evidence can be used in a straightforward way to confirm or disconfirm theories of language and social understanding. But it can be used to clarify what these phenomena are.

That attempts to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for concepts such as ‘language’, ‘meaning’, ‘understanding’, and ‘communication’ are largely misguided is nicely captured by Wittgenstein in Philosophical Investigations. One can only think of paragraph 3 where Wittgenstein tries to cast more light on the nature of such definitions:

> It is as if someone were to say: "A game consists in moving objects about on a surface according to certain rules..." --and we replied: You seem to be thinking of board games, but there are others. (Wittgenstein 1953, 3)

The “other games” of interest here are, of course, prelinguistic children, autistic individuals and non-human primates. Only the close study of these cases will tell us more about the real nature of our own linguistic abilities and how they relate to the ways in which we conceptualize ourselves and our relations to others.
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