Mindblindness and Radical Interpretation in Davidson

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There has been a fair amount of interest in the philosophical community lately with respects to attempts by developmental psychologists to define and explain childhood autism.¹ The interest arises because many of these psychologists suggest that autism is best characterized as a failure of the child to develop what is called a “theory of mind.”² What they mean by “theory of mind” varies, but in general, the claim is that these children do not describe or view the world as containing minds—things with beliefs, thoughts, intentions or desires—nor do they interact with people qua people. For the autistic child, the world does not contain such things. For them, the world is populated only with objects and other animate creatures. They are able to understand the causal workings of objects on each other, and the means/ends relation of animate objects, like machines and animals, but they are blind to the fact that some of the animate objects in the world are creatures with minds.

In this paper I review some of the arguments put forward by some psychologists in which they come to the conclusion that autistic individuals suffer from mindblindness, and I also look at one particular implication these sorts of individuals pose for Donald Davidson’s theory of radical interpretation. It has been claimed that a particular manifestation of mindblindness in autistic people

serves as a counterexample to claims Davidson has made about the relation between belief and intention in linguistic competence.³

In this paper I proceed in several steps. In part one, I outline what autism is, how it is diagnosed, and what some psychologists suggest the cause of autism is. In part two, I compare some of the key concepts used in the assessment of autism with some key concepts found in Davidson’s account of radical interpretation. In part three, I then rehearse an objection made by some commentators who have also pointed out these similarities, and I then attempt to rescue Davidson from refutation.

What is Autism?

Autism is a spectrum disorder usually diagnosed in children before they reach the age of three. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders defines autism as a disorder with the following symptoms:

A. A total of six (or more) items from (1), (2), and (3), with at least two from (1), and one each from (2) and (3):

(1) Qualitative impairment in social interaction, as manifested by at least two of the following:

(a) marked impairment in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviours such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body postures, and gestures to regulate social interaction;
(b) failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level;
(c) a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people (e.g., by a lack of showing, bringing, or pointing out objects of interest);
(d) lack of social or emotional reciprocity.

(2) Qualitative impairments in communication as manifested by at least one of the following:

(a) delay in, or total lack of, the development of spoken language (not accompanied by an attempt to compensate through alternative modes of communication such as gesture or mime);
(b) in individuals with adequate speech, marked impairment in the ability to initiate or sustain a conversation with others;
(c) stereotyped and repetitive use of language or idiosyncratic language;
(d) lack of varied, spontaneous make-believe play or social imitative play appropriate to developmental level.

(3) Restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities, as manifested by at least one of the following:

(a) encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest that is abnormal either in intensity or focus;
(b) apparently inflexible adherence to specific, non-functional routines or rituals;
(c) stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms (e.g., hand or finger flapping or twisting, or complex whole-body movements);
(d) persistent preoccupation with parts of objects.  

With respect to these three different categories of symptoms, this paper will address the social deficits (the first category) and the linguistic and communicative deficits (the second category).

As autism is a spectrum disorder, these sorts of symptoms range from a complete inability to communicate at all, combined with other problems like mental retardation and epilepsy (about fifty percent of those afflicted with autism fall into this range), to those individuals who are able to lead almost normal lives with minimal deviations from standard behavior—these extremes are sometimes labeled low-functioning and high-functioning autism. For the purposes of this paper we are going to be concerned with a particular subset of autism. We are interested in those people who are afflicted with autism and are able to communicate with members of their own linguistic community, but yet do not regard other persons as persons, as creatures who have beliefs and intentions, or mental states in general. This is the high-end of low-functioning autistics. They can communicate with others insofar as they speak the same language and

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understand the words spoken by members of their own linguistic community, but their social interaction is extremely impaired and they display serious deficits in understanding both the pragmatics of language and the social conventions governing the appropriate use of language. This particular group of autistics is of interest to philosophers (and it is this group that I am going to concentrate on in this paper) because their behavior pulls apart, as it were, accounts of linguistic competence and linguistic acquisition which rely on grasping the mental states of other speakers (e.g., accounts offered by philosophers like Paul Grice or Davidson). Members of this particular band of the spectrum are sometimes referred to as “autistic speakers.”

Mindblindness

Before I examine the linguistic deficits of that particular band which we will refer to as autistic speakers, I want to first examine the fact that all low-functioning autistics suffer from what Simon Baron-Cohen refers to as “mindblindness.”

The most well known and widely discussed test to determine whether a child is suffering from mindblindness or autism is what is known as the “false-belief test.” The idea behind the test is the following: if we want to know whether the child regards other people as having minds, we need to test whether she attributes to others particular mental states, or interprets the things they do in terms of knowledge, beliefs, intentions, etc. This sort of test is particularly challenging as most children at around the age of three do not possess the vocabulary of belief and intention. One way to get around the problem would be to ask the child what a person would do, based on things they know they have seen (Compare: “Where does Sally believe the marble is? with “Where will Sally look for the marble?”). So, e.g., if we let a child see a person place a marble in a box, and then ask where that person will look for the marble at a later time, we only need rely on the vocabulary of “looks.” The problem here however is that if

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5 It needs to be stressed that the analysis in this paper is directed only towards this particular band of the spectrum. No claims are made here about the linguistic competence of high-functioning autistics nor of the gesture systems sometimes found in non-linguistic low-functioning autistics. Furthermore, some critics have suggested that such autistic speakers do not exist—that insofar as they have any linguistic competence they have some ability to mindread, despite the fact that this is not acknowledged in the false-belief task. I will not address those criticisms here either. Granted, if autistic speakers did not exist, or if the false-belief test is an insufficient mechanism in determining mindreading abilities, then Davidson’s account of linguistic competence and acquisition remains on safe-ground. I will leave it to Davidson’s critics to respond to these criticisms.
the child says that the person will look for the marble in the box, it is still unclear whether the child is saying that because she is attributing a belief to that person, or whether she is expressing her own beliefs—expressing her belief as to where she would look for the marble.

In order to separate out what the child being tested believes, and what she thinks other people believe, researchers have developed a so-called “false-belief test” to ensure that the child and the other person believe different things. In this test (sometimes called the “Sally-Anne test”), the child watches as Sally places a marble in a basket, and then watches as Sally leaves the room. During her absence, Anne enters the room and removes the marble from the basket and places it in a box. Sally then re-enters. The child is asked where Sally will look for the marble. Unlike the true-belief test, the child being tested does not believe the same thing as Sally, therefore, if the child responds by saying that Sally will look for the marble in basket, then it is clear that the child is able to separate her beliefs and perspectives on the world from those of other people–she is able to recognize that she could have beliefs about the world that other people do not have. And this recognition of course indicates that she at least has some implicit grasp of the concept of belief.6 Children with autism are notoriously poor at this test. Baron-Cohen concludes that this indicates that the child is mindblind.

**The Modular Theory of Mind**

But what is the cause of this mindblindness? An answer provided by Baron-Cohen is that certain biological modules, or what he prefers to call “neurocognitive mechanisms,” are not functioning properly.7 In particular, he argues that mindreading requires four different mechanisms, and that in the case of autistics, two of these mechanisms are inactive or highly inefficient. These four mechanisms are ID, EDD, SAM, and ToMM: the Intentionality Detector, the Eye-Direction Detector, the Shared-Attention Mechanism, and the Theory-of-Mind Mechanism. It is these latter two that cause the problem for the autistic.

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6 It is interesting to note, but not something I will pursue in this paper, that Davidson has argued that in order to have the concept of belief, we first must have the concept of error (“The Problem of Objectivity”). We don’t know what it means to classify someone as having a belief, or having thoughts in general, he argues, until we are able to understand what it means for someone to have a false belief. Having the concept of belief just is to have a grasp of the idea that there is a distinction between the way the world is and how one takes the world to be.

7 Ibid., 57.
The Intentionality Detector (ID). This mechanism of the mind works by attributing to any self-propelled object the agency of goal and desire. It allows us to recognize other creatures as having a particular goal in what it is doing, and to infer the desires of that agent from those goal-oriented actions. This of course is not a human-specific mechanism and is found in almost all mammals, as having such a mechanism has tremendous survival advantages. Although ID is an essential or necessary feature of mindreading, it is not sufficient. A creature may possess ID without attributing thoughts to others. In this respect, Baron-Cohen’s title for this mechanism, “The Intentionality Detector,” is misleading, especially for philosophers who regard intentions as a species of propositional attitudes alongside beliefs and desires. According to a standard philosophical account of mind, to have an intention is an indication that one has thoughts, and hence a mind. Nevertheless, it seems clear from what Baron-Cohen has written, that he actually has in mind something like Daniel Dennett’s design stance. The idea behind the design stance is that things have a particular goal or purpose, and they act in such a way in order to satisfy that goal–this could just as easily be said about things that do not have minds. For example, we may be happy to say that a robot has a particular design, and that it is designed to achieve certain goals or functions, but we may be reluctant to say that it has intentions.

Eye-Direction Detector (EDD). The second mechanism is the EDD. This mechanism allows a creature to look at the face of another and determine where the eyes of that creature are looking. Like ID this is a mechanism with high survival value. It allows us to detect the presence of creatures with eyes, to determine whether a creature is looking at us or at something else, and it allows us to determine whether another creature has seen something else or not. Most mammals have both the ID and EDD.

The conjunction of these two modules or mechanisms allow us to assess or engage with other creatures in what are called dyadic relationships—a relationship between agent and self, or between agent and object. Conjointly they allow us to determine what another creature is looking at (us, or another object) and to assess what it wants to do with that object (or us). If we were merely to stop here, our universe would be an essentially autistic one. We would be able to determine the goals of another creature by observing it doing things in its environment. And based on our own desires and beliefs, we could manipulate our environment with the knowledge of how certain things function, in order to satisfy our wants. In that respect, our interaction with other animate creatures

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(like parents and teachers) would be no different than our interaction and manipulation of a machine, or any other tool we could use in order to attain our goals. If all we had were merely ID and EDD we would not be engaging in what are called “triadic relationships,” relationships in which not only does a subject see an agent acting purposefully toward an object, but also the subject and the agent are aware of each other as they engage that object and aware of each other’s perspectives on the object. This step to triadic relationships comes about as a result of the next two mechanisms, and crucially, it is these two mechanisms in which autistic children show marked deficiencies.

**Shared-Attention Mechanism (SAM).** A key function in building triadic relationships between oneself, another individual and an object is what is called SAM. SAM utilizes both ID and EDD in order to determine that both you and the agent are attending to the same object, and if the other creature also possess SAM, then both can become aware that they are attending to the same object and that the other knows that the other is attending to the same object. In nine to fourteen month old children this is usually assessed by watching them look at the gaze of another person, and then trace the gaze to the object, look at the object, then refer back to the agent to determine whether they are looking at the same thing. Toddlers manifest their SAM by protodeclaratives, in particular, pointing gestures. To point to something is an attempt by that person to single out an object and draw someone else’s attention to it. We can get toddlers to focus their attention on an object and recognize that they know (and know that we know, etc.) we are directing their attention to it; they can also direct our attention to objects, aware that we are able to attend to the object and that we may be interested in the object in the same way that they are.

But for low-functioning autistics, this is not the case. Studies by Baron-Cohen and others suggest that “they do not show gaze monitoring, nor do they show the related behaviors of attempting to direct visual attention of others by using the pointing gesture in its ‘protodeclarative’ form.” So, for autistic children, sharing attention with someone else is not an activity they engage in. They will only interact with others in a dyadic, instrumental way—when they want someone to get something for them or to operate something for them. E.g., they may bring a bottle they cannot open to an adult to open it for them, but they typically will not bring an object to an adult or point to an object merely to draw the adults attention to it. To use a Kantian metaphor, they see others as means to their ends but not ends-in-themselves.

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9 Ibid., 66.
Theory of Mind Mechanism (ToMM). If we get as far as having or triggering these three neurocognitive mechanisms or modules, Baron-Cohen argues that we can grasp the perceptual and volitional states of other agents or animate creatures. But it is only when ToMM comes on board that we are able utilize knowledge about someone’s volitional and perceptual states as input to make claims about their epistemic mental states. It is only when ToMM is activated that we regard other people as having minds, which includes thoughts, emotions, beliefs, intentions, and as engaging in activities like pretending, deceiving, imagining, etc.

In normally developing children, ToMM first emerges around the eighteen to twenty-four month mark, and its occurrence is usually manifested by the fact that children start to engage in pretend play (they can pretend that other things (dolls, toys, imaginary friends) have mental states, and they can distinguish between pretend or make-believe worlds and the real world). Later, from around the age of three to four years, ToMM is further manifested by the fact that children are able to grasp that some knowledge can be the result of perception (i.e., that seeing leads to knowing), and that some perceptions may be illusory (i.e., that appearance is not necessarily the same as reality).

It is clear then how ToMM is related to low-functioning autism and how the false-belief task is supposed to be a test of this. Failure at the false-belief test indicates a failure to acknowledge a distinction between how things are and how others take them to be, and a failure to fully grasp how perception leads to knowledge.

Davidson’s Theory of Radical Interpretation

For those who have studied the work of Davidson, especially his philosophy of language and mind, these two features of mindreading highlighted by Baron-Cohen, viz., SAM and ToMM, ought to strike a chord in that they are very similar to theories he has himself put forward with respect to linguistic communication and understanding. In particular, I would suggest that the account of SAM put forward here resembles in many respects Davidson’s account of triangulation, and that ToMM has many affinities with his account of radical interpretation. For the

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10 Ibid., 51.
11 In his development and explication of this argument, it is interesting to note that Baron-Cohen makes use of the characteristically philosophical language of propositional attitudes and referential opacity to differentiate epistemic mental states from perceptual or volitional states.
12 Ibid., 54–55.
next part of this paper I will indicate in which ways some of the things Baron-Cohen and others have had to say in locating the problem with autistic children have been anticipated, independently it seems, by Davidson.

**ToMM and Radical Interpretation.** Davidson’s earliest papers in the philosophy of language have two major components—his account of the form a theory of meaning for any natural ought to take, and his account of how it is that one is able to understand a natural language. It is this second aspect, which Davidson calls radical interpretation, that I want to concentrate on first, in comparison to Baron-Cohen’s ToMM.

Davidson’s theory of radical interpretation is based on the idea that in order to understand or grasp the meaning of what is being said by a speaker, we must be an interpreter of the speaker’s mental states. Davidson, following Quine,\(^{13}\) encourages us to imagine that we are faced with the prospect of trying to understand a language we have never heard before. Paying attention to the details of how it is that we eventually understand the native in these sorts of cases sheds light on some of the constitutive features of communication and meaning, not only in the radical case, but also in the homophonic case, the case where we seem to be unproblematically conversing with speakers in our own linguistic community. As Davidson says in “Radical Interpretation”:

> The problem of interpretation is domestic as well as foreign: it surfaces for speakers of the same language in the form of the question, how can it be determined that the language is the same? Speakers of the same language can go on the assumption that for them the same expressions are to be interpreted the same way, but this does not indicate what justifies the assumption. All understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation. But it will help keep assumptions from going unnoticed to focus on cases where interpretation is most clearly called for: interpretation in one idiom of talk in another.\(^{14}\)

Let me highlight three of the constitutive features of Davidson’s theory of communication. First, the project of radically interpreting the native is essentially the task of determining what the native speaker believes and intends. The best route to determining what a particular utterance means is to determine

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what the native believes about the world and what she intends her words to mean. So for Davidson, the project of determining the meaning of the words used by the speaker is at the same time the project of assessing the speaker’s attitudes towards the world and other people. He says: “Since we cannot hope to interpret linguistic activity without knowing what a speaker believes, and cannot found a theory of what he means on a prior discovery of his beliefs and intentions, I conclude that in interpreting utterances from scratch—in radical interpretation—we must somehow deliver simultaneously a theory of belief and a theory of meaning.”

Second, in order to be able to break into the radically foreign language, Davidson has famously argued that the speaker and interpreter must share many beliefs about the world. If the native’s beliefs about the world differed too much from the interpreter’s, it would be impossible to correlate what the native believes (utterances held-true) with what the radical interpreter believes. So, according to this Principle of Charity, not only do interpreters attribute beliefs to the speaker, those beliefs must be mostly true. Again, here’s Davidson: “The methodological advice to interpret in a way that optimizes agreement should not be conceived as resting on a charitable assumption about human intelligence that might turn out to be false. If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behavior of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything.”

Third, Davidson has not only highlighted the fact that we need to attribute true beliefs to speakers in order to correctly understand them, but he has gone further to suggest that we also must understand a whole host of other propositional attitudes. In many of his later writings, for example, he has paid particular attention to the different sorts of intentions present in every linguistic utterance. An interpreter must grasp the speaker’s semantic intentions (her intentions that her words be interpreted in certain ways), her intentions of force (her intentions that her utterance be interpreted as having a particular force, e.g., assertive, imperative, interrogative, etc.) and, sometimes, her ulterior intentions (her intention to achieve some non-linguistic goal). If we miss any of these intentions, we are going to miss either the literal meaning of the words used or the speaker’s point in making the utterance:

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15 Donald Davidson, “Belief and the Basis of Meaning,” in ibid., 141–54, at 144.
16 Davidson, “Radical Interpretation,” 137.
Each of these foregoing categories may harbor more, in some cases many more, intentions but at least one intention of each sort is always present. A simple case: I shout “Thin ice” as you skate toward disaster. My ulterior motive is to warn you, the force of my utterance is assertory, and I intend you to take my words to mean that the ice toward which you are skating is thin … A linguistic action is frustrated if its intended audience does not grasp the producer’s intended semantic meaning and force.\(^{18}\)

A general characterization of Davidson’s radical interpreter, then, is someone who is acutely aware, or able to become aware, of the mental state of the speaker. The more the interpreter knows about the speaker’s beliefs and intentions, the better able she is at grasping what her words mean. The more she knows what her words mean, the better equipped she is to grasp her beliefs and intentions. Working your way into a radically foreign language has the character of simultaneously developing a theory of meaning and a theory of mind for the speaker.

**SAM and Triangulation.** Since the publication of “Rational Animals” in 1982, Davidson has been more inclined to talk about the conditions that make language possible by using the metaphor of triangulation.\(^{19}\) In general, Davidson’s triangulation argument has been used to serve many purposes, e.g., to show, contra Quine, that stimulus is distal, and not proximal,\(^{20}\) to show that language and thought are essentially social,\(^{21}\) and that private languages are impossible,\(^{22}\) and to locate the source of normativity in linguistic communication.\(^{23}\)

On Davidson’s account, triangulation is a necessary condition for the possibility of having a language at all. It requires that there be at least two people for language to emerge (they form two of the apexes of the triangle) and that they are able to coordinate their responses to the environment and each other on the same object (the third apex). This requires that both individuals are aware that the other person has the same object on which they are triangulating in mind, and that they find their responses to the object similar enough to theirs that communication

\(^{18}\) Davidson, “Locating Literary Language,” 171.


\(^{22}\) Donald Davidson, “The Second Person,” in ibid., 107–21.

and thought could emerge. But Davidson says: “The triangular arrangement is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition, of thought.” He then asks:

What must be added to the basic triangle of two or more creatures interacting with each other through the mediation of the world if that interaction is to support thought? The unhelpful answer is that the relation between the creatures must include linguistic communication. For unless the creatures can communicate, unless they can engage in the exchange of propositional contents, there is no way they can take advantage of their ability to triangulate their shared world. They must, in other words, recognize each other as embodied minds with a location in a common space and time. The reason this answer is not very helpful is that it assumes what was to be explained. Of course, if there is language there is thought, so it cannot be easier to explain the former than the latter. Nevertheless, it is useful to recognize the somewhat surprising fact that the social element that is essential to language is also essential to thought itself.24

Like Baron-Cohen, who argues that SAM is required in order for ToMM to be triggered, i.e., that we must be able to jointly attend to the same objects before we can regard other creatures as having minds, Davidson also argues that triangulation is a necessary condition for thought and language, and since radical interpretation is understood as the process of simultaneously developing a theory of mind and theory of meaning, triangulation is a necessary condition of radical interpretation.

The Challenge of Autism

We can see right away how it is that this sort of theory runs into problems when we consider the case of autistic speakers, as I defined them earlier. Autistic speakers, strictly understood, are able to speak and understand, despite serious pragmatic defects and social inappropriateness, yet are unable to read the mind of those they understand and commune with. These autistic speakers do not attribute beliefs or intentions to other people at all and obviously do not apply the

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Principle of Charity. Their inability to attribute intentions and beliefs to others also entails that they fail to discriminate amongst the many sorts of intentions found in every linguistic encounter. There is also evidence that they cannot triangulate with other speakers. They are unable to follow another’s directed gaze toward an object and unable to direct other people’s attention. In short, it appears that autistic speakers have acquired a language without, at the same time, acquiring a theory of mind. Critics argue that this is a direct contradiction of Davidson’s theory of radical interpretation. He states that all understanding is interpretation, yet here we have a case of speaking and understanding with no interpretation at all. An autistic speaker is able to utter sentences that people from her own linguistic community are able to understand, and she is able to understand the utterances of these same members. In order to account for how they came to acquire this ability, these critics argue that we must look to theories that do not rely on the ability to develop a theory of mind such as Davidson’s.25

In what follows, I respond to these criticisms in two ways. First, I argue that these critics have misread Davidson on what he has said about language acquisition. Second, I suggest that radical interpretation, correctly understood, makes good sense of autism and autistic speakers. Autistic speakers are not counterexamples to Davidson’s theory, because they are not radical interpreters.

So what has Davidson actually said about the acquisition of language? Does he have a theory about how a child learns her first language? Well, if one did not think that there was any significant difference between the child’s acquisition of a first language and the acquisition of a second language after the critical period (said to be around seven years of age), then it would seem that Davidson’s theory of radical interpretation would apply to the child as well as to the jungle linguist.26 But Davidson has been quite clear throughout his career that the resources required for radical interpretation are not available to the child. In that respect, he says he is only concerned with how, “People who already have a language (whatever that means) manage to apply their skill or knowledge to actual cases of interpretation. All the things I assume an interpreter knows or can do depends on having a mature set of concepts, and

26 Michael Dummett is one prominent critic of Davidson who, mistakenly assumes that Davidson’s philosophy of language is an attempt to account for first language acquisition. This assumption lies in the background of much of Dummett’s criticism of Davidson’s proposal of radical interpretation. (See his “What is a Theory of Meaning? (I)”, in Michael Dummett, The Seas of Language (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993)
being at home with the business of linguistic communication.”

He has essentially been quiet about what he regards as an “infinitely difficult problem” of describing the details of how it is the child is able to gradually emerge as a speaker. There are a couple reasons for this.

First, Davidson characterizes radical interpretation as the process of constructing a Tarski-style theory of truth for the speaker we want to understand. In the case of the jungle linguist, this process of interpretation may proceed (although it is unlikely) exactly how Quine and Davidson describe it: correlating sentences held-true by the native with the conditions under which they are uttered, and mapping this on to the Tarskian quantificational schema. In the case of the everyday interpreter of language, Davidson uses this theory of radical interpretation as a rational reconstruction of what we are implicitly doing in practice: if we possessed the kind of knowledge radical interpretation attributes to speakers and hearers of a language (the T-theory), then we would have some of the resources necessary to understand that language. But a moment’s reflection shows us that the features required to construct Tarski-style truth theories are not, and, more importantly, could not be, available to creatures who are not linguistically competent (e.g., pre-linguistic children). This is most clearly seen when we remember that the Tarskian schema makes a distinction between object and meta-languages, between the language of the speaker and the language of the interpreter. But the pre-linguistic child, the one who is learning her first language, does not yet possess a language, so of course she will be unable to state the condition under which, say, her parents’ utterances are true.

Second, Davidson has been very clear about the role that the speaker’s intentions play in accounting for meaning and communication. He has stated, e.g., that “meaning, in the special sense in which we are interested when we talk of

28 The quietism I am discussing here is with regards to spelling out the empirical and psychological details of how children come to acquire language. Davidson is not quiet, however, when it comes to the philosophical question of indicating the conditions that make language acquisition possible. In “Reading the Minds of Others,” Manuela Ungureanu provides a convincing and careful examination of the differences between the philosophical project with which Davidson is engaged and the empirical or naturalistic project many of Davidson’s critics think he should be engaged with.
29 Donald Davidson, “Truth and Meaning,” in Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, 17–36.
30 Of course, only one language is mentioned in radical interpretation (the object language, the language we want to understand), but in order to state the conditions under which the object language sentences are true, some language must be used—and this is the language of the interpreter.
what an utterance literally means, gets a life from those situations in which someone intends (or assumes or expects) that his words will be understood in a certain way, and they are” and, elsewhere, that “the sole source of linguistic meaning is the intentional production of tokens of sentences.” In order to grasp that the English speaker means *snow is white* by “Snow is white,” or that Mrs. Malaprop means *a nice arrangement of epiteth* by “a nice derangement of epitaphs,” Davidson argues that it is essential that we grasp her semantic intentions and intentions of force. But according to Davidson, intentions, like beliefs and desires, are propositional attitudes. In order to discriminate one intention or belief from another, we must be able to finely individuate them, and this requires the resources of a fully developed language. But since the pre-linguistic child does not have a language at all, she is not able to attribute these sorts of intentions and beliefs to those she is learning the language from. Her ability to ascribe beliefs and intentions can only be as sophisticated as her linguistic resources will allow. Radical interpreters and jungle linguists do possess this level of sophistication–pre-linguistic children do not.

So, for at least these two reasons, radical interpretation is not a model we can rely on to account for first-language acquisition. In fact, Davidson expresses bafflement as how we can actually describe how preverbal children come to have a language. It is obviously a gradual process, a process in which children move from having no concepts and no thoughts, to being fully competent language users. Describing the contents of their words and sentences at this later stage is easy–they are more or less the same as ours. But for preverbal children gradually acquiring language, things stand differently. Davidson says:

> What we lack is a vocabulary for describing the intermediate steps. We are able to describe what the preverbal child does by employing the language of neurology, or in crude behavioral terms we can describe movements and sounds emitted. You can deceive yourself into thinking that the child is talking if it makes sounds which, if made by a genuine language user, would have a definite meaning. (It is even possible to do this with chimpanzees.) But words, like thoughts, have a familiar meaning, a propositional content, only if they occur in a rich context, for such a context is required to give the words or thoughts a location and a meaningful function … If you want to describe what is going on in the

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head of the child when it has a few words which it utters in appropriate situations, you will fail for lack of the right sort of words of your own… It is not that we have a clear idea what sort of language we could use to describe half-formed minds; there may be a very deep conceptual difficulty or impossibility involved. That means there is a perhaps insuperable problem in giving a full description of the emergence of thought. I am thankful that I am not in the field of developmental psychology.\(^{33}\)

Davidson explains it this way: using radical interpretation, we are able to understand the utterances of people with fully developed minds and fully developed linguistic repertoires. Although there will be some indeterminacy in interpretational schemes (e.g., there may be more than one truth theory consistent with the truth conditions of the speaker’s utterance), this indeterminacy is no more threatening than deciding between, say, Celsius and Fahrenheit, to measure temperature; one interpretational scheme (or temperature scale) is just as good as the other because meaning (or temperature) remains invariant. But in the situation of a child who is gradually learning her first language, the case is different. Since she is not equipped with a repertoire that will constrain the meaning of her utterances in the same way as a competent adult speaker, not only will there be many different interpretational schemes that will account for what she is saying, but also, and more importantly, the content of what has been said will vary from one scheme to another. Davidson says that his “suggestion with respect to the early stages of language acquisition, was that we should ask: in how many ways can we represent the information conveyed by the child’s utterances in our own language. The more ways we can represent what the child says, the less information the child’s utterances convey. When the ways become as constrained as they are with accomplished speakers, the child is an accomplished speaker.”\(^{34}\)

This may seem counterintuitive. Under the appropriate circumstances (e.g., in the presence of her mother), the child utters noises that sound like our words. We automatically and uncritically want to say that the child is picking up some English words, and that the child means by those words what we mean. We may say that the child has learned part of the language. But I suspect that the reason we think the child means anything by those words is because those are the


words that we would use in that circumstance—we are dealing with a case of homophonic interpretation where we are easily misled into thinking that we are dealing with a genuine speaker whose words have the same content as ours.

In order to avoid being misled by these homophonic cases, it is better to imagine the radical case of interpretation. If the child was being raised in a community of whose language I had no knowledge, it seems unlikely that I would be able to attribute any definite or precise content to her utterances. Imagine someone who did not speak English trying to interpret the utterances of an eighteen month old, from scratch. Eighteen month olds do a lot of babbling, so first of all it seems unlikely that the radical interpreter would be able to sort out “genuine” words from mere babbling. Further, if she was able to isolate, say, “mama,” as a linguistic utterance, how would she give it any precise content? The child has almost no other “utterances” and beliefs by which such an attribution could be constrained, and eighteen month old children utter these “words” inconsistently—when her mother is present, when the mother is absent, when the baby-sitter is present, etc.

Keeping these remarks in mind, I think there are three questions that need to be asked with respect to autistic speakers. First, does radical interpretation account for how autistic speakers acquire their first language? Second, can autistic speakers radically interpret others? And, third, can we radically interpret the autistic speaker?

**Autistic Speakers and Radical Interpretation**

With respect to the first question, Do autistic speaker’s use radical interpretation to acquire their first language? the answer is obvious. Radical interpretation requires that we are already linguistically competent, and that we are able to discriminate finely the contents of other people’s minds. Autistic speakers learning their first language cannot do this, but not because of their particular impairment, rather because no child learning her first language has this ability. Whatever account is put in place here, it is going to be conceptually quite different from Davidson’s. The whole issue of mindblindness at this stage is a red herring.

In that respect, I think we can answer the charges made by Davidson’s critics. They argue that the existence of autistic speakers threatens his account of radical interpretation because these speakers have acquired their first language without reading the minds of others, without the ability to attribute beliefs and intentions to them. Davidson, however, denies that any preverbal children have
the ability to read minds and attribute intentions and beliefs to other speakers in
the way that radical interpretation requires, and to the extent that radical
interpretation depends on this ability, preverbal children, autistic or otherwise, do
not radically interpret. Of course, Davidson’s theory of radical interpretation does
indeed make claims about the relation between interpreting other speakers and
being able to ascribe beliefs and intentions to them. Barring the case of first
language acquisition, Davidson’s argument is that if we cannot ascribe beliefs and
intentions to a speaker, then we are not going to be able to understand the
linguistic utterances of that person. In fact, Davidson goes so far as to say that if
we cannot grasp her intentions or assign meaning to her utterances, then there is
no reason for us to say that she is a speaker of a language at all.

Since autistic speakers are afflicted with mindblindness, then they should
be ruled out as radical interpreters. Since they do not grasp the complex intentions
that are associated with linguistic utterances, then they should not be able to
interpret them. But autistic speakers do, in fact, understand other speakers. This
is not a claim about how the autistic speaker came to understand her first
language; this is the claim that autistic speakers who have already acquired their
first language are able to understand people who speak like they do. There are a
couple of things we should keep in mind in determining what we are committed
to when we make such a claim.

First, while it is certainly true that autistic speakers understand many of
the utterances of other speakers from their linguistic community, this
understanding is extremely literal and rigid. Autistic speakers, e.g., have a very
difficult time coping with any deviant or idiosyncratic language use. Davidson has
done a lot of significant work in spelling out how we understand and cope with
malapropisms, slips of the tongue, garbled grammar, puns, etc. All of this requires
that we understand the utterer’s semantic intentions, and that we maintain a
certain flexibility in linguistic exchanges whereby we can modify, on the fly as
it were, parts of our interpretational scheme that would make more sense of the
speaker’s utterances. But how would the autistic speaker, whose understanding
of, say, English, is extremely rigid and literal, who is unable to ascribe intentions
and beliefs to fellow speakers, how would she make out in understanding, e.g., a
Mrs. Malaprop?

Second, autistic speakers are very poor at grasping the pragmatic aspects
of language. Although they may be able to understand the literal meanings of
words in cases where the speaker assigns the same meaning to the words that the

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35 Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs.”
autistic speaker does, the autistic speaker is generally unable to grasp the point of the speaker’s utterance. Autistic speakers do quite poorly in understanding metaphors, jokes, irony, sarcasm, etc. This, again, is due to their inability to grasp the speaker’s intentions.

Third, based on these above claims, it seems unlikely that the autistic speaker would make a good radical interpreter, in the strict sense of the term. That is, although the autistic speaker does possess a first language, she would not be able to adopt the position of the jungle linguist and sort out for herself what the native’s utterances mean. Of course, there is no way to test that hypothesis, but a closely related hypothesis is that autistic speakers would not be able to acquire a second language (after the critical period) in an immersion situation. This seems like a pretty plausible claim, especially if the autistic speaker is unable to deal with a speaker’s deviance from what she takes to be the standard meaning of words and if she is unable to cope with metaphor and irony, etc.

I am willing to conclude based on these sorts of considerations that autistic speakers are not radical interpreters. Their ability to understand the utterances of people from their own linguistic community is not accounted for by the fact that they attribute beliefs and intentions to them, but by the fact that other members of their community speak the way they do. If we take seriously Davidson’s claim that all understanding of another is accounted for by radical interpretation, and since I am said to be radically interpreting members from my own linguistic community who speak almost exactly like me, obviously, one wants to say, we are radically interpreting the autistic speaker. The way we understand her words and utterances is the same as how we understand everyone else from our linguistic community.

But, again, there is something misleading about the homophonic case of which we must be aware. We assume in these cases that when we hear someone utter, say, “The marble is in the box” that they intend us to grasp that they intend their words to mean that the marble is in the box. On a Davidsonian analysis there is a certain amount of intentional complexity involved every time a speaker tries to convey something to her audience. We usually pay no attention to these intentions when the speaker speaks like we do. We assume that her words mean what we mean by them when we speak to members of our linguistic community.

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36 Sabbagh, “Communicative Intentions and Language.”
As I have been emphasizing, these sorts of intentions are made manifest when communication is not going smoothly, when the assumption of homophonic interpretation fails (the situation of the jungle linguist or, say, the case of Mrs. Malaprop).

So let’s imagine that you are interpreting an autistic speaker whose utterances belong to a language radically different from our own. Since this “speaker” does not attribute beliefs, intentions or other propositional attitudes to you, she is not going to regard you as a person at all, let alone a person who is trying to interpret her utterances. In this case the interpretation is going to be completely one-way, as opposed to dialogical. The autistic speaker will utter sentences that could be interpreted by members of her own linguistic community because they sound like their utterances (they are homophonic), but the autistic speaker will not utter these sentences with the intention that her utterances have a particular meaning, or with the intention that others understand her as having those intentions (this is because she does not possess ToMM). In the radical case, failure to attribute these intentions to the speaker will immediately preclude interpretation. But further to this, autistic speakers do not triangulate (their SAM is not activated)—they do not grasp the intentions of other speakers who are attempting to direct their attention to other objects, nor do they attempt to direct the attention to others. Not only will the interpreter be unable to attribute semantic intentions to the autistic speaker, she will not be able to correlate her utterances with truth-conditions.

Conclusion

I conclude that autistic speakers are neither radically interpretable, nor are they radical interpreters. It is only in the homophonic situation that we are lead to believe that they are interpreters, but if we follow the methodology of radical interpretation (as Davidson and Quine urge us to), we see that this is an illusion. Furthermore, critics who maintain that radical interpretation cannot account for how autistic speakers acquire their first language have failed to appreciate that Davidson’s theory of radical interpretation was never intended to account for how we acquire a first language at all, whether that acquisition was typical or impaired. In either case, the theory of radical interpretation is not threatened by the fact that there are autistic speakers.