

# Language and Know-How

David Simpson

*Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 9 (4), 2010: 629-643.

## 1. Introduction

It is perhaps natural to think that we are able to communicate by virtue of knowing, and sharing, a common language. However, this generates three questions: what is the nature of the language that is known and shared?, in what sense is it known?, and how does this knowledge enable communication?

Prior to Frege this language was thought of as a code that mediates between the minds of communicators. But Frege, and then Wittgenstein, convinced philosophers that the model of a code translating and transmitting thoughts could not work. If we assume that the code translates thoughts that interlocutors grasp independently of language, the nature of these non-linguistic thoughts is mysterious. For example, it seems impossible to explain what it is to grasp a complex concept independently of how it is expressed in language. More importantly, the model merely puts off an explanation of what it is to understand a language, for the public code seems to be a translation of a private language. As Michael Dummett puts it,

If we explain someone's knowledge of a second language as consisting in his grasp of a scheme of translation between it and his mother tongue, we tacitly presuppose that he understands his mother tongue; it then remains to be explained in what his understanding of his mother tongue consists. (Dummett 1978: 98)

This sort of objection leads to a conception of language, 'not just as a means of expressing thought, but as a *vehicle* for thought' (Dummett 1978: 99), which makes no appeal to the prior grasp of the concepts that can be expressed in language.

Accepting the post-Fregean revision, attention turns to the second question. Most commonly, and again following Frege's lead, this is partly answered by specifying what it is that we know, namely a theory of meaning for a language.

A theory of meaning can be shared because it is conventional, arising not from the soul of individual speakers, but in their common cooperative space. Thus it is by virtue of two speakers sharing a theory of meaning for a language that they are able to communicate. It might seem that we have thereby answered the third question, since if language is the vehicle of thought, and if knowing a language involves knowing a theory of meaning for a language, then our communicative interactions follow from our shared theory regarding a mutual vehicle.

However, complications arise when we reflect on our actual linguistic outputs and our linguistic knowledge. Throughout the discussion I have briefly sketched, the necessity of a shared language has been taken for granted, however, it seems to be challenged from two directions.

One problem for the claim that we necessarily know a language is that almost no competent language users could cite any semantic or syntactic rules, or provide even a basic description of their language. So even if language understood as a set of conventional rules is something we *can* know (as, for examples, linguists and philosophers), knowing it is not, it seems, necessary for its successful use. Perhaps, however, we do all necessarily know our language, but our knowledge is, in some sense of the expression, implicit. This is the view of Michael Dummett. I will discuss this idea further in Section 3; however, the *prima facie* puzzle is how non-explicit knowledge can play a role in delivering communication.

The second problem arises from Davidson. On the one hand, he argued that linguistic conventions could not explain our sharing of language, since conventions presuppose language in order for them to be established (Davidson 1979; 1982)<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, he argued that a shared language, in the sense of a shared theory of meaning for interpreting utterances, cannot be necessary for communication, since our actual linguistic output is idiosyncratic, and yet communication overcomes this idiosyncrasy. I will return to Davidson's second argument in Section 4, but the general worry that arises from these challenges is

---

<sup>1</sup> See Simpson (1992) for discussion of these arguments in the context of speech act theory.

that the seemingly obvious idea that we know a language, and that this knowledge is what enables communication, is becoming fragile.

One response to this fragility is to claim that discussions of the epistemology of language have been working with the wrong concept of knowledge, and have been directed at the wrong point. That is, discussions have focussed, in explaining our ability to communicate, on our knowledge of language as *knowledge-that* – the grasp and application of rules and propositions. As an alternative to this intellectualist view of communication, my aim here is to promote two interrelated ideas. First, communicators primarily exercise practical cognitive abilities, what Gilbert Ryle called ‘know-how’, not propositional knowledge of rules. Second, inspired by Davidson’s neo-pragmatism, we see this know-how as focussed directly on the understanding and interpretation of others, rather than on language itself. Understanding and interpretation involves the skilful *use* of language, but language is not, in communication, the object of understanding and interpretation.

In Section 2 I will present Ryle’s (1949) account of knowledge-how and its relation to knowledge-that. I will in part explicate Ryle’s position by defending it against recent criticism, especially that of Stanley and Williamson (2001). In Section 3 I will criticise Dummett’s (1978) argument that implicit propositional knowledge of a language is necessary to explain linguistic behaviour. Dummett, I will argue, adopts an infelicitous sense of ‘implicit’, which drives him back into the pre-Fregian assumptions that he himself has given us good reason to reject. In Section 4 I will show how Davidson’s (1986) argument against the existence of language (that is, language as a set of rules the knowledge of which enables linguistic behaviour), and his triangulation thesis, can be brought together with Ryle’s account of know-how in an explanation of linguistic communication. In Section 5 I will argue that the Davidson-Ryle position does not mean giving up intuitions regarding the normativity of discourse. It does, however, point us towards a naturalistic account of normativity.

## 2. Knowledge-how and knowledge-that

### *The Intellectualist legend*

In the second chapter of *The Concept of Mind* Ryle considers the family of concepts that relate to intelligence, and sets himself the task of showing that

there are many activities which directly display qualities of mind, yet are neither themselves intellectual operations nor yet effects of intellectual operations. Intelligent practice is not a step-child of theory. On the contrary theorizing is one practice amongst others and is itself intelligently or stupidly conducted. (Ryle 1949: 27)

In so doing he wants to dispel the idea that intelligently or stupidly performed acts are the outcome of inner 'occult episodes'. The target of Ryle's critique is someone committed to the idea that to do something while thinking what one is doing (doing something consciously and purposively) is

to consider certain appropriate propositions, or prescriptions, and to put into practice what these propositions or prescriptions enjoin. It is to do a bit of theory and then to do a bit of practice. (Ryle 1949: 30)

Ryle thinks that the legend is sustained in part by the assumption that the knowledge underlying our doings is propositional – knowledge-that.

Ryle's main argument against the idea – that in order to do something we must first consider certain propositions or prescriptions, and then put them into practice – is that it collapses in a regress. The argument has two versions. First, the consideration of propositions is itself an operation.

But if, for any operation to be intelligently executed, a prior theoretical operation had first to be performed and performed intelligently, it would be a logical impossibility for anyone ever to break into the circle. (Ryle 1949: 31)

Second, the intellectualist legend assumes that when an agent does anything intelligently the act is preceded and steered by another internal act of considering an appropriate regulative proposition.

But ... why does the hero [of the legend] not find himself calling to mind a cooking-recipe, or a rule of Formal Logic? Perhaps he does, but then his intellectual process is silly and not sensible. Intelligently reflecting how to act is, among other things, considering what is pertinent and disregarding what is inappropriate. Must we then say that for the hero's reflections how to act to

be intelligent he must first reflect how best to reflect how to act? The endlessness of this implied regress shows that the application of the criterion of appropriateness does not entail the occurrence of a process of considering this criterion. (Ryle 1949: 31)

Thus, according to Ryle the legend assumes that an intelligent action is intelligent by virtue of the actor having considered or reflected upon propositions or maxims (that is, applying propositional knowledge), but because consideration or reflection is itself an operation, something that is done, and done intelligently or stupidly, the propositional knowledge that is applied cannot be the basis for action.

It is important to note that Ryle is not suggesting that the 'contemplation of propositions' reduces to know-how; he is suggesting instead that such contemplation depends on the exercise of know-how.

### *Knowing a way*

The most well-known contemporary critique of Ryle's arguments is mounted by Stanley and Williamson (2001). Their argument has two main parts. First they insist that not all actions can be candidates for know-how. For example, digesting food and winning a fair lottery are not cases in which one employs knowledge-how to *F*. Thus they restrict the range of actions to intentional actions (2001: 415). Second, they deny that manifestations of knowledge-that must be accompanied by distinct actions of *contemplating* propositions (2001: 415). In support of their intuitions here, they quote Carl Ginet.

I exercise (or manifest) my knowledge *that* one can get the door open by turning the knob and pushing it ... by performing that operation quite automatically as I leave the room; and I may do this, of course, without formulating (in my mind or out loud) that proposition or any other relevant proposition. (Ginet, in Stanley & Williamson 2001: 415)

So, as know-how has to be restricted to intentional actions, and as the exercise of knowledge-that does not need to be accompanied by the contemplation of a proposition, Ryle's argument fails.

The first puzzling aspect of this argument is the assumption that digesting food and winning a lottery are *actions*. It is true that we might say 'Hannah is now digesting the steak'; but this does not commit us to saying that digestion is something that

Hannah *does*. ‘Hannah’ stands in for ‘Hannah’s gut’. For Hannah, the digestion of her steak is something that just happens. She can do something *about* it (eat better, take probiotics), but she, as an agent, doesn’t do the digesting. Similarly regarding the lottery. What Hannah *does* is buy a ticket. Winning the lottery is something that happens to her – for all that we might happily use the locution: ‘Hannah has won the lottery’. Stanley and Williamson thus hive off the wrong set of events. Ryle is interested in things that *we do* – typically consciously, but not necessarily. He never treats things like digestion as candidates for know-how.

The second odd aspect of Stanley and Williamson’s critique is the invocation of Ginet’s assertion as the support for their claim that manifestations of knowledge-that need not be accompanied by distinct actions of contemplating propositions. It seems to me that Ginet’s claim is both question-begging and beside the point. On the one hand, Ginet assumes that propositions that are ‘manifested’ in an action are therefore *employed* in that action (although unconsciously), and there is no reason to accept this without argument. On the other hand, however, the assumption should be of no concern for a Rylean position. Ryle’s claim is not that the employment of propositions is always conscious; it is that the employment of propositions is an example of know-how (see also Noë 2005: 281-2).

I want, for present purposes, to set these problems with the critique of Ryle aside, and consider Stanley and Williamson’s positive account of knowledge-how as a species of knowledge-that. They take as their example the sentence:

Hannah knows how to ride a bicycle

They claim that this sentence should be understood as saying:

- (1) there is a way *w* for Hannah to ride a bicycle,
- (2) Hannah knows that *w* is a way for her to ride a bicycle
- (3) Hannah entertains the proposition that *w* under a practical mode of presentation

Thus, knowing how is a species of knowing that.

Step (1) follows from construing the sentence as containing an embedded question. Thus they treat ‘Hannah knows ...’ like, for example, ‘Hannah asks ...’, so that ‘how to ride a bicycle’ stands in for a proposition regarding the way to ride a bicycle.

There is much to be said about the way Stanley and Williamson draw on linguistics in the construction of their positive account (see Abbott 2006; Rumfitt 2003; Noë 2005; Bengson & Moffett forthcoming: §4), but my main interest is with Step (3).

### *The loss of ability*

I noted that Stanley and Williamson assert that the range of 'doings' must be restricted to intentional actions, which then allows them to say that know-how is *more* than mere ability. This in itself does not give them what they need. As we have seen, they need the 'how' to be a proposition. That is, in order to construe know-how as propositional knowledge Stanley and Williamson need also to *distinguish* know-how from ability. They are not explicit about this move, but it is central to their procedure. We can see what happens from the following two examples.

A ski instructor may know how to perform a certain complex stunt, without being able to perform it herself. (Stanley & Williamson 2001: 416)

A master pianist who loses both of her arms ... still knows how to play the piano. But she has lost her ability to do so. (Stanley & Williamson 2001: 416)

Both these examples are meant to be cases in which someone has know-how without ability, and if they work they seem to be cases in which the knowledge (that is, know-how) is most obviously construed as propositional. But the examples only do this job if we assume that there is only *one* use of the expression 'know how', and this is clearly not the case.

I assume that the instructor has not lost her legs, or developed creaky joints, since then she would be just like the pianist. So it seems that she could never do the stunt. But in *this* context if we choose to say 'Jan knows how to do the stunt', this manner of speaking implies that Jan can *describe a procedure* for doing the trick. Thus, she knows a way, and we can treat the sentence as containing an embedded question; but we are not talking about someone who has know-how (ability) *with regard to the stunt*. Jan is like an innumerate history teacher, drafted in to take the maths class, who just reads from the textbook. She knows how (is able) to read out a procedure, but she doesn't know how (is not able) to do quadratic equations.

The pianist is, in a way, more interesting. Prior to the loss of her arms she knew how to play the piano. After the loss? Well, we could experiment: reattach her arms. All being well she is still able: she still knows how to play the piano. But nothing mysterious has happened here. She is in no different position than if her piano was stolen and then returned. Know-how can, however, deteriorate. After some time it may well be that reattachment would not reinstate the same level of ability. After a long time it may become appropriate to say that she no longer knows how to play the piano – although she may well remain able to teach piano, and in that particular sense of being able to describe a procedure, or knowing a way, know how to play the piano.<sup>2</sup>

The empirically vague but conceptually clear boundaries in cases like this emphasise that know-how is, as Noë says of abilities (2005: 284-5), embodied and situated. In order to know how to play a piano one needs a body that falls within certain parameters (for example, one needs a way of depressing the keys, one needs to be large enough, ...), and in order to know how to play a piano one needs a piano.<sup>3</sup>

### *The return of the regress*

Because they separate ability from know-how, Stanley and Williamson generate an interesting split in their positive account, which they recognize. They imagine that Hannah doesn't know how to ride a bicycle; then Susan points to John riding a bicycle and says to Hannah, 'That is a way to ride a bicycle'; so

Hannah knows that that way is a way for her to ride a bicycle

---

<sup>2</sup> See Noë (2005: 283-4). Noë also makes this distinction between the two senses of 'know how', for which he credits Kent Bach (Noë 2005: n4).

<sup>3</sup> Bengson and Moffett (forthcoming: §2), also claim that ability is not necessary for know-how, but they think, further, that cases in which someone is able to complete a complex task without knowing what the intermediate steps will be, show that ability is not sufficient for know-how. Their defence of the claim of insufficiency depends, I think, on mis-describing scenarios. Their hiker, who is able to get to her car but does not, on setting out, know how she will do it, *does* know how to navigate in the sort of conditions she is in. That is why she is able. In this regard she is like a proficient pianist, who knows how to sight-read, or a proficient reader or, for that matter, someone who knows how to walk, or how to talk.



But Hannah doesn't know how to ride a bicycle. She is in the same situation as the ski instructor.

Stanley and Williamson say that in this case, 'knowledge of the proposition is ascribed to Hannah under a demonstrative mode of presentation' whereas in a case in which Hannah *does* know how to ride a bicycle, 'knowledge of the proposition is ascribed to Hannah under a different mode of presentation, what we call a *practical* mode of presentation' (Stanley & Williamson 2001:429).

They suggest that the relation between the demonstrative mode of presentation and the practical mode of presentation parallels that between the demonstrative and the first person mode. So, if John's pants are burning, then in the following propositions the complement clauses express the same proposition, and the difference between the two is that of mode of presentation.

John believes that that man has burning pants  
John believes that he himself has burning pants

Thus, they think, the difference between the following is also mode of presentation.

Hannah knows that that way is a way for her to ride a bicycle  
Hannah knows how to ride a bicycle

However, the parallel does not give them what they need. The crucial difference is *not* between modes of presentation, but between knowing a proposition and having an ability – that is, being able to carry out an operation or procedure described by that proposition. In explaining how the practical mode of presentation gets Hannah from knowing a way to ride to knowing how to instantiate that way herself, Stanley and Williamson say that

thinking of a way under a practical mode of presentation undoubtedly entails the possession of certain complex dispositions. It is for this reason that there are intricate connections between knowing-how and dispositional states. But acknowledging such connections in no way undermines the thesis that knowing-how is a species of knowing-that. (Stanley & Williamson 2001: 429-430)

The trouble is that this does not answer the question of how we move from knowing a way to being able to instantiate an operation. In other mode-of-presentation

changes no such demand need be made, but here it is essential. Presumably the ski instructor, when unable to do the trick, knows a way under a demonstrative mode of presentation. In that case, it seems that on Stanley and Williamson's account, if she became able to do the trick she would add some dispositional states to her propositional knowledge. Presumably, either she becomes able to do the trick *by* changing her mode of presentation of the procedure, or she learns to do the trick, and then her mode of presentation changes. The first option seems simply mysterious. But the second option suggests that all the work is being done by the added dispositional states. Thus, change in mode of presentation is either an accompaniment to or a consequence of the development of the appropriate dispositional states – that is, of the development of know-how.<sup>4</sup>

We might instead say that the instructor does already know the way under a practical mode of presentation. In that case, we accept that someone can know a way under a practical mode of presentation, and *yet* be unable to instantiate that way. But now we need to ask what changes us from knowing a way to knowing how? Seemingly, the only resources available to Stanley and Williamson to explain the difference between an instructor who *knows how* (in their sense) and an instructor who *is able*, is that the instructor who is able knows how to instantiate the way. That is, she knows a way to instantiate a way to do the trick – and a regress begins (see also Koethe 2002: 328).

The drift towards a second regress is avoided when we resist the need to instate propositional knowledge as the underpinning of our practices. Yet it might be thought that in spite of Ryle's focus on intelligent operations, and his treatment of them as underpinned by know-how, the use of language is surely an operation that must have at its core propositional knowledge of a theory of meaning. After all, so the concern would go, it is only through such knowledge of a shared language that we are able to communicate with and understand others. Michael Dummett's 'What

---

<sup>4</sup> After explaining the embodied and situated nature of abilities, Noë notes also the way the development of abilities affects our attitudes, and enables us to have experiences that we could not have otherwise (2005: 285). If we do think that there is mode of presentation difference regarding the instructor who learns the trick, the feedback processes Noë refers to give reason to think that the change of mode follows the development of know-how. See also my 2008 regarding the way developed skills feed back to the agent.

Do I Know When I Know a Language?' (1978) is a powerful expression of this concern.

### 3. Implicit knowledge of a language

Dummett asks how seriously we ought take the word 'knowledge' when it is used with regard to our mastery of a language; whether the knowledge involved when we speak of knowing a language or knowing the meaning of a word explains the practical ability, or whether the practical ability is all there is to the practical knowledge (which was a view that Dummett had previously held (Dummett1976)). He thinks that we need to take it seriously, at risk of collapsing this mastery into mere automated action. He compares 'knowing Spanish' with 'knowing how to swim', and says that the difference is that it is only an empirical fact that we cannot swim unless we have been taught.

It would not be magic if someone were, instinctively as we should say, to make the right movements the first time he found himself in water, .... But it seems natural to think that it would be magic if someone who had not been brought up to speak Spanish and had never learned it since were suddenly to start speaking it. (Dummett 1978: 94-5)

He goes on to say that if you are to speak Spanish, there are a great many things that you have to know, 'just as there are many things that you have to know if you are to play chess' (1978: 95).

This argument is, however, grounded in an approach that, as I have indicated earlier, Dummett himself rejects. Dummett is thinking of someone taking up Spanish as a second language, as he makes clear. It is true that when we take up a second language, normally we are taught a grammar and lexicon and idioms – and it does seem natural, at least at first glance, to say that when we learn the language we gain knowledge imparted in this way, *and* that this knowledge explains our practical ability. But this is surely not the right place to begin consideration of the issue.

If we think about a child learning a *first* language, the analogy with being, perhaps not thrown in the deep end, but at least placed in the shallows, seems quite reasonable. Furthermore, it is imaginable that an adult could find herself cast ashore among Spanish speakers, without knowing Spanish, and 'pick it up'.

For Dummett, the difference between swimming and speaking Spanish is that speaking a language is necessarily a conscious process, whereas we can imagine that someone, put in the water for the first time, 'need not, in any sense, know what he is doing; he need not even know that he is swimming' (Dummett 1978: 95). Therefore, he claims, 'a theory of meaning is not a description from the outside of the practice of using the language, but is thought of as an object of *knowledge* on the part of speakers'.

A speaker's mastery of his language consists, on this view, in his knowing a theory of meaning for it: it is this that confers on his utterances the senses that they bear, and it is because two speakers take the language as governed by the same, or nearly the same, theory of meaning that they can communicate with one another by means of that language. (Dummett 1978: 100-101)

He says that the use of language is the primary manifestation of our rationality, 'it is *the rational activity par excellence*' (1978: 104). He is concerned that accounts of language use that opt for a direct description of actual linguistic practice, without any appeal to the notion of knowledge, such as Quine's causal account in terms of a complex of conditioned responses, fail to give an explanation of what goes on for language users.

To represent speech as a rational activity, we must describe it as something on to which the ordinary procedures of estimating overt motive and intention are brought to bear. This requires a place, for which a purely causal theory allows no room, for the distinction, essential to the comprehension of an utterance, between why a speaker says what he does and what it is that he says, that is, what his words mean. (Dummett 1978: 104)

The desire to avoid reductionist strategies, such as Quinean behaviourism, is a significant motivation for Dummett, but he acknowledges that this seems to push him towards pre-Fregean psychologism (1978: 102-103).

Dummett is clear about the problems of supposing that our understanding of each other depends on the occurrence in us of certain inner processes that prompt our utterances.

If this were so, it would be no more than a *hypothesis* that the sense you attached to my utterance was the sense I intended it to bear, the hypothesis, namely, that the same inner processes went on within us both. (Dummett 1978: 102)

This is an especially strong challenge because Dummett thinks that our knowledge of language is implicit. That is, if we have (propositional) knowledge of language it must be implicit, because language users are unable to formulate an explicit theory of meaning that guides their practice. However, he claims that he avoids the charge of psychologism because of his insistence that implicit knowledge ascribed to speakers must be manifested in their use of language, and 'it is part of the business of a philosopher of language to explain in what specific feature of this use a speaker's knowledge of each particular part of the theory of meaning is so manifested' (Dummett 1978, 102). Therefore, he says, there is no need for any act of faith. He thinks that implicit knowledge is 'knowledge which shows itself partly by manifestation of the practical ability, and partly by a readiness to acknowledge as correct a formulation of that which is known when it is presented' (1978: 96).

There is, however, an important ambiguity in the notion of 'implicit' operating here. In one sense, to say that knowledge is implicit is to say that it is unconscious, but nevertheless guides our practice. That is, it is just like explicit, conscious knowledge and application of rules, except that it's not conscious. In another sense, it is to say that our practice (the pattern of our practice) implies certain rules, or can be described as according with certain rules. In this second sense we are not saying that there are actual practice-guiding rules, but rather that the rules are a description of the pattern of practices. There is a partial analogy with Dummett's natural swimmer. No doubt there is an account to be given in explanation of why they stay afloat – how their arm movements generate lift, etc. – but this does not commit us to thinking that the person is following this account as practice-guiding rules.

Dummett adopts the first interpretation, but this undermines his initial distinction between swimming and speaking a language. If the difference between swimming and speaking Spanish is that the second is conscious, and if this is supposed to show that we have knowledge of language, then this knowledge cannot be implicit in this sense (that is, unconscious). If the knowledge is conscious, then the account is simply implausible, as Dummett recognizes.

If we adopt the second reading of 'implicit', however, then we have no reason to see language (understood as a theory of meaning for a language) as guiding our

practices. We can say that our practices can be captured or explicated by a theory of meaning, but we need not say that they are guided by it. Dummett is right to say that speaking is a conscious activity, but it is a conscious activity directed at the understanding and interpretation of others, not directed at the application of linguistic rules.<sup>5</sup>

Donald Davidson's account of prior and passing theories shows that we can set aside the need for propositional knowledge of language – as the mechanism by which interpretation and understanding are made possible. He also shows that communication lies among our practices, and is not partitioned by dependence on a special (implicit) grasp of an hypostatized set of rules.

#### 4. Knowing our way around in the world

Davidson's 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' (1987) is infamous for the claim that 'there is no such thing as a language', but the underlying point of the paper follows the slogan. Davidson goes on to say that there is

no learnable common core of consistent behaviour, no shared grammar or rules, no portable interpreting machine set to grind out the meaning of an arbitrary utterance. ... [L]inguistic ability is the ability to converge on a passing theory from time to time .... [Thus], we have abandoned not only the ordinary notion of a language, but we have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally. (Davidson 1986: 445-446)

The argument for these claims has three parts, which I shall only sketch here.<sup>6</sup> First, he claims that a large part of our linguistic experience contradicts the assumption that we understand others by feeding their utterances into a previously learnt theory. We are able to make sense of malapropisms, proper names, incomplete or grammatically garbled sentences, words we have never heard before, slips of the

---

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Hanna (2006) objects to Dummett's comparison of speaking Spanish and swimming, and insists on an intermediate category of activities, which she calls 'skills which we know-how to perform' (Hanna 2006: 273). These are purposive and have criteria of correctness, but agents do not require any knowledge-that to perform them. She places language in this category. In the third group, rules *guide* behaviour; in the second group, behaviour *accords* with rules (2006 274). I think that Hanna grants too much to the intellectualist, and that she leaves herself vulnerable to the suggestion that skills as know-how are dependent on reasoned or intellectual skills.

<sup>6</sup> See Simpson (2003) for a more detailed discussion.

tongue, and new idiolects (Davidson 1986: 442). He says that phenomena such as these could not be interpreted by feeding them into a previously learnt theory, because no theory could accommodate the specificity of the occasion. The implication is that a previously learnt theory (a language understood as a theory of meaning for a language) is neither necessary nor sufficient for understanding others.

We do, however, manage in such situations, and he thinks that this is because we adopt what he calls prior and passing theories. We come to interactions with expectations about how to interpret utterances. These 'prior' theories are based on previous interaction, and on judgements about the social situation of our self and our interlocutors (gender, educational background, and so on). The more familiarity there is, the more accurate the prior theory will be, but the prior theory will always be more or less inadequate. We adjust our prior theory to the specific situation in order to make the best possible sense of our interlocutor (this is our passing theory), and this will then feed into a prior theory in the future.

As the speaker speaks his piece the interpreter alters his theory, entering hypotheses about new names, altering the interpretation of familiar predicates, and revising past interpretations of particular utterances in the light of new evidence. (Davidson 1986: 441)

So what we have, rather than the traditional conception of a reified language that enables understanding, are developing patterns of interpretation.

What must be shared for communication to succeed is the passing theory. For the passing theory is the one the interpreter actually uses to interpret an utterance, and it is the theory the speaker intends the interpreter to use. (Davidson 1986: 442)

Davidson does not think of this as an explicit theory: 'the point is not that speaker or hearer has a theory, but that they speak and understand in accord with a theory' (Davidson 1994: 5; see also 1986: 438).

The most obvious response to Davidson's claims, voiced, for example, by Dummett (1986), is that the abilities he points to in fact draw on a background of learnt regularities. There is deviation, but deviation is always from a norm, and the most obvious candidate for a norm is a shared language. Furthermore, it can be argued,

without shared practices in the form of a shared language, Davidson's communicators cannot mean anything at all.

However, this response presupposes that understanding is only possible by way of (reified) language. For Davidson, there is sharing, but what is shared is a world, a tendency to slice and bunch the world in similar ways, and a recognition of others as sharing the world. This is the triangulation thesis. It allows Davidson to grant that an adequate account of meaning must provide a test of what it is to go on in the same way, and accept that this demands reference to social interaction, but deny that it presupposes a shared language or linguistic regularities. Davidson thus shows us how to conceive of our linguistic practices as arising out of social interaction.

[T]here must be an interacting group for meaning – even propositional thought, I would say – to emerge. Interaction of the needed sort demands that each individual perceives others as reacting to the shared environment much as he does; only then can teaching take place and appropriate expectations be aroused. It follows that meaning something requires that by and large one follows a practice of one's own, a practice that can be understood by others. But there is no fundamental reason why practices must be shared. (Davidson 1994: 16)

Michael Devitt and Kim Sterelny (1999) develop a view that in many ways accords with that proposed here. They argue that 'competence in a language does not consist in the speaker's semantic propositional knowledge of or representation of rules'.

It is a set of skills or abilities, some of them grounded in the external world. It consists in the speaker being able to do things with a language, not in his having thoughts about it. Understanding a language no more involves having propositional knowledge of a semantic sort about the language, or representing its rules, than being able to ride a bicycle involves having propositional knowledge of a mechanical sort about riding, or representing the mechanics of riding. (Devitt & Sterelny 1999: 187)

I differ from them on two points. First, they treat the competence of communicators as lying in their understanding of a language, whereas on the Ryle-Davidson approach adopted here, the relevant competence relates to our understanding of others. Second, they see the skill of language-users as their ability to translate back and forth between the public language and Mentalese (1999: 187-190), which relates to (although it does not reproduce) Fodor's language of thought. The



introduction of Mentalese does not necessarily generate the same problems that the old private language-public code hypothesis did, because the translation is a matter of skill or ability, rather than the representation and application of rules (although there is a worrying regress looming if it is claimed that we *understand* our Mentalese). However, my concern is that the introduction of this theoretical posit is unnecessary if we first avoid the hypostatisation of language – and I think that on the view I am promoting we are able to do this.

## 5. Normativity

I noted in Section 3 Dummett's concern, that if we fail to take seriously the word 'knowledge' with regard to our mastery of language, we risk collapsing mastery into mere automated action. This reflects a more general worry about a 'bottom-up' approach such as I have supported: that normativity and rationality disappear in something like a Quinean naturalism. However, Ryle and Davidson show that we can avoid intellectualism without losing normativity.

Normativity and rationality arise in the interaction between our selves as purposive agents and a world of physical and social constraints and enabling possibilities. When we engage in normative practices (act as agents) we take ourselves to be adopting a first person perspective in an objective world – that is, in Davidson's sense, a world that is a world also for others.

As I hope to have demonstrated in the discussion of Ryle's critics, we should and can avoid a choice between mere happenings and actions guided by knowledge-that. Thus, a significant difference between accidents and habits on the one hand and the actual exercise of know-how on the other, is that when we exercise know-how we engage normatively.

To be intelligent is not merely to satisfy criteria, but to apply them; to regulate one's actions and not merely to be well-regulated. A person's performance is described as careful or skilful if in his operations he is ready to detect and correct lapses, to repeat and improve upon successes, to profit from the examples of others and so forth. He applies criteria in performing critically, that is, in trying to get things right. (Ryle 1949: 29)

At this stage a richer account is required of intersubjectivity and our understanding of others and ourselves as agents. It is not, of course, possible to carry out that project here, but with the Rylean approach I have adopted here as a starting point, it would take up recent work that has brought phenomenological insights to bare on these questions,<sup>7</sup> and it would take up Ryle's own, neglected writings on phenomenology. In this context, Ryle, as we would expect, insists that understanding is itself a part of knowing how. Like Dummett, he rejects the idea that understanding 'consists in inferring, or guessing, the alleged inner-life precursors of overt actions' (1949: 53), because we have no basis for the inference. But whereas Dummett sees language as the immediate focus of understanding, and is thus forced to treat knowledge of language as implicit (that is, unconscious) propositional knowledge, Ryle, like Davidson, treats understanding as directed at others (and ourselves) in interaction.

A central claim of this paper is that we are lead astray if we think that the relevant 'understanding' (the understanding involved in communication) is the understanding of a language. When we communicate we use a language in order to be understood and to understand others, and here 'a language' is an expression that serves to pick out related patterns of interpretation and uses of utterances. When we do philosophy of language and linguistics we note the patterns and regularities, and we develop theories about them, but we are not thereby capturing what communicators understand.

## **6. Conclusion**

My claims regarding know-how, if successful, show that intentional actions, whether intellectual (for example, knowing-that the tyre is flat), or practical (for example, riding a bike), or procedural (for example, following instructions – a procedure – for replacing a tyre), depend on know-how. If my support for Davidson and my critique of Dummett stand up, then two conclusions follow. First, our use of language cannot be reduced to an intellectualist account of propositional knowledge of a theory of meaning. When we use language we display, at bottom, know-how. Second, our

---

<sup>7</sup> See for example Gallagher (2001), and Gallagher & Hutto (2007).

linguistic behaviour is primarily practical intentional action. Primarily, using a language is more like riding a bike than following a set of instructions. Although some of our uses of language are no doubt procedural – explicitly and consciously following syntactic and lexical guidelines and suggestions – such phenomena are secondary, and are grounded in the primary abilities.

In proposing that our communicative abilities should be understood as displaying know-how, I aim to show that these abilities can be explained from bottom-up, as arising out of more basic capabilities, without the need to assume the injection of some special ingredient, and without installing a disconnection between our normative, rational, and linguistic capacities and other aspects of our getting around in the world. When we consider these higher-order processes in abstraction from other aspects of our lives, it is perhaps natural to adopt a top-down model. But once we remind ourselves that normative, reflective, and purposive practices can operate without the presumption of a guiding language, and without the presumption of an ur-language, we open up the possibility of a naturalistic understanding of the place of our higher-order practices in the world.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> My thanks to Richard Menary and Britt Harrison for valuable comments on earlier drafts. My thanks to Robert Dunn for discussions of Ryle and Davidson. Work on this paper has been supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (DP1095109), and by research leave provided by the University.

## Bibliography

- Abbott, Barbara (2006), 'Linguistic Solutions to Philosophical Problems', <https://www.msu.edu/~abbottb/abbott-lingsols.pdf>
- Bengson, John and Marc Moffett (forthcoming), 'Non-propositional Intellectualism', in J. Bengson & M. Moffett (eds), *Knowing How: Essays on Knowledge, Mind and Action*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Davidson, Donald (1979), 'Moods and Performances', in D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford: 109-122.
- Davidson, Donald (1982), 'Communication and Convention', in D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford: 265-280.
- Davidson, Donald (1986), 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', in E. LePore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Blackwell, Oxford: 433-446.
- Davidson, Donald (1994), 'The Social Aspect of Language', in B. McGuinness & G. Oliveri (eds), *The Philosophy of Michael Dummett*, Kluwer, Dordrecht: 1-16.
- Devitt, Michael & Sterelny, Kim (1999), *Language and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Bradford, Cambridge, Mass.
- Dummett, Michael (1976), 'What is a Theory of Meaning? II', in M. Dummett, *The Seas of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993): 34-93.
- Dummett, Michael (1978), 'What Do I Know When I Know a Language?', in M. Dummett, *The Seas of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993): 94-105.
- Dummett, Michael (1986), 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking', in E. LePore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Gallagher, Shaun (2001), 'The Practice of Mind: Theory, Simulation or Primary Interaction?', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 8 (5-7): 83-108.
- Gallagher, Shaun and Hutto, Dan (2007), 'Understanding others through primary interaction and narrative practice', in J. Zlatev, T. Racine, C. Sinha and E. Itkonen (eds), *The Shared Mind: Perspectives on Intersubjectivity*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Hanna, Patricia (2006), 'Swimming and Speaking Spanish', *Philosophia*, 34: 267-285.

- Hornsby, Jennifer (2005), 'Semantic Knowledge and Practical Knowledge', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society – Supplementary Volume*, 79: 107-130
- Koethe, John (2002), 'Stanley and Williamson on Knowing How', *Journal of Philosophy*, 99 (6): 325–328.
- Noë, Alva (2005), 'Against Intellectualism', *Analysis* 65 (4): 278-90.
- Rumfitt, Ian (2003), 'Savoir Faire', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 100: 158-66.
- Ryle, Gilbert (1949), *The Concept of Mind*, Hutchenson, London.
- Simpson, David (1992), 'Communicative Skills and the Constitution of Illocutionary Acts', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 70: 82-92.
- Simpson, David (2003), 'Interpretation and Skill: On Passing Theory', in G. Preyer, G. Peter & M. Ulkan, *Concepts of Meaning: Framing an Integrated Theory of Linguistic Behavior*, Kluwer, Dordrecht): 251-266.
- Simpson, David (2008), 'Irony, Dissociation and the Self', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 15 (6): 119-135.
- Stanley, Jason & Timothy Williamson (2001), 'Knowing How', *Journal of Philosophy* 98 (8): 411-444.