Passing Theories through Topical Heuristics: Donald Davidson, Aristotle, and the Conditions of Discursive Competence

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Article:

What are the conditions of discursive competence? In "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" Donald Davidson explains how it is possible that in practice we can, with little effort, understand and appropriately respond to linguistic anomalies such as the malapropism—anomalies because, by definition, the "language" cannot account for how we understand them. Such anomalies, Davidson concludes, are the exceptions that do not prove but refute the traditional rule that antecedent linguistic systems govern discursive meaning. If that is so, then meanings are not a property of a linguistic system and are not "governed by learned conventions or regularities" (1986, 436); therefore, learning and sharing such conventions, what we traditionally call "language," is not a necessary condition of successful communication. He shows this by arguing that two conditions must be met for successful interlocution and that meeting these sufficiently allows successful interlocution to take place. A third condition—that the interlocutors share a language, an organized set of learned conventions or regularities "learned in advance of occasions of interpretation" (436) for which phenomena such as malapropisms would be anomalous—is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition of discursive competence.

What I hope to show in this paper is that the two conditions Davidson argues interlocution must meet in order to succeed both involve the interlocutor's implicit knowledge of what since Aristotle the rhetorical tradition has called *topical heuristics.* Although Davidson himself seems unaware of it, his philosophy places invention in a new light, one that allows us to understand that the invention process is not merely a supplement to discourse, useful only for professional speakers and writers, but intrinsic to all intercourse, and that the topics are not merely formal but pragmatic relations that develop from the processes of our interactions with others and with objects of our common concern in a world we can come to share.

Inferential method

Davidson argues that the first condition necessary for successful interlocution is that "the interpreter can learn the semantic role of each of a finite number of words or phrases and can learn the semantic consequences of a finite number of modes of expression" (1986, 437). "For this to be possible," says Davidson, "there must be systematic relations between the meanings of utterances" (436). Here he is not talking about grammatical systems but about systematic relations between and among the interlocutors' discursive actions and the world with its objects to which their actions refer. As I'll explain more fully shortly, these are *topical* relations. What makes these relations possible, Davidson argues, is that the interlocutors share, not a set of learned conventions, but a "recursive characterization of the truth conditions of all possible utterances of the speaker" (437).

Such a theory of truth can be something like a Tarski truth definition, the explanation of which can be extremely convoluted (see Davidson 1984), but it boils down to saying that an utterance is true if the anticipations raised by a belief in an interpreted utterance are met by the consequences of believing the utterance; or, to put it another way, if the utterance is an answer to the question that solicited it or a solution to the problem to which it responds. Thus, an example of such a truth definition would be "The grass is green (an utterance made by someone, somewhere, somewhen, under certain conditions) is true if and only if the grass is green (to that

person, at that place, at that time, under those conditions)." The force of a Tarski truth definition is that to understand what an utterance means is to understand the conditions that make it true (to the speaker). This, in turn, implies that in order for the interpreter to learn the semantic roles of the speaker's words and phrases and the semantic consequences of her modes of expression, the speaker must be consistent in how she uses them to call the interpreter's attention to the objects of her discourse. In other words, in order for me to figure out that when you say "The grass is green" you mean what I would have meant by saying "The marijuana is fresh," you have to (previously or subsequently) use "green" and "grass" consistently in other situations to refer to what I would in such situations typically refer to as "fresh" and "marijuana." The first condition requires not a coherence of linguistic signs in a shared system of signs, but of consistency of the use of signs to interact in a shared world.

The second condition that must be met, obviously enough, is that the speaker and interpreter "share a method of interpretation" (Davidson 1986, 436) such as the inferential method Davidson describes above as the first condition, and from the basis of that shared method come to share a theory about how to use marks, gestures, or noises in order to effect the responses they intend from one another. To meet this second condition interlocutors need not share in advance a "language." It is true that because "a speaker necessarily intends first meaning to be grasped by his audience" (436), he will anticipate, and use, the "theory" that he believes the audience will apply to his utterance. Such a "theory," however minimal, is something like what we call a "language," but already adjusted to a particular set of circumstances. Yet, even when a theory is adjusted from the start, if communicative success depended upon "getting it right" the first time at bat, then seldom would anyone experience communicative success. What is important from the beginning is not that the interlocutors' "codes" match, but that they share a similar method of adjusting their use of signs when responses don't match anticipations.

Davidson sketches this shared inferential process, reducing the continual dialogic interplay to two distinct phases. The first is the *prior theory.* The prior theory

> ...is what the speaker believes is the starting theory of interpretation the interpreter has for him. The speaker does not necessarily speak in such a way as to prompt the interpreter to apply this prior theory; he may deliberately dispose the interpreter to modify his prior theory. But the speaker's view of the interpreter's prior theory is not irrelevant to what he says, nor to what he means by his words; it is an important part of what he has to go on if he wants to be understood. (1986, 442)

Of importance is Davidson's emphasis upon belief—what the speaker believes the interpreter believes about the speaker's beliefs, etc., about how to behave discursively (use words, gestures, marks, and so on) in a particular situation. There is no question of either party's referring to some external standard, such as a grammar. The speaker speaks in anticipation of how he will be interpreted; and the interpreter is prepared to interpret as she anticipates how the speaker will speak to her. Once the utterance is made, each party enters a second phase, the *passing theory:*

> For the hearer, the prior theory expresses how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker, while the passing theory is how he *does* interpret the utterance. For the speaker, the prior theory is what he *believes* the interpreter's theory to be, while his passing theory is the theory he *intends* the interpreter to use. (442)

Davidson stresses that the interlocutors need not share in advance a theory about how to behave discursively (they need not share a "language") but must share a passing theory, "for the passing theory is the one that the interpreter actually uses to interpret an utterance, and it is the theory the speaker intends the interpreter to use" (442).

Davidson's point about the necessity of sharing an inferential method is that "most of the time prior theories will not be shared, and there is no reason why they should be" (1984, 443). Moreover, even the prior theory is quite

different from what we traditionally call a "language" because "an interpreter must be expected to have quite different prior theories for different speakers" (443)—and, I might add, for the same speakers in different circumstances. In addition, a speaker 's "first meanings" would necessarily reflect the collective discursive habits that will have accrued as a result of a group's cooperative activities, and her discourse would accommodate her socioeconomic relations with her audience as well as the particular task at hand and the group's history of similar dealings. Unsurprisingly, for Davidson, all this specificity points toward a theoretical impasse. No matter how complete and specific our prior theories may be, any general framework, "whether conceived as a grammar for English, or a rule for accepting grammars, or a basic grammar plus rules for modifying it"—any general framework, for the very reasons it is general, "will by itself be insufficient for interpreting particular utterances" (444). What matters, what must be shared, is the *passing* theory, which cannot be learned in advance but is *invented* on the fly.

Moreover, says Davidson, how the passing theory is invented, the "strategy" for producing it, is a "mysterious process by which a speaker or hearer uses what he knows in advance plus present data to produce a passing theory" (1986, 445), and this, too, cannot be learned in advance of the particular interlocutive act: "For there are no rules for arriving at passing theories, no rules in any strict sense, as opposed to rough maxims and methodological generalities" (446). Apparently, in Davidson's view, we have now come pretty much to the end of what we can say about discursive competence. For him, "There is no more chance of regularizing, or teaching, this process than there is of regularizing or teaching the process of creating new theories to cope with new data in any field—for that is what this process involves" (446).

If we were to take the last claim at face value, the project of learning how to recognize and promote inventive opportunities, and to understand and enhance the inventive process, would come to an abrupt end. I think Davidson must be thinking, correctly, that there can be no algorithm for arriving at passing theories; yet I also think he must be unaware that his distinction between prior and passing theories is, in fact, a minimal description of heuristics, and discursive heuristics has been taught and learned for thousands of years, not only within the discipline of rhetoric, which initially developed heuristics, but within the several disciplines that have split off from rhetoric over the centuries. Heuristics is hardly the "mysterious process" Davidson seems to think it is, although indeed it has been widely misunderstood and misapplied, largely because it has come to be interpreted from the metaphysical perspective Davidson so strongly opposes.

Between prior and passing theories: Topical heuristics

Davidson's distinction between prior and passing theories is at the same time a distinction between questions and answers or problems and solutions. An utterance is always at once a provisional solution to the problem of how the speaker believes his discursive partners will interpret him, as well as a question (even when not in question form) to those partners about the interpretability of the utterance. Each revision of each interlocutor's "theory" about the other's discursive behavior is, in effect, an answer to the problem or question of interpretability posed by the other's discourse. Thus, Davidson implies that interlocution is a heuristic process. As Webster's defines it, a heuristic procedure is nothing more than a "problem-solving technique" that provides "aid and directions in the solution of a problem but [that is] otherwise unjustified or incapable of justification." Davidson himself offers us little insight into these procedures other than to say that a passing theory "is derived by wit, luck, and wisdom from a private vocabulary and grammar, knowledge of the ways people get their point across, and rules of thumb for figuring out what deviations from the dictionary are most likely" (1986, 46).

Of course, such procedures for intelligently hypothesizing about how to solve a specific type of problem or how a particular audience will respond to a concrete utterance have been studied and theorized for well over two thousand years under the topic of the *topics.* As a solution for the problem of how to fill in the explanatory gap between prior and passing theories, I suggest that the "systematic relations between utterances" (1986, 436) which Davidson argues are the necessary condition for successful interpretation are at every level *topical* relations: the relations governing the constitution of the objects of our notice are topical, the relations between our discursive acts are topical, and the relations between those acts and the objects to which they refer are topical.

The approach I take to explaining these topical relations begins with Davidson's distinction between prior and passing theories and his emphasis upon *belief* in the interlocutive process, as when he says that "central" to the process "is what the speaker believes is the starting theory of interpretation the interpreter has for him" (1986, 442). The recursiveness that distinguishes interlocutive processes—the speaker acting upon her belief about what her interpreter believes she believes about his beliefs, etc.— from non-discursive stimulus-response processes is indeed central to interlocution in general and, as we shall later see, to inventive processes in particular. What definition of *belief* can fit with the heuristic procedure outlined by Davidson's distinction between prior and passing theories and yet can link that distinction to the rhetorical tradition of *topoi* so that we may develop a pragmatic understanding of invention?

The definition that best accommodates these requirements is, to my mind, Charles Peirce's. In his essay "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," he lists three properties of belief as understood pragmatically: "First, it is something that we are aware of; second, it appeases the irritation of doubt; and, third, it involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or, say for short, a *habit*" (1955, 28). For Peirce, "The essence of belief is the establishment of a habit; and different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise" (29). As a phase of the process Peirce calls "thought" (which is, note, identical to what I refer to as discourse), belief is a response to doubt as a solution is a response to a problem, or an answer is a response to a question. As he puts it, "I use [doubt and belief] to designate the starting of any question and the ending of it" (26). Thought begins in doubt as an "irritation" caused by the inadequacy of a currently held belief (or habitual response) to a situation at hand. Thought (or discourse) ends, or comes to temporary rest, when belief is again established as a new rule of action or habit with respect to such a situation.

To Peirce, all thoughts are narrative: they are "actions having a beginning, middle, and end" (1955, 28). In his work, while the character of the beginning and ending of this narrative is fairly clear, the middle is more muddled. Here is his clearest description:

> Images pass rapidly through consciousness, one incessantly melting into another, until at last, when all is over—it may be in a fraction of a second, in an hour, or after long years—we find ourselves decided as to how we should act under such circumstances as those which occasioned our hesitation. In other words, we have attained belief. (27)

This precursor to the Jamesian stream of consciousness, although evocative, is ultimately too vague to be of much help to our current project. Particularly unhelpful is his use of the term "images" to describe what we attend to between the problem that initiates thought and the solution that brings thought to rest.

If "thought" is initiated by an irritation caused by the inadequacy of a belief (or rule of action or habit) to guide our activity within a particular situation, and thought ends when a new belief and habit is established with respect to that situation, then clearly what we attend to and select from is a repertoire of other beliefs in order to find one that will adequately resolve the situation. The alternative rules of action or habits that we may or may not find appropriate guides to our discursive behavior in a particular situation are, I would suggest, precisely the same thing that the ancient Greek Sophists, rhetoricians, and philosophers called the topoi.

As Eleonore Stump has said, "Aristotle's concept of a Topic is not easy to comprehend and is the subject of considerable controversy" (1978, 159). The definition of a topic is highly arguable. Ernest Havet argues that "topics are only logical forms" (1846, 15), while W. Rhys Roberts (1924) and Lane Cooper (1932) call them "lines of argument." Charles Sears Baldwin calls them "headings" (1959, 14) while John Henry Freese defines them as "a place to look for or store something" (1939, 482). In a similar vein, R. C. Jebb defines a topic as "the place in which a thing is to be looked for in the memory" (1909, 143). Edward P. J. Corbett defines the common topics as "devices to find arguments for writing or speaking on any subject whatsoever" and the special topics as "devices for finding arguments appropriate to a particular audience" (1986, 46). William M. A. Grimaldi, in contrast, defines the special topics as "varied aspects (i.e. sources) under which the subject may be studied for a clearer understanding" and the common topics as "forms of inference, in which to develop this understanding to

further conclusions" (1974, 178). Donovan J. Ochs makes no sharp distinction between common and special topics but between the dialectical and rhetorical topics, defining a dialectical topic as "a relational principle enabling a person to locate and analyze the ways in which a specific predicate may be attributed to a subject," but for him the rhetorical topics are only "an amalgam of miscellaneous molds into which rhetorical arguments are usually cast" (1974, 200). After a review of what Aristotle says in both the *Topics* and the *Rhetoric,* Eleonore Stump concludes that "the evidence in the *Rhetoric . . .* tends to indicate that a Topic is primarily a strategy rather than a principle and confirms a similar impression gained from the *Topics"* (1978, 172). As a strategy, she says, a topic is "something like a basic recipe or blueprint, according to which one can produce many things the same in structure but differing in detail and in material" (174).

That modern commentators, translators, and theorists give such divergent definitions to what is, after all, a fundamental rhetorical concept, should not be surprising. As Mark Backman notes, throughout his work Richard McKeon repeatedly emphasizes that the definition of the topic or commonplace has always varied from era to era:

> As devices of rhetoric, commonplaces have often served contradictory purposes. At times they have referred to the seat of arguments and have been closely allied with the traditional rhetorical division of memory. At other times, they have referred to heuristic devices that suggest qualities, characteristics, and relations appropriate to all arguments. More recently, they have been identified with unvarying and repetitious formulae that offer an "easy substitute for the invention of a pertinent solution." (1987, xviii)

No doubt, the definition of a topic depends upon the purposes of the person defining it. Here, I am concerned to defend my claim that the "systematic relations between the meanings of utterances" that Davidson argues speakers must imply and interpreters must infer if discourse is to succeed are the same sort of relations that traditional rhetoric has described as the topoi of heuristic invention. For that purpose, it is best to accept Ochs's conclusion that "each topic specifies a type of relationship" (1974, 200) and, more importantly, to recognize that these relationships have both a formal and a pragmatic, historical dimension.

E. F. (Ted) Dyck (2002) has recently clarified the formal dimension of topical relationships in an important contribution to Aristotelian topical theory. He begins his analysis by noting that we should not confuse topics with enthymemes, as have too many scholars. Topoi are not themselves arguments. Aristotle is clear that enthymemes are made from topoi. In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle twice defines a topic as an element *(stoicheion)* of the enthymeme. As Lane Cooper translates one of these passages, " 'Elementary form' and *topos* signify a class into which many particular enthymemes fall" (1403a17-18; see also 1396b21). In the *Metaphysics,* Aristotle defines an element as "that which is the primary constituent, indivisible, single, small, capable of many uses, and inherent" (1014b15-16). For Aristotle, then, the topics are in some sense elements of enthymemes.

Moreover, as Dyck notes, the *Rhetoric* "seems to refer to three kinds of topoi: "(1) the 'common' topoi (`More or Less,''Possible or Impossible,''Past or Future Fact'-1358a21,1397a6,1391b23-1393a20); (2) twenty-eight 'general' topoi (1358a21,1397a6-1400b33); (3) an unspecified but very large number of 'special' topoi (1358a18 and 23)" (2002, 106). All of these topoi share in common that they are used to construct enthymemes, as opposed to syllogisms (1403a17-20; 1358a30,1396b20, 1403b14). The difference between the enthymeme and the syllogism will tell us what a *topos* is.

Syllogisms of whatever kind—hypothetical, disjunctive, or categorical—involve three propositions in sequence. They are related in such a way that the first two imply the third. In the *Prior Analytics,* Aristotle defines a syllogism as "a discourse [logos] in which, certain things being stated, some-thing other than what is stated follows of necessity from their being so. I mean by the last phrase that it follows because of them, and by this, that no further term is required from without in order to make the consequence necessary" (24b18-23). In the syllogism "if P implies Q, and Q implies R, then P implies R," it is simply because Q is defined in terms of P, and R is defined in terms of Q, so that it is necessarily the case that R can be defined in terms of P. This necessity is missing in the *Rhetoric's* definition of enthymeme: "When it is shown that, certain propositions

being true, a further and quite distinct proposition must be true in consequence, whether universally or for the most part, this is called deduction [syllogism] in dialectic, enthymeme in rhetoric" (1356b15-18). Enthymemes are not merely truncated syllogisms. Rhetorical enthymemes reach probable, not necessary conclusions—and they are probable, not necessary, simply because they cannot be governed by the relation of implication, as are all syllogisms. As M. F. Burnyeat has shown, many, if not most, of the enthymemes Aristotle describes are "simply impossible to represent ... as a syllogism" (1996,100-101).

Accordingly, Dyck proceeds to demonstrate that "Aristotle's enthymemes overwhelmingly and consistently share [this] feature: they substitute *another relation, a topos,* for the relation of *implication* as they move from syllogism to enthymeme" (2002,111). Formally, whereas a syllogism is "If P, and P implies Q, then Q," an enthymeme is "If P, and a suitable topical relation T holds between P and Q, then Q" (111). In one example Dyke constructs the following forms of enthymemes using the topos *greater than* (the More and the Less; see 1393a9-12) (Here, x and y are variables; G is the predicate "is good"; L is the relation "is the largest member of'; E is the predicate "is an end"):

> (al) If A and B are both *greater than* C, and if A less C is *greater than* B less C, then A is *greater than* B.
> (b1) If x is *greater than* y, then G(x) is *greater than* G(y). ["A number of goods is a greater good than one of a smaller number, if that smaller number is included in the count" (1363b19).]
> (c1) If L(x,Y), L(w,Z), and x is *greater than* w, then Y is *greater than* Z. [If the largest member of one class surpasses the largest of another, then the one class surpasses the other" (1363b22).]
> (d1) If E(x) and not-E(y), then G(x) is *greater than* G(y). ["If one of two things is an end, and the other is not, then the former is the greater good" (1364a13).]

As Dyck points out, "All these enthymemes use the topos *greater than* in that place we would ordinarily expect *implies"* (112).

Furthermore, the topoi governing enthymemes are often not even binary relations as such but *predicates.* In fact, two of the three common topics are predicates: " 'Past or Future Fact' is a predicate Chas happened'), as is the `topos"the Possible or Impossible' Cis possible')" (Dyck 2002, 112). "What Aristotle actually does," says Dyck, "is to construct enthymemes using these predicates and other topoi (binary relations): 'If it is possible for one pair of contraries to happen, then it is possible for the other' (1392a9). Letting P be the predicate `—is possible,' this enthymeme has the form 'If P(x) and x is contrary to y, then P(y)" (112). Dyck analyzes the three common topics and all twenty-eight of the general topics in this way and concludes that his definition of the enthymeme—"a syllogism in which one or more premises may be probable and *a topos* replaces *implication"* (111)—"actually captures the treatment of the enthymeme in the *Rhetoric"* (111). That treatment boils down to saying, "If the binary relation of *implication* is considered as a topos, 'implies,' then the syllogism can be seen as a *special case* of the more general [weak] enthymeme" (116).

Topoi and Enthymemes

Dyck's analysis takes us a long way toward understanding the formal dimension of topos and enthymeme, but in rhetoric just as important as the topical forms is how topoi and *doxai* are created and how they are found. I now want to suggest that (1) the topoi, or *relations,* as defined by Dyck, develop during the course of concrete discursive interactions between speakers and interpreters, and constitute the common objects of their attention, just as Davidson describes the process in his theory of triangulation; and (2) that what in traditional rhetorical theory is called *invention* is the same process Davidson refers to when he claims that the *passing theory,* which interlocutors must invent on the fly, is what they must share in order to communicate successfully.

If we are to tie topical theory to Davidson's passing theories and his argument that successful interlocution requires there to be "systematic relations between the meanings of utterances" (1986, 436), we must also understand the topics' pragmatic and historical dimension.

To begin, we should recall that Aristotle emphasizes that what the topoi "embodied" in enthymemes are is a "distinct question" from that of "the proper way of looking for" enthymemes. The latter, of course, is the crucial issue for rhetorical invention. This distinction has been noted by a number of commentators, including Scott Consigny, who says that for Aristotle (as well as Cicero, Vico, Leibniz, Bacon, and McKeon) a topic is not only "construed as an essential *instrument* for discovery or invention" (1994, 65)—that is, a relation that can "open up and delimit a logical place in which the rhetor can discover and manage new meanings and relation-ships" (66)—but also a topic is "a *realm* in which the rhetor thinks and acts" (65). From this second sense the term *topos* (in Greek, a "place" or "site") gets its name. According to Consigny, topos designates "that region or field marked by the particularities of person, acts, and agencies in which the rhetor discloses and establishes meaningful relationships" (65). Aristotle stresses this second sense of the term *topos* more in the *Rhetoric* than in the *Topics.* As Jacques Brunschwig has convincingly shown, Aristotle typically takes a "referential and empirical" approach in the *Rhetoric* when discussing the topoi, in contrast to the analytical approach he takes in the *Topics.* In the *Topics,* topoi "are not retrospectively related to a number of already produced syllogisms, but prospectively related to a number of syllogisms still to be produced out of them" (1996, 41). Whereas in the *Rhetoric* the focus is upon finding the appropriate, because habitually used, topoi for a given problem, in the *Topics* the "standard formulation" of the topoi "is that of a rule, inviting the learner to examine *(skopein, skepteon)* whether such and such a condition holds; if it does, the production of the appropriate syllogism is possible" (41). In other words, whereas in the *Topics* Aristotle is more interested in, as he says in the very first lines, reasoning "from reputable opinions about any subject presented to us" (100a21), in the *Rhetoric* he is more concerned about discovering what the relevant reputable opinions are than in determining their logical validity.

If we look closely at the *Rhetoric,* we can see that here enthymemes are made up of topoi only in the sense that enthymemes are chains or groups of doxai—opinions or beliefs—linked by those relations Aristotle calls topoi. To find or invent enthymemes one goes to the particular places where people have historically confronted problems and questions of the sort that is currently at issue, and where they have determined solutions and answers to them. A habitual familiarity with any situation's problems and questions that define it is essential to comprehending it and, as Aristotle implies, having such a grasp of what is truly at stake in a discourse is far more important than any technical understanding of the orator's art. To a large degree, the art of rhetoric *is* the art of finding what those people who are historically involved in the kind of problems at stake habitually, if not consciously and thematically, already know. These opinions, or doxai, as formal structures (sentences or statements), as well as the topoi that structure them, can be disconnected from the original problems to which they are solutions (or from the original questions to which they are answers) so that the rhetor can reconnect and combine them by means of the appropriate topical relations to construct his arguments, or enthymemes. Obviously, as a consequence of this dissociation and transfer, the belief will not retain its original *meaning* within the newly constructed enthymeme, although the referent of the statement's terms may remain the same. (The statement "It's a beautiful, clear day" as an answer to the question "Would you like to take a walk?" has a very different meaning within the statement "John says 'It's a beautiful, clear day' " when it's the answer to the question, "Will we need to irrigate again today because of the drought?" The statement can be transferred as a solution or answer from one problem or question to an-other because the two questions for which it may be an answer share a common topic, but its meaning alters in the transference because for each question the other topoi to which the shared topic relates are different.)

Objects of belief

The fact that rhetors seek arguments from doxai related by topoi suggests that even for the metaphysician Aristotle not language or its signs but discursive interactions constitute historically the objects of discourse (in the above example, the weather)—what he considers to be the referents of the terms of the doxai. If this is so, then contrary *both* to the notion that the objects of our notice preexist our discourse about them—such that our discourse may or may not adequately "mirror" the world—and to the notion that our discourse constitutes or prestructures objects in the world, we notice objects only in relation to problems we share or have shared with others. That is to say, objects are constituted for us only in the topical relationships of historical problematic situations, so that, although an object of attention may retain its "objectness" long after its originating situation

has passed, just as may an opinion about the object, our words never either refer to objects "as such" that preexist any discursive interaction with them, nor do they constitute them. No system of language constitutes the objects to which signs can refer; words and other signs refer to the relations that have determined the objects we notice as relevant to the task of solving problems with others.

Although he uses different terminology, this is basically Donald Davidson's theme in "The Second Person," where he introduces the idea of triangulation. There he argues that "language is necessarily a social affair" (1992, 262) because there can be no meaningful speech without "the interaction of at least two speaker-interpreters" (265) with the same objects. In its insistence upon the social dimension of discourse, Davidson's theory at first seems to resemble social construction and many forms of postmodernism. However, Davidson's view distinguishes itself sharply from all other theories of discourse that assume meaning is determined by linguistic systems and not by cooperative human interactions with shared objects in a common world. For there to be a triangle, the utterances of at least two speakers must come to converge upon a third element, the common cause of the discourse, as a consequence of their interaction with it.

Davidson explains that interaction requires "three similarity patterns": the first person must notice some similarity between the object in question (say, a chair) and other objects (other chairs); the second person must notice the same similarities; and each person must notice a similarity between the other's responses to the object and her own responses to it. According to Davidson,

> The only way of knowing that the second apex of the triangle—the second creature or person—is reacting to the same object as oneself is to know that the other person must also know that the first person constitutes an apex of the same triangle, another apex of which the second person occupies. For two people to know of each other that they are so related, that their thoughts are so related, requires that they be in communication. (1992, 264)

As we have already seen, Davidson's point will be that communication does not require sharing the same language but does require the interaction of at least two speaker-interpreters. However, we need to go a little further to make my point that what words refer to are not objects preexisting discourse but topical relations, generated by interlocutive interactions with the world, that determine the objects of our attention.

So let's go back to the chair. If you and I come from different societies and have no common "language," when I point at a chair and say "chair" you will not necessarily think my word for chair is "chair." You might think "chair" means leather, or furniture, or obstacle, or "mine," or "sit down," or any of a thousand different things until some interaction with the chair as a "chair" takes place, such as my pointing to another chair not leather and saying "chair," or saying "Sit on chair" and then sitting on the chair followed by "Sit on floor" then sitting on the floor. If you were to join in sitting on things and calling them "chair" and observing my reaction, etc., before too long we'd both have a fair idea of how the other uses the word "chair" as we gradually triangulate upon a common object of the discourse.

The point *is—there is no chair* except as a set of relations between the object and other objects and the object and ourselves and others, or, more accurately, we understand *chair* only in relation to it and its relation to other things and interlocutors. Finding out what "chair" means, what a chair *is,* and what to do with a chair and the word "chair" are exactly the same process. This is what Davidson means when he says his theory erases the difference between discursive competence and knowing how to get around in the world generally. There can be no chair until interlocutors discursively interact with the chair as a "chair." At the same time—and note that this is far different from structural and poststructural theories that treat topics as merely formal linguistic relations rather than discursive, pragmatic relations—neither the sign "chair" nor the linguistic system of which it may be believed to be a part constitutes the chair or these relations. These relations are comprehended neither *prior to* comprehending that "chair" refers to them nor as a consequence of comprehending that "chair" refers to some object already perceived. The constitution of the object, the interpretation of the discourse, and the comprehension of the relation between them are one and the same event.

Thus, if a person says, "We should remove the chair," the statement has to be understood as the solution to a problem or answer to a question that exists as an interruption in the flow of an ongoing cooperative activity with others; for it is the actions that determine the relevant relations that constitute the objects bearing notice and what the signs we use to refer to them *can* mean; that is, what we can expect as a response to the signs we use. Saying the same words, in one situation I may, if I speak to my employee, expect him to lift a piece of furniture and take it out of the room; in another situation, I may expect a colleague to second the motion and another to call for a vote. What "removing" can mean and what "chair" can mean depends not merely upon the "language" but upon the historically developed topical relations appropriate to the situation to which my language refers. We each have in memory, of course, a repertoire of topical configurations associated with previously encountered situations, and having these—particularly sharing these with our interlocutor—speeds up the inferential processes of triangulation. But these *do not fully constitute* what we eventually triangulate.

But what happens when we encounter a discursive conflict, when two interlocutors perceive different problems, and therefore different topoi govern their discourse? For example a colleague tells me as we are about to leave the office that a storm is coming, with the intention of signaling that I should grab my umbrella, but I take it to mean I should shut down my computer. Here we can easily foresee a potential conflict between intended and effective meanings: the same truth conditions—the relevant topoi defining the situation—that motivate an interlocutor's intention may motivate a response from her partner that she could not anticipate. Precisely because the latter understands the former he may respond in a way she does not expect. For instance, my colleague may have intended her statement to suggest that we should huffy and leave before the storm arrives in order to avoid our getting wet, and that intended meaning would conflict with its effective meaning that I should shut down my computer. The topical relations that are relevant to the situation for her (alone) do not match those that are relevant for me (alone), but our need to cooperate makes it necessary for each of us to merge into a shared topical landscape—my problem becomes a problem for solving her problem, and *vice versa—and* so further discourse ensues. That is, now each of us must take into account the different topoi that determine what she and I perceive to be problems within our shared situation, and in order to account for this combination of topoi, we must reconfigure our respective senses of the problem. In cases like this example we must modify our conflicting problems at hand—her problem of how to avoid getting wet and mine of how to avoid damaging my computer must become the shared problem of how to avoid both inconveniences—and we must *invent* a solution.

Invention, finding the appropriate enthymemes, requires that we first determine the question or problem to which the enthymeme will be a response. Most of the time we have ready-to-hand (usually "unwritten") social rules of action, conventions, or beliefs that easily resolve such recurrent conflicts: in our society, another's potential loss of property will generally trump our potential personal discomfort. Often, compromise is possible—she says, "I'll walk ahead to get my car and bring it around to the door while you shut down your computer." What we call "persuasion" usually ends in a conscious agreement to a hierarchy of priorities or to a compromise. Sometimes, however, the conflict of meanings and purposes is such that no shared rule of action is available and no compromise is possible.

Jean-Francois Lyotard refers to such a conventionally irresolvable conflict as *le differend:* "a case of conflict between at least two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments" (1988, xi). The postmodern perspective, represented here by Lyotard, accepts the semiotic assumption that meaning is a property of the structure of sentences and shared linguistic rules. Consequently, such conflict marks the existence of "heteromorphous ... language games," and the heteromorphism suggests that if the parties are to reach "any consensus on the rules defining a game and the 'moves' playable within it" they *"must* be local ... agreed upon by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation" (Jameson 1984, 66). "Consensus," of course, requires the subordination of one "game" to another, the submersion of the world constituted by one beneath the world constituted by the other, and consensus is thus only a step away from what Lyotard calls "terror"—"the efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game one shares with him" (63). For this reason Lyotard and other postmodernists are inclined to promote not innovation, which from this perspective can be only a permutation "under the command of the

system" (66), but *paralogy*. Paralogy, not consensus, Lyotard claims, is the proper end of discourse (65-66). Parologism, according to Fredric Jameson in his commentary upon Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition, is* a search for "instabilities" in which "the point is not to reach agreement but to undermine from within the very framework" of current discourse (xix). The rhetoric that results from such a search is, as Jameson points out, necessarily "one of struggle, conflict," an agonistic battle for the language, since, in this view, it is the language that will constitute what world will be shared.

According to the pragmatic view I am proposing here, in contrast, there is but one world and it is, always and necessarily, already shared. Because we share our world through discursive interaction (the process Davidson calls "triangulation"), cases of what Lyotard calls "le differend" signal a need not for paralogy but for the invention of new truth of our world. Different answers are not the products of incommensurable "games"—life is most assuredly not a game—but responses to different questions, or as Davidson would put it, different sets of truth conditions. The proper response to conflict is not capitulation to the inevitability of difference and contradiction but the mutual incorporation of the contending topoi into the conditions for truth that motivate our discourse, into the questions or problems we recognize as being relevant to the current discursive situation.

A pragmatic, interactionist understanding of language and truth, one that both allows and accounts for cooperative invention, implies that words, gestures, and other signs are not elements in a closed system governed by an entirely different set of rules from the rest of the world; rather, they are themselves objects of notice constituted by relations developed between them and us as we interact with them in the world—that is, by topoi—just like everything else. Our "language" is no more than the set of our beliefs about how we should and do use these signs, our habits of employing them to refer to other topoi. This set is generated in exactly the same way as our other sets of beliefs; it has exactly the same ontological status as the others; and we interpret them—infer their meaning—in exactly the same way. Thus, the intelligibility of the word "chair" in the sentence "We should remove the chair" is not different in kind from the intelligibility of someone's removal of the chair: we understand the use of "chair" as a direct object in the same way we understand the use of the chair as furniture that can be removed. To put this another way, sentences are enthymemes embodying topics from a set of topics (grammar, etc.) specialized to direct our attention to, although receiving their meanings from, enthymemes embodying another topical set (the relations that compose the particular discursive situation). Communication is a coordination of our use of linguistic topoi with our use of other topoi.

Linguistic "enthymemes" (sentences) are convincing in a particular situation (as utterances) to the extent that through their signs the rhetor links opinions (topical relations of one object of attention to another) together in a way acceptable to (believable by) the specific audience. Generally, they will be acceptable insofar as the audience already habitually uses these same relations to solve these kinds of problems; and, generally, the audience will habitually use these same relations to solve problems involving these objects because these relations constituted the objects in the first place as being relevant to a similar problem. For example, in a legislative debate over whether to fund machine gun A or machine gun B, the argument that "A should be selected because it fires more rapidly" will have force because rapidity of fire is a topic (relationship) constituting the object (machine guns) in the first place.

This, I think, is why Aristotle says, "the first thing we have to remember" about inventing rhetorical enthymemes is that we must "know some, if not all" about what people already believe about such problems (1396a4-6). We must also be sure that these doxai "bear on the matter at hand" as much as possible without getting beyond the training and capabilities of the audience. In this last recommendation Aristotle is referring to his previous distinction between two kinds of enthymeme, one suitable to rhetoric and dialectic, which draws from topics that apply to any subject, and another kind that draws from special topics "which are based upon such propositions as apply only to particular groups or classes of things" (1358a16-18). The more specialized these are, the closer they come to belonging to some science, discipline, or other province besides the general disciplines of rhetoric and dialectic, and the more local they are to one particular science or discipline, the less acceptable they will be for arguments in another science or discipline. For example, the topical relations governing a particular audience's opinions about kinship obligations are unlikely to be of any use in generating

arguments about cooking—primarily because the audience will be unlikely to see any relevance to the issue. *Most* topics are these highly specialized, strictly local sorts of relations, associated with only a narrow range of problems and issues. Very few are universal or general. That is why, as Aristotle clearly recognizes, the range of issues subject to rhetorical handling is severely limited. And that is also why Davidson will claim that communicative competence "cannot be taught."

By "cannot be taught," it should now be clear, Davidson means that the process cannot be conveyed merely formally in the way one can convey, say, mathematics. Discourse, like all intercourse, is a skill that can be developed not through "book learning" but through a process of interaction with things and people. We may learn in abstraction what a topical relation is formally, but we can learn what it means pragmatically only through discursive interaction, through the back and forth of anticipation and revision of our words' effects. The chef ephebe must learn through trial and error, through attempt and correction, through question and answer with the master how and to what degree each ingredient, temperature alteration, and so on, affects the balance of tastes, the consistency, and the texture of a base and so the very meaning of "First you make a roux." A recipe hardly conveys this knowledge, this skill of adjustment and interaction, and the recipe alone means little if anything to anyone who does not already understand the topical relations the recipe implies. The beginner cook cannot really understand the language of the recipe, the intention of the writer, until he *has made* the etouffee, and made it properly.

Analogously, Davidson says that what a speaker and interpreter share as a *result* of successful communication, their "passing theories" about how the other person uses words and marks, is not, as "language" is usually assumed to be, something learned *in advance* of their interlocution (like a recipe); thus, the process of moving from a prior to a passing theory about how an interlocutive partner intends her discursive actions to be understood cannot be regularized and so cannot be taught. "There is no more chance of regularizing, or teaching this process," says Davidson, "than there is of regularizing or teaching the process of creating new theories to cope with new data in any field—for that is what this process involves" (1986, 445-46). Precisely. The communicative process *is* the process from which formal inventive procedures are derived; it is not a consequence of them.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that the procedures Aristotle describes as *invention* for determining the best means of persuasion in a rhetorical situation involve the same "mysterious processes" of interpretation that Davidson describes as the movement between prior and passing theories in his analysis of the necessary conditions of communicative success. Although knowledge of linguistic conventions may bring interlocutors more efficiently to the point of what Davidson calls "radical interpretation," they reach their "passing theories" not as a consequence of their prior knowledge of such conventions but as a consequence of their prior and present interactions with others that have constituted, through the establishment of the topical relations they have found useful in solving shared problems, the common objects of their discourse. Linguistic conventions are the consequence, not the cause, of discursive success. The cause is the cooperative interaction to solve shared problems in a shared world. The topics are the historical products of that cooperation, and the ability to come to understand which topics our interlocutors are relating to the problem at hand and how they are relating them is the mark of discursive competence.

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