

## INTELLIGIBILITY AND CONCEPTUAL SCHEMES

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The article treats Davidson's considerations on conceptual schematism. The first part examines his general position. It includes remarks about the dualism of scheme and reality, about abandoning empiricism and re-establishing immediate touch with the world by linguistic means, and it suggests that we should, following prof. Davidson's position, abandon not only the idea of differing schemes, but as well the idea of a single scheme. The second part discusses his main thesis, the assertion that intelligibility implies having the same conceptual scheme. It is argued that the bounds of intelligibility are at the same time the bounds of our notion of rationality. And lastly, it denies that vicious circle of ascribing beliefs and understanding of sentences may be settled by general agreement of beliefs, and claims that a relativist treats aliens more charitably.

Everyone who speaks any of the foreign languages, knows quite well how many misunderstandings we might face, if we were not accustomed to the very social use of all possible alien concepts. Differences in gender, number, voice might be overcome all right, but nevertheless we might play games using ambiguities of a familiar or an alien language. Therefore, everyone would agree, unless we do not accept all the rules of a foreign language, we might produce serious error. This very fact encourages the idea of different conceptual schemes. People are used to say that using a particular (natural or theoretical) language accounts for the differences in opinions.

Now, there may be no problem, since it is said, we all use the same logic, and we all face the same world. These facts led some philosophers to attack the very idea of a conceptual scheme. Thus, D. Davidson concludes that »in giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false«. <sup>1</sup> »Of course«, says D. Davidson, »truth of sentences remains relative to language, but that is as objective as can be«.

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<sup>1</sup>. »On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme« in D. Davidson: *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1986. p. 198.

In the present paper I would like to discuss D. Davidson's considerations concerning conceptual schematism. The first part examines his general position. It includes remarks about the dualism of scheme and reality, about abandoning empiricism and re-establishing immediate touch with the world by linguistic means, and I suggest that we should, following D. Davidson's position, abandon not only the idea of differing schemes, but the idea of a single scheme as well. The second part is the core of argumentation. I discuss his main thesis, the assertion that intelligibility implies having the same conceptual scheme. I argue that the bounds of intelligibility are the bounds of our notion of rationality. And lastly, I deny that vicious circle of ascribing beliefs and understanding of sentences may be settled by general agreement of beliefs, and claim that a relativist treats aliens more charitably.

It is beyond doubt, that D. Davidson argues against conceptual relativism, claiming conceptual scheme to be a false idea. But in the end of his discussion, we might be surprised by the fact, that he is not arguing for a single or a common scheme or ontology. For he says: »It would be equally wrong to announce the glorious news that all mankind — all speakers of language, at least — share a common scheme and ontology. For if we cannot intelligibly say that schemes are different, neither can we intelligibly say that they are one.«<sup>2</sup> What is he proving, then? Are we sharing a common ontology or not? Are we using different schemes or not?

What D. Davidson is up to, according to his own words, is to re-establish the unmediated touch with familiar objects. How are we to do it? By setting the translatability criteria for all possible languages. In other words, we get in touch with objects by using a language. Now, the first question is whether by using a language we establish the unmediated touch with objects, or is it rather so, that words themselves represent something. Is it not so, that by using words, we already have a medium, means or instruments for representing. D. Davidson seems to be aware of this, since he speaks about antics of familiar objects that make our sentences true or false. Nevertheless, he assumes that antics pose no problem for getting in unmediated touch with objects. The second question is whether there are »familiar objects« at all, since he relinquished to announce the glorious news for mankind that there is a single, common ontology. The third question is whether the truth of sentences remains relative to

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<sup>2</sup>. *ibid*

language only, as D. Davidson says, or is it rather so that the independent objects, sense-data, experience or whatsoever bear for the truth too, as he implies elsewhere? For, what does this »relative to language« mean? The assertion that the truth remains relative to language needs further clarification.

Those questions have something to do with what D. Davidson calls »the third dogma of empiricism«, i. e. with his abandoning of scheme — reality dualism. In that respect, there is a limited number of ontological possibilities. The first is realistic one. It considers language as a representation of the outer world. The truth requirements seem to be twofold then: independent world on one side, and linguistic representations on the other. Only in that case may we speak of representations as adequate or inadequate. The second option I may call idealist. It asserts that we may not speak of the independence of the world. What we get from the world, or even, what is the world, is already given in, or through our linguistic categories. This assertion can be formulated in various ways, but probably the most pregnant one is from Wittgenstein: »Das die Welt meine Welt ist, das zeigt sich darin, das die Grenzen der Sprache ... die Grenzen meiner Welt bedeuten.« Accordingly, what the world is, we can only intelligibly say on the linguistic grounds. Or conversely, to use D. Davidson's words: »Nothing, however, no *thing*, makes sentences and theories true: not experience, not surface irritations, not the world, can make a sentence true.«<sup>3</sup>

D. Davidson obviously thinks, that we all speak a common language, the language of logic, and that our only task is to prove that it is really so. But I wonder, whether the truth of sentences remains relative to language only, or is it as »objective as can be«. Because, then we have no outer criterion to find out whether snow is really white, but only a coherentistic picture of truth, and we have to depend on our belief that, that is really the case.

I am not proving that it is actually what D. Davidson has thought, but rather that it is what we mean when someone says: »the truth remains relative to language«. And that type of picture seems to be more subjective than D. Davidson thinks.

But, it is surprising that D. Davidson criticizes the doctrine of conceptual relativism from this point of view. Since, it seems that this doctrine is more plausible to those philosophers who take for granted that the bounds (limits) of my world are the

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<sup>3</sup>. *ibid* p. 194.

bounds (limits) of my language. Such a philosopher would say: We move within different worlds because we speak different languages. So our worlds as well as our languages are incommensurable.

D. Davidson thinks that those differences of languages are just the differences in shape and appearance, but not in their essence. And their essence must obviously fit the world.

By abandoning empiricism, D. Davidson thinks that he is not giving up the world. But how do we get into unmediated touch with it, namely with »familiar objects«? Through their antics. But how do we know whether a sentence about the antic of an object is true? Can we raise such a question, according to Davidson? The point is obviously that an antic already is a representation of an object, therefore, objects should not be considered so familiar. In other words, if we (suppose legitimately) abandon the dualism of scheme and reality, can we abandon the dualism of an object and its antic? What do we call for if we want to prove whether the antic is a correct picture of an object?

When we abandon the third dogma of empiricism, we get a rather interesting but dubious equation: a word (an antic) already is an object. There is no relation (»touch«) between one to the other, because they have to be the same thing, otherwise the dualism still works. The described idealistic option now seems to be more in the Davidsonian spirit.

But how did we get so diverse names for familiar objects? That is the question an empiricist should answer. What D. Davidson must answer is that all those diverse names (antics) have the same meanings. So it is not an empiricist who needs translatability criteria in order to prove conceptual difference, since he might say: wherever names differ it will be more likely that the concepts will do so too. And the names can differ because they can express different points of view (or describe different aspects) of the same outer thing. Thus we get many meanings for the single outer thing. Since aspects of a thing are not to be equated with what a thing really is, it is intelligible that aspects may be incommensurable.

Therefore, the burden of argumentation must be on D. Davidson's side. He must use internalistic means to prove the existence of compatible semantic rules. He must use translatability criteria to prove it. Furthermore, since he abandoned empiricism, he must prove that there are aprioristic reasons why our notions in any language coincide not only with each other but as well with the matter of fact.

Now, this is quite a heavy task. And maybe, when he realized into what kind of problem he entered he wrote: »neither can we intelligibly say that they (*schemes op. D.P.*) are one«. But the problem was not only to show that there is one conceptual scheme instead of many, but that there is none. As we have seen, the idea of a (linguistic) scheme already presupposes a dualism of scheme and reality which D. Davidson abandoned. So the further problem would be for him to show that language is no conceptual scheme at all. And it would follow not only that we have to abandon the idea of various conceptual schemes, but the very idea of a scheme as well. (By the way, in criticizing the doctrine according to which language organizes something, D. Davidson forgot that the very idea of a *scheme* includes organizing something.) And since a notion of scheme is still useful, I suggest to keep it.

It is worth mentioning that in what follows we shall respect all limitations D. Davidson has set to the defender of conceptual relativism, and disregards all the lines of defence which he considers irrelevant. We shall therefore pass over such issues as taxonomical differences, changing of meanings, conditions of concept-building even not the failures of translatability, namely all usual types of argumentation in favour of conceptual relativism. We shall just examine coherence and consequences of D. Davidson's position.

Let us now consider, apart from the third dogma, his most convincing argument against conceptual relativism. It goes this way: since there is no background on which to compare contrasting schemes, the idea of differing conceptual schemes is not meaningful. And there is no such background, because it would be intelligible at least for the one who does the comparison. And if it were intelligible, it would belong to the same conceptual scheme. In other words, a background would be »a common core« of differing schemes. To make the whole argument clearer let us say: *for D. Davidson intelligibility implies having the same conceptual scheme*. Differing ideas might be wrong, strange, perhaps even irrational, but if we get any sense out of them, they would belong to »our« conceptual scheme. And they would have some sense if we could somehow understand what they were about. How would we understand alien linguistic utterances? By building translation manuals of the first (approximative) order, then by building a manual of a second order (more informative one) and so on.<sup>4</sup> After a series of consecutive

<sup>4</sup>. This idea was suggested by D. K. Henderson in »The Principle of Charity and the Problem of Irrationality. (Translation and the Problem of Irrationality)«, *Synthese* 73 (1987) pp 225-252

translations, in the end we would understand what a foreigner has said. The outlasted difference would thus not be a »conceptional« one, but a difference in opinion. So, the intention of the argument is to reduce alleged conceptual differences to differences in opinions.

The argument declares that since there is nothing what could not be made intelligible in some way or the other, we share a single conceptual scheme. It strength lies in the fact, that we may not introduce gaps between translated concepts and meanings as an argument for relativism, since we can always add intelligible adjustments to make a foreign concept clearer. In that respect D. Davidson would subscribe to Putnam's critical remark directed to Feyerabend: to tell us that someone has incommensurable notions, and then to go on and to describe them at length is totally incoherent.<sup>5</sup> So, in order to refute the argument, we have to prove that some alien concept or conception is *a priori* non-translatable.

What is unclear in the argument is a demarcation line between intelligibility and unintelligibility. When would we say that someone speaks quite unintelligibly? In cases of apparent irrationality? No, since his utterances have to be intelligible in a way to be called irrational. So they are not unintelligible. And if that were so, both rational and irrational utterances would form a single conceptual scheme. To avoid this paradoxical consequence, D. Davidson has to introduce psychological matters into a conceptual discussion. *Since we cannot interpret foreign words without knowing what they mean, says D. Davidson, we have to know foreigner's beliefs. And we cannot know what a foreigner believes if we do not know his language.*<sup>6</sup> So instead of solving the first paradox, he brings another into play. On my opinion, it forms a vicious circle. Someone might wonder, how can a philosopher who trusts in a total translatability refer to such an argument. However, it serves different needs, namely to prove that we have to assume general agreement of beliefs. And a step further will be a proof that we cannot say when a foreigner's error is a consequence of differences of conceptual shemes and not of beliefs.

Can we understand irrational beliefs? If the answer is no, then the sentences of a foreign language expressing irrational beliefs would not be intelligible. Therefore, according to D. Davidson's thesis, they would not be translatable, and therefore, dif-

<sup>5</sup>. Putnam, Hilary: *Reason, Truth and History* p. 114

<sup>6</sup>. *ibid.* 196.

fering conceptual schemes would occur. If the answer is 'yes', then we should face a problem how to understand them. Since I consider rationality as a basis of interpretation and understanding, the only option left is to draw a distinction between understanding rational and irrational beliefs. Suppose now, that we can have a different measure of understanding for the first and the second type of beliefs. Those differing measures would define, practically speaking, completely different understandings. So instead of having two distinct schemes, we would have two distinct notions of understanding. The difficulty would be renamed, and two types of beliefs would just have to be accepted. But, *merely by accepting that they exist, we cannot make foreign beliefs and utterances intelligible*. And since we cannot, we need something more for translation.

Suppose once again that we were able to translate anything, namely to make anything intelligible. When would we justifiably say that we understood something made intelligible? Can we understand anything intelligible? D. Davidson would say that we understand anything that is intelligible. But can we justify anything intelligible? No, since there may be quite peculiar utterances and beliefs. For instance, that for every our belief B, an alien believes non-B, and for any our sentence S, he says non-S. Now, since we abandoned empirical proof for credibility of beliefs and truth of sentences, we have to grasp the whole system of beliefs and linguistic utterances. What we immediately grasp is that the alien system is diametrically opposed to ours. And that is practically everything we thereby made intelligible.

Now, consider a man who understands those two contradictory systems of language and belief, and who has no independent evidence for their credibility. He would say S to a companion, and non-S to an alien, and he would explain his sentence according to the chosen system of beliefs respectively. Would we say that he is using a single or a double system? Those who would consider his behaviour and speech assuming there were a single conceptual scheme, would have to conclude that he behaves and speaks irrationally. Only the relativist, with more wits for empirical matters, by considering him more charitably, and searching for a system beneath apparent irrationality would understand him. The anti-relativist has made intelligible only the irrationality of the speaker. But of course, thereby he admitted that he cannot understand him, moreover that he cannot tell us why and when he is irrational (for sometimes it seems that he is not). The relativist, on the contrary, by insisting that his opponent gave up too soon in explanation of foreigner's beliefs, and

supposing that our scheme is not necessarily the only one, would find out that a foreigner is quite rational.

There are two paradoxes (morals) in the story:

1. *the paradox of understanding irrationality.* If we assume total translatability, then both rational and irrational beliefs and sentences belong to the same scheme. And by definition we understand just the rational part. Thus within a single scheme we would have intelligible and unintelligible part. Thus the assumption of total translatability fails.

2. *the paradox of charity.* The definition says: total translatability (and its consequence — existence of a single scheme) assumes general agreement of beliefs, being thus very charitable. But the more we use total translatability, the sooner we will come to ascribe irrationality to beliefs. So the more we insist on total translatability, the less charitable we will be.

These considerations make a conceptual relativism somewhat more appropriate to the matter. Because against the opposite idea, it was shown that either there are utterances and beliefs that cannot fit into a rational or intelligible common scheme, or there are different measures of their intelligibility, therefore different schemes in approach to them. In both cases, intrinsic differences occur. Conceptual relativism takes advantage of them, and calls them for the matter of simplicity, conceptual schemes.

In the first case, if irrational beliefs occur, it is likely that they will show up either as a system of behaviour or as a system of concepts. According to conceptual relativist, both types of systems may be called a conceptual scheme. And since they are irrational, they are different.

In the second case, if we use different measures of intelligibility in examining strange beliefs and sentences, we can make them intelligible, but then we are using different types of conceptual schemes. One for our concepts and beliefs, and the other for the strange ones. Therefore, we have to abandon the idea that by total translatability we ensure a common scheme.

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<sup>7</sup>. To avoid this consequence (because it is a kind of proof that he cannot make anything intelligible), in order to ascribe charitably a kind of intelligibility to such an irrational speaker, the anti-relativist needs now a new translation. What he needs is a translation manual for irrational speakers. He needs a systematic criteria for translating irrational beliefs and sentences into rational ones, to prove intelligibility. Why does he want to prove intelligibility? To prove speaker's irrationality. So, as a consequence of his translations an anti-relativist gets what he had in the beginning. As a matter of fact he moves in a circle.

You may have noticed that I have not separated beliefs from concepts, and schematism from behaviour. There is a good reason for it, namely to avoid a belief — concept paradox. My assumption is that where concepts differ, a behaviour will too, and even more conversely. Consequently, I am able to speak about different conceptual schemes even when considerable differences in behaviour occur. For instance, when drivers drive left-side or right-side, it is likely that concepts of driving will change. When someone has a motor-boat, and the other rows, it is likely that concepts of fishing will change. When someone knows to read, and the other does not, it is likely that the concepts of communication will change etc. We may introduce as many behavioural differences as we like. There is no reason not to treat behavioral systems as any other. And of course, system can be reconstructed linguistically, as well. So the conceptual relativism does not lean on the linguistic arguments only. And the more empirical differences we introduce between people and between their thoughts, the less we need the charity, principle. We would not be forced by the principle of charity, as D. Davidson thinks, but rather by the broader context than language itself. General agreement would not be a starting point, but rather our objective.

If we pose such a big philosophical problem like a circle between understanding beliefs and language, we cannot move away from it by saying: *OK, then let us start with beliefs.*

The significance of our considerations is of greater importance if one takes into account that we have used neither:

1. »failures of translation«,
2. nor the principle of charity (at least in D. Davidson's sense and context),
3. nor the dualism of uninterpreted content and scheme.

Perhaps the weakness of the opposite conception proves conceptual relativism to be more intelligible and stronger doctrine.

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*Darko Polšek*: INTELLIGIBILITY AND CONCEPTUAL SCHEMES

## Sažetak

U članku se razmatra Davidsonova kritika konceptualnog shematizma. U prvom dijelu se daju opće primjedbe o Davidsonovom stavu prema odnosu jezika i ontologije. U drugom se analizira tvrdnja o zamislivosti kao kriteriju identiteta konceptualne sheme. Za shvaćanje ovog kriterija potrebno je uvesti i dodatni — kriterij racionalnosti vlastitog stajališta. U posljednjem dijelu se osporava Davidsonov postulat dobronamjernosti, prema kojem začarani krug pripisivanja misli i vjerovanja možemo razriješiti općim slaganjem u pogledu vjerovanja. Zaključak je da relativist s idejom o različitim konceptualnim shemama postupa dobronamjernije.