Triangulation and the Problem of Objectivity

Dissertation

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Abstract

I argue that the best way to understand Donald Davidson’s notion of triangulation is as an account of the concept of objectivity. In particular, triangulation is the framework that makes possible the simultaneous emergence of the interrelated concepts of objectivity, belief, truth, and error, as well as determinate mental content and linguistic normativity. I argue that this framework consists of the shared similarity standards and shared similarity responses of two creatures converging on a common object and the responses of one another.

I claim that Davidson’s introduction of the notion of triangulation was motivated by the problem of error in interpretation and the related epistemic problem of objectivity. I also claim that the notion of triangulation grew out of theses inherited from his mentor W.V.O. Quine as well as work Davidson did in the middle part of his career both on the causal determination of content, and also on the rejection of linguistic conventions and his alternative account of linguistic normativity. I suggest that Davidson’s work on the notion of triangulation went through roughly three periods of changing focus: its role in making possible determinate content; its role in making possible the concept of error; and its role in making possible linguistic normativity. All three roles are required for emergence of the concept of objectivity, and all three require actual linguistic communication with another creature.
Finally, I argue that Davidson’s solution to the problem of objectivity is to be seen is his final account of interpretation. That account of interpretation was a confluence of his account of linguistic normativity and the way in which triangulation makes such normativity possible in the context of ostensive language learning. Davidson came to see ostensive learning not as the adult teaching the child a preexisting language, but rather as the adult providing the normative check needed for the child to develop a new language of its own. The adult’s ostension of an object establishes the content of the child’s new bit of language and the object serves as the objective standard against which the adult judges the child correct or incorrect in future uses of the language thus created. Davidson came to see interpretation to involve the same process of ostension, with the native providing what is necessary for the interpreter to create a new language similar to that of the native’s. The native’s utterance of an observation sentence provides the ostension that makes objects constitutive of the interpreter’s newly created sentence and this relation between sound and object is the source of our sense of objectivity.
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Introduction

The objectivity which thought and language demand depends on the mutual and simultaneous responses of two or more creatures to common distal stimuli and to one another's responses. This three-way relation among two speakers and a common world I call 'triangulation'. In the end, the idea is as simple as that of ostensive learning, but with an insistence that triangulation is not a matter of one person grasping a meaning already there, but a performance that (when fully fleshed out) bestows a content on language. This thesis, and its ramifications for philosophy of mind, language, and epistemology, turn up again and again in my work after 1982. – Donald Davidson1

In this introductory chapter I introduce my project, telling what triangulation is and giving the theses I will argue for regarding triangulation. I also give reasons that justify the project, including both general reasons for thinking that interpretative work such as the current project is important, as well as more specific reasons for thinking that such an approach to Davidson’s work on triangulation is both appropriate and needed. Indeed, I suggest that most commentators have misunderstood Davidson’s notion of triangulation, and I discuss the views of one author who I take as fairly representative of how triangulation is misunderstood in the secondary literature.

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The Project

Donald Davidson uses the simple example of two creatures interacting with one another and a common object (e.g., two animals jointly stalking their prey) as a way of illustrating what is necessary for creatures to come to have thoughts about an objective world. Triangulation appears repeatedly in publications in the last half of Davidson’s career and from it he draws a number of important conclusions about mind and language. Despite its obvious importance to Davidson, triangulation has received relatively little attention in the secondary literature, and most commentators have found Davidson’s uses of triangulation less than compelling. Before we can judge the merits of the uses to which Davidson puts this notion, we must properly understand it. The purpose of this dissertation is to lay the groundwork for such an understanding by providing the historical and interpretative context of Davidson’s notion of triangulation.

Let me begin with a few passages by way of introducing triangulation. Davidson originally introduced triangulation as an analogy. Triangulation, as we know from geometry class, is the determination of the distance of one point from a second point by locating a third point, measuring the distance between the second and third point, and measuring the angles at the second and third points. Although this is the original meaning of “triangulation,” Davidson does not mention this geometrical problem. Instead, he imagines an individual perceptually triangulating objects and thereby coming to have a feel for their distance. Davidson then compares this perceptual triangulation with a conceptual notion of triangulation: two individuals discussing their shared world are able to compare their perspectives and come to have a notion of objective truth. Here
is the passage in which Davidson first introduces triangulation, found at the end of the article “Rational Animals”\textsuperscript{2}:

If I were bolted to the earth, I would have no way of determining the distance from me of many objects. I would only know they were on some line drawn from me towards them. I might interact successfully with objects, but I could have no way of giving content to the question where they were. Not being bolted down, I am free to triangulate. Our sense of objectivity is the consequence of another sort of triangulation, one that requires two creatures. Each interacts with an object, but what gives each the concept of the way things are objectively is the base line formed between the creatures by language. The fact that they share a concept of truth alone makes sense of the claim that they have beliefs, that they are able to assign objects a place in the public world. The conclusion of these considerations is that rationality is a social trait. Only communicators have it.\textsuperscript{3}

Davidson’s concern is with the comparison of perspectives that linguistic communication allows, for he argues that it is such communication that gives rational creatures like us the ability to conceive of an objective reality. Another way he puts this is that objectivity requires intersubjectivity.

In one of his last descriptions of triangulation, Davidson gives an explanation of how triangulation can make possible the notion of objective truth—by making possible the notion of error—to creatures that lack thought and speech.

To take the simplest case, consider two individuals jointly interacting with some aspect of the world. When the pair spot a lion, each hides behind a tree. If the individuals are in sight of one another, each also sees the other hide. Each is therefore in a position to correlate what he sees (the lion) with the other's reaction. If the situation is repeated, a consequence is that if one individual sees a lion when the other does not, the one who does not see the lion is apt to treat the first's reaction as a conditioned stimulus, and also hide. Now consider a situation in which each sees the same lion, but one of the individuals, because the light is poor, or a tree partially obscures the lion, reacts as he normally reacts to a gazelle.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., p. 105.
This turns out to be a mistake. This little skit cannot, in itself, explain conceptualization or grasp of the idea of error on the part of either observer. It does no more than indicate the sort of conditions in which the idea of error could arise. Thus it suggests necessary (though certainly not sufficient) conditions for conceptualization.\(^4\)

This little skit, as Davidson calls it, is an example of triangulation: two creatures reacting to a commonly perceived object and the reactions of the other creature to that object.

One can see in these two passages—though separated by nearly twenty years—a very similar concern with objectivity and the necessity of the comparison of one’s own perspective with that of another for this concept.

While the descriptions given of triangulation in these two passages provide a way of introducing triangulation, one thesis of this dissertation is that these descriptions leave out what is most fundamental to triangulation. Triangulation, I will argue, is not the triangular set of causal relations seen in the examples above. Instead, triangulation is what makes those causal relations possible. As seen in the passage above in which Davidson first introduces triangulation, Davidson initially only had an analogy in mind. But when he returns to the topic of triangulation seven years later, triangulation is a detailed specification of what makes this sort of comparison possible. Fundamental to the process are inborn similarity standards shared by the triangulating creatures: the two creatures must find the same objects similar, and find the reactions of one another to those objects similar. So similarity, as a way of grouping or classifying things in the world, is fundamental to how Davidson conceives of triangulation. And yet, for most commentators, the description of triangulation lacking any mention of similarity is the

only one they work with. One aim of this dissertation is to make clear the way in which this description is misleading and the way in which the notion of shared standards of similarity is essential to understanding triangulation.

For convenience, I divide Davidson’s work into three periods. In the early period, we see the views that lead to the notion of triangulation introduced in the passage seen above from the paper “Rational Animals.” This paper marks the beginning of what I think of as Davidson’s middle period, during which Davidson published material relevant to understanding triangulation, but nothing on triangulation itself. The publication of “The Conditions of Thought” five years after triangulation’s original introduction marks the beginning of the late period, the period in which all of Davidson’s work on triangulation occurred. In that paper, Davidson characterizes triangulation in very different terms from the analogical way in which it was originally presented, a quite detailed characterization that serves as the basis for all later discussions of triangulation.

With these three periods in mind, the dissertation has the following broad themes. First, the notion of triangulation cannot be understood apart from the problems that appear in the early period that triangulation is meant to address. Second, the notion of triangulation developed out of work done in the middle period. Third, in the late period, Davidson’s focus is on the role of triangulation in making possible the concept of objectivity. This late period has roughly three stages, Davidson’s focus being: first, the role of triangulation in providing for determinate mental and semantic content; second,

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the role of triangulation in making possible a concept of error; and third, the role of triangulation in making possible linguistic communication.

To understand these roles of triangulation, we must understand that for Davidson, triangulation is a framework within which thought and language emerge. It is probably fair to say that most approaches to thought and language are reductive. A simple account might reduce meaning to thought—the meaning of my words are the thoughts expressed—and reduce thought to certain physical processes occurring in the brain and perhaps also causal relations with the environment. The criterion of success of such a reductive project would be accounting for meaning in terms of thought without essential appeal to semantic concepts; and accounting for thought in non-intentional terms. Such a reduction would fit language and thought into a broadly physical framework or picture of the world.

Davidson rejects such projects. With respect to thought and language, Davidson is a non-reductionist. First, as he argued in “Mental Events,” mental states and events cannot be reduced to physical states and events. The mental and physical are governed by different constitutive principles—the mental, rationality, and the physical, strict physical laws—and this prevents any reduction of one to the other. Second, as he argued in “Thought and Talk,” language cannot be reduced to thought, since thought requires language. Now, many interpretations of triangulation take this notion to be primarily concerned with Davidson’s argument that in order to have thought we must have language. The argument, briefly put, is that thought requires the concept of objectivity,

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and the concept of objectivity requires linguistic communication. Triangulation makes its appearance in the second step of the argument in support of the claim that the concept of objectivity requires linguistic communication. Although Davidson clearly makes such use of triangulation, I suggest in this dissertation that triangulation plays a broader role that what is seen in its use in this argument.

Non-reductive accounts are often enough criticized on the grounds that the only conditions they can give for the sufficiency of thought or language involve thought and language. For example, the following sort of account seems viciously circular: thought requires language, and language in turn requires thought. Such an account would not seem to shed any light on thought and language. Davidson’s account is sometimes charged with such circularity, for he seems to argue that thought requires the concept of objectivity, but to have this concept one must linguistically communicate the content of one’s thoughts with other speakers. Thought, we are told, requires thought. Trivially true, but not particularly interesting or informative.

I would suggest that this sort of circularity objection can be avoided if we can show that Davidson’s account, though non-reductive and so unavoidably circular, is not viciously so. That it is not—or that at the very least, that Davidson thought it not—can be seen by looking at triangulation’s broader purpose. This broader purpose becomes clear if we consider what sort of an account of thought and language is available to the non-reductionist. Davidson’s view is a version of emergence. The idea is that while we cannot give non-intentionally specified sufficient conditions for thought or language, we can give a set of necessary conditions which make possible the emergence of thought and
language. Briefly put, the picture is this. Davidson claims that certain concepts are both necessary for thought possession and are primitive in the sense of not being explicable in terms of simpler concepts. Included among the primitive concepts are the concepts of belief, truth, objectivity, and error. While these concepts cannot be reduced to or explicated in terms of other more basic concepts, an informative account of these concepts can be provided by showing their interrelations and the roles they play.

Davidson’s suggestion is that these concepts are best understood in terms of the roles they play in interpersonal understanding and in particular linguistic communication.

Triangulation, I suggest in this dissertation, is the non-intentionally specified set of conditions necessary for the emergence of this set of related concepts. Triangulation, we will see, also makes possible the emergence of mental and linguistic content, on the one hand, and linguistic communication on the other. So, while it is true that Davidson claims thought requires language which requires thought, the account is not viciously circular. Thought requires a set of interrelated concepts, as well as determinate content, and having this set of interrelated concepts requires linguistic communication. The framework that makes possible the concurrent emergence of these concepts, determinate content, and linguistic communication is the non-intentionally specified set of conditions or framework that Davidson calls triangulation.

With the understanding of triangulation’s role as providing a framework for the emergence of thought and language, let me briefly introduce the theses I will argue for in this dissertation. In chapter one, I argue that the motivation for Davidson’s introduction of the notion of triangulation is found in the context of a debate he had, occurring over
the space of several years, with his mentor W. V. O. Quine. That debate concerned a
topic central to both of their general philosophical positions, namely radical interpretation,
or the interpretation of the speech of someone from scratch without the help of bilingual
aids. This thought experiment is meant to shed light on the nature of knowledge and
linguistic meaning. The debate itself involved the very beginnings of radical
interpretation, in which the interpreter observes the native utter sentences in the presence
of objects and interprets the sentences on this basis. While Davidson’s view is that the
distal object should be taken as the cause of the native’s holding the sentence true and as
the content of that sentence, Quine argued that the better candidate for translating the
sentence is the proximal stimulation of the native’s sensory receptors. Both approaches
encounter what is known as the problem of error, though for different reasons. On a
proximal approach, the difficulty is that the same proximal stimuli can be the result of
different distal causes, while on the distal approach the same distal stimuli can cause
different verbal responses. In either case, error occurs, but neither approach seems well
suited to deal with it.

While early on, Davidson treated the debate as primarily a problem with
interpretation, he later came to see the debate as the symptom of a deeper epistemological
difference with Quine. Quine’s epistemic view was empiricist and in particular was a
form of what Davidson rejected as scheme-content dualism. On this view, language is a
scheme that organizes or fits experience, which on Quine’s approach is characterized in
terms of proximal stimuli. Davidson rejected scheme-content dualism on the grounds
that the best way we have of understanding language is in terms of truth conditions, and
proximal stimuli—or other empiricist characterizations of experience—are the wrong sort of thing to serve as evidence or reasons for believing something true. Seen in this light, Davidson’s problem of error was a symptom of a deeper problem, the problem of objectivity. Simply put, all that can serve as evidence or a reason for holding a belief is another belief. Speakers are caused by distal stimuli to hold sentences true, and we interpret the sentences on this basis. But to be caused to hold a sentence true is to be caused to believe that sentence is true, and while speakers can be caused to form beliefs in this way, causes cannot serve as reasons for beliefs in the sense of providing evidence for those beliefs. In other words, the world causes beliefs, but epistemically all speakers have access to are their beliefs. They cannot step outside their beliefs and examine the causal relations between their beliefs and the world and conclude whether or not their beliefs are warranted. This is the problem of objectivity: how can we be assured that our beliefs are true of an objective, independently existing world?

With this problem as background, in chapter two I look at the work that Davidson did in his middle period out of which, I claim, triangulation grew. I first look at the influences of Quine on Davidson’s assumptions concerning the nature of interpretation and meaning. I then look more closely at the problem of objectivity and the approach that Davidson takes to solve it. Davidson discusses and rejects a false dilemma in epistemology between foundationalism and coherence theories of knowledge. He rejects foundationalist theories—of which scheme-content dualism is a species—and feels pressured to hold a coherence theory view. The problem as is well known with coherence theories is that incompatible theories can be coherent taken individually.
Davidson suggests, though, that actually held coherent sets of beliefs are different; they have in their favor a presumption of truth. The reason for this is seen in the way actually held sets of beliefs get their content. Basic empirical beliefs, like those attributed at the beginning of radical interpretation, get their content from causal relations to the world. The solution to the problem of objectivity, then, is not to give an account of objectivity in the sense of giving evidence that our beliefs are true of an independent world; the solution is to give an account of how beliefs get their content and how, in this process, we come to have the concept of objectivity. Triangulation, I suggest, is Davidson’s account of this concept and so his solution to the problem of objectivity.

The second part of chapter two deals with a very different topic that Davidson was concerned with in his middle period. While many accounts of meaning make essential appeal to linguistic conventions, Davidson rejects any such role for conventions. He therefore offers a different account of linguistic communication, one in which speakers intend and attempt to get listeners to assign certain interpretations to their speech, and listeners provide whatever feedback is required for the speaker to be justified in believing the intention has be recognized by the listener. My suggestion is that Davidson’s rejection of conventions and his alternative characterization of communication are essential for understanding triangulation. Moreover, if we combine the account of interpretation suggested in the first part of the chapter with the account of communication seen in the second part of the chapter, we can abstract out a picture of what triangulation makes possible: the interpreter interpreters speech on the basis of
causes of utterances, and the speaker intends to get the interpreter to recognize the speaker’s intention to mean by that utterance the object in question.

In the third chapter, I finally introduce triangulation in detail as Davidson characterizes it in the *Conditions of Thought* paper. In trying to make clear what precisely Davidson has in mind by triangulation, I reject one common misinterpretation. According to the common interpretation, triangulation is introduced to rule out proximal stimuli as content determining, by claiming that the content determining cause is the common cause of the responses of both speaker and interpreter. Given this common-cause interpretation of triangulation, it is often objected that there are too many common causes of the responses of communicating creatures. The account is therefore inadequate. I reject this common-cause interpretation. I suggest that the view Davidson presents from the *Conditions of Thought* on is that triangulation makes possible the responses of two creatures to a common cause. Simply put, creatures like us are born finding the same distal stimuli similar, and it is such shared inborn standards of similarity that make possible both communication—including radical interpretation—and the ostensive learning one one’s first language. The importance of triangulating an object is not that triangulation picks out the distal stimulus rather than proximal stimuli as relevant to content determination; the importance is that by triangulating an object, a contrast is made possible between objects creatures subjectively find similar and objects being objectively similar. It is only thus that creatures can be said to be responding to objects qua objects—that is, independently existing objects. This characterization of
triangulation is therefore the beginnings of Davidson’s solution to the problem of objectivity.

In chapter four, I look at Davidson’s views on the concepts of error and objectivity. I begin with the account of concept possession that Davidson presents late in the late period. I stress that for Davidson, concept application requires judgments that a given object belongs to a certain class. It follows that concept possession requires determinate content—concepts pick out determinate classes—and awareness that a given object thought to belong to the class might not in fact belong to the class—i.e., an awareness of possible error. I then look at Davidson’s presentations of triangulation in the late period and suggest that early on, beginning with the *Conditions of Thought* paper, the focus is on how triangulation makes possible determinate conceptual content. Later, the focus comes to be triangulation’s role in making possible the concept of error. In both cases, Davidson argues that linguistic communication is also necessary. Determinate conceptual content requires communicating this content with the creature with which one is engaged in triangulation. And the concept of error requires communicating reasons or explanations for cases of error. Both cases involve giving reasons for the judgments involved in concept application. And both cases are crucial for having the concept of objectivity.

In chapter five, I look at the way in which triangulation makes possible linguistic communication. I suggest that as Davidson came to emphasize ostensive language learning as a case of triangulation, his treatment of triangulation changed. In particular, while early treatments of triangulation treated both creatures as playing the same roles for
one another, in later discussions of ostensive learning the differences between teacher and child become salient. Considered from the perspective of the child, triangulating with the adult not only makes possible determinate content—the object ostended—but the teacher’s responses to the child also make possible a notion of linguistic normativity. The adult provides a check on the correct or incorrect use of language by the child. I suggest that this view is a convergence of Davidson’s view of communication presented in chapter two and an evolving emphasis on response similarity in triangulation. I then discuss Davidson’s reasons for thinking that in ostensive learning meaning is created rather than passed on, and in particular that the bit of language the child develops in ostension is not the adult’s language, but a new language modeled on the language of the adult. This is important because the object ostended comes to play a constitutive role in the meaning of the child’s utterances, and as a result the child cannot doubt the original ostensions. I then suggest that a shift in Davidson’s view concerning interpretation occurred in light of this view of ostensive learning. Instead of thinking of interpretation as analogous to the relation between speaker and listener in his account of communication, he thinks of interpretation as analogous to the relation between child and adult in ostensive learning. In interpretation, the interpreter, like the child, is engaged in the ostensive learning of a language, a new language modeled on but not the same as the native’s. As such, the same results that follow in the case of ostensive learning follow in the case of interpretation: the role of the object ostended establishes a use for the newly acquired bit of language. The originally ostended object provides the objective standard against which the native judges future responses of the interpreter to be correct or
incorrect. We thus have Davidson’s final solution to the problems of objectivity and error in the standard provided by world and interlocutor.

**Motivations for the Project**

In my view, the theses I argue for in this dissertation are necessary for a proper understanding of triangulation. But even if I am correct, this begs the next question: Why triangulation? One reason to devote time and attention to triangulation is that it is an important element in the thought of an important thinker. It is no exaggeration to say that Donald Davidson was one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. In the philosophy of action, he persuaded philosophers to reject the then prevailing view that reasons cannot be causes. In the philosophy of mind, he persuaded many philosophers that while type identity should be rejected, token identity and supervenience are plausible alternatives, and that there are reasons for thinking that the mental is irreducible to the physical. Finally, in the philosophy of language, Davidson suggested the use of a truth theory—as introduced by Alfred Tarski to account for truth in mathematics—as a way to structure and make precise what is wanted in an account of meaning.

It is widely assumed that analytical philosophy—the very kind of philosophy Davidson was engaged in—rejects the sort of appeal to authority that seemed to be a characteristic of philosophy before the modern period. Indeed, this rejection is considered part of the general rejection of authority that occurred with the rejection of Aristotelian philosophy. Yet, in the previous paragraph I seem to be recommending just that rejected sort of philosophy: I am suggesting a reason for studying triangulation that is
not a matter of the idea of triangulation itself but rather of who had the idea. However, I think this picture of analytic philosophy as concerned merely with ideas is incorrect. The place of Quine and Davidson in analytic philosophy and the frequency with which they are cited and discussed in analytic philosophy goes well beyond the discussion of mere ideas. There is a presumption that the ideas of such influential figures have merit. I think this can be said about Davidson and his notion of triangulation. I suspect, however, that this sort of reason is analogous to the role of anecdotal evidence in science, which provides reason to pursue research but does not justify the value of the research. In the present case, if the current project is to have merit, it will be found in the theses discussed in the previous section; the value of the dissertation is not to be found merely in the topic discussed but also in the theses argued for regarding that topic. Is there any reason to think that such historical/interpretive theses are valuable?

Again, it would seem that in analytic philosophy the value of historical theses tends to be restricted to showing past failed attempts to solve a problem. Although such an approach to history has merit, it is very narrow. And although I do not comment directly on the merits of triangulation, this is not because I think it is implausible. Indeed, I think there is much that is interesting and perhaps right in Davidson’s uses of triangulation. But as I have said, making such valuations requires first an understanding of triangulation.

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One could still argue that historical research is unnecessary for evaluation; and interpretation is necessary only to the extent that it is required to reconstruct Davidson’s arguments for evaluation. And I think there is a point in this. The trouble is that the focus is too narrow. One can of course reconstruct the premises and conclusions explicit and implicit in a particular argument. What this misses, however, is that if a philosopher’s views are reactions to the views of others, then the full reconstruction of that philosopher’s arguments for his views will almost certainly involve premises and arguments shared with and inherited from those other philosophers. In Davidson’s case, perhaps the most important influence is that of Quine, and we will see this influence throughout the dissertation, but particularly in chapters one and two.

Understanding triangulation depends not only on such historical background as found by looking at the views he inherited from Quine; it is equally important to understand the arguments Davidson himself gives for other views he holds that are relevant to triangulation. This is part of the motivation for chapter two’s discussions of Davidson’s arguments for the causal role of objects in determining empirical content and Davidson’s rejection of the role of linguistic conventions in the determination of linguistic norms and so meaning. If I am correct that understanding triangulation depends on understanding these theses, it is also correct that the plausibility of these theses and the soundness or lack thereof of the arguments in their favor will bear on an evaluation of Davidson’s uses of triangulation.

One might still wonder why a dissertation on triangulation is needed. In other words, even granted that an historical-interpretive dissertation on triangulation is valuable
for being necessary in an evaluation of triangulation, why is an entire dissertation required? Why not just read what Davidson says about triangulation? For anyone familiar with Davidson’s writings, this question will perhaps seem facetious. The question is nevertheless important. The simple answer is: Davidson is damn hard. Of course, this answer is nearly circular, for it begs the next question: Why is Davidson hard? There are several interrelated reasons having to do with the breadth and interconnectedness of Davidson’s views—reasons that should be somewhat apparent in the number and types of topics discussed in the previous section.

First, Davidson is one of the few recent examples of a system builder. Unlike the philosophers of old, recent philosophers tend to be quite specialized and to publish in article format. Articles are self-contained and meant to be understood to a large degree in isolation. As we have seen, Davidson’s writings and work cover many fields within philosophy: mind, language, epistemology, action theory, etc. And yet, despite its diversity, Davidson’s work is an interconnected whole. And as I have suggested and will try to show in this dissertation, triangulation is an essential part of this whole.

Despite being a system builder, Davidson also writes in article form. Only at the end of his career did Davidson produce a book, and although it brings together some of his ideas, that book does not by any means cover them all. Indeed, not only does Davidson write in article form, but his articles are published in various (sometimes quite obscure) places and require considerable effort to bring together. We will see that this is

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true of triangulation, too. Davidson discusses triangulation in articles in well-known journals, in obscure journals, and in responses to papers published in book form.

Third, and related, each of Davidson’s articles depends for its proper understanding on an understanding of other of Davidson’s articles. And this tends to reiterate such that understanding any one article requires as a background an understanding of most of Davidson’s other articles. This holism of understanding is true of triangulation as of any other element of Davidson’s views.

A fourth reason for the difficulty of understanding Davidson is Davidson’s writing style. Rather than give reasons for a thesis, then reasons for those reasons, and so on until reaching agreed upon beginning points, Davidson tends to present burden of proof arguments. In particular, he considers various proposals on a given topic and finds them all lacking, and then at the end of the article he presents his own view. The upshot of this style is that Davidson tends to present his own views only in very truncated form following discussions of other views. To get a complete picture of his view on any topic, then, one must pull together several of these brief and often sketchy arguments. Again, this is true of triangulation. Indeed, as we saw above, Davidson’s introduction of triangulation occurs in the last paragraph of the paper “Rational Animals.” Davidson nowhere has an article that deals solely with triangulation. And most presentations of triangulation occur at the end of papers and are geared specifically to that paper’s topic. To form a complete understanding of triangulation therefore requires looking at numerous articles.
Fifth, triangulation does not have a single use. Davidson uses triangulation to account for the objectivity of thought, the origin of the concept of truth, and the normativity of meaning. With its help, Davidson argues against skepticism and for both social and perceptual externalism. And in light of triangulation, Davidson argues that thought requires language. Moreover, Davidson describes triangulation in different contexts: that which occurs among creatures lacking language and thought, that which occurs in ostensive language learning, and that which occurs in radical interpretation. Making sense of these various uses and how they are related is challenging, rewarding, and almost always frustrating.

So, the reasons for a dissertation on triangulation: triangulation is a central concept in the thought of an important thinker and therefore deserves evaluation; but such evaluation requires placing triangulation in its proper historical and interpretive context; and interpreting Davidson is made hard by various features of his philosophy and writing style. But there is one final reason to focus on triangulation’s historical and interpretive context: nobody else has done so. Those who have dealt with triangulation in the secondary literature have failed to understand triangulation in its historical and interpretive contexts. This has led them to misunderstand triangulation—its motivations, its justifications, its uses, etc.—and as a result they have evaluated it uncharitably.

In the chapters that follow, I consider only one author’s interpretation of triangulation and his criticisms of it. The reason for considering his view is that it is fairly well known and includes what I think are fairly typical interpretations of and responses to triangulation. The reason for not considering other interpretations, other
than for reasons of space, is that there is really a dearth of any good secondary literature on triangulation. Very few are historically or interpretative sensitive. The tendency is to begin with what is really a caricature of triangulation and use that as a spring board to a discussion of the author’s own views. As an example of such a caricature, take the discussions of Robinson Caruso as a puzzle case of triangulation. Suppose someone is shipwrecked on a deserted island and has nobody to triangulate with. Does the person have thought? This very quickly leads to discussions of whether actual linguistic communication is necessary for thought on Davidson’s account, or if perhaps merely the ability to triangulate is sufficient. I admit to being puzzled why an account of what is required for the emergence of thought and language would be relevant to such cases. Perhaps a more relevant case would be feral children, but I am not sure there are enough details about such cases to decide whether the children were able to acquire a full blown concept of objectivity without any linguistic interaction. At any rate, my claim is that the secondary literature is rather bad when it comes to triangulation, which both explains my lack of discussion of the secondary literature and my motivation for this project. Let me however give one example of an interpretation of triangulation from the secondary literature as a contrast with my own and again as a motivation for my project.

I want to look briefly at Jason Bridges’s criticisms of Davidson’s triangulation as they occur in his “Davidson’s Transcendental Externalism.” I chose Bridges’s article because not only is it fairly representative of the way commentators read Davidson’s

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work on triangulation, but also because Bridges is also quite clear about the background assumptions he makes—assumptions which, I maintain, lead him to misread Davidson.

Bridges begins by distinguishing two projects Davidson engaged in during the latter part of his career: one, the epistemological project of defending a non-empiricist account of knowledge and thereby securing a defense against skepticism; the other, the metaphysical/transcendental project of showing that triangulation is a necessary condition of thought. On my view, this division is confused for several reasons. First, triangulation arises out of Davidson’s non-empiricist account of knowledge; to separate these as two separate projects is to fundamentally misunderstand them. Second, securing a defense against skepticism is a happy result of Davidson’s non-empiricist account of thought and language based on triangulation, not a motivation for Davidson’s rejection of empiricism. Third, it is not clear in what sense the arguments Davidson makes with the use of triangulation are either metaphysical or transcendental, and at any rate I do not think the arguments concerning triangulation’s necessity for thought are the only or even the main reasons for introducing triangulation. As I have suggested, triangulation is Davidson’s non-reductive account of the emergence of thought and language and in particular our concept of objectivity.

Taking triangulation as unconnected with what Bridges calls the epistemological project leads I suggest to the criticisms he makes of what he sees as the metaphysical project involving triangulation. Part of that metaphysical project is Davidson’s argument that since the concept of truth is required for thought, and triangulation is required for the concept of truth or error, it follows that triangulation is required for thought. Like many
other commentators, Bridges complains that Davidson has not made compelling the necessity of the second creature for making possible the notion of error (and so truth). Bridges suggests that regardless of how the second creature responds (to an object and/or to the first creature), it is the first creature’s past conditioning with respect to an object (type) that is relevant to that creature’s expectations being thwarted; the second creature’s expectations being thwarted or not plays no role.

Now, Bridges is correct that a lone creature can be conditioned to respond to an object and that the creature can as a result have failed expectations. As Davidson would agree, the creature’s inborn similarity standards group objects together and on the basis of such perceived similarities the creature can learn, form expectations, and discriminate objects. However, Davidson’s claim is that triangulation—and so the second person—is required for making sense of relevant similarity, or similarity according to a standard. A lone creature can be said to respond to objects as similar, but this is not to respond to them as relevantly similar, which requires two (or more) creatures. For two objects to be relevantly similar is for them to be not merely found similar, but for there to be an answer to whether or not the creature is right in its similarity judgment. A lone creature may respond as if objects were similar or dissimilar—Davidson sees this as mere discrimination—but without a second creature, there is no possibility of the creature being wrong or making a mistake.

Bridges’s second line of criticism takes issue with Davidson’s claim that triangulation is necessary to determine the cause of a creature’s responses. Criticisms of this argument of Davidson’s generally involve a claim of circularity: in order that the
second creature play a role in the establishment of a cause of the first creature’s responses, the first creature must already conceive of the second creature and the object. Since to conceive of the creature and object is to have thought—and so for there to be determinate causes of one’s responses—the account assumes what it purports to explain. Bridges puts the objection this way:

Time and again, Davidson suggests that the transition into thought is effected by a creature’s cottoning on to the fact that it and another creature are jointly triangulating on particular events in the world. There is a real question how such a cottoning-on could in any sense be part of the explanation of the acquisition of the capacity for thought, given that it presupposes that capacity.

As I said above, although one can characterize triangulation in terms of creatures interacting causally with each other and objects—and Davidson at times does so—this characterization leads to the suspicion that the account is circular. A closer look at Davidson’s characterization of triangulation reveals it to be a particular convergence of responses that allow for each creature to take advantage of the responses of the other creature so as to provide objective checks both on the similarity of objects and on the similarity of responses. While all of this presupposes causal relations among creatures and objects, triangulation itself does not assume the creatures have concepts of objects or thought more generally.

So, given the reasons presented in this section, and in light of the criticisms made of Davidson’s uses of triangulation based, as they are, on misinterpretations, it is important that we take a closer look at triangulation and what Davidson is really up to.

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10 Ibid.
Chapter 1: Quine’s Dualism, the Proximal-Distal Debate, and the Problem of Error

Davidson’s introduction of triangulation was occasioned by a long-running debate with his mentor, W. V. O. Quine. This debate concerns interpretation, a topic important to both thinkers. The focus of the debate is what to take as the stimulus that causes a speaker to utter certain sentences about their environment. Quine favors the proximal cause, the stimulation of one’s sensory receptors; Davidson favors the distal cause, the objects themselves. This chapter concerns this proximal-distal debate and how it motivated Davidson’s introduction of triangulation.

While the proximal-distal debate concerns interpretation, I will try to make clear why Davidson came see the debate as a “minor corollary” of a more fundamental difference with Quine concerning epistemology. Davidson rejects Quine’s epistemology as a form of empiricism and a version of the dichotomy of scheme and content. In this chapter, I aim to answer the following three questions: What are the relations among Quine’s empiricism, the scheme-content dichotomy, and the epistemic role he assigns proximal stimuli? And what are the reasons for Davidson’s rejection of Quine’s notion of proximal stimuli, and in particular, how is that motivated by his rejection of the two elements of Quine’s epistemology? And finally, how does Davidson’s rejection of
Quine’s epistemology and of the role of proximal stimuli motivate the introduction of triangulation?

I argue for the following in this chapter. Quine’s motivation for taking proximal stimuli as central for meaning and epistemology derives from two sources, namely elements of his views inherited from his mentor Rudolf Carnap and the verificationist theory of meaning. Quine’s rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction, which was central to Carnap’s views, leads to a fundamental transformation of the views Quine inherits from him. I will suggest that this inheritance, in conjunction with the verificationist theory of meaning, explains the place of proximal stimuli in Quine’s epistemology—as the common reference point, as Davidson sometimes puts it, to which different conceptual schemes are relative. Now, with the notion of proximal stimuli, Quine avoids a problem that Davidson faces, the problem of error: how to distinguish between the set of distal stimuli that are in the extension of a creature’s predicates, and the set of distal stimuli that are not (and so would constitute errors). But while Davidson’s rejection of scheme-content dualism leads him to take distal objects as central to meaning and knowledge; and the centrality of objects means making a notion of error and so objectivity important; the rejection of the scheme-content distinction makes it difficult to account for the objectivity of thought. This is the problem of objectivity: how to account for the objectivity of thought given the rejection of the traditional distinction between subjectivity—a scheme and its content—and objectivity. Triangulation is meant to address the problem of objectivity not by analyzing error and objectivity as a relation between mind and world, but rather by accounting for our concept of objectivity as arising in the relations among two minds and a common world.
In what follows, I begin by looking at the views of Carnap that provide the background for understanding Quine’s views and in particular Quine’s notion of proximal stimuli and the dualism of scheme and content that underlies it. I then turn to a detailed examination of Quine’s views and follow this with a look at Davidson’s reasons for rejecting Quine’s empiricism and dualism of scheme and content. I next look at the details of the proximal-distal debate, and in particular Davidson’s realization that what was really at issue was differences in epistemology. I then look at how in the context of that debate the problem of error arose, and I suggest that the problem of error as it occurs in interpretation is a manifestation of the deeper problem of objectivity that arises from Davidson’s rejection of the scheme-content distinction. Finally, I suggest that triangulation was introduced to address this problem.

Carnap

Rudolf Carnap, a central member of the Vienna Circle, was the mentor of Quine and had a profound influence on Quine’s thinking. Quine is known for his criticisms of logical positivism, but it can be said that for Quine, Carnap just was logical positivism, and Quine’s criticisms were directed primarily at Carnap. In this section I will provide what I take to be Carnap’s views, noting the Kantian project that engaged him and how it led to his notion of logico-linguistic frameworks, or conceptual schemes.

Carnap was originally concerned with what Michael Friedman has called the coordination problem.\(^\text{11}\) Simply put, the coordination problem is this: the picture of the world provided by science is abstract and mathematical; our experience of the world is

concrete and qualitative; how, then, do we make sense of the relationship between the scientific description of the world and our experience of it? Kant forged a connection between Newtonian physics and our experience of the world by positing an intermediate cognitive process, one which made raw experience Euclidian and so made experience palatable, so to speak, for the Newtonian description of the physical world that governs our cognition. The trouble with this solution to the coordination problem was that it resulted in our being able to know a priori that space is Euclidian, and Einstein showed that space is not Euclidian. There is an obvious solution to this Kantian problem: relax the constraints such that a connection can be forged between any physical description science (and mathematics) might provide of the world and our experience of it. One way to do this, and the way Carnap eventually does, is to argue that the connection between science and experience is a conventional one.

The interface between abstract theory and concrete experience is accomplished by Carnap’s logico-linguistic frameworks. These frameworks provide explicit definitions of concepts that allow for an interface between theory and world. Importantly, these definitions are conventions, true by definition, adopted as part of a framework. It is here that analyticity plays its role. The elements of these frameworks are analytically true; Kant’s synthetic a priori is unneeded. The interfaces between theory and experience are conventional structures. Though these structures are composed of analytic truths, no one collection of such truths is correct in the absolute sense of being correct descriptions of either the world or our experience. This lack of uniqueness is important because it allows for the principle that is perhaps most central to Carnap’s thought, the principle of tolerance.

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In light of the plurality of logico-linguistic frameworks, the question arises on what basis one decides to adopt a particular framework. Carnap’s answer is that one adopts a framework not on cognitive but on pragmatic grounds. Because frameworks are necessary for the cognition of experience and so for settling empirical questions, one cannot empirically decide between frameworks. Instead, one can choose to adopt a framework on pragmatic grounds—the framework is useful for achieving some set of theoretical goals—and once adopted one can ask and answer empirical questions.

This distinction between pragmatic and cognitive reasoning, combined with the conventional nature of frameworks, leads to Carnap’s principle of tolerance\textsuperscript{12}:

Let us grant to those who work in any special field of investigation the freedom to use any form of expression which seems useful to them; the work in the field will sooner or later lead to the elimination of those forms which have no useful function. Let us be cautious in making assertions and critical in examining them, but tolerant in permitting linguistic forms.\textsuperscript{13}

This pragmatic view of framework adoption leads Carnap to a rather novel view of philosophy according to which philosophy should be concerned with the construction of frameworks for adoption by scientists. Given the rejection of the notion of synthetic a priori knowledge, there are only two types of knowledge: analytic a priori and synthetic a posteriori. Philosophy is clearly not involved in the investigation of a posteriori knowledge; that is the domain of science. What is left is analytic a priori knowledge. On Carnap’s view, analytic truths are part of frameworks adopted for use by scientists. Philosophy, then, becomes the construction and investigation of logico-linguistic frameworks for possible use by scientists.

The distinction between a priori framework construction and a posteriori theory building gave a way of demarcating science from non-science. Carnap divides questions into two sorts, internal and external. Internal questions are cognitive questions. They are questions made within a linguistic framework that admit of a straightforward truth value. Given the adoption of the physical object framework, for example, one can ask various questions, from the location of one’s favorite book to the mass of theoretical particles. External questions in contrast are pragmatic questions. They are made outside of a framework and concern the consequences of adopting that framework. One can ask whether the framework of physical object talk would facilitate use of a particular scientific theory. However, considering whether to adopt the physical object framework, one might be tempted to ask whether there really are physical objects. Carnap’s claim is that such a question is confused and ultimately meaningless. Theoretical questions can only be asked within a framework; they are meaningless otherwise.

With this understanding of Carnap in mind, I want to look at how what Quine accepts from Carnap—his pragmatism—and rejects—the distinction between analytic and synthetic truths—leads to Quine’s naturalistic approach to epistemology and how, in conjunction with Quine’s empiricism, that approach motivates Quine’s favoring uninterpreted, proximal stimuli over interpreted, distal stimuli as the basis for knowledge and interpretation.

Quine

Willard Van Orman Quine was the pupil of Carnap and the mentor of Davidson. Quine was not only, as previously mentioned, one of the most influential critics of logical positivism, he was also—as A.J. Ayer put it—the last great logical positivist. From the
logical positivists he inherited their positivism—an interest in science as the paradigm for human knowledge—as well as the verificationist theory of meaning. He also inherited from Carnap the pragmatism inherent in the principle of tolerance as well as Carnap’s distinction of scheme and content.

The picture Quine inherits from Carnap transforms in various ways with the rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction. Along with that distinction, Quine rejects both of these elements of Carnap’s philosophy: the idea of philosophy as distinct from science and the distinction between external and internal questions. The rejection of these elements of Carnap’s philosophy coupled with Quine’s verificationism results in what is distinctive about Quine’s philosophy. In particular, it is convenient to think of Quine’s philosophy as the combination of three different elements: his empiricism, naturalism, and pragmatism.

Quine’s *empiricism* is his verificationism. According to verificationism, the meaning of a sentence is its method of verification; we understand the meaning of a sentence if we understand the conditions that would add to or detract from the probability that that sentence is true. Quine’s verificationism has two elements. First is the assumption that what a theory means is just what experiences verify the theory. Second is the assumption that whatever experiences verify the theory is what makes the theory true. The second point follows if one assumes the first, since what the theory concerns *just is* what confirms it. This verificationism comes to have a Quinean flavor in light of his rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction. First, rather than there being some sentences that are empirically confirmed and some that are true regardless of the way the world is—the synthetic and analytic sentences, respectively—every sentence has both
empirical and non-empirical content. Second, and as a result, sentences are verified not individually but as groups, since no sentences have empirical consequences to call their own. The resulting view is that theories as wholes have meaning, and what they mean is whatever empirically confirms and so makes true the theory as a whole.

According to Quine’s naturalism, philosophy is continuous with science. Rather than developing abstract structures or frameworks for scientists, philosophy looks at human beings (with the methods of science) to determine not what they should believe or are justified in believing, but what they do believe and how they have come to hold those beliefs. For Quine, epistemology becomes the scientific, empirical study of knowledge. Rather than being normative, epistemology takes a decidedly descriptive turn.

According to Quine’s pragmatism, the pragmatic criteria by which external questions were answered on Carnap’s view are on a par with empirical criteria as elements of scientific methodology. Rejecting the distinction between external and internal questions means, on the one hand, that math, logic, and ontology are confirmed to the degree that the scientific theory in which they occur is empirically confirmed; and on the other hand, the distinction between the empirical and the metaphysical becomes blurred. Our theories of the world are much like webs, with theoretical statements (concerning math, logic, and ontology) internal to the web, more empirical statements to the periphery. Modifications to the internal portions of the web are guided more by pragmatic concerns; those on the periphery are more sensitive to empirical factors. In other words, internal to the web are the sorts of things philosophers (and the logical positivists) are concerned with and the sorts of things Carnap thought of as only answerable to pragmatic criteria.
For our purposes, these three theses—pragmatism, naturalism, and empiricism—provide the resources to understand Quine’s distinctive approach to philosophy and in particular his proximal approach to meaning.

1. Pragmatism tells us that simplicity is a cognitive criterion of theory adoption; simpler conceptual schemes are ceteris paribus truer conceptual schemes.

2. Naturalism tells us that rather than proposing conceptual schemes for adoption by scientists, philosophers should empirically study how people come to the conceptual schemes they do.

3. Empiricism tells us that what verifies a conceptual scheme is the meaning of that scheme and so what makes that scheme true.

These theses lead Quine to maintain a rather non-realist, pragmatic or instrumentalist view of conceptual schemes. For Quine, rather than thinking of schemes as reaching beyond the sensory evidence to the objects they would prima facie concern, schemes are tools for the prediction of experience. Objects are conceived of as posits, the function of which are to simplify and aid in the prediction of experience.

As an empiricist I continue to think of the conceptual scheme of science as a tool, ultimately, for predicting future experience in the light of past experience. Physical objects are conceptually imported into the situation as convenient intermediaries—not by definition in terms of experience, but simply as irreducible posits comparable, epistemologically, to the gods of Homer. …The myth of physical objects is epistemically superior to most in that it has proved more efficacious than other myths as a device for working a manageable structure into the flux of experience.14

Judgments of simplicity concern the ease with which the worldview as a whole meets with the empirical data. “The edge of the system must be kept squared with experience;

14 Ibid., p. 41
the rest, with all of its elaborate myths or fictions, has as its objective the simplicity of
laws.”\(^\text{15}\) Ontological questions—those external questions confused by metaphysicians,
according to Carnap, with internal questions—become on Quine’s picture just part of the
simplifying picture provided by science.

Ontological questions, under this view, are on a par with questions of natural
science. …Now Carnap has maintained that this is a question not of matters of
fact but of choosing a convenient language form, a convenient conceptual scheme
or framework for science. With this I agree, but only on the proviso that the same
be conceded regarding scientific hypotheses generally. Carnap has recognized
that he is able to preserve a double standard for ontological questions and
scientific hypotheses only by assuming an absolute distinction between the
analytic and the synthetic; and I need not say again that this is a distinction which
I reject.\(^\text{16}\)

Quine concludes *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* with just this pragmatic view of objects as
parts of worldviews used to predict sensory experience:

Carnap, Lewis, and others take a pragmatic stand on the question of choosing
between language forms, scientific frameworks; but their pragmatism leaves off at
the imagined boundary between the analytic and the synthetic. In repudiating
such a boundary I espouse a more thorough pragmatism. Each man is given a
scientific heritage plus a continuing barrage of sensory stimulation; and the
considerations which guide him in warping his scientific heritage to fit his
continuing sensory promptings are, where rational, pragmatic.\(^\text{17}\)

Notice that both Carnap’s and Quine’s pragmatism require something like the
principle of tolerance. For both, pragmatic factors are those that guide theory choice over
and above fitting empirical data. For Carnap, this means choosing a logico-linguistic
framework on the basis of one’s aims and goals; for Quine, this means making
modifications to one’s conceptual scheme so as to minimize change and preserve overall
simplicity. The assumption in both cases is that the empirical facts will not determine a

\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 42.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. 43.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 43.
unique conceptual scheme; more than one conceptual scheme or logico-linguistic framework is compatible with the empirical world. And of course this tolerance assumes a division of scheme and content. It is not surprising, then, that Davidson’s rejection of this division is directed at the idea that there can be more than one conceptual scheme, and that his argument is against the intelligibility of the content that such schemes share on Quine’s view.

Two results of Quine’s taking proximal sensory stimulation as his starting point are significant. First, conceptual schemes take as their content, and so are confirmed by and made true by, non-conceptualized data. Because the data is non-conceptualized, it can serve as a causal explanation of conceptual schemes, but it cannot serve as evidence for conceptual schemes in a normative, justificatory sense. This point is significant because it is the basis for Davidson’s rejection of scheme-content dualism. Second, because the stimuli are proximal and causal, a notion of truth or error does not play a role in the account. Proximal stimuli explain what you believe and so what you do, but since they do not justify, there is no room for error. Indeed, one primary reason for Quine’s taking the proximal cause as significant is that it rules out error. This point is significant because it is why Quine does not, as Davidson, face the problems of error and objectivity.

**Davidson’s attack on Quine’s scheme-content dualism**

In “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” Davidson argues against the intelligibility of the notion of alternate conceptual schemes. The main argument of the paper is aimed at versions of the distinction similar to that held by Quine, and Quine serves as the paradigm of such versions. One can read the structure of the paper as dismissing various views, leaving Quine’s view as the only remaining alternative.
Davidson then dismisses Quine’s view, leaving the proponent of conceptual schemes no alternative but to admit the notion is vacuous.

We have seen how the notion of a conceptual scheme or logico-linguistic framework played a central role in the views of Rudolf Carnap. We then saw how this distinction changed in the hands of Quine with the rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction. In this section of this chapter we look at the arguments Davidson makes for the conclusion that with the rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction, the only way to make sense of the scheme-content distinction is in terms of interpreted scheme and uninterpreted content. This is Quine’s view, and we will look at Davidson’s argument that Quine’s view requires that the relation between scheme and content is that of making true, but that uninterpreted content cannot play such a role. With the rejection of the notions of scheme and content—the empiricist notion of subjectivity—Davidson assures us that thought is still objective because our knowledge of the world is unmediated and direct.

Davidson makes two assumptions in his argument that Quine, at any rate, should not balk at. Davidson assumes that we can identify conceptual schemes with languages and that therefore conceptual schemes, like languages, must be revealed in the behavior of speakers. As Davidson puts it, we must be able to tell that a form of behavior is speech behavior. If, however, a conceptual scheme is radically different from our own, and conceptual schemes are identified with languages, then a radically different conceptual scheme must be an untranslatable language. So, if there are radically different conceptual schemes, we must be able to identify a behavior as speech behavior while finding ourselves unable to translate the speech into our own language. Davidson’s
argument will be that this is not possible.

Nothing, it may be said, could count as evidence that some form of activity could not be interpreted in our language that was not at the same time evidence that that form of activity was not speech behavior. ¹⁸

Guiding Davidson’s argument is consideration of the analytic-synthetic distinction. If we have this distinction on board, we can distinguish within a language between those sentences that are analytically true in virtue of their meaning alone, and those that are true also because of the way the world is. The analytically true statements can be taken to express conceptual truths and so taken together make up a speaker’s conceptual scheme. The synthetically true statements provide the empirical content of the scheme. This is the sort of picture held by logical positivists and in particular Carnap. Since only synthetic statements say anything about the world, sets of analytic statements are merely frameworks for talking about the world; the only requirements on adopting such a framework, as we saw for Carnap, are pragmatic, not cognitive. This picture allows for a straightforward distinction between scheme and content.

As we have seen, Quine rejects the analytic-synthetic distinction. But Quine does not give up the distinction between scheme and content. The result of abandoning the first is that the nature of the two elements of the second is transformed. Once Quine abandons the analytic-synthetic distinction, if he is to keep a notion of empirical content in the picture, this content must be provided by an unconceptualized something existing outside the conceptual scheme. Davidson writes:

The dualism of the synthetic and the analytic is a dualism of sentences some of which are true (or false) both because of what they mean and because of their

empirical content, while others are true (or false) by virtue of meaning alone, having no empirical content. If we give up the dualism, we abandon the conception of meaning that goes with it, but we do not have to abandon the idea of empirical content: we can hold, if we want, that all sentences have empirical content. Empirical content is in turn explained by reference to the facts, the world, experience, sensation, the totality of sensory stimuli, or something similar. Meanings gave us a way to talk about categories, the organizing structure of language, and so on; but it is possible, as we have seen, to give up meanings and analyticity while retaining the idea of language as embodying a conceptual scheme. Thus in place of the dualism of the analytic-synthetic we get the dualism of conceptual scheme and empirical content.\(^\text{19}\)

Giving up the dualism of analytic and synthetic statements while retaining a notion of empirical content “… suggests instead a dualism of quite a different sort, a dualism of total scheme (or language) and uninterpreted content.” Indeed, to make sense of comparing conceptual schemes, a non-conceptual sort of evidence must be specified.

…the common relation to experience or the evidence is what is supposed to help us make sense of the claim that it is languages or schemes that are under consideration when translation fails. It is essential to this idea that there be something neutral and common that lies outside all schemes. This common something cannot, of course, be the subject matter of contrasting languages, or translation would be possible.\(^\text{20}\)

So the picture is that there must be something common to all schemes, something they are all about; but whatever that is, it cannot be conceptualized, or all conceptual schemes would be about the same stuff. This view Davidson calls the third dogma of empiricism and Davidson rejects this dogma as unintelligible.

The new dualism is the foundation of an empiricism shorn of the untenable dogmas of the analytic-synthetic distinction and reductionism shorn, that is, of the unworkable idea that we can uniquely allocate empirical content sentence by sentence. I want to urge that this second dualism of scheme and content, of organizing system and something waiting to be organized, cannot be made intelligible and defensible. It is itself a dogma of empiricism, the third dogma. The third, and perhaps the last, for if we give it up it is not clear that there is

\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 189.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 190. My emphasis.
anything distinctive left to call empiricism.\textsuperscript{21}

Davidson’s main argument that the notion of conceptual schemes is a rejection of the intelligibility of this notion of neutral or uninterpreted content. His argument is that our best way of understanding the notion of truth requires translation, and so the notion of a true but untranslatable conceptual scheme is incoherent. To get to this argument, Davidson must provide a connection between the dualism of scheme and content we have attributed to Quine, on the one hand, and the notion of truth on the other. This is accomplished in two steps involving Quine’s verificationism. First, the content of a conceptual scheme is what verifies that scheme.

The general position is that sensory experience provides all the evidence for the acceptance of sentences (where sentences may include whole theories). A sentence or theory fits our sensory promptings, successfully faces the tribunal of experience, predicts future experience, or copes with the pattern of our surface irritations, provided it is borne out by the evidence.\textsuperscript{22}

The second step is the assumption that theoretical terms are introduced in order to account for the evidence; if a theory fits all the evidence, there is no further question as to the truth of what it says about the world.\textsuperscript{23}

... The point is that for a theory to fit or face up to the totality of possible sensory evidence is for that theory to be true. If a theory quantifies over physical objects, numbers or sets, what it says about these entities is true provided the theory as a whole fits the sensory evidence. One can see how, from this point of view, such entities might be called posits. It is reasonable to call something a posit if it can be contrasted with something that is not. Here the something that is not is sensory experience—at least that is the idea.\textsuperscript{24}

Putting these two steps together, then: a conceptual scheme’s role is to fit the evidence,

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 189.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 193.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid. 22, p. 192.
and to the extent it does this, the scheme is true.

Neither of these points is Davidson’s target; although he does take himself to be attacking empiricism, his target is not Quine’s verificationism but rather his pragmatism. This is the pragmatism that Quine shares with Carnap, derived from the principle of tolerance, and that in Quine’s hands becomes the view that questions of ontology and logic are freely chosen in simplifying the scheme’s account of the empirical content, and that the resulting conceptual scheme is true—including the pragmatically chosen elements—to the extent that the scheme fits the empirical evidence. This pragmatism pushes Quine to characterize the evidence for such schemes as unconceptualized sensory stimulation. Davidson’s objection is this: unconceptualized content cannot serve as the evidence for a conceptual scheme in this way, and in particular it makes no sense to talk of schemes being true of something unconceptualized.

The trouble is that the notion of fitting the totality of experience, like the notions of fitting the facts, or being true to the facts, adds nothing intelligible to the simple concept of being true.²⁵

Nothing intelligible is added by talk of something making frameworks true.

Davidson’s fundamental reason for rejecting the notion of conceptual schemes is that we cannot make sense of a conceptual scheme being made true by something unconceptualized. The reason for this is two-fold:

First, Davidson thinks of conceptual schemes as languages.

Second, Davidson thinks of truth, as applied to languages, as best characterized in the manner introduced by Alfred Tarski.

The crux is that Tarski’s definition of truth involves translating one language into

another. So to make sense of a conceptual scheme requires translating that scheme. Of course, this alone suggests that alternate conceptual schemes are impossible, if we assume that the criterion of being an alternate conceptual scheme is untranslatability. For this reason, Davidson puts his main argument against conceptual schemes in terms of:

…the question how well we understand the notion of truth, as applied to language, independent of the notion of translation. The answer is, I think, that we do not understand it independently at all.\footnote{Ibid, p. 194.}

But this is not the end of the argument, since what is needed is some idea of why truth is so characterized. And indeed, looking at the details of Tarski’s work tells us why truth is not characterized in terms of a relation between language and uninterpreted data, but rather between language and interpreted truth conditions. Tarski’s theory of truth delivers for every sentence of a speaker’s language a T-sentence. (The requirement that a theory do so is known as \textit{Convention T}.) T-sentences pair a structural description of a sentence of the speaker’s language with a specification of the sentence’s truth conditions given in the language of the interpreter:

‘Snow is white’ is true if and only if snow is white.

The crucial point is that the right hand side of the T-sentence gives the truth conditions of the speaker’s sentence by using the language of the interpreter—in other words, by employing the full conceptual resources of the interpreter.

Nevertheless, Convention T suggests, though it cannot state, an important feature common to all the specialized concepts of truth. It succeeds in doing this by making essential use of the notion of translation into a language we know.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 194-195.}

We cannot compare another speaker’s concepts or language with an unconceptualized
reality; we can only compare it with reality as we conceive it. The concept of truth has its
use not in specifying a relation between man and unconceptualized world, but rather
between men concerning their conceptualizations of the same world.

Only against the background of a shared, uninterpreted content can such
differences in scheme be made sense of. So with the rejection of the notion of
uninterpreted content we cannot make sense of conceptual schemes; and without the
notion of alternate conceptual schemes, we also lose the notion of the relativity of truth.

In giving up dependence on the concept of an uninterpreted reality, something
outside all schemes and science, we do not relinquish the notion of objective
truth—quite the contrary. Given the dogma of a dualism of scheme and reality,
we get conceptual relativity, and truth relative to a scheme. Without the dogma,
this kind of relativity goes by the board. Of course truth of sentences remains
relative to language, but that is as objective as can be. In giving up the dualism of
scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but reestablish unmediated touch
with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or
false.28

With this rejection of the scheme-content distinction, relativity of truth to
conceptual schemes also goes, and as a result we have unmediated touch with the world.

This final passage of the paper, as I understand it, is perhaps the first place where
Davidson states the view that initially motivates the introduction of triangulation. His
suggestion is that we are not giving up on the notion of objectivity or objective truth by
rejecting the notion of conceptual scheme and content. Since the notion of objectivity
plays no role in the rest of the paper, this passage may seem puzzling. But the reason for
bringing up the notion of objectivity—the notion of the independence of truth from our
beliefs—is crucial for our understanding of triangulation. The empiricist’s
characterization of scheme and content is a characterization of subjectivity. Our

28 Ibid., p. 198.
conceptual schemes and the evidence we have for them are our beliefs about the world and what that world is like. Without this notion of subjectivity, it is hard to conceive of what objectivity would amount to. Davidson nevertheless reassures us that he has not given up the world, but he is suggesting we have direct and unmediated contact with the world. Yet as we will see next, the problem of objectivity manifested itself in the context of the proximal-distal debate as the problem of error. And it is these two problems—two sides of the same coin, really—that triangulation is meant to address.

The Proximal-Distal Debate

As we have seen, Quine’s approach to meaning and epistemology favors taking proximal stimuli as the data that confirm conceptual schemes. As we will see in this section, Quine also takes proximal stimuli as the data for interpretation. Davidson, however, takes distal objects as central to both epistemology and meaning. This point of contention between Quine and Davidson became the focus of a long-running debate between the two.

Initially, it seems, Davidson thought of the debate as concerning a central difference in their views on interpretation. Later, he came to see the debate as the symptom of a more fundamental disagreement over epistemology. In particular, Davidson saw the proximal-distal debate as a result of his difference with Quine concerning the dualism of scheme and content. In the previous sections of this chapter we saw in detail the elements of Quine’s views that led to such a dualism. We also saw how that dualism, along with Quine’s empiricism, led Davidson to reject Quine’s epistemology. In this section we look at the proximal-distal debate in light of their differences in epistemology, and in the next section we see how Davidson’s introduction
of triangulation occurred within the context of this debate.

Both Davidson and Quine take observation sentences to be the basic evidence for radical translation/interpretation. Generally speaking, an observation sentence is one that is uttered by a speaker in response to current observation. Saying “Hey, a rabbit” would be an observation sentence in English, since its utterance could be triggered by the presence of rabbits alone. Saying “Hey, a bachelor” would not be an observation sentence, since it is not uttered in response to any particular observations on their own (you can’t tell a bachelor, usually, just by looking; collateral information is required). Observation sentences are the key to breaking into an unknown language, since observation sentences are uttered in response to currently observed situations open to the linguist. Both Davidson and Quine agree that observation sentences are central to understanding meaning, being both the first sentences learned by a child learning its first language, and also being the first sentences interpreted in radical interpretation.

Quine and Davidson agree on the key role of observation sentences in radical interpretation, but their characterization of observation sentences differs markedly. The proximal-distal debate concerns what to take as the cause of utterances of observation sentences. Suppose a native’s utterance of an observation sentence in the presence of a rabbit is caused by the rabbit. Given what we know about perception, the utterance in this case is also caused by the stimulation of the native’s sensory receptors (visual,

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29 Quine’s thought experiment radical translation is the construction of a translation manual for the speaker of an unknown language without any bilingual aids; Davidson’s thought experiment radical interpretation is the construction of a Tarski-style truth theory of a speaker without any bilingual aids or prior semantic knowledge of the speaker’s language. Henceforth, I will use “radical interpretation” when referring to both.

30 Observation sentences are also important in Quine’s philosophy of science, being the observational checkpoints of theories.
auditory, etc.) caused by the rabbit. Where, along the causal line from rabbit to utterance, should we locate the semantically relevant cause? The distal stimulus, the rabbit? Or the proximal stimulus, the stimulation of sensory receptors? Davidson says rabbits, Quine says the rabbity proximal stimuli.

An observation sentence for Quine is an occasion sentence, one speakers will assent to or dissent from outright in response to current proximal stimulation (when the sentence is presented as a question). The meaning of an observation sentence is the proximal simulations that trigger the speaker to assent to (and dissent from) it. This is the \textit{stimulus meaning} of the sentence. Two speakers mean the same thing by an observation sentence if the two assent to (and dissent from) the sentence given the same proximal stimuli. In other words, a sentence is \textit{stimulus synonymous} for two speakers just in case it has the same stimulus meaning for the two speakers.\textsuperscript{31} By finding stimulus synonymous sentences between his own language and that of the native, the translator is finding the evidence, in terms of stimulation, for the native’s language-cum-worldview. In the context of this epistemic project, Quine claims that we should take proximal stimuli as the basis for translating observation sentences.

On the surface, the role of observation sentences for Davidson is similar to Quine, since for Davidson observation sentences are the linguist’s entering wedge into an unknown language. Davidson does not however allow a role for proximal stimuli but instead takes the distal conditions that make sentences true as the basis for interpreting observation sentences. Suppose a native repeatedly utters 'Es regnet' when it is raining,\textsuperscript{31} As we will see in the section concerning the details of the proximal-distal debate, the characterization given here of observation in terms of proximal stimuli is modified by Quine later in his career. The present characterization is found in \textit{Word and Object} among others of Quine’s early formulations of observation sentences.
but does not do so in the absence of rain. Here, the observation sentence is 'Es regnet', and the sentence is held true when it is raining near the speaker, otherwise not. This correlation of utterance and circumstance is evidence that the truth conditions of the sentence are that it is raining. So, this is one piece of evidence for a truth theory for the speaker, namely one that generates as one of its theorems something like: “‘Es regnet' is true just in case it is raining.” Davidson’s view is that since the circumstances shared by speaker and interpreter are what make a speaker’s utterances true or false, these circumstances should be the basis for interpreting observation sentences.

According to Davidson, although the difference with Quine concerning the location of the stimulus that determines meaning had been there since Davidson first read Quine’s *Word and Object*, it was only in June of ‘81 at a meeting in Heidelberg that the difference came to a head.

After Stuttgart, Rorty, Quine, Putnam, and I went on to Heidelberg to rehearse our positions at length. Dieter Henrich was there, and acted as gracious host. For me the most interesting moment came when I argued for an externalist account of the contents of perceptual beliefs. Quine commented that it should make no difference whether we took the content to be determined by patterns of sensory stimulation or by the external object, since they were simply at different points in a single causal chain. I claimed it did make a difference…. The question whether the meaning of a perceptual sentence is fixed by the distal or the proximal stimulus was one which we had long disagreed, but this was the first time the issue had been raised so clearly.32

(This meeting occurred the year before Davidson introduced for the first time in print his notion of triangulation, discussed below.) Davidson records that Quine remained unchanged in this regard at a meeting six years later, but that at a meeting in April of 1988 Quine had changed his view, abandoning the notion of “stimulus meaning”, but

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keeping the epistemic priority of proximal stimulation. Motivating the rejection of stimulus meaning was Quine’s realization that since no two creatures are ever likely to share the same proximal stimuli, defining meaning in terms of such stimuli has the consequence that the observation sentences of two creatures will infrequently, if ever, mean the same thing. This of course undermines the role of observation sentences in translation and as the empirical checkpoints for science. How observation sentences are matched, then, became for Quine dependent on empathy. Instead of saying we mean the same thing by P iff we utter P given the same proximal stimulation, we mean the same iff we would utter P if we were in the speaker’s shoes, so to speak. Speaking of this change in Quine’s view, Davidson writes:

> He decided simply to do away with the matching of neural patterns as the key to translation, … He stressed …the role of empathy in teaching language and in radical translation: we see how the learner or speaker is located, and what she seems to be attending to, and then imagine what proximal stimulations we would have if we were in her shoes (Quine 1990b, p. 3).33

Quine does not abandon the centrality of proximal stimulation in meaning, but rather the place of stimulus synonymy and the role of shared proximal stimuli. And despite Quine’s growing dissatisfaction with the notion of stimulus meaning, he retained to the end of his career the central place of proximal stimulation in his epistemology. Quine’s project, after all, was the naturalized epistemic one of accounting for the sorts of differences in conceptual schemes that are possible given the same experience, where experience is characterized in terms of proximal stimuli. As Quine put it in *Word and Object*:

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We cannot strip away the conceptual trappings sentence by sentence and leave a description of the objective world; but we can investigate the world, and man as a part of it, and thus find out what cues he could have of what goes on around him. Subtracting his cues from his world view, we get man’s net contribution as the difference. This difference marks the extent of man’s conceptual sovereignty—the domain within which he can revise theory while saving the data.  

As Davison describes Quine’s position:

The new position abandoned stimulus meaning, but retained the priority of the neural stimulations. Only thus, Quine argued, could one keep track of the "flow of evidence from the triggering of the senses to the pronouncements of science” and give an account of how we arrive at the "reification of rabbits and the like". 

Although Davidson and Quine did wrangle over the location of the stimulus with regard to meaning, the real issue that divided them was not how to characterize language learning or interpretation, but how to characterize our knowledge of the world.

Immediately following a discussion of how Quine had come to hold a distal position similar to himself in the context of meaning, Davidson writes:

There is a related matter, however, where there may remain a difference. For many years I have wondered whether Quine's empiricism creates a significant gap between us, or merely marks a matter of emphasis. Quine has characterized empiricism as based on two "cardinal tenets ... One is that whatever evidence there is for science is sensory evidence. The other... is that all inculcation of meanings of words must rest ultimately on sensory evidence" (Quine 1969, p. 75).

I agree with Quine, and, indeed, learned from him, that the inculcation of meaning depends on the same considerations that knowledge does. The difficulty is in the phrase "sensory evidence". 

Davidson takes this notion of sensory evidence to be Quine’s physicalistic version of traditional empiricism’s “impressions.” As we saw earlier in this chapter, Davidson rejects Quine’s idea that proximal stimulation can play the role of evidence. For

Davidson, Quine’s view is another incarnation of traditional empiricism and the scheme-

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35 Ibid. 8, p. 59.
content distinction:

The question is approached by introducing a notion of *perceptual similarity*, which is intended to serve as the "physical correlate of sensory experience." In other words, this is a recognizable version of empiricism in the tradition of C. I. Lewis and the Carnap of the *Logische Aufbau*, minus, of course, the two dogmas, and it is also a version of the scheme-content dichotomy against which I argued in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (Davidson 1974).\(^{37}\)

It is this difference in epistemology that was at the heart of the proximal-distal debate.

Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" was a heady mixture of philosophy of language and epistemology. When I read it in manuscript form in 1950 I had one misgiving: for all its revolutionary criticism of reductionism and the synthetic/analytic distinction, *it seemed to me to retain the equally untenable empiricist dualism of "the tribunal of experience" and conceptual scheme.* … Despite his principled insistence on the public nature of language, Quine's epistemology from beginning to end remained based on private, pre-conceptualized, data. *My difference with Quine on the question of whether linguistic communication should depend on the proximal or the distal stimulus was a relatively minor corollary of a deeper disagreement about epistemology.*\(^{38}\)

Davidson’s rejection of proximal stimuli as playing a role in meaning is thus based on his rejection of their playing a role in knowledge; and this is based on his rejection of the empiricist dualism of scheme and content.

One result of Davidson’s view, therefore, is that objects are not, as on Quine’s picture, posits the utility of which is to systematize our stimulations. Indeed, while for Quine the notion of an object is something we are likely to read into our translation of an alien tongue, for Davidson the concept of an object is a concept any thinker *must* have.

Contrasting his epistemology with Quine’s, Davidson writes:

> From the start, though, I made three related changes which reflected my different epistemology. The first was to make responses to the external world, that is, distal stimuli, the basic data for interpreting empirical sentences. The second was to substitute interpretation for translation in order to emphasize the semantic

\(^{37}\) Ibid., p. 83.

\(^{38}\) Ibid. 33, p. 729. My emphasis.
structure of language and to highlight the role of truth. The third was to claim that Quine's way of detecting the truth functional sentential connectives by observing patterns of inference could be extended to the patterns of quantificational logic. This meant that the radical interpreter was able to spot the roles of singular terms and predicates and whatever did the work of quantifiers and variables in natural languages from the start. *These three changes gave up Quine’s doctrine that predication and the ontology that goes with it are a provincial trait of our home language which we read into the languages we understand rather than a fundamental feature of anything we would call a language.*

For Davidson, an essential element of what it is to have concepts and thoughts is to have a notion of objects and their properties.

**The problems of error and objectivity**

What speaks in favor of taking the distal stimulus as the evidence for interpretation is that interpreter and native do not share proximal stimuli; rather, what is shared are the external circumstances of interpretation. Rabbits are shared, not rabbity proximal stimuli. As we have seen, this is one of Davidson’s arguments against proximal stimuli playing a role in interpretation and for the distal stimulus playing a role. On the proximal side, however, one can note that since speakers make mistakes, the proximal stimuli are more securely correlated with utterances of “hey, a rabbit.” This is because (presumably) when one mistakes a squirrel on a dark night for a rabbit, for instance, one’s proximal stimuli caused by the squirrel resemble those ordinarily caused by rabbits. Indeed, this relation to error is Quine’s justification, in *Word and Object*, for taking proximal stimuli as what cause native utterances.

It is important to think of what prompts the native’s assent to “Gavagai?” as stimulations and not rabbits. Stimulations can remain the same though the rabbit be supplant by a counterfeit. Conversely, stimulation can vary in its power to prompt assent to “Gavagai” because of vibrations in angle, lighting, and color contrast, though the rabbit remain the same. In experimentally equating the uses

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39 Ibid. 33, pp. 729-730. My emphasis.
Indeed, given Quine’s naturalistic epistemology, it is not surprising that he takes the proximal line, since proximal stimuli explain behavior in a way that distal objects do not. Consider: what one believes explains one’s behavior whether or not what one believes is true. Now, since proximal stimuli correspond to traditional empiricism’s sense data or impressions, such stimuli are naturalistically specifiable surrogates for the empirical content of beliefs. Indeed, one could say that proximal stimuli allow the naturalistic epistemologist access to how things seem to the subject. In other words—as remarked in a previous section—proximal stimuli correspond to the subjective. As such, one can use proximal stimuli to explain a subject’s behavior while avoiding any concern with the truth of the subject’s beliefs. A notion of false belief or error therefore does not play a direct role on Quine’s approach to either meaning or epistemology.

As far as I have found, Davidson has never given a precise characterization of what he calls “the problem of error.” Whereas on Quine’s proximal approach error does not enter into the discussion, on Davidson’s distal approach error does. While causal interaction with objects does often explain behavior—including verbal behavior and so the utterance of observation sentences—this is not always the case. Beliefs can be false; indeed, Davidson has often said that mistakes are what give the attribution of beliefs its point. So taking a distal approach has as a consequence the possibility of error.

What is perhaps less clear is why Davidson considers error a problem. As suggested above, Davidson first thought of the proximal-distal debate in terms of

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interpretation, and then later saw the debate as a “minor corollary” of his difference with Quine over epistemology and in particular the distinction of scheme and content. Similarly, I take the problem of error in interpretation to correspond to the more fundamental problem of objectivity in epistemology. Let me begin with error in interpretation, and then show why error is problematic in the context of discussing the problem of objectivity.

According to Davidson, Quine’s early emphasis on proximal stimulation made error easier to explain than his own distal approach. Commenting on the meeting in ’82 in Heidelberg, the same year as Davidson’s first publication involving the notion of triangulation, Davidson writes:

For me the most interesting moment came when I argued for an externalist account of the contents of perceptual beliefs. Quine commented that it should make no difference whether we took the content to be determined by patterns of sensory stimulation or by the external object, since they were simply at different points in a single causal chain. I claimed it did make a difference. I agreed that taking the proximal stimulus (Quine’s "stimulus meaning") made error easier to explain, but it failed to anchor words and thoughts to the right objects.  

Notice that here Davidson’s claim is not that the proximal theory avoids error but rather that it better explains error. While Quine’s naturalistic project need not concern itself with error, it is nevertheless true that having proximal stimuli in the picture helps in the explanation of error. Error is a mismatch between proximal stimuli and the distal world that cause them. One can explain why someone utters “there’s a rabbit” in the presence of a squirrel on a dark night; because of the poor perceptual conditions, the proximal stimuli of the speaker match those that normally accompany the presence of rabbits. On a strict distal approach, according to which the utterance is interpreted as always

41 Ibid.36, p. 58.
concerning the distal stimulus, the speaker’s utterance of “there’s a rabbit” in the presence of a squirrel will be interpreted as meaning there is a squirrel present. Here, presumably, is where the problem of error arises for Davidson.

Ironically, Davidson had long argued that translating according to proximal stimuli could lead to systematic errors in interpretation. If, for example, a speaker suffers from cataracts or a similar visual problem, one could imagine the speaker’s proximal stimuli caused by squirrels as always matching the proximal stimuli of other speakers when they encounter rabbits. In such a case, Quine’s approach would counsel interpreting this speaker as talking about rabbits—while the natural interpretation would be as talking about the distal stimuli—squirrels. However, this is not a problem of error in the sense we have been discussing; the error is in belief attribution, not in the beliefs attributed. And at any rate, Quine seemed more persuaded by Davidson’s other argument against the notion of proximal stimuli: two speakers never share the same proximal stimuli, and so matching proximal stimuli cannot serve as a notion of synonymy (stimulus synonymy) and so as a basis for translation. Quine eventually agreed that matching proximal stimuli was not needed for. Instead of matching stimulus meaning, Quine placed an emphasis on empathy, the idea being that the interpreter can imagine the proximal stimuli—the experience, really—of the speaker, and interpret accordingly, even when the two have different proximal stimuli.

It was clear to me that by not appealing to Quine's concept of stimulus meaning as what needed to be matched for translation (or, in my case, for interpretation) I was creating a problem for myself, the problem of error. Quine's substitute for stimulus meaning was empathy, which is also a way of bypassing the problem of error on the principle that translation will succeed if errors match. If you can't see the rabbit and I can, our proximal stimuli don't match, but neither would I say
there was a rabbit (or "Gavagai!") if I were in your shoes.\textsuperscript{42}

If an interpreter takes the class of proximal stimuli that caused the speaker to utter "rabbit" as the meaning of that utterance, this would include proximal stimuli caused by squirrels on a dark night. But if the interpreter knows that such visual conditions lead to the interpreter’s proximal stimuli being what they would otherwise be when caused by rabbits, the interpreter can avoid speaker errors by interpreting according to the proximal stimuli the interpreter would have if he were the speaker. Once again, error does not enter significantly into Quine’s project.

The appeal to empathy, though an improvement over stimulus meaning for Quine—since it avoids the assumption that speaker and interpreter share proximal stimuli—cannot perform the same function for Davidson. By appealing to proximal stimuli and avoiding error, Quine also avoids introducing a notion of truth, since true and false beliefs equally explain behavior. Continuing the discussion of Quine’s appeal to empathy:

This was perhaps a solution to Quine's problem of translation, but it wouldn't work for interpretation, since interpretation aimed to assign truth conditions to an informant's utterances, and \textit{nothing in Quine’s approach seemed to me suited to explaining how the concept of truth was to be introduced}.\textsuperscript{43}

Davidson’s program involves assigning truth conditions to the utterances of speakers, but on Quine’s proximal approach, questions of truth do not arise. One might imagine that truth would come up intersubjectively for the proximal approach, but mere agreement and disagreement between subjects regarding their proximal stimuli does not rule out their both being wrong. For example, it could be that the members of an entire linguistic

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid. 39, p. 730.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., p. 730.
community are caused by rabbits to utter “rabbit”, but they are all also caused to utter “rabbit” when they encounter squirrels on dark nights.

It is not enough for the interpreter to share the verbal habits of a speaker, since both might be wrong and both might simply be programmed or conditioned to act similarly when exposed to similar stimuli. The point is not that the interpreter and speaker might be wrong but somehow later find this out. The point is that as long as proximal stimuli are taken as the data for interpretation, there is no clear way to introduce a notion of truth into the picture. The picture is solipsistic, with speaker and interpreter responding not to one another and a shared world but rather to their own proximal stimuli. The idea, then, is that Davidson’s truth conditions are *objective* truth conditions, conditions that can obtain independently of the beliefs of speakers.

To put the same point another way: where, in the matching of verbal behaviors, does a sense of objectivity come in? What is the difference between being trained to follow others and understanding that one might be wrong? Davidson wants some way of characterizing how objectivity can enter into the interpretation of a speaker.

Let me know turn to the problem of objectivity and how it bears on this discussion. As just seen, discussion of the problem of error has led Davidson to considering objectivity. I suggest that the problem of error is the interpretive equivalent of the epistemic problem of objectivity. In the paper “The Problem of Objectivity,” Davidson asks after our concept of objective truth as a preliminary for answering how we can know that our beliefs are true:

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44 Ibid., p. 730.
What explains our grasp of the concept of objective truth? It may be that the epistemological question will be solved if we can answer the apparently simpler question how thought is possible. If we can understand what makes error possible, we may then see how, given the existence of thought, it must be the case that many of our beliefs are true and justified, and so constitute knowledge.\textsuperscript{46}

The point I wish to stress here is that Davidson closely connects in this passage the concept of objective truth and error. Understanding what makes error possible, Davidson is suggesting, would explain our grasp of the concept of objective truth. And Davidson explicates the concept of objectivity as the realization of truths independent of our beliefs. He also contrasts the concept of objectivity with the subjectivity of belief:

To recognize the chance that we may be wrong is to recognize that beliefs can be tested—belief is personal, and in this sense subjective; truth is objective. The problem is to account for our having the concept of objectivity—of a truth that is independent of our will and our attitudes. Where can we have acquired such a concept? We cannot occupy a position outside our own minds; there is no vantage point from which to compare our beliefs with what we take our beliefs to be about.\textsuperscript{47}

So the problem of objectivity is the problem of understanding how we can come to possess the concept of objectivity given that we cannot compare our subjective beliefs with an objectively independent world.

The problem of objectivity, then, is the problem of accounting for our concept of objectivity, where that concept is the awareness of truths independent of our beliefs. This problem is intimately related to the problem of error, which is saying what makes error possible. The connection between the problems is that error makes possible the concept of objectivity, and so solving the problem of objectivity requires saying what makes error possible.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p. 8.
While we have had some success understanding what is problematic about error in the context of interpretation—taking the distal approach makes error possible, but also makes it hard to explain—we need to understand what makes objectivity a problem in epistemology. The problem arises because of Davidson’s rejection of the empiricist notion of subjectivity. That notion, as we have seen, was characterized by the dualism of scheme and content. As we have seen, Davidson originally rejected that distinction because of the unintelligibility of schemes being made true by an unconceptualized something existing outside all schemes. Davidson’s later complaint against the notion of subjectivity is not that the evidence is unconceptualized, but that the evidence can be specified completely independently of what it is evidence for.

What matters, then, is not whether we can describe the data in a neutral, theory-free idiom; what matters is that there should be an ultimate source of evidence the character of which can be wholly specified without reference to what it is evidence for. 48

In other words, the evidence is completely subjective:

Instead of saying it is the scheme-content dichotomy that has dominated and defined the problems of modern philosophy, then, one could as well say it is how the dualism of the objective and the subjective has been conceived. For these dualisms have a common origin: a concept of the mind with its private states and objects. 49

We will see in a later chapter that this point against the subjective as evidence that can be specified independently of other epistemic states is something Davidson acquired from Wilfred Sellars. But the result, for our purposes, is the same: by rejecting the myth of the subjective, as Davidson calls it, we reject with it the accompanying account of error and

49 Ibid., p. 43.
objectivity. Without some foundations, some subjective states that are epistemically warranted and warranting, we get the problem of error:

The demise of the subjective as previously conceived leaves us without foundations for knowledge, and relieves us of the need for them, but new problems then arise that cluster around the nature of error, for error is hard to identify and explain if the holism that goes with a nonfoundational approach is not somehow constrained.\(^{50}\)

It is Davidson’s rejection of the subjective, of the scheme-content distinction, that leads to error and objectivity presenting a problem. If the subjective is conceived of as the collection of beliefs and evidence about an objective world, then no particular problems arise. Objective truth is just truth independent of whatever is contained in the subjective. In rejecting the subjective, Davidson appears to be rejecting the objective—thus his assurances, at the end of the conceptual schemes paper, that he is not rejecting the notion of objectivity. Davidson needs some way to make the distinction between the subjective and the objective—the way things seem and the way things really are. Triangulation plays this role.

**Triangulation introduced**

Triangulation was originally introduced in the context of arguing that thought requires language. More specifically, thought requires the concept of truth, and this concept requires interpretation—i.e., linguistic communication. For our purposes, what is important is the claim that possessing the concept of truth requires interpretation. The argument for this thesis involves two steps, namely that the concept of truth requires triangulation, and that the only thing that could make triangulation sufficient for the concept of truth is if the triangulating creatures engage in linguistic communication. Our

\(^{50}\) Ibid., p. 47.
focus is the first of these two steps, the connection between triangulation and possession of the concept of truth.

Davidson originally argued for the thesis that thought requires language in his ’75 paper “Thought and Talk.” It was not until later, when he developed his externalist triangulation model, that he came to see clearly why this is so:

But the description that fits this form of externalism has grown more complex, tightening the connection between thought and language, and putting the conditions for command of the concept of objectivity on a firmer basis. I would now put more emphasis on an idea that was adumbrated in a talk I gave at Oxford in 1974:

Someone cannot have a belief unless he understands the possibility of being mistaken, and this requires grasping the contrast between truth and error – true belief and false belief. But this contrast . . . can emerge only in the context of interpretation, which alone forces us to the idea of an objective, public truth. (Davidson 1975, p. 22)

The thesis of that paper was that there is no thought without language. Thought, I came to believe, depends on social interaction. What was not clear to me in 1974 was why this should be so.  

Thought requires the concept of truth, and the concept of truth requires understanding that one’s beliefs can be false, that one can be mistaken. Davidson maintained that this contrast between truth and error could only arise in the context of interpretation.

Davidson’s introduction of triangulation was his explanation for why this is so—and so with the introduction of triangulation, what was unclear in ‘74 became clearer:

My recent emphasis on the triangle that connects the radical interpreter, her interpretee, and the world is...a somewhat recent conviction not only that this triangle is essential to understanding others, but that it is also essential to the awareness of objectivity, the fact that error is possible, and that there is a

52 While there are many varieties of externalism, the fundamental assumption is that factors external to a creature are necessarily appealed to in the individuation of that creature’s content-bearing states.
distinction between what is believed and what is the case.\textsuperscript{54}

Seven years after arguing in “Thought and Talk” that thought requires language, Davidson introduced triangulation for the first time in print, and he did so in connection with the concept of truth. In particular, he suggests that a notion of intersubjective truth is sufficient for the concept of objective truth, and then he offers an analogy to suggest why the notion of intersubjective truth is necessary for a concept of objective truth.

I suggest, then, that the concept of intersubjective truth suffices as a basis for belief and hence for thoughts generally. And perhaps it is plausible enough that having the concept of intersubjective truth depends on communication in the full linguistic sense. To complete the ‘argument’, however, I need to show that the only way one could come to have the belief-truth contrast is through having the concept of intersubjective truth. I confess I do not know how to show this. But neither do I have any idea how else one could arrive at the concept of an objective truth. In place of an argument for the first step, I offer the following analogy.\textsuperscript{55}

Davidson then gives triangulation as an analogy suggestive of why the concept of intersubjective truth is necessary for the concept of objective truth.

If I were bolted to the earth, I would have no way of determining the distance from me of many objects. I would only know they were on some line drawn from me towards them. I might interact successfully with objects, but I could have no way of giving content to the question where they were. Not being bolted down, I am free to triangulate. Our sense of objectivity is the consequence of another sort of triangulation, one that requires two creatures. Each interacts with an object, but what gives each the concept of the way things are objectively is the base line formed between the creatures by language. The fact that they share a concept of truth alone makes sense of the claim that they have beliefs, that they are able to assign objects a place in the public world. The conclusion of these considerations is that rationality is a social trait. Only communicators have it.\textsuperscript{56}

Triangulation involves two (or more) creatures interacting with an object. What gives them the idea of objective truth is the line between the two creatures, a line of


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, p. 105. My emphasis.
communication, about a common object. One comes to an idea of objectivity through communicating with others about the world.

This is the first mention of triangulation in print. It is only a suggestive analogy, an analogy that Davidson will work the rest of his career fleshing out. While later Davidson will argue that triangulation makes the concept of objective truth possible by making possible a concept of error, here his only claim is that triangulation makes possible a notion of the way things are objectively. However, we saw above in the context of the proximal-distal debate that Davidson rejected matching proximal stimuli on the basis that even if proximal stimuli agree between speakers, they could still be wrong. That is, intersubjective truth does not amount to objective truth. Indeed, commentators have taken triangulation to be just that, an account of objectivity in terms of agreement and disagreement. As a result, such commentators have been understandably unsatisfied. In an interview with Davidson, Kenneth Taylor suggested that by giving up the scheme-content distinction, Davidson has also given up objectivity:

*My worry has always been that one of the things that the duality of scheme and content gave us hope of understanding is what we might call the source of the objective representational content of our beliefs such that our beliefs enjoy a kind of answerability to how things are with the world. I wouldn’t want to claim that empiricism ever succeeded in revealing the source of the objective representational contents of our beliefs. But I’ve never fully understood what, in your view of things, could be the source of such objective representational content.*

Taylor goes on to express dissatisfaction with Davidson’s account of objectivity in terms of triangulation:

*I know you’ve defended a kind of triangulation approach. But could you help me*

see how having two minds rather than one in the picture helps with objective representational content? I can’t see how that gives you any more than what I call a “jazz combo” theory of content. Imagine that you are jazz player, engaging in a jam session with other jazz players. You all try to play in such a way that others will both want to and know how to “go on” with you. *One can see how a kind of normativity, a kind of “answerability” to how things are by the lights of others can emerge here. But it isn’t obvious how to get answerability to a mind-independent world out of any such story.*

I am suggesting that this description of triangulation as a jazz combo is a characterization of triangulation as it appears in its first, analogical presentation above in “Rational Animals.” In a later publication—but one published nine years before Taylor presented his jazz combo characterization of triangulation—Davidson asks and answers Taylor’s question. Here is now Davidson puts the questions:

Two questions now obtrude. The first is: why should an interpersonal standard be an objective standard, that is, why should what people agree on be true? The second is: even if it is the case that communication assumes an objective standard of truth, why should this be the only way such a standard can be established?

Notice that not only are these two questions what Taylor had in mind, but they are also the questions that motivated Davidson’s original introduction of triangulation. Either Taylor was unaware of what Davidson had written about triangulation since its first introduction, or he had not understood what Davidson had written. In either case, in the following chapters I show Davidson’s evolving use of triangulation in addressing the problems of error and objectivity.

In this chapter I have presented the background and context of triangulation’s introduction. We saw who Davidson was reacting to in the development of his own views, his teacher W. V. O. Quine, and the origin of those views in the logical

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58 Ibid.
empiricism of Quine’s mentor Rudolf Carnap. We were then able to see why Davidson’s reaction to Quine took the form of a rejection of the empiricist distinction of scheme and content. With that rejection in mind, we were able to more clearly understand the epistemic differences between Quine and Davidson that underlie, in Davidson’s view, the proximal-distal debate. In particular, we have come to see how the rejection of the scheme-content distinction leads to the problems of error and objectivity. And here we have the problematic that occasioned the introduction of triangulation.

In the next chapter I provide two more crucial background elements to the picture, both derived from Quine’s notion of radical interpretation: first, Davidson’s development of a causal account of content determination; and second, Davidson’s rejection of a necessary role for linguistic conventions in communication. These developments occurred in the interim between Davidson’s original introduction of triangulation as an analogy in “Rational Animals” and his reintroduction of the notion, seven years later, as an account of the objectivity of thought content in “The Conditions of Thought.” I suggest that understanding these two developments in Davidson’s views is necessary for understanding triangulation as it occurs there as well as in other papers throughout the rest of his career.
Chapter 2: Causes & Conventions

In the previous chapter we saw the influences of both Quine and Tarski on Davidson. Davidson’s rejection of Quine’s empiricism and dualism of scheme and content played a key role in shaping Davidson’s views. And Davidson combined Tarski’s work on truth as a model for constructing a meaning theory with radical interpretation—derived from Quine—as the empirical method of application of a meaning theory to speakers. In this chapter we will see how Davidson came to emphasize two further influences of Quine. From Quine, Davidson inherited the idea that whatever there is to meaning, it can be seen in the process of radical interpretation. From this fundamental assumption, Davidson derives two conclusions important for our purposes. First, from the necessity and centrality of observation sentences to the process of radical interpretation, Davidson concludes that the distal objects that cause speakers to hold sentences true determine the content of those sentences and the thoughts they express. Second, from the fact that radical interpretation is radical—it requires no shared language—Davidson concludes that linguistic conventions are not necessary for linguistic communication and meaning. Both of these theses will appear repeatedly in our later discussions of triangulation and provide crucial context for an understanding of Davidson’s uses of triangulation. Moreover, these two theses converge on a third thesis
central to Davidson’s later views, what I call the meaning creation thesis: that meaning is created rather than passed on in ostension.

In terms of the historical development of Davidson’s views, the current chapter deals with what I think of as Davidson’s middle period. Davidson’s work in his early period on Tarski and his rejection of Quine’s dualism of scheme and content played a central role in motivating Davidson’s introduction of triangulation as a solution to the problems of error and objectivity. This role was seen in triangulation’s first introduction in the “Rational Animals” paper. But further relevant work was done between that introduction and the later reintroduction of triangulation in “Conditions of Thought.” In this chapter we look at that work. In the next chapter, we look at Davidson’s reintroduction of triangulation in a much more developed form at the beginning of the late period, and in the remaining chapters we look at triangulation’s development through the rest of that period.

The current chapter has four sections. In the first section, we look at passages where Davidson discusses the specific influences Quine had on his views concerning meaning. In the next section we look at the reasons Davidson gives (based on radical interpretation) for the view that causation plays a central role in content determination.

60 Recall from the introduction that for the purpose of understanding triangulation I am dividing Davidson’s career into three periods: the early period, or everything published before the first introduction of triangulation in “Rational Animals”; the middle period, or material published between the first introduction of triangulation and its reintroduction in “The Conditions of Thought”; and the later period, including everything published after the reintroduction of triangulation. The roots of triangulation can be found in the early period’s work on Tarski-style meaning theories—discussed in the first two chapters of this dissertation—particularly in the rejection of scheme-content dualism; themes even more directly concerned with triangulation and developing a theory of meaning are found in the middle period and discussed in the previous and current chapter; finally, detailed discussion of triangulation is found in the later period and discussed in the chapters that follow.
In the third section we look at the reasons he gives for rejecting any constitutive role for conventions in linguistic meaning and the alternative account of communication he gives derived from reflection on radical interpretation. In the final section, I do two things. First, I suggest that when brought together, the material from the preceding two sections give a nice account of the roles of speaker and interpreter in triangulation. Second, I suggest that the resulting view of triangulation explains why Davidson takes meaning to be created in ostension (discussed in the first section).

**Quine**

As we have seen, the importance of Quine for Davidson’s views had a positive aspect in Davidson’s acceptance of the methodology of radical interpretation; and a negative aspect in Davidson’s rejection of Quine’s empiricism and the dualism of scheme and content. In this section, we see further influence of Quine on Davidson’s views concerning meaning. It will be recalled that Davidson rejected Quine’s appeal to sensory stimulation both in radical interpretation and, more fundamentally, in epistemology. However, Davidson argues that in the very places that Quine embraces this proximal theory, Quine also gives a distal theory. And in fact, as we have seen, although Quine never gave up the proximal theory with respect to epistemology, he did with respect to meaning. From early works such as *The Roots of Reference*\(^61\) to his later works such as *Pursuit of Truth*\(^62\), Quine talks of external shared circumstances being the basis for the

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interpretation of observation sentences rather than shared proximal stimulation. This distal approach can be seen even in *Word and Object*, right alongside the proximal theory.

In the preface, Quine writes,

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Language is a social art. In acquiring it we have to depend entirely on intersubjectively available cues as to what to say and when. Hence there is no justification for collating linguistic meanings, unless in terms of men’s dispositions to respond overtly to socially observable stimulations.
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Somewhat ironically, then, although Davidson rejects Quine’s proximal approach, Davidson learned the distal approach from Quine. According to this distal approach, observable responses to observable stimuli (objects and events) rather than shared proximal stimuli are the basis for the interpretation of observation sentences.

Davidson suggests that the distal theory of meaning follows from two elements found in Quine:

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…the role ostension plays in radical translation, and the emphasis on the fact that all there is to empirical meaning is what is picked up in such situations (aside from what we learn from the interanimation of sentences).
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The role ostension plays in radical translation is just the utterance of observation sentences in the presence of the events or objects provides for the interpretation of those sentences. By itself, this role of ostension does not amount to a theory of meaning, since this role is compatible with any number of theories of meaning. What is required to make this role of ostension into a theory of meaning is the claim that there is nothing more to the meaning of observation sentences than what is picked up in ostension. The

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65 Ibid. 63 , p. 291.
result, Davidson claims, is an externalist theory according to which the ostended objects constitute the meaning of those sentences.

Quine’s account of ostension plus the insistence that what is acquired in ostensive situations as it filters through the web of language is all there can be to meaning, add up to a subtle form of externalism which (alone, I would say) can constitute the basis of a satisfactory theory of meaning.

This claim that all there is to empirical meaning is what is picked up in ostension I will call the **primacy of ostension**.

While Davidson acquired the primacy of ostension thesis from Quine, it is not a bare assumption. Indeed, I suggest that two theses derived from Quine ground the thesis of the primacy of ostension. The most fundamental assumption derived from Quine is this:

**The public nature of meaning**: whatever there is to meaning, it can be discerned by an appropriately placed and equipped observer.

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66 It should be noted that here Davidson is endorsing an externalist thesis that is different from another externalist thesis he has endorsed. The thesis we are discussing—what we might call the *radical interpretation externalist thesis*—is that whatever there is to meaning is determined by the *current* linguistic context. The second externalist thesis found elsewhere—what we might call the *historical externalist thesis*—is that the history of a speaker is relevant to the interpretation of the speaker’s speech (and mental states). In support of the historical thesis, Davidson gave the infamous swampman example, in which a physical duplicate of Davidson is produced by lightening hitting a tree stump in a swamp. Davidson suggests that we cannot interpret this duplicate Davidson’s thoughts or words as having their normal content since the duplicate has no history of causal relations with objects. Since, for example, the duplicate has never eaten dumplings, one cannot give a standard interpretation to its utterance “I like dumplings.” The two externalist theses are not strictly speaking incompatible. Radical interpretation externalism starts with the interpretation of presently observed objects, but one could argue that the interpretation of words for objects not present presupposes causal interaction with objects of those types (or interaction with those who have had such direct interaction with the objects). However, as we will see in the next chapter, Davidson comes in his middle period to focus on the current communicative context in such a way as to be incompatible with the historical externalism thesis.

67 Ibid. 63, p. 291.
An appropriately placed observer is one in a position to observe the verbal behavior of the speaker in its normal context. And an appropriately equipped observer is one whose faculties are operating normally. The observations of such an appropriately placed and equipped observer are sufficient to allow for a correct interpretation of the speaker’s verbal behavior. But further, there is nothing more to meaning than what such observations reveal.

Quine is, and has been since I took my first logic course with him some sixty years ago, my teacher and inspiration. Perhaps the most important thing he taught me was that there can be no more to the communicative content of words than is conveyed by verbal behavior. 68

And again: “Quine was the first fully to recognize that all there is to meaning is what we learn or absorb from observed usage.”69

From this thesis of the public nature of meaning follows a thesis concerning a methodological approach to meaning:

_The radical interpretation approach_: fundamental facts concerning meaning can be discerned in the process of radical interpretation.

This follows from the public nature of meaning thesis and the definition of radical interpretation. The radical interpreter is by hypothesis appropriately placed and equipped.

Quine revolutionized our understanding of verbal communication by taking seriously the fact, obvious enough in itself, that there can be no more to meaning than an adequately equipped person can learn and observe; the interpreter’s point

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69 Ibid. 63, p. 295.

In addition, since radical interpretation is radical—it assumes no knowledge of the speaker’s language—the approach begs no semantic questions. So reflection on radical interpretation should yield fundamental facts about meaning.

From the method of radical interpretation follows what I take to be Davidson’s most fundamental and perhaps radical thesis concerning the nature of empirical meaning:

\textit{The meaning creation thesis:} meaning is created in the process of ostension.

The contrast here is with the view that ostension passes on established meanings—that words have meanings that are then passed on from speaker to interpreter. Instead, Davidson suggests that the use that is established in ostensive learning constitutes meaning.

This seems obvious to many people: "meaning is use", quoth Wittgenstein. The idea is obvious, but its full force is still mostly unappreciated or misappropriated. Misappropriated by those who would convert any typical purpose served by uttering a sentence into a kind of meaning. Unappreciated by those who treat Wittgenstein' s slogan as gesturing at a way of discovering a meaning already embedded in an expression. \textit{What wants emphasizing is not that use points the way to preexisting meanings, but that it creates, and so constitutes, meaning.} \footnote{Davidson, D. (1999) “Reply to Quine.” In L. E. Hahn (Ed.), \textit{The Philosophy of Donald Davidson} (pp. 80-85), Chicago: Open Court, p. 80. My emphasis.}

The meaning creation thesis will be discussed in detail in chapter five. For now I will note that the misappropriation Davidson mentions here points to the fact that on Davidson’s view, the use that endows words with meaning is that which occurs in ostension.
This thesis does not, I suggest, follow directly from the primacy of ostension, but requires another thesis derived from radical interpretation that we discuss in the third section of this chapter—the rejection of linguistic conventions—based on the claim that nothing linguistic shared prior to communication is required for successful communication.

This [meaning creation thesis] helps explain Quine's (and my) concentration on the tableau containing two people (teacher and pupil, jungle linguist and informant, speaker and hearer) in a shared environment, for in this situation it is irrelevant what powers may be lodged in the speaker's utterances in other contexts. 72

I take it this last phrase point to two ways in which radical interpretation is separate from other contexts. First, if the speaker uses a word to refer to a wider class of objects in other contexts, for instance, those uses are irrelevant to the meaning of the word for the interpreter. Second, any other contexts which depend on the use made by other speakers is irrelevant. The speaker may have learned an expression ostensively from another individual, but this fact is irrelevant to the interpreter. What matters for meaning is not what is brought to the ostensive learning situation, but what happens in the situation.

Davidson claims that the meaning creation thesis grounds an externalist view of meaning and epistemology. Externalism is the thesis that factors external to an individual are necessary for individuation of that individual’s content bearing states (either thought or language). The externalist thesis follows from the way in which meaning is endowed with a use in ostension.

It now seems absurdly simple, something I ought to have found in Wittgenstein, but it took Quine's account of radical translation to make me see that learning a language is not a matter of attaching the right meanings to words, but a process in which words are endowed with a use. I resisted Quine's notion of stimulus meaning which seemed to me to suffer from much the same ills as sense data as the basis for meaning and knowledge. But if from the start one took Quine's radical translator as sharing an external world with his interlocutors, then language, and with it epistemology, would be ineluctably externalized. 73

In ostension, a word or phrase is given a use. The use is to be true of objects of the ostended sort. The object is not a clue to some preexisting meaning had by the word, either in the mind of the speaker or the language community of the speaker.

**Causation and content**

In this section, I look at Davidson’s emphasis during his middle period on the importance of causation to semantics. We look at two papers published back to back, Davidson’s ’82 paper “Empirical Content” and his ’83 paper “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge.” I begin with the latter because it contains a clear statement of the role of causation in content as well as illustrating the epistemic use to which Davidson puts that role. The former paper contains Davidson’s reasons for claiming that that use is essential and in particular how that use follows from his rejection of epistemological foundationalism (this rejection following from his rejection of scheme-content dualism). That use, simply put, is this: causation’s role in determining objective empirical content allows for Davidson to avoid embracing a strictly coherence view of knowledge which seems to follow on the heels of his rejection of subjective foundationalism. My suggestion in following chapters is that triangulation is Davidson’s account of what

73 Ibid. 63, p. 295
makes such objective content possible, thereby addressing the problems of error and
objectivity discussed in the previous chapter.

Davidson’s concern in the *Coherence Theory* paper is obviously with
epistemology, but as Davidson was later to admit, the paper is badly named. Indeed, it
is clear that Davidson is rejecting coherence theories as well as empiricist
foundationalism in that paper. His suggestion here and in the earlier *Empirical Content*
paper is that this choice is a false dilemma. His reason for calling his position a
coherence theory is that he argues that if you have a coherent set of beliefs, then you can
be sure that your beliefs are mostly true. This is not because coherence in itself
guarantees truth; it doesn’t. His claim instead is that to the degree that a belief coheres
with other beliefs, it has a presumption of truth. The meat of his argument, however, is
why this is so. His reasoning is that beliefs get their content from causal relations with
the world. This comes out in his claim that beliefs are mostly veridical by their very
nature. His position, then, is that what guarantees most of our basic beliefs about the
world are true is not their foundation in a subjective certainty, nor the mere fact that our
beliefs are consistent, but rather our understanding of the way in which causation
determines the content of empirical beliefs. My way of putting this is that Davidson is
giving a semantic way out of an epistemic dilemma.

Let me begin with Davidson’s reasons for rejecting coherence and foundationalist
theories. I should mention first that Davidson often mentions the skeptical consequences

74 I also regret having called my view a ‘coherence theory’. My emphasis on coherence was properly just a
way of making a negative point, that ‘all that counts as evidence or justification for a belief must come
from the same totality of belief to which it belongs’. “Afterthoughts,” Davidson, D. (2001) *Subjective,
of foundationalism as a reason for rejecting such theories. In securing something certain such as sense data, such theories raise skeptical questions concerning our inferences from sense data to an external world. But Davidson’s considered view is that while skepticism does tell against a theory of knowledge, in empiricism’s case the skepticism is a symptom of a deeper problem. That deeper problem was seen in the previous chapter’s discussion of the rejection of scheme-content dualism.

Davidson’s reason for rejecting traditional coherence theories is a familiar one. Since two theories can be coherent and yet inconsistent with one another, coherence alone is not sufficient to secure truth. As a corollary, as we saw in the previous chapter, Davidson claims that the coherence that result from the rejection of foundationalism leads to the problems of error and objectivity. Given his rejection of foundationalism, rather than saying he accepts a coherence theory, Davidson should perhaps say that he finds himself cornered in the coherence camp and wants to find a way out. There must be some reason to think that a coherent set of beliefs is a true set of beliefs.

…The search for an empirical foundation for meaning or knowledge leads to skepticism, while a coherence theory seems at a loss to provide any reason for a believer to believe that his beliefs, if coherent, are true. We are caught between a false answer to the skeptic, and no answer. The dilemma is not a true one. What is needed to answer the skeptic is to show that someone with a (more or less) coherent set of beliefs has a reason to suppose his beliefs are not mistaken in the main.75

The choice between coherence theories and empiricist foundationalism can be shown to be a false dilemma if as he says he can give an independent reason for thinking a coherent set of beliefs is a set of mostly true beliefs.

Since Davidson rejects foundationalism, his argument can be seen as addressing the skeptic, but again, his concern with skepticism is secondary (more on this below). His primary motivation is what we saw in the last chapter: the solution to the problems of error and objectivity that arise from his rejection of foundationalism. As we saw in the previous chapter’s discussion of Quine’s epistemology, that rejection takes the form of the claim that while sensation (or proximal stimulation) plays a casual role in knowledge, it cannot play an epistemic role. Causes cannot serve as either evidence or justification:

…I suggest we give up the idea that meaning or knowledge is grounded on something that counts as an ultimate source of evidence. No doubt meaning and knowledge depend on experience, and experience ultimately on sensation. But this is the ‘depend’ of causality, not of evidence or justification.  

The only thing that can play a role as evidence is belief. Beliefs about causes can play justificatory roles, but causes conceived of as something outside the realm of belief cannot.

What we have shown is that it is absurd to look for a justifying ground for the totality of beliefs, something outside this totality which we can use to test or compare with our beliefs. The answer to our problem must then be to find a reason for supposing most of our beliefs are true that is not a form of evidence.  

We will go into this line against empiricist foundationalism more below in our discussion of the *Empirical Content* paper. Now I turn to Davidson’s reason for thinking that most of our beliefs are true.

Causation cannot play an epistemic role. This does not make causal relations with the world irrelevant, however. For while causation cannot play an epistemic role,

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76 Ibid., p. 146.
77 Ibid., p. 146.
Davidson suggest that causation can and does play a semantic role. This semantic role is seen in radical interpretation. In interpreting observation sentences, an interpreter must look to the causes of the utterances of those sentences. But as we saw in the previous section in connection with the distal theory Davidson inherited from Quine, this is not a mere epistemic claim. Davidson claims that the typical causes of a speaker’s holding true observation sentences determine the content, and therefore the truth, of such sentences.

… I urge that a correct understanding of the speech, beliefs, desires, intentions, and other propositional attitudes of a person leads to the conclusion that most of a person’s beliefs must be true, and so there is a legitimate presumption that any one of them, if it coheres with most of the rest, is true….it is bootless for someone to ask for some further reassurance; that can only add to his stock of beliefs. All that is needed is that he recognize that belief is in its nature veridical. Belief can be seen to be veridical by considering what determines the existence and contents of a belief.78

Now we can more clearly state why Davidson felt it was accurate to say his position was a coherence theory. His position is that a person cannot step outside of his beliefs and compare those beliefs with the world. Attempting any such comparisons would not result in finding a source of evidence for one’s beliefs; they would only result in acquiring more beliefs. The individual can do no better, in insuring that his or her beliefs are true, than to try to maximize their coherence. To the extent that an individual belief coheres with the rest—including beliefs caused by the world in experience—it is justified. So Davidson’s theory of justification is a coherence theory. But our conviction that beliefs are true of an independently existing world comes from our understanding of how beliefs get their content.

78 Ibid., p. 146.
Let us look directly at Davidson’s argument that causation plays a constitutive role in determining the content of observation sentences and the contents of the beliefs those sentences express. In the current context, Davidson characterizes ostension in causal terms. Interpreters do not merely interpret observation sentences as true about currently observed situations; they interpret observation sentences according to the objects that cause speakers to hold those sentences true.

…it is impossible for an interpreter to understand a speaker and at the same time discover the speaker to be largely wrong about the world. For the interpreter interprets sentences held true (which is not to be distinguished from attributing beliefs) according to the events and objects in the outside world that cause the sentence to be held true. A speaker says “There’s a rabbit.” The interpreter notes the presence of a rabbit and takes the speaker’s utterance to be true if and only if there is a rabbit present. The presence of the rabbit causes the belief of the speaker—that there is a rabbit present—and so the utterance expressing this belief. The interpreter notes this causal relation and on its basis interprets the utterance and attributes the belief. The speaker’s belief and observation sentence are therefore made true by the same thing that provides the interpreter’s interpretation of that sentence and attribution of that belief. It is therefore impossible, if this characterization of interpretation is correct, for an interpreter to interpret the speaker’s observation sentences and attribute beliefs to the speaker, and also count those beliefs and observation sentences false.

This is a conclusion not about what determines content, but rather how the interpreter attributes content. The interpreter cannot but help interpret the speaker’s

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79 Ibid., p. 150.
observation sentences and so the beliefs they express so as to be mostly correct. However, from this fact about radical interpretation, Davidson draws a constitutive semantic conclusion, namely that causes determine the content of the sentences and beliefs they cause:

…if I am right, we can’t in general first identify beliefs and meanings and then ask what caused them. The causality plays an indispensable role in determining the content of what we say and believe. This is a fact we can be led to recognize by taking up, as we have, the interpreter’s point of view.80

Davidson assumes what I have called the radical interpretation approach. Recall that I claimed that from the radical interpretation approach follows the primacy of ostension, according to which whatever there is to empirical meaning is picked up in ostension. These Quinean theses bridge the gap between the epistemic fact about interpretation and what I call Davidson’s causal thesis:

The typical cause of a speaker’s holding an observation sentence true determines the truth conditions of that observation sentence and the belief it expresses. The causal thesis is introduced in Davidson’s middle period—in particular, in the two papers we discuss in this section—and thereafter he characterizes the interpretation of observation sentences in causal terms. One reason to keep this difference in mind is the following. In the early period, Davidson characterizes interpretation in intersubjective terms: interpreters must interpret speakers so as to make the speaker’s beliefs true in the eyes of the interpreter. (As a corollary, Davidson’s argument against skepticism in his early period followed from the holistic nature of belief attribution rather

80 Ibid., p. 150.
than the causal way in which empirical beliefs get their content.) But as we saw in the previous chapter, triangulation was introduced to show how an intersubjective notion of truth can amount to or deliver an objective notion of truth. The causal thesis, and by extension triangulation, are meant to address this concern.

From the causal thesis follows Davidson’s claim again skepticism.

What stands in the way of global skepticism of the senses is, in my view, the fact that we must, in the plainest and methodologically most basic cases, take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief. And what we, as interpreters, must take them to be is what they in fact are. Communication begins where causes converge: your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same events and objects.\(^{81}\)

The methodology, here, is of course provided by radical interpretation; and the most basic cases are the interpretation of observation sentences. The interpretation of observation sentences involves taking the causes of speakers holding them true as their content; and the causal thesis guarantees the wanted correlation between content and truth.

Before continuing, I should return to my point earlier about the relationship between Davidson’s views on meaning, his rejection of empiricism, and his rejection of skepticism. I claimed earlier that Davidson’s arguments against skepticism are a consequence of his views on radical interpretation. Indeed, Davidson writes that the realization that his theory of content had this consequence was a discovery of sorts:

I have never set out to answer, refute or show empty those scepticisms which question our knowledge of the external world or of other minds; I think that any philosophical view that invites such scepticism must be wrong (though not necessarily uninteresting). It has therefore come as something of a surprise to me to discover that if I am right in my theorising about how our beliefs and utterances

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\(^{81}\) Ibid., p. 151.
come to have the contents they do, scepticism cannot get started.  

And a couple of years later, commenting on the causal thesis, Davidson writes:

It took time to appreciate what was for me the revolutionary power of this way of viewing language and thought and their relation to the world, and longer still to realize that if one accepted this view, general skepticism of the senses and skepticism about other minds would be seen to be futile before they could be formulated. I did not set out to discredit skepticism, nor did I give up empiricism because it led to skepticism. It is the form externalism that developed from my concern with how thoughts and utterances come to have the content they do which discredits skepticism.

In the previous section we discussed how externalism follows from other theses adopted from Quine, including the primacy of ostension. It is clear that like that thesis, the causal thesis follows from reflection on interpretation. Indeed, the causal thesis follows from reflection on how ostension occurs in radical interpretation.

I now would like to discuss in more detail Davidson’s rejection of foundationalism and the role that rejection plays in the role he gives the causal thesis. To see the relationship between these roles, we must look at “Empirical Content,” a paper published in ’82, a year before the publication of the Coherence Theory. There Davidson gives a line of reasoning analogous to that of the later paper: the choice between coherence and foundationalism is a false dilemma; the third choice is a semantic one.

But the focus of this paper, as the title indicates, is empirical content and so involves an extended discussion of empiricist foundationalism. Davidson rejects the empiricist account of empirical content for the same reasons given in the Coherence Theory paper.

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As we saw in the previous chapter, Davidson rejects Quine’s dualism of scheme and content on the grounds that it assumes conceptual schemes are confirmed by something existing outside of conceptual schemes, something non-conceptual and ultimately only causal in nature. In the present paper, too, Davidson takes this line against the empiricist. The idea that our beliefs confront reality can at best only be metaphorical; no sense can be made of beliefs confronting an unconceptualized reality.

There is, then, good reason to conclude that there is no clear meaning to the idea of comparing our beliefs with reality or confronting our hypotheses with observations. What should be denied is that these mundane events are to be analyzed as involving evidence that is not propositional in character—evidence that is not some sort of belief.  

Of course, Davidson’s view does not exclude causality. Empirical beliefs are caused by objects and events. One sees a rabbit and one is caused to believe there is a rabbit present. What Davidson rejects is any view according to which one infers from one’s experience of the rabbit that there is a rabbit present. There is no such subjective evidence on Davidson’s view. If anything is to serve as evidence, it must be propositional in character; experience in the empiricist’s sense in not. The belief caused by the rabbit, however, is propositional in character and so can serve as evidence for other beliefs. Such empirical beliefs are therefore foundational in a sense, but only in this sense.

Again:

We experiment and observe, but this is not ‘comparing’ in any but a metaphorical sense, for our experimentation bears no epistemological fruit except as it causes us to add to, cling to, or abandon our beliefs. This causal relation cannot be a relation of confirmation or disconfirmation, since the cause is not a proposition or belief, but just an event in the world or in our sensory apparatus. Nor can such

events be considered in themselves to be evidence, unless, of course, they cause us to believe something. And then it is the belief that is properly called the evidence, not the event.\textsuperscript{85}

Here we again see the aspect of Davidson’s view that gives rise to the problem of objectivity. The individual has access to only his or her beliefs. Those beliefs are of course caused by objects and events in the world, but the individual has no access to such causes other than by the beliefs they cause. To search for the cause of a belief would only result in more beliefs. The irony is that by rejecting the subjective view of conceptual scheme and content, while the result would appear to be a direct, unmediated relation between thinkers and their world, Davidson seems to have pushed thinkers into a world of their beliefs.

The important point here is the notion of an inferential bridge between events and beliefs. Davidson is rejecting the view according to which the subjective is internal, the objective external, and one must infer the latter from the former.

…the causal relations between our beliefs and speech, and the world also supply the interpretation of our language and of our beliefs. In this rather special sense, ‘experience’ is the source of all knowledge. But this is a sense that does not encourage us to find a mental or inferential bridge between external events and ordinary beliefs. The bridge is there all right—a causal bridge that involves the sense organs. The error lies, as Neurath saw, in trying to turn this causal bridge into an epistemological one, with sense data, uninterpreted givens, or unwritable sentences constituting its impossible spans.\textsuperscript{86}

This is another statement of Davidson’s rejection of the dualism of scheme and content and with it the traditional distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. The role that causes play is not the epistemic one of providing evidence or justification for beliefs.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., p. 173. My emphasis.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., pp. 174-175.
As we know from our discussion of triangulation in the previous chapter, the solution to this problem of objectivity is to be found in interpretation. And as we have discussed in this section, the solution involves the causal way in which beliefs get their content. The way out of a coherence position is to recognize that in interpretation, distal causes must be taken as the content of observation sentences and the beliefs they express.

My main point is that our basic methodology for interpreting the words of others necessarily makes it the case that most of the time the simplest sentences that speakers hold true are true. *It is not the speaker who must perform the impossible feat of comparing his belief with reality; it is the interpreter who must take into account the causal interaction between world and speaker in order to find out what the speaker means, and hence what that speaker believes.* Each speaker can do no better than make his system of beliefs coherent, adjusting the system as rationally as he can as new beliefs are thrust on him. But there is no need to fear that these beliefs might be just a fairy tale. *For the sentences that express the beliefs, and the beliefs themselves, are correctly understood to be about the public things and events that cause them, and so must be mainly veridical.*

Here we recognize the causal thesis found in the *Coherence Theory* paper. There as here we saw that it is because the interpreter *must* take into account causal relations between speaker and object, while the speaker *cannot* take into account causal relations between his or her own beliefs and the objects that cause them, that the idea of objective truth must arise in the context of interpretation. What grounds this idea is our understanding of the way in which causes determine content.

**Against conventions**

In ‘82 and then in ‘86 (and again in ‘94), Davidson published papers arguing against the necessity of linguistic conventions for linguistic meaning. This is, after the

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87 Ibid., p. 174. My emphasis.
88 Because the presentation in the ‘94 article combines the current theme with a theme to be discussed in a later chapter, I will discuss the ‘94 article in that later chapter.
causal thesis, our second thesis that follows from the radical interpretation approach (which, recall, follows from the fundamental assumption of the public nature of meaning). This rejection of conventions will play a key role in Davidson’s characterization of triangulation. Triangulation tells us what speakers must share if not linguistic conventions, and in particular triangulation grounds Davidson’s positive account of linguistic communication and of objectivity. As I suggest in this section, if we apply what Davidson has to say about what makes linguistic communication possible to the ostensive learning of a language, we will find crucial elements of Davidson’s later uses of triangulation.89

Both linguistic and non-linguistic conventions are explicitly or implicitly agreed upon regularities in behavior meant to solve a particular problem encountered by a group, where the behavior in question is one of more than one possible, equally good solutions to the problem.90 For example, it is a convention of driving in America that when two cars come to a four-way stop, the car on the right goes first. This convention obviously solves the problem of who should go first when two cars come to the intersection at the same time; it is also arbitrary, in the sense that other possible solutions would have worked equally well (the rule could have been that the car on the left goes first). This is an explicitly agreed upon convention, a rule of driving. It is possible, however, that the

89 And as we will see in chapter five, Davidson’s use of triangulation in this sense occurs in articles that concern the rejection of linguistic conventions.
rule arose not through explicit agreement, but through an accident of history; the first to encounter the problem let the one on the right go first, and the custom stuck.\(^91\)

A linguistic convention is this sort of convention. The regularity in question concerns verbal behavior. Linguistic conventions are associated with specific languages and linguistic communities. For instance, it is a convention of English that “car” is used to refer to cars. This convention solves a problem, that of communicating about cars. This convention is arbitrary, in the sense that many other possible sounds could have been used to refer to cars. Finally, this could be an implicit convention, in the sense that members of the English speaking community perhaps did not explicitly come to the decision that, henceforth, cars would be referred to with the use of “car.”

Some philosophers have held that conventions are necessary for linguistic meaning and communication; an explication or analysis of meaning will make essential use of the notion of a convention. For instance, the explanation of “car” meaning car is that there exists a convention, shared by English speakers, to use “car” to refer to cars. Davidson, as I have mention and as we will now see in detail, rejects the idea that conventions are necessary for meaning and communication. This is a simple corollary of the thesis that radical interpretation is revealing about the nature of meaning.\(^92\) Indeed, Davidson draws this point explicitly about the externalism he learned from Quine:

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\(^{91}\) The importance of allowing for the possibility of implicit conventions is the obvious difficulty encountered if we assume that all linguistic conventions were explicitly agreed upon: the original agreement on what conventions to follow would have had to be mediated by the use of language, which would presuppose the existence of conventions.

\(^{92}\) In “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” Davidson gives a different argument against conventions, namely that mistakes in language use—deviations from the norm—pose no barrier to communication. Although this empirical fact can be explained by conventions playing no necessary role in meaning, it is not a
Quine’s externalism is social, but despite his emphasis on the importance of speakers being coaxed by parents, teachers, and society to make the same sounds in relevantly similar situations, he never suggests, with Tyler Burge, that even someone who is mistaken about what most people mean by a word nevertheless means, all unwittingly, what they do. The social element in Quine’s picture enters in a far more fundamental way: it concerns agreement, not on sounds (which is why translation plays the role it does) but on the external circumstances which prompt the sounds.  

In radical interpretation, it is not necessary that speaker and interpreter share a language.

What is most fundamental to a linguistic convention is that it is a behavioral regularity shared by more than one individual; and this sharing is something brought to language exchanges, not developed as language exchange occurs. In radical interpretation, however, linguistic communication occurs without the sharing of prior linguistic regularities, and indeed whatever is shared comes to be shared during the process of interpretation. It follows that whatever there is to meaning, shared conventions are not a necessary part of it.

Davidson’s initial claim concerning what is necessary for linguistic communication is that while the interpreter and speaker need not speak in the same manner, the interpreter and speaker must agree on how to interpret the speaker’s words: “if communication succeeds, speaker and hearer must assign the same meaning to the

 convincing premise of that fact. Mistakes, it might be argued, can only be reinterpreted because they occur against the background of shared conventions. This cannot be said about radical interpretation. For this reason among others, I favor the argument against conventions based on radical interpretation. Davidson, D. (2002) “Quine’s Externalism.” Grazer Philosophische Studien: Internationale Zeitschrift für Analytische Philosophie, 66.

94 “…it is very difficult to say exactly how speaker's and hearer's theories for interpreting the speaker's words must coincide. They must, of course, coincide after an utterance has been made, or communication is impaired. But unless they coincide in advance, the concepts of regularity and convention have no definite purchase. Yet agreement on what a speaker means by what he says can surely be achieved even though speaker and hearer have different advance theories as to how to interpret the speaker.” Davidson, D. (1983) “Communication and Convention,” In Davidson, D. (1984) Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, New York: Clarendon Press, p.277.
speaker's words." I will call this and later explications of this idea Davidson’s *characterization of communication*. What must be agreed upon is not the manner of speaking, but the manner of interpreting the speaker’s words. More is required, however, involving the intentions of the speaker: “the speaker must intend the hearer to interpret his words in the way the speaker intends.” I will refer to this as the *basic intention* of communication. If I say “car” to a non-English speaker, pointing to a car, then I intend for “car” to refer to cars—that is, I intend the speaker to so interpret my use of “car.” Finally, the speaker cannot just *assume* the hearer will give the intended interpretation; rather, the speaker must be *justified in believing* that the hearer can indeed come to the intended interpretation: “he must have adequate reason to believe that the hearer will succeed in interpreting him as he intends.” I will call this the *justification requirement*. This requirement is in part a response to those who have criticized Davidson’s account—including Michael Dummett—as being a Humpty Dumpty theory of meaning: “car” means car because—and only because—I intend it. On the Humpty Dumpty theory, intentions seem rather magical. Davidson’s position is that the intentions must be made available to the interpreter and the speaker must be justified in believing he has succeeded in doing so.

Combining the idea that what successful communication requires is that the hearer and speaker agree on the interpretation of the speaker’s words, with the idea that

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95 Ibid., p. 276.
96 Ibid., p. 276
97 Ibid., p. 276.
we can model linguistic competence as the construction of a Tarski meaning theory, we get the following characterization of what successful communication requires:

…for communication to succeed, a systematic method of interpretation must be shared. (I shall henceforth assume there is no harm in calling such a method a theory, as if the interpreter were using the theory we use to describe his competence.) The sharing comes to this: the interpreter uses his theory to understand the speaker; the speaker uses the same (or an equivalent) theory to guide his speech. For the speaker, it is a theory about how the interpreter will interpret him. Obviously this principle does not demand that speaker and interpreter speak the same language…What must be shared is the interpreter's and the speaker's understanding of the speaker's words.\(^99\)

In “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” Davidson makes more precise the idea that communication can be modeled in terms of speakers and listeners employing theories of interpretation. Davidson distinguishes two sorts of theories in characterizing linguistic communication.

I have distinguished what I have been calling the prior theory from what I shall henceforth call 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 prior theory to be, while his passing theory is the theory he intends the interpreter to use.\(^100\)

Of course, in actual communication each individual will be both speaker and interpreter. For purposes of explication, Davidson considers only one half of this dyad: one person as speaker and the other as hearer. He then considers two things: what speaker and hearer bring to the communicative exchange and what occurs during the exchange. What the speaker and hearer bring to the exchange Davidson calls the “prior theory.” The listener's prior theory concerns how the listener will interpret the speaker; it is, in


\(^{100}\) Ibid., p. 101.
essence, the starting point of the theory the listener will construct to interpret the speaker. The *speaker’s prior theory* concerns not how the speaker will interpret the listener, but how the speaker should speak so as to be interpreted by the listener as the speaker intends. This may include specifically linguistic information—say, that the listener is Japanese and does not understand English, or that the person is from the east coast of the US rather than from the deep south—as well as the listener’s education, socio-economic status, age, gender, ethnicity, and whatever else the speaker might take to be relevant to being interpreted correctly.

Davidson calls both theories that develop *during* the communicative exchange the passing theories. The *passing theory for the hearer* is the developing truth theory used to interpret the speaker; it is the theory the hearer is using while also constructing and modifying. The *passing theory for the speaker* is the correct truth theory for the speaker; it is how the speaker intends to be interpreted; it is the truth theory the speaker hopes to lead the hearer to construct.

Davidson distinguishes prior and passing theory for two reasons. The first reason is in order to make clear the argument against the necessity of shared conventions. The argument is that prior theories need not be shared, and passing theories do not exist prior to communicative exchanges. Neither, therefore, can be considered convention governed since linguistic conventions must be shared prior to communication. This distinction therefore helps make clear what was implicit in the argument from radical interpretation: conventions need not be shared prior to communication because in radical interpretation this is not the case (and communication succeeds anyway). The second reason to make...
the distinction between prior and passing theory is to characterize what is required for successful linguistic communication. Davidson’s characterization of successful communication is what we saw earlier—that speaker and hearer must agree on the interpretation they assign to the speaker’s words—though put in new terms: “The asymptote of agreement and understanding is when passing theories coincide.”  

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. Only if these coincide is understanding complete.

This is a statement of what I earlier called Davidson’s characterization of communication.

While the matching of passing theories is necessary for linguistic communication, prior theories are not merely of practical use. Speakers must have a prior theory, some idea of how the interpreter will interpret their speech; and so interpreters must have a prior theory for the speaker’s prior theory to concern.

Central to this picture 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.

If the speaker made no assumptions about the listener, communication would be impossible. In particular, the speaker must make assumptions about what the listener is assuming about the speaker. Indeed, according to this passage, the speaker’s prior theory

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101 Ibid., p. 102.
102 Ibid., p. 102.
103 Ibid., p. 101.
is relevant to the meaning his words have. The question is then what sort of information a speaker’s prior theory at minimum must contain. For in radical interpretation, by hypothesis the speakers have no prior theories for one another.

The way in which speakers insure that listeners have enough to go on to assign correct interpretations—rather than sharing specific linguistic conventions—involves general knowledge about language, people, and the world.¹⁰⁴

…the speaker may well provide adequate clues, in what he says, and how and where he says it, to allow a hearer to arrive at a correct interpretation. Of course the speaker must have some idea how the hearer is apt to make use of the relevant clues; and the hearer must know a great deal about what to expect.¹⁰⁵

In what follows, I want to focus on the special case of radical interpretation, and in particular on what clues both speaker and interpreter must provide so as to bring each other to the correct expectations and what is necessary for the successful use of such clues.

Recall from the last section that Davidson concluded, from the fact that interpreters must take the causes of speaker’s utterances of observation sentences as the content of those sentences, that the content of such sentences is determined by those causes. The same strategy occurs here in Davidson’s discussion of communication. From the fact that radical interpretation is possible he concludes that linguistic conventions are unnecessary for communication. Now, in this context he goes on to say what is required for successful communication. This account includes one element that

¹⁰⁴ That communication involves such general knowledge leads to an anti-reductionist argument similar to what we will see in chapter four’s discussion of Sellars’s and Davidson’s anti-reductionism. Since linguistic competence cannot be systematized, Davidson maintains that it cannot be reduced.
¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 94, p. 277.
was missing in earlier accounts: while discussion of radical interpretation focuses on what is required of the interpreter—the interpreter must take causes to be the content of observation sentences—discussion of communication includes what is required of the speaker—the speaker must have the basic intention and must meet the justification requirement. What Davidson does not do in his discussion of communication, however, is consider the radical interpretation situation or ostension in this connection. His concern is rather with full linguistic communication. We can, however, abstract out of this account of linguistic communication what he would say about these situations.

Consider radical interpretation in light of Davidson’s characterization of communication. We can think of radical interpretation as the limiting case of communication, the case in which the prior theories of both speaker and listener are empty. The task then is to converge on passing theories, assigning the same interpretations to the speaker’s utterances. Recall that prior theories are necessary for communication in this sense: the speaker must have some beginning assumptions about how the listener will interpret his speech; and the listener must have some assumptions to begin with in interpreting the speaker. So while in radical interpretation the prior theories qua truth theories of both speaker and listener are empty, the two must have some beliefs about what the other will do. In the case of radical interpretation, then, what is brought to communication is just the general world knowledge used to build passing theories. Here is where we will see—I am suggesting on Davidson’s behalf—what is most fundamental to meaning.
In the ostension that occurs in radical interpretation, the following must occur. The speaker must use a bit of language in the presence of an object, or more specifically must indicate that with this bit of language he intends the bit of language to be true of the object ostended. The speaker thus must have the basic intention to be interpreted in a certain way. The speaker must also meet the justification requirement: he must be justified in his belief that the interpreter can, from his ostension, understand his intention that the bit of language be true of the ostended object. It seems clear that two things must be true if the speaker is to be so justified. First, the interpreter must understand ostension and the speaker must believe this. Second, if the speaker is to be justified in this general belief about ostension, and in the belief that the interpreter has correctly understood this particular ostension, the interpreter must give some indication of this. That is, the speaker cannot meet the justification requirement unless the interpreter gives some sort of feedback concerning the speaker’s ostension. Another way of putting this: the speaker must engender in the interpreter the right expectations concerning the speaker’s linguistic behavior, and the interpreter must provide some evidence to the speaker of having formed the correct expectations.

Now consider the case of the ostensive learning of a language. Davidson has written more than once concerning the importance of thinking about ostensive language learning for his views concerning triangulation, and as we will see beginning in the next chapter, he often discusses ostensive learning as a case of triangulation. By assumption, the case of ostensive language learning differs from radical interpretation in one respect: the teacher is an interpreter of the child, while the child is not yet a speaker. It is here
that we can see, not just what the adult must do in interpreting the child, but also what the
adult must do in response to the child, thus providing for an analogue of the justification
requirement. Since by assumption the child has no language at the start, the child has no
concept of ostension. The child also lacks the basic intention. Nevertheless, we can give
an account of the sorts of associations that must be made and the kinds of expectations
created that make will make possible forming the basic intention and meeting the
justification requirement. The process begins with the teacher ostending an object and
uttering a word, say “table” in the presence of a table. The child imitates the adult’s
utterance and is rewarded. The child later utters “table” in the presence of a table and is
rewarded. As a result, the child comes to utter “table” in the presence of tables. What
the child is learning is not merely a language, but ostensive language learning: making
the same sound in the presence of the same object results in the teacher coming to expect
more of the same; and the teacher provides the feedback as to whether or not the teacher
has formed such an expectation and whether or not the child is continuing in conformity
with this expectation.

One suggestion that I will make in chapter five is that on Davidson’s account of
triangulation, interpreters must provide feedback to speakers, and speakers must be
motivated to attend to such feedback. In the absence of shared linguistic conventions to
provide the norm of communication, the teacher/interpreter must provide the norm for the
speaker. What makes ostensive learning central to Davidson’s account of triangulation is
the way in which the teacher provides a check for the speaker on the speaker’s responses
to the environment. At the beginnings of ostensive learning we have this check in place,
absent any thought or language on the part of the learner. As we will see in the following chapters, triangulation is what makes this possible.

**The shaping of triangulation**

In this chapter we have seen how Davidson inherited some very fundamental theses about meaning and knowledge from Quine. In particular, we have seen how from the radical interpretation approach follow two theses: the causal thesis and the rejection of linguistic conventions. We saw in the first section how from the public nature of language thesis, Davidson accepts the primacy of ostension and the meaning creation thesis. We saw in the second section how Davidson offers the causal thesis as a solution to the problem of objectivity. And in the third section we saw how from Davidson’s rejection of linguistic conventions and his characterization of communication follow the basic intention and the justification requirement. In this last section I want to bring these ideas together and briefly say how they bear on triangulation.

As stated in the introductory chapter, and as I will argue in the next chapter at length, triangulation is Davidson’s account of what makes possible the sort of interaction we see in ostension between two creatures and an object. The last two sections of this chapter approach such a triangle from different perspectives. The section concerning the causal thesis approaches the triangle from the interpreter’s point of view and asks: what is required of an interpreter in ostension? The section concerning linguistic conventions approaches communication from the perspective of the speaker and asks: what is required of a speaker to be understood? Brought together in ostension, we have what triangulation will make possible: the interpreter takes the cause to determine content, and the
interpreter provides a check on the speaker’s responses to that object. The speaker thus
does not—as Davidson put it—have to do the impossible and compare beliefs with their
causes; the interpreter’s responses, however, give the speaker an objective check on
beliefs and the things in the world that cause them.

Moreover, by bringing together the causal thesis with Davidson’s characterization
of communication, we get a clearer picture of why for Davidson the meaning creation
thesis follows from the primacy of ostension. The interpreter must take causes to
determine content, but what determines the causes are the responses of the speaker and
the responses of the interpreter to those responses. Nothing outside of or prior to the
triangulation is relevant to the meaning of the speaker’s utterances. So meaning is not
passed on but rather created.

This completes the background relevant to my interpretation of triangulation. In
the following chapters I look at what I think of as Davidson’s reintroduction of
triangulation after the middle period, beginning what I think of the late period wherein he
develops his account of triangulation. We will see with Davidson’s reintroduction of
triangulation, he gives a much more developed account of how triangulation makes
possible objective mental content. We will then see how this account of objective mental
content develops into an account of what makes possible a concept of objective truth.
Then we will see how Davidson uses triangulation to account for the normativity of
language. And finally, I will bring together these various developments and show how
triangulation makes possible the creation of meaning. All of this will be done with
special attention to the intimate relation Davidson’s uses of triangulation have with his rejection of the subjectivity and scheme-content dualism of empiricism.
Chapter 3: Shared Similarity Responses

In his ‘89 article “Conditions of Thought,”106 Davidson reintroduced triangulation, seven years after its only prior appearance in “Rational Animals.”107 This reintroduction marks the beginning of what I think of as the third and last part of Davidson’s career. In this chapter we will finally come to have a fundamental understanding of what triangulation is. While this chapter describes triangulation in detail, the focus is on triangulation’s role in making possible responses to shared distal stimuli. Following chapters show further roles triangulation came to play, including: making possible a notion of error and so the concept of truth; and making possible a notion of linguistic norms. This chapter can be seen as continuing the previous chapter’s discussion of the role of causation in interpretation; the next chapter as continuing the discussion in chapter one of the problems of error and objectivity; and the final chapter as continuing the last chapter’s discussion of Davidson’s account of communication. In terms of Davidson’s three periods, then, the current and following two chapters bring to bear work from both

Davidson’s early and middle periods to provide an understanding of triangulation and its uses.108

This chapter has four sections. In the first section, I show that it follows from theses accepted from Quine and discussed in the previous chapter that Davidson is committed to what I call the *shared cause thesis*, namely that speaker and interpreter must share the causes of their verbal responses. I also look at two problems discussed by Davidson concerning the determination of such shared causes. In the next two sections, I present the basics of Davidson’s solution to these problems, i.e., triangulation. In the second section, I discuss the notion of relevant similarity and how two roles triangulation plays are related to relevant similarity. In the third section, I discuss the notion of *similarity responses* and how two creatures sharing such similarity responses can pick out the shared cause of their responses, thereby solving the two problems discussed in section one. I suggest that triangulation should be understood not as a common cause account of conceptual and linguistic content, but rather as an account of the common causes that determine such content in terms of shared inborn similarity responses. In the final section, I discuss an example of a well-known interpretation of triangulation as a common cause account, and I show how the criticisms of Davidson’s uses of triangulation based on that interpretation are found baseless on my interpretation.

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108 Recall that the middle period begins with Davidson’s introduction of triangulation in “Rational Animals” and the late period begins with his reintroduction of triangulation in “Conditions of Thought.” My suggestion is that the middle period was an incubation period, so to speak, in which Davidson worked on topics that led to a notion of triangulation much more developed than that which arose out of the early period. Work from both of these periods is necessary for a complete understanding of triangulation as it is developed in the late period.
The shared cause thesis and two problems

As we saw in chapter two, one source of triangulation is Quine’s views on meaning. According to the public nature of meaning thesis, whatever there is to meaning must be available to an appropriately placed and equipped observer. From this thesis follows the radical interpretation method of investigating meaning, since the radical interpreter is by assumption appropriately placed and equipped. In light of the thought experiment, we get the primacy of ostension: whatever there is to empirical meaning is picked up in the process of ostension. Moreover, Davidson argues that the causes of a speaker’s verbal responses determine the empirical content of those responses—the causal thesis. And this, we saw, was a key element in Davidson’s solution to the problem of objectivity. According to that solution, while speakers cannot compare their beliefs with the causes of those beliefs—only more beliefs would be acquired—the role of causality shows itself in its role in the interpretation of observation sentences. This implies that the notion of objective truth arises in the context of interpretation, and in particular the interpretation of observation sentences as taking their content to be what causes speakers to hold them true. What this process assumes, then, is that the cause that determines the content of the speaker’s utterance of an observation sentence is the same cause that determines the interpreter’s interpretation of that sentence. So speaker and interpreter must in this sense share the distal cause. I call this the shared cause thesis: content determining causes are shared by speaker and interpreter.

Davidson identifies two problems with the shared cause thesis. Both problems have to do with the location of the cause that a creature is responding to in ostension.
The first problem involves the idea of a common cause of the reactions of a speaker and interpreter.

The distal theory I am urging Quine to accept is stuck with the notion of 'the' common cause of utterances (or dispositions to such). The problem that threatens is that there may be too many candidates for the common cause—for example any large slice of the history or the universe up to a time before the speaker or speakers were born.\(^{109}\)

Picking out a cause is different from picking out the cause, and in the case of a shared cause, there are many causes that could serve as the common cause. Any cause of a common cause is itself a common cause. This problem I will call the common cause problem.

Davidson often discusses a different but related problem, what I will call the causal chain problem: Where, along the causal chain from object to speaker, should we locate the cause of the speaker’s verbal responses? In the following passage, Davidson introduces this problem in the context of the psychologist’s training of animals (the classical conditioning of a dog to salivate at the ringing of a bell).

This seems straightforward, but as psychologists have noticed, there is a problem about the location of the stimulus. In the case of the dog, why say the stimulus is the ringing of the bell? Why not the motion of the air close to the ears of the dog—or even the stimulation of its nerve endings? Certainly if the air were made to vibrate in the same way the bell makes it vibrate it would make no difference to the behavior of the dog. And if the right nerve endings were activated in the right way, there still would be no difference. And in fact if we must choose, it seems that the proximal cause of the behavior has the best claim to be called the stimulus, since the more distant an event is causally the more chance there is that the causal chain will be broken.\(^{110}\)


\(^{110}\) Ibid. 106, pp. 196-197.
Davidson’s characterization of the choice available to the psychologist is that between proximal and distal theories—his own distal theory and Quine’s proximal theory—with the addition of the motion of the air that mediates. Any link along a causal chain can be picked out as the cause. In Quine’s case, he argues that the proximal stimulus is more firmly conditioned to the response and so given Quine’s epistemic purposes is the cause. Davidson, as we know, maintains that the distal stimulus is the cause relevant to meaning and interpretation. Davidson needs a reason for why this distal cause is the appropriate cause.

The two problems are similar but distinct. The causal chain problem involves the relation between a single creature and some object. A causal chain connects the creature and the object. The problem is determining which link along the chain from creature extending out to the object is the cause to which the creature is responding. The common cause problem has to do with the distal cause and beyond; two creatures react to a common cause, but this cause is part of a causal chain extending out beyond the object.

It is easy to get the impression that Davidson attempts to solve the causal chain problem by appealing to a common cause only to find himself facing the common cause problem. It is also easy to imagine that triangulation was Davidson’s attempt at solving the first problem, and so triangulation faces the second problem. I think this interpretation is incorrect. My primary reason for thinking so is that from its introduction in the Conditions of Thought paper, triangulation solves both problems.

111 Indeed, the passage above in which Davidson mentions the common cause problem is from a paper published only one year after the reintroduction of triangulation—in the paper from which the passage is taken concerning the causal chain problem. I am suggesting that Davidson has both of these problems in mind when he introduced triangulation—as a solution to the problems, not as generating these problems.
That is, the way in which triangulation accounts for determining the common distal cause as the cause to which two creatures are responding also rules out any causes of that common cause being candidates for being causes of the creature’s responses.

Triangulation, as we will see, is not the mere appeal to a common cause in accounting for content; it is an account of what about creatures must be the case if they are to respond to a particular common cause. We know antecedently, from the account of interpretation and the shared cause thesis, that speaker and interpreter do indeed respond to a common cause.

**Relevant similarity**

Although our focus in this chapter is Davidson’s reintroduction of triangulation in “Conditions of Thought” (1989) and its relation to the shared cause thesis, crucial for understanding triangulation as presented in that paper are Davidson’s views on causal explanation. Davidson presents his reasoning about causation as it occurs in “Conditions of Thought” in a paper published a year later, “Meaning, Truth, and Evidence”\(^\text{112}\) (1990). And while Davidson discusses relevant similarity and triangulation together in various places, perhaps the clearest connection is made in “Externalisms”\(^\text{113}\) (2001) where he connects the notion of relevant similarity with the two functions of triangulation. I look at these various articles in this section, connecting up Davidson’s views essential to understanding triangulation, and then in the following section I turn to Davidson’s presentation of triangulation in “Conditions of Thought.”

\(^{112}\) Ibid. 109.

Davidson acknowledges a pragmatic element in causal explanation. While causes exist independently of thinking creatures, what one picks out as the cause of an event depends upon one’s interests. Davidson applies this pragmatic notion to the problems concerning picking out the cause in interpretation.

On a distal theory, causes external to the speaker matter directly to meaning, and so must be taken into account by an interpreter. But is it sufficiently clear how such external causes matter to meaning? The concept of causality is applied according to human interests (as both Quine and Putnam have emphasized in this context). Quine's proximal theory is also causal, but the elements that serve as cause and effect, namely sensory stimulations and verbal responses (or dispositions to such) are explicitly indicated. Quine’s naturalistic approach to epistemology allows him to use whatever concepts are at his disposal, including scientific ones, in his account of knowledge. Davidson, however, is investigating the roots of conceptualization itself, and so he cannot assume what are the causes that determine conceptual content. To understand Davidson’s claim that the pragmatics of causal explanation applies to the causes that determine content we must understand the notion of relevant similarity.

Concepts are ways of grouping, classifying, or categorizing things, properties, events. The concept baseball groups or classes or categorizes all things that are baseballs. Of course, if we took all baseballs and examined them, we would find they have many properties in common (e.g., all weigh under 10 pounds; all are found on planet earth; all have a role to play in a game/sport; etc.). They will also have many properties in common with an indefinite number of other objects. What brings them together into one group, the baseball group, is that they are all relevantly similar—relevant, that is, to our

\[114\] Ibid 109, p. 60.
interests. In this case, the relevant interest is (something like) being an object used in a particular sport in a particular way. What makes the baseballness of baseballs the relevant similarity is that we are interested in this aspect of these objects.

Relevant similarity is connected to causation in the following way. When we pick out the cause or causes of some event, we use our concepts. We say: “The baseball broke the window.” Here, we are subsuming the cause under our concept baseball, and the effect under our concept window. Now, put these points together: causes are picked out by our concepts; our concepts group together things found relevantly similar; and so causes are picked out by what we find relevantly similar.

The notion of relevant similarity is a standard or criterion for classifying things as similar. If such a standard were always learned, it is not clear how learning would ever get started. There must therefore be some standards of relevant similarity that are inborn. Davidson attributes recognition of this notion of relevant similarity and its role in learning to Quine.

Quine, so far as I know, introduced the subject of relevant similarity in *Roots of Reference* (Quine 1974).

"If an individual learns at all, differences in degree of similarity must be implicit in his learning pattern...Some implicit standard, however provisional, for ordering our episodes as more or less similar must therefore antedate all learning, and be innate." (p. 19) Such similarity, he remarked, is confined to the individual—the episodes are more or less similar for him. 115

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The similarity Quine has in mind here concerns proximal stimuli. Creatures trained to respond in a particular way in the presence of a stimulus must find the stimuli from presentation to presentation similar for conditioning to occur. And certainly for any learning to occur, some such similarity standards must be inborn. This sort of similarity is subjective in the sense that if two things are similar, they are similar for a creature. Moreover, not only is the relevant similarity of objects subjective in this sense, so is the relevant similarity of a creature’s responses.

When I first read this I was troubled by the thought that the most basic sort of similarity (perceptual similarity) was being characterized in terms of another sort of similarity (relevantly similar response). This second variety of similarity could no more be attributed to nature apart from living creatures than the first.¹¹⁶

For Quine, specifying what a creature finds similar is a simple matter of looking at how the creature generalizes. This is done by looking at how the creature responds to various stimuli. Simply put, similar responses indicate the creature finds the perceived stimuli similar. What troubled Davidson was not, however, a problem for Quine. Quine’s naturalistic approach allows him to use whatever concepts are at his disposal for characterizing the training situation. Davidson, however, is concerned with making sense of concept formation itself, and so it would be question begging to use our concepts to specify which responses of the creature are similar. We will return to this point about the relevant similarity of responses below.

There are two important senses in which relevant similarity is related to concepts. First, relevant similarity is the basis for determining what cause a creature is responding to. The cause of a creature’s responses is determined by what that creature finds

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 39.
relevantly similar. Second, relevant similarity is a normative notion in the sense that one can mistakenly take two things to be relevantly similar. Davidson raises these points in the context of discussing Tyler Burge’s account of perceptual externalism.  

But there are serious lacunae in Burge's account of perceptual externalism. There is, first, the problem of the content of perceptual beliefs. According to Burge it is the 'normal' cause of a perceptual belief that determines the content of the belief. But what is the normal cause? It could be anything from the stimulation of nerve endings to the original big bang. Clearly, we need a way to isolate the right cause. Second, Burge gives no serious account of error, and without an account of error, there is no way to distinguish between having a concept and simply having a disposition….These are both problems about relevant similarity.

Of course, to say that the normal cause of a belief determines its content is to be aware that creatures can have false beliefs, and so we cannot take all the causes of a belief to play a role in determining its content. So if we could give an account of the normal cause of a belief, we could also give at least the beginnings of an account of error. The two problems are therefore intimately related. Conversely, if an account of the normal cause cannot be given, we cannot give an account of concept possession, since we cannot distinguish mere dispositions from having actual concepts. One is disposed to respond similarly to whatever one finds relevantly similar, regardless of whether those things are in fact relevantly similar. In this sense, concepts are normative, dispositions are not. Both problems, therefore, are problems of relevant similarity.

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117 Perceptual externalism is the thesis that objects of perception, external to the mind, are necessary for individuating mental states.
119 As we will see in the next chapter, Davidson claims that to have concepts, one must have the concepts of truth and error. For this reason, while determining the cause that determines content is necessary for an account of error, it is not sufficient.
Let us look at each of these problems of relevant similarity, beginning with error. Davidson’s discussion of error as involving relevant similarity assumes that concepts have a certain sort of normativity in that they can be applied correctly or incorrectly. To err in the application of a concept is to apply it to something that is not relevantly similar to other things to which one applies that concept.

Fake cows are in one way relevantly similar to real cows—that's why we make mistakes. But in another way, fake cows aren't at all like cows—they don't fall under the concept cow. It is because we occasionally mistake fakes for the real thing that we can be said to have concepts, to classify things, and so sometimes classify them wrong.\(^{120}\)

So a criterion on concept possession is the possibility of error, of applying concepts wrongly. Davidson characterizes this in terms of relevant similarity. The objects that fall under a concept are relevantly similar. Mistakes sometime occur because we mistakenly take some object to be relevantly similar to a group of objects which, because they are relevantly similar, fall under a concept.

The idea that causes determine content also involves relevant similarity. If we are to pick out the normal cause of a speaker’s verbal responses, we must know what the normal cause is. That of course requires that we know what the creature is responding to—how the creature groups causes. And this is again a matter of what things the creature finds similar.

The problem of relevant similarity comes up also in connection with the idea that the content of a perceptual belief depends on its common or usual cause. Even to approach the question, we must have some idea which causes are being gathered together. Since any set of causes whatsoever will have endless properties in common, we must look to some recurrent feature of the gatherer, some mark that

\(^{120}\) Ibid., p. 4.
he or she has classified cases as similar.\textsuperscript{121}

To know what things a creature finds similar, we must of course look to the responses of the creature. But as we saw earlier, this is to characterize one kind of similarity in terms of another: perceptual similarity in terms of response similarity. And then the same question of relevant similarity will recur, since we need to know what responses of the creature are relevantly similar. As we will see in a following chapter, Davidson appeals to the responses of the interpreter in accounting for the similarity of the speaker’s responses; but then, again, it seems the problem recurs. I believe Davidson has a response to this problem; we will discuss that, too, in a later chapter. For now, I wish only to make clear the role of relevant similarity in picking out the causes which, according to the causal thesis, determine content; and in particular how relevant similarity will solve the two problems discussed in the previous section, namely the casual chain problem and the common cause problem.

Before doing so, I want to discuss once more the relation between normativity and cause determination in terms of relevant similarity, but as it relates to the problem of objectivity. That problem, recall, is making sense of the objectivity of our beliefs given that we have no independent access to the causes of our beliefs. Any attempt to confront our beliefs with reality only results in more beliefs. An analogue of this problem confronts the causal thesis thought of in terms of relevant similarity. Recall that according to the causal thesis, the cause of a speaker’s responses (observation sentences) determines the content of those responses. As we saw, this runs into the problem of saying what determines what is the normal cause of a speaker’s responses. Davidson

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., pp. 4-5.
suggests that this is a problem of relevant similarity: the normal causes—the content determining causes—are the relevantly similar ones. But to judge that two things are relevantly similar is just to believe that the two things are relevantly similar, and once again we have no access to the causes of our beliefs other than the beliefs they cause in us.

Davidson’s solution is not to appeal to unconceptualized evidence, since anything unconceptualized cannot serve as a reason; only beliefs can serve as reasons for other beliefs. Instead, Davidson suggests we come to possess a notion of objectivity in our understanding of the way in which causes figure in interpretation, namely that causes determine the content of beliefs. We then saw that this presupposes that speaker and interpreter share the same causes, which led to two problems: the causal chain and common cause problems. Davidson claims that determining the cause that a creature is reacting to is a problem of relevant similarity, which led to the current discussion.

Now consider interpretation in terms of relevant similarity. The speaker responds to an object with an observation sentence. This sentence, assume, expresses that a kind of object is present. The interpreter takes like utterances to be caused by objects of that sort. But what object? The speaker is responding to a particular kind of object. The speaker responds similarity when the speaker finds objects relevantly similar. The interpreter too takes the objects responded to to be of the same kind. That is, the interpreter finds the objects to be relevantly similar. So, for this process of interpretation, of ostension, to occur, speaker and interpreter must share standards of similarity—they must find the same objects relevantly similar. In doing so, not only do they pick out the same object as the one to which the speaker is responding; they also make possible, as we
saw above, a notion of error. If there are cases in which the speaker responds similarly when the interpreter does not, then their similarity judgments are at odds. But of course, this is natural, since both speaker and interpreter have concepts. The role of triangulation is to show what makes this all possible.

**Similarity Responses**

Triangulation is typically characterized by commentators as a three-way causal interaction between two creatures and an object. An object causes both creatures to react, and each creature notes the reactions of the other to that object. Indeed, Davidson at times briefly characterizes triangulation in this way, too. But I want to suggest that from triangulation’s reintroduction in the *Conditions of Thought* paper, Davidson has clearly had something different in mind. My suggestion is that triangulation is better understood as what makes this three-way causal interaction possible. Indeed, for creatures like us, triangulation is necessary and sufficient for this three-way interaction: whenever you have the three-way causal interaction, you have triangulation; and whenever you have triangulation, you have the three-way causal interaction. But to think of triangulation as the three-way causal interaction itself encourages the idea that Davidson is giving a common-cause solution to the causal chain problem, and so encourages the criticism that there are more than one common cause. Thinking of triangulation in this way also lends itself to the impression that there is something circular in Davidson’s use of the notion of triangulation, since he claims that triangulation is necessary for thought about objects, but interacting with objects and other creatures in this way seems to require thought about those objects and creatures. But if we keep in mind the problems that motivate
Davidson—the problems of error and objectivity—and we understand triangulation as what makes these triangular causal relations possible, these concerns about Davidson’s uses of the notion of triangulation do not arise.

Before continuing, I should mention that Davidson discusses triangulation as occurring in three different contexts. First, triangulation can occur between two animals that lack thought and language. An example might be two creatures stalking an individual prey. Second, triangulation occurs in cases of ostensive language learning. Here, the adult has thought and language and the child is being introduced into thought and language. Third, triangulation occurs in the ostensive interpretation of observation sentences in radical interpretation. In this section, I will assume in my discussion the first kind of triangulation, so as to make clear the way in which triangulation occurs in all three. In the passages we examine, however, Davidson uses all three contexts of triangulation. The differences between these three contexts will be important for later chapters, but for present purposes it is important to note that triangulation as I will characterize it occurs in the same way in all three contexts.

Davidson’s solution to the causal chain problem—as exemplified in the case of the psychologist training the dog—begins with the notion of subjective similarity, by which I mean things seeming similar to a subject. (Davidson often puts this as a creature “finding” two things similar.) Davidson considers the case of classical conditioning, in which a dog is trained to salivate upon hearing a bell with the simultaneous presentation of food. Davidson’s initial claim is that subjective or perceived similarity—a kind of generalization in which in this example the dog generalizes the learned behavior from a
few instances of the ringing of a bell to any bell ringings the dog finds similar—is necessary for learning. If we did not come with inborn standards of similarity, even such simple learning would be impossible:

The phenomenon of generalization, of perceived similarity, plays an essential role in this process. One ring of the bell is enough like another from the dog’s point of view to provoke similar behavior, just as one presentation of food is enough like another to engender salivation. If some such selective mechanisms were not built in, none could be learned.\(^\text{122}\)

We saw above that Davidson’s credits Quine with the basic notion of relevant similarity, and Davidson here agrees with Quine that some such standards of similarity must be inborn if learning is to take place. In this example, what is found similar are bell ringings. Quine would of course characterize such learning in terms of proximal stimulation of the dogs ears. The inborn relevant similarity that is required on Quine’s account is a similarity among proximal stimuli, not objects.

The way in which similarity is subjective for Davidson is not a matter of proximal stimuli. As we know, objects cause beliefs about objects; the causal chain that mediates such relations between us and objects is epistemically irrelevant. Similarity must therefore be a matter of the similarity among objects; and since such standards must be inborn, it follows that learning requires that we be born finding distal stimuli similar. This is true in two senses. First, we must find distal and not proximal stimuli similar. Second, among distal objects, we must find some similar and some not. So subjective similarity is relevant both to the common cause problem and to the causal chain problem. What causes the dog’s responses? We do not find the stimulation of the dog’s ears

\(^{122}\) Ibid 106, p. 196.
similar or the stimulation of our own ears similar; we find the bell ringings similar. The
distal stimulus is picked out by our inborn standards of similarity. Similarly, we find the
ringings of the bell similar and not any more distal causes of the ringing of the bell. So
both the causal chain problem and the common cause problem are solved (in part) by
appeal to what things a creature naturally find similar. This is true both in our description
of the dog being trained as well as a child learning the word “table” in ostensive language
learning.

Why, though, does it seem so natural to say the dog is responding to the bell, the
child to tables? It seems natural to us because it is natural for us. Just as the dog
and the child respond in similar ways to stimuli of a certain sort, so do we. It is we
who find it natural to group together the various salivations of the dog; and the
events in the world that we notice and group together that are causally linked to
the dog's behavior are ringings of the bell. We find the child's utterances of the
word "table" similar, and the things in the world we naturally class together that
accompany these utterances are tables….we do not observe the stimulation of
nerve endings other people and animals, and if we did we would probably find it
impossible to describe in a non-circular way what made the patterns relevantly
similar from trial to trial.123

The circularity Davidson has in mind is this: the only way we could say the proximal
stimulation of your eyes and my eyes are the same would be by reference to the object
that causes the stimulation. We simply are not built to find proximal stimuli similar; we
are built to find distal objects similar.

It is natural to wonder why, if creatures like us are built to find distal objects
similar, this would not be the end of Davidson’s account. Why do we need triangulation,
and why in particular do we need a second creature in the picture? This question is
natural only if we fail to keep in mind that the similarity at issue is subjective. That is,

123 Ibid., p. 197.
Davidson has only made the claim that creatures like us are born finding objects similar. As yet, nothing is introduced into the account to distinguish between cases in which a creature finds two things similar and they are indeed similar; and cases in which a creature finds two things similar and they are in fact not similar. This notion of the subjectivity of inborn similarity standards is the pre-conceptual analogue of Davidson’s account of beliefs. For an individual, beliefs are caused by objects, but they have no access to the causes of their belief other than the causation of other beliefs. Similarly, the creature finds distal objects similar, but a lone creature does not have access to the similarity of objects other than through more cases of finding similar.

This interpretation is contrary to the common interpretation according to which triangulation—as a three-way causal interaction—picks out one link on the causal chain that eventuates in a creature’s response. The picture is that the two causal chains cross, and where they cross the common cause of their responses is determined. It is true that Davidson claims that observing a lone creature interacting with an object cannot answer the question whether the creature is responding to proximal stimuli or distal stimuli.

For if I am right, the kind of triangulation I have described, while obviously not sufficient to establish that a creature has a concept of a particular object or kind of object, is necessary if there is to be any answer at all to the question what its concepts are concepts of. If we consider a single creature by itself, its responses, no matter how complex, cannot show that it is reacting to, or thinking about, events a certain distance away rather than, say, on its skin.\(^{124}\)

Nevertheless, for there to be an answer to this question, the creature must first have inborn similarity standards according to which distal objects are found similar. What is wanted from triangulation’s role in determining the distal stimulus is making known to

\(^{124}\) Ibid., p. 198.
another creature what objects the first creature finds similar. And this is necessary because, in order to respond to the object qua object—as something that exists independently of the creature responding—and not merely as things found similar, error must be made possible. Triangulation is introduced as an account of what is necessary for creatures to understand the difference between something being found similar and something being similar. Another way of putting this is: triangulation is an account of how creatures come to distinguish between things seeming similar and things being similar. Triangulation does this by picking out objects in a way that makes the distinction possible.

In terms of extension, what a creature responds to when it responds to things found similar according to inborn similarity standards will be just those things found similar. This group will include objects that actually are similar according to the creature’s inborn similarity standards, and also objects that are not similar according to those standards. The latter are of course mistakes, but the creature has no criterion by which to distinguish mistakes from the rest. Triangulation brings in another creature to make this distinction. If two creatures can compare, so to speak, what they each find similar with what the other finds similar, then cases of divergence can make possible a distinction between what the creatures find similar and what is similar. In order to make sense of creatures comparing what they find similar, Davidson appeals to a technical notion he introduces, namely that of similarity responses. Similarity responses can be defined as follows:
Similarity responses: responses of a creature that reveal what objects the creature takes to be similar. Similarity responses are tokens of response types—tokens that an observer takes to be of the same type.

Similarity responses make possible the sort of comparison between two (or among more) creatures that Davidson thinks is necessary for a notion of objectivity. More specifically, similarity responses make possible a notion of error. They do this by making it possible for two creatures to reveal what they find similar and so to make possible the awareness of divergence.

It is not enough that two creatures have inborn standards of similarity and that they reveal what they find similar to another creature, however. If two creatures are to be checks on each other with respect to their responses to objects, they must respond to the same objects. Their similarity responses, that is, must be to the same objects. So such creatures must share inborn similarity standards and inborn similarity responses. They must be built finding the same things similar and responding in a way that reveals this. If they were born with quite divergent similarity standards, learning and communication would be impossible.

Not only must the creatures share similarity responses—there must be overlap between their responses—but it must also be the case that their overlap in similarity responses is not perfect. Error must be possible. If the creatures always found the same objects similar, and so their similarity responses always coincided, their interaction would not add anything to their responses to objects taken alone. There would be no
distinction between what objects the creatures find similar and what objects are similar. Of course, error is possible; perceptual errors do occur.

The way in which similarity responses make available to the second creature what objects the first creature find similar is of course not direct. Triangulation does not presuppose the creatures’ responses are verbal. All that is required is that the creatures respond in a way that reveals what objects they find similar. This requires that each creature emit a response that is similar to past responses when the current object is found relevantly similar to the objects responded to in the past. In other words, each creature must make it possible for the other creature to correlate responses with objects.

So, from what has been said, such a correlation requires is three things. First, the creatures must find distal objects similar. Second, the creatures must find the same objects similar.

For this to work, it is clear that the innate similarity responses of child and teacher—what they naturally group together—must be much alike; otherwise the child will respond to what the teacher takes to be similar stimuli in ways the teacher does not find similar. A condition for being a speaker or interpreter is that there must be others enough like oneself.\(^\text{125}\)

And third, each creature must respond in ways that the other creature will find similar.

Thus the child, learning the word "table", has already in effect noted that the teacher's responses are similar (rewarding) when its own responses (utterances of the word "table") are similar. The teacher on his part is training the child to make similar responses to what he (the teacher) perceives as similar stimuli.\(^\text{126}\)

There are two cases of the last requirement. One, the shared inborn responses could be similar between the two creatures. Dogs may be born such that they bark one way in the

\(^{125}\) Ibid., p. 199.
\(^{126}\) Ibid., p. 199.
presence of threats, and another way in the presence of non-threats. Dogs could be born finding these bark types different and come to correlate the other’s barks to threats with its own barks to threats, thereby setting up a correlation. Later, in cases in which one dog barks in reaction to a threat, the other dog might take this as a sign that a threat is present. Another way creatures might respond in ways the other creature finds similar is to respond in an arbitrary, non-inborn but consistent ways to an object. In the same way in which a bell can be paired with food and so come to trigger salivation, so the arbitrary responses of the first creature could come to be correlated with an object by the second creature. Note, that while the similarity responses of a creature must be similar over time (in the eyes of the second creature), the account does not assume or require that the creatures’ responses to the same object must be similar. One creature may bark in the presence of danger while the other hops on one foot in the presence of danger. This is an analogue to what we know about radical interpretation, namely that speakers need not speak similarly to communicate—they need not speak the same language. But just as the case with this discussion of triangulation, interpretation requires consistency of response by each creature such that the same sorts of correlations can be established.

Davidson’s claim is that the sharing of similarity responses solves the two problems that arise for the shared cause thesis. The cause of a creature’s responses is determined by shared similarity responses. Discussing the case of interpretation,

Davidson writes:

What narrows down the choice of the relevant cause is what is salient for speakers and their interpreters. Salience is defined in terms of similarity of responses…. what our verbal responses pick out as 'the' cause from among the many
candidates.\textsuperscript{127}

This occurs when each creature classes together the same object in their responses:

The interpreter's verbal responses class together or identify the same objects and events that the speaker's verbal responses class together.\textsuperscript{128}

And then each creature correlates these two classes:

If the interpreter also classes together the verbal responses of the speaker, he can correlate items from two of his own classes; verbal responses of the speaker he finds similar and distal objects and events that he finds similar. To the latter he has his own verbal responses; these provide his translation or interpretation of the speaker's words.\textsuperscript{129}

The result is that a common cause is picked out:

Thus the common cause becomes the common subject matter of speaker and interpreter.\textsuperscript{130}

Notice that this is an account of how the common cause becomes the common subject matter, not that the common subject matter just is the common cause. Triangulation is not a common-cause account, it is an account of the common cause.

Involved in our picture there are now not two but three classes of events or objects the members of which are naturally found similar, by us, and by the child. The child finds tables relevantly similar; we also find tables similar; and we find each of the child's responses to tables similar. Given these three patterns of response it is possible to locate the relevant stimuli that elicit the child's responses. They are objects or events we naturally find similar (tables) which are correlated with responses of the child we find similar. It's a form of triangulation: one line goes from the child in the direction of the table, one line goes from us in the direction of the table, and the third line goes from us to the child. The relevant stimulus is where the lines from child to table and from us to table converge.\textsuperscript{131}

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., p. 61.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., p. 61.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., p. 61.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid. 106, pp. 197-198.
Notice that no mention of causation is made in this characterization of triangulation (though of course the interaction among speakers and objects are causal). Instead, all the work is done by inborn similarity standards—what we and the child find similar. Moreover, the picture is not of a common object impinging on the creatures, but rather of the shared similarity responses reaching out, as it were, and securing the same object.

Let me attempt, then, to state succinctly how I take Davidson to characterize triangulation:

*Triangulation*: the convergence of the *similarity responses* of two (or more) creatures in which both creatures *find similar* both distal stimuli (objects) and the responses of the other creature to those stimuli. As a result of noting *correlations* between what is found similar with similarity responses of the other creature also found similar, the creatures pick out the distal stimulus as *relevantly similar*.

We can now return to our discussion earlier in the chapter of the pragmatics of causal explanation. What we pick out as the cause of an event is interest relative, but in the cases we are discussing, shared similarity responses pick out the relevant cause.

We need not, then, be worried by the dependence of the concept of cause on our interests; it is our shared similarity responses, which decide what we count as a relevant cause. Science, it is true, strives to overcome the interest relativity of ordinary causality. But science may without prejudice or circularity note the facts about human nature that reflect interests: the facts about salience, attention, and

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132 I should mention that Davidson apparently holds a Russellian view on the relation between causal explanation and science. Science, as Russell argued and Davidson agrees, tries to eliminate causal explanation where possible in favor of laws. Indeed, Davidson seems at times to suggest the further claim that causal explanation has its home in action explanation and, as we have seen, in interpretation and communication. The important point is that while science picks out laws that are independent of our explanatory interests, causal explanation involves picking out a cause from among many possible causes as the cause of an event based on our explanatory interests.
tendencies to generalize in some ways rather than others.\textsuperscript{133}
The interests then to which such primitive causal explanation are relative are reflected in what we find salient—where salience is defined in terms of similarity responses—and tendencies to generalize in particular ways—our inborn standards of similarity.

As Davidson comes to describe it, triangulation has two functions. In this chapter, we have seen Davidson’s use of the notion of triangulation in accounting for the fact that the distal cause determines conceptual and linguistic content. That is the first of triangulation’s functions. The second function is making possible the concept of objective truth. I have suggested that in determining a specific distal stimulus as the one to which creatures respond, and doing so in terms of a notion of similarity, triangulation also makes possible a notion of error. It also makes possible a distinction between what is thought to be the case and what is the case. But we have not yet directly dealt with the issue of error and the concept of objective truth. My reason for doing so is that in this chapter one of my goals was to present triangulation as Davidson introduced it in the Conditions of Thought paper. One reason for doing this is to dispel the view that possibly Davidson had in mind a common cause account of content. From the beginning, Davidson had something very different in mind. The reason I have not dealt with the concept of truth is that Davidson does not introduce this function until later papers, and so his presentation of triangulation as having two functions gradually developed out of the account given in this first paper of the late period. In the Conditions of Thought paper, Davidson only in the final paragraphs briefly mentions the concept of truth as arising.

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.106, p. 61.
intersubjectively. I will therefore discuss triangulation’s function in making possible the concept of truth in the next chapter.

**Triangulation as a common cause account**

In the course of presenting my interpretation of triangulation, I have suggested that commentators have misinterpreted triangulation as a common cause account of content and have based mistaken criticisms of Davidson’s uses of triangulation on that interpretation. Of course, even if no commentator had ever given such an interpretation, it would be important to be clear that that is not what Davidson is doing. In this section, however, I want to look at one well known article in which just such an interpretation is given. I also want to suggest that the author’s questions, concerns, and criticisms of Davidson’s uses of triangulation are answered on the interpretation of triangulation presented in this chapter.

The paper I have in mind is Peter Pagin’s “Semantic Triangulation.” Pagin originally presented this paper at the Davidson conference in Karlovy Vary in September 1996. The version of the paper I discuss in this section is a revised version found online and completed in February, 2000. Pagin writes in a footnote, recent publications by Davidson and other commentators on triangulation. I am mentioning this because the revised version of the paper, like the original, gives the same common cause interpretation of triangulation. My comments in this section are not, therefore, a straw man argument of sorts, based on outdated, so to speak, interpretations of triangulation.

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135 The revised version takes into account, Pagin writes in a footnote, recent publications by Davidson and other commentators on triangulation. I am mentioning this because the revised version of the paper, like the original, gives the same common cause interpretation of triangulation. My comments in this section are not, therefore, a straw man argument of sorts, based on outdated, so to speak, interpretations of triangulation.
attributed to the fact that nowhere in his paper does he discuss the *Conditions of Thought* paper—if it were not for the fact that Davidson discusses the notion of similarity responses in most of his discussions of triangulation, including those Pagin sites.

Pagin first considers triangulation’s role in determining the distal stimulus as that to which creatures respond. He explicitly states what I have called the causal chain problem, and he suggests that triangulation is a common cause solution to this problem:

In the first place, the presence of the second person is a necessary condition of there being a unique stimulus at all… In the second place, the relation to the second person provides a way of determining what the relevant stimulus is…. The first part of the answer, then, is that the relevant stimulus is a common cause of reactions of two persons.\(^{136}\)

Given this common cause interpretation, Pagin goes on to suggest that two questions naturally arise:

First, there is a question about convergence. If an event c is a common cause of two other events, a and b, then any further event d which is a cause of c is also a common cause of a and b. So there is no such thing as the common cause. There can, however, be a unique closest common cause. There doesn’t have to be, but in case there is one, this is most plausibly what the talk of the intersection of causal lines comes down to. Anyway, I shall presently just assume that the idea of converging causal lines is clear and precise enough.\(^{137}\)

If we take Davidson’s use of the notion of triangulation as a common cause account, then it is natural as I have suggested to respond with what we have called the common cause problem. As I have suggested and as I hope was clear, Davidson’s account of triangulation begins with creatures having inborn standards of similarity according to

\(^{136}\) Ibid., p. 4.
\(^{137}\) Ibid., pp. 4-5.
which distal objects are found similar. When two creatures triangulate, they are both responding to the same object in virtue of sharing these inborn similarity standards.

Pagin suggests that even assuming we have a clear notion of converging causal lines, the common cause cannot be sufficient for being the relevant stimulus of those responses.

Secondly, there is a question about necessary and sufficient conditions of being the relevant stimulus. Clearly, being the common cause of two persons’ reactions cannot be a sufficient condition for being the relevant stimulus of those reactions. Counterexamples are too easy to come by. What more is needed, then?

Since Pagin does not give an example of the counterexamples he has in mind, I can only guess from the suggested solution he discusses next. Based on that, I assume he has in mind that while an object or event may be the common cause of the responses of two creatures, this common cause may have various aspects, and the creatures responding may be responding to different aspects of the common cause. If this is what Pagin has in mind, once again the problem is resolved on my interpretation of triangulation: the relevant aspect of the cause to which the creatures are responding is that aspect in which they find that object and other objects like it similar. This was covered in our discussion of relevant similarity.

Now, Pagin gives a solution to these problems by appealing to something he says one can find suggested in places where Davidson discusses triangulation, but nowhere does Davidson discuss this solution explicitly. What Pagin has in mind is what I discussed above as the interpreter correlating the responses of a speaker with objects responded to. Pagin is right that Davidson does not discuss repeated instances of
triangulation as determining the relevant sense in which objects are similar. But this is because standards of relevant similarity are inborn in the most basic instances of triangulation. Correlation is required to establish the relation between objects found similar and responses found similar, not to rule out various ways in which objects are similar as irrelevant similarities. The shared inborn similarity standards and responses that are elements of triangulation concern the same relevantly similar aspects of objects and events. This is required for learning to get off the ground.

Pagin argues that if repeated instances of triangulation is suggested as the way to meet the problem he has raised, triangulation turns out to be unnecessary for determining the stimulus to which a creature is responding. For if repeated responses by a creature to an object are sufficient to determine what that creature is responding to, then the responses of a lone creature would be sufficient; the presence of the second creature in triangulation is unnecessary. Pagin then suggests as a solution to this problem something Davidson claims elsewhere but Pagin obviously finds shocking: “According to Davidson, however, a second person is needed, because without her, there is no fact of the matter as to which of the first person’s responses are similar!”

He goes on:

Responses of the first person are the same or similar in virtue of being treated as such by an observer… So the second person is needed for providing a standard of similarity of the first person’s responses.

Pagin’s response is understandable given the interpretation he has provided:

This is how I understand Davidson’s first kind of triangulation. I must confess that I find it puzzling. There is one feature in this picture that I find questionable,

\[138\] Ibid., p. 6.
\[139\] Ibid., p. 6.
but which I shall touch on only briefly. It is the rather anti-realistic view that there is no such thing as similarity of responses save as from the perspective of an observer. Davidson moves in one sentence from asking for the criterion for saying that a creature treats stimuli as similar to asking for a criterion of similarity of responses, i.e. (normally) behaviour. To me the difference between these two questions is enormous.\footnote{Ibid., p. 7.}

This response completely misses Davidson’s claim that inborn standards of similarity are required if learning is to take place. In particular, if a creature is to be introduced to thought and language through ostensive learning, the child must not only find the same objects similar as the teacher, but the child must also find the responses of the teacher similar; and the teacher likewise must find both the objects ostended and the child’s responses to those objects similar.

There is another reason this response by Pagin misses its mark, and that involves the normative aspect of relevant similarity we discussed above. The essential role of the triangular relation between two creatures is to allow for a distinction between what they find similar and what is similar. Above, we made this point with respect to the distal object: overlapping standards of similarity allow for divergence and so the possibility of error. But as we will see in detail in the final chapter, Davidson claims that the same point holds for the responses of creatures engaged in triangulation, particularly as it occurs in ostensive language learning. We will see that in papers published later in his late period, Davidson argues that the adult serves as an objective check on the similarity of the responses of the child to ostended objects. At any rate, we should avoid interpreting Davidson’s claim that response similarity depends on the responses of
another creature as a way of fixing something that was lacking in his claim that the responses of two creatures are required to pick out the distal stimulus.

In a footnote, Pagin discusses the notion of similarity in greater length, giving two interpretations of Davidson’s views on similarity. I want to mention the first to reinforce the suggestion that Pagin misses entirely the distinction between what creatures find similar—a subjective notion because it lacks the possibility of error—and shared standards of similarity, which allows for an objective notion of relevant similarity because it allows for the possibility of error.

…there is, on Davidson’s view, no such thing as e.g. the similarity of two responses beyond being treated as similar by us. This is an utterly problematic view, implying e.g. that we could not be wrong about similarities.\textsuperscript{141} Pagin is correct that we cannot be wrong about similarities, but only when what we have in mind is what creatures find similar. What Pagin misses is how triangulation provides for the contrast between being found similar and being in fact similar.

Finally, I want to discuss Pagin’s charge of circularity against Davidson’s use of triangulation to specify what is necessary for thought. Since Pagin found inadequate Davidson’s arguments that the second person is required in triangulation in order to determine similarity of response, he goes on to a distinct claim Davidson makes concerning triangulation to see if in it we can discern why triangulation is necessary for thought.

The account then introduces the second person and converging causal lines, and so far so good. The next step, however, is to introduce such requirements as that

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 7.}
the observer “consciously correlates the responses of another creature with objects and events in the observer’s world”, and as knowledge of the triangular situation itself. And now it looks as if part of the difference between just reacting and reacting to specific objects or events is having knowledge not only those objects and events but also about other persons and their knowledge of the same objects or events and of oneself. On the surface, this is a clear case of invoking, in the account itself, those categories and capacities that were supposed to be accounted for. We are not much helped by being told that the difference between reacting to a particular object and just reacting consists in part in being aware of that object, even as an object of shared attention. ¹⁴²

The first thing to note is that Pagin takes the requirement of awareness, as we might call it, as a condition on picking out the distal object. But nowhere in the passages in the Conditions of Thought paper, nor in other papers as far as I know, does Davidson employ the requirement of awareness in this way. Indeed, the object must be triangulated before the creatures could become aware of triangulating the object. We should also note, once again, that Pagin only makes this suggestion because he has found Davidson’s account lacking; and that that is a result of Pagin not clearly understanding triangulation as the convergence of shared, inborn similarity responses.

Let us look at one of the final passages from the Conditions of Thought paper, where Davidson gives his first presentation in print of the requirement of awareness.

Since the bell or a table is identified only by the intersection of two (or more) sets of similarity responses (lines of thought, we might almost say), to have the concept of a table or a bell is to recognize the existence of a triangle, one apex of which is oneself, another a creature similar to oneself, and the third an object or event (table or bell) located in a space thus made common. ¹⁴³

On my interpretation, Davidson’s view is this. Triangulation is a necessary condition for concept possession and thought. Triangulation is the convergence of inborn similarity

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 8.
¹⁴³ Ibid. 106, p. 199.
responses. In particular, two creatures are born finding distal objects similar, and by
coming together and responding to the inborn similarity responses of the other, they mark
out a distal object as the object to which they are responding in such a way as to make
possible divergence in their responses. This divergence in their responses makes error
possible, which is required to have a concept of the object as an object—i.e., something
existing independently of the creature. And having such an objective understanding of
objects is part of what it is to have a concept of objectivity. Shortly before the passage
above, after completing his account of triangulation in terms of similarity responses,
Davidson writes:

Enough features are in place to give a meaning to the idea that the stimulus has an
objective location in a common space; it's a matter of two private perspectives
converging to mark a position in intersubjective space. So far, however, nothing
in this picture shows that either we, the observer, or our subjects, the dog and the
child, have the concept of the objective.\textsuperscript{144}

Two private perspectives—two creatures finding things similar—come together to
determine the object as having an objective location in a common space—they determine
the object found similar as being similar objectively, i.e., independent of being found
similar. But of course, this is not to have the concept of objectivity. Indeed, it is not yet
to have concepts at all.

At no point in this account are the creatures described in such a way as to require
assuming they have either thought or concepts. But once triangulation so described is in
place, the creatures are in a position to have concepts, since triangulation provides a
framework in which they can then come to be aware of the contrast between objects

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., p. 198.
found similar and objects that are similar. This requires, Davidson suggests in the passage, that the creatures recognize the existence of the triangle. At this point, I suspect, Davidson would claim that the awareness and the concepts arise together; he is not claiming that awareness of the triangle would precede concept formation, since such awareness would require concept possession. But this discussion of the awareness requirement is not part of his account of triangulation as a necessary condition of thought and concepts.
Chapter 4: The Concepts of Error and Objectivity

In the previous chapter we saw that triangulation has two functions: picking out the distal, shared cause as the content determining one in ostension, and making possible the concept of error. While the last chapter discussed the former function, the latter function was largely ignored. We saw the concern with content arise because of the problems of error and objectivity and the suggestion that what constrains the holism that results from Davidson’s rejection of the traditional notion of subjectivity is the role of causation in interpretation. Triangulation was introduced to address two problems that arose with the assumption that speaker and interpreter share the causes that determine the content of the speaker’s observation sentences and the thoughts they express. In the current chapter, I build on the interpretation of triangulation offered in the previous chapter and discuss triangulation’s role in making possible the concept of error.

This chapter has four sections. In the first, I discuss what Davidson claims is necessary for concept possession. We will see that concepts involve judgments or beliefs that a particular object belongs to a certain class. Since such judgments can be correct or incorrect, concepts inherit their normativity from such judgments. Moreover, with such judgments come the concepts of objectivity, truth, and error. In the second section, we look at what Davidson said early and late about error. In the early period, he claims that the concepts of belief, truth, and error are interrelated and arise in the context of...
interpretation. In the late period, Davidson locates the concept of error in the context of reason giving, and in particular the reasons we can give for our beliefs and the explanations we can give for false beliefs or errors. Having the concept of error therefore comes with the concepts of belief, truth, and objectivity, and also requires linguistic communication in order to give such reasons and explanations. In the third section, I turn to triangulation and trace Davidson’s claims concerning how triangulation makes possible the concept of objectivity. We will see that Davidson’s initial focus is on triangulation’s role in making possible determinate content and the necessity of linguistically communicating this content for the concept of objectivity. Later, Davidson comes to emphasize the way in which triangulation makes possible the concept of error, and that linguistic communication of errors is necessary for the concept of objectivity. The conclusion drawn is that triangulation is necessary for the concept of objectivity because it is necessary for both determinate content and error; and that linguistically communicating the content of conceptual content and error is necessary and sufficient for the concept of objectivity. Triangulation thus provides the framework necessary for the emergence of the interrelated set of concepts Davidson claims is necessary for thought and language. In the final section, I look again at Peter Pagin’s interpretation and criticisms of triangulation, this time in its connection with the concept of objectivity. I suggest that once again Pagin’s criticisms miss their mark, being based on an incomplete understanding of triangulation.
Concept possession

Recall my explication of triangulation in the previous chapter. Two creatures with or without concepts and thought share inborn similarity responses. In virtue of their shared similarity responses, a common cause of their responses is picked out. These inborn responses are not concepts; but because they pick out the shared object as relevantly similar, a pre-conceptual notion of normativity is possible. Similarity is normative in this sense: things found relevantly similar form a class. By picking out objects as relevantly similar, the objects are classified or grouped. Having a concept also involves classification or grouping objects, but concepts are normative for Davidson in a stronger sense: whether or not a particular object falls under a concept is an objective matter. Thus, for inborn standards of similarity to make possible concept possession, it must be possible to draw an objective distinction between objects that are and are not relevantly similar. I suggested that one function of triangulation is allowing for a distinction between being found similar and being in fact similar. It does this by making possible the partial overlap of similarity responses; disagreements allow for a distinction between objectively similar and found similar. With this as background, let me turn to the account of concept possession Davidson presents in the latter part of his career.

Davidson holds that concepts are normative, by which I mean a concept has a definite extension and applying the concept to objects not in the extension of the concept is an error. On this basis, Davidson distinguishes between concept possession and discriminative learning. One can train a rat, for example, to respond in the presence of a red light by pressing a bar. This is not enough to show the rat has a concept of red, since
there is no way of distinguishing if its pressing the bar in the presence of a purple light is a mistake or if the rat’s concept covers both red and purple. Moreover, Davidson often presents the reductio argument that, if we hold that mere discrimination suffices for concept possession, then even the simplest organisms have concepts. This, Davidson thinks, is enough to show that discrimination is not enough, since even some plants—which most would agree do not have concepts—adjust their facing to sunlight.

There are those who agree with Davidson that concepts are normative while disagreeing with him concerning simpler creatures. Naturalizers of content are often atomists with respect to concept possession. According to such accounts, a frog, for example, possesses the lone concept fly, because of certain unique causal relations between the frog and flies: an internal state of the frog represents the fly (rather than, say, black dots, to which the frog sometimes mistakenly flicks its tongue) because, for instance, either this response has the function of acquiring flies rather than black dots, a function given by learning (Fred Dretske) or evolution (Ruth Millikan); or the flicking at black dots is asymmetrically dependent on the flicking at flies (Jerry Fodor). Davidson rejects such accounts:

There are those who hold to a form of conceptual atomism, maintaining that it is possible to have the concept of a spider and no other concept (Fodor and Lepore 1992). This seems to me impossible. A creature might be genetically programmed to behave in many ways appropriate to the presence of a spider, and it might seem natural to attribute to such a creature the concept of a spider. But would such an attribution be justified? Here there is a dividing line. If having a concept is simply to discriminate objects or properties of one sort or another, then the most primitive animals have the concepts of heat, color, moisture and so on; even plants adjust to sunlight, nutrients, and competition.145

145 Davidson, D. (1999) “Interpretation: Hard in Theory, Easy in Practice.” In M. D. Caro (Ed.), Interpretations and Causes: New Perspectives on Donald Davidson’s Philosophy (pp. 31-44). Dordrecht:
Davidson’s response here is the reductio, but his reasoning involves three holistic claims. The first is that to have a concept is to have various beliefs about objects included in the concept. To have the concept of a gun requires a number of beliefs—that guns are weapons, that they shoot bullets, etc.—though with the rejection of analyticity, Davidson rejects the idea that any particular beliefs are necessary to have a concept. This content holism is contrasted with attitude holism, according to which having one particular type of attitude such as beliefs requires another, say desires. In the present case of concept possession, Davidson claims that if a creature has a concept, the creature is able to classify things, where to classify something is to believe that the object in question is a member of that class. It is here that the normativity of concepts enters, since to believe that something is of a certain class allows for the possibility of being mistaken.

But if having a concept is to place objects in a category, then a creature with concepts is capable of thought, for to place something in a category is to opine that it belongs there, and opinions are prone to error, they are true or false, and they are in part identified by their relations to other judgments.146

To have a concept rabbit, for example, is to make certain judgments, such as that is a rabbit. Having a concept requires having beliefs, therefore, and beliefs are prone to error. What is more, such judgments require an understanding that they could be mistaken: “To have a concept is to classify objects or properties or events or situations while understanding that what has been classified may not belong in the assigned class.”147

This view locates the normativity of concepts in their occurring in judgments, rather than

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146 Ibid., p. 39.
in unique causal relations to objects. Indeed, to the extent that such judgments are identified by their relations to other judgments—relations of implication and evidential support and the like—and these other judgments are concept involving, the view is that having one concept requires having many. So contrary to the naturalizers of content, creatures cannot have lone concepts, both because of the role of background beliefs in determining the content of concepts, and also because concepts inherit their normativity from their place in judgments.

Davidson claims that concepts and judgments are necessary for the concept of objectivity.

With concepts come judgements: this is edible, this poisonous, here is a cube, there a lion. Judgements, unlike mere responses, can be true or false. It is only with concepts and judgements that we can be said to have the idea of an objective world, a world that is independent of our sensations or experience.\(^\text{148}\)

And having concepts and judgments is also sufficient for having the concept of objectivity: “Finally, to judge that something falls in a class is to have the concept of objectivity, since to believe that something falls in a class is to understand that one could be mistaken, i.e., to have the concept of error.\(^\text{149}\) So the distinction between having the concept of an object and merely discriminating an object from others involves the presence of judgments. Such judgments that something falls under a class involves the awareness that one could be mistaken. This awareness requires the concept of error. And to have the concept of error is to have the concept of objectivity, of a world that is independent of one’s judgments.


\(^{149}\) Ibid., p. 160.
I suggested in the last chapter that there is an intimate relation between determining the content of a concept and making possible the normativity associated with a concept. Picking out the object that is the content of a concept, in virtue of classifying the object, makes error possible.

With concepts come beliefs, and with beliefs comes the distinction between the true and the false. To have this distinction is to have the concept of objectivity, that is, to appreciate the fact that many things are as they are however we think of them. One cannot have beliefs about most aspects of the world without grasping the fact that things may seem, look, or appear to be other than they are. All these issues arise only after beliefs have a determinate content, and it is simply unclear how the conditioning of responses, no matter how sophisticated, can bestow a content on beliefs (or sentences, for that matter), as long as it is unclear how conditioning can account for error and conceptualization.¹⁵⁰

So concept possession minimally requires two things: determinate content and the concept of error. Recall that the two functions of triangulation are picking out the cause that determines content, and making possible the concept of error. As we saw in the last chapter, these are both matters of relevant similarity. If we imagine two creatures lacking concepts engaging in triangulation, their inborn similarity responses triangulate a common cause of their responses. The creatures have, through the responses of the other, access to an independent proto-judgment, we might say, that the object triangulated is relevantly similar. This access to another’s responses as to whether or not the object is relevantly similar makes possible the distinction between finding the object similar and the object in fact being similar. Now, if we imagine the creatures come to have thought, their concepts will take as their contents the object naturally found similar. Their responses will come to be judgments that the object is of a certain sort. The distinction that triangulation made possible between seeming similar and being similar now amounts

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 145, p. 40.
to the belief or judgments that the object belongs to a class with the awareness that it might not belong to that class. So by making possible determinate content and the concept of error, triangulation provides a framework in which thought and concept possession can emerge. In the next section, I will look more closely at the concept of error and what its possession involves. In this way we will be able to better understand, in the section that follows, Davidson’s claims concerning the role of triangulation in making possible a concept of error.

The concept of error

I suggested in chapter two that during Davidson’s middle period he began to emphasize the way in which causation not only figures in interpretation but also makes possible a solution to the problem of objectivity, where that problem was understood to be generated by the principle that only a belief can serve as a reason for another belief. Davidson therefore needed a way of accounting for a concept of objectivity that does not involve comparing beliefs with their causes. The role of causation was instead brought in in interpretation and the determination of the contents of beliefs. We will see that such causal relations, as made possible by triangulation, allow for the concept of error. But before Davidson’s middle period, and so before this emphasis on the causal thesis, Davidson did not emphasize this causal determination of content. Nevertheless, he did claim that the notions of belief, truth, and error arise in the context of interpretation.
Let me begin with one of Davidson’s earliest discussions of error. In his ’75 paper “Thought and Talk,”\textsuperscript{151} Davidson argues that a creature cannot have beliefs without having the concept of belief. Since beliefs for Davidson are not internal, representational states, the concept of belief is not the concept of such representational states. The concept of belief is simply the concept of a state that has truth conditions that can be either fulfilled or not. That is, to have the concept of belief is to understand that beliefs can be true or false. “Someone cannot have a belief unless he understands the possibility of being mistaken, and this requires grasping the contrast between truth and error—true belief and false belief.”\textsuperscript{152} Davidson rejects the idea that a creature can have beliefs without understanding the distinction between true beliefs and false beliefs. His claim is that this distinction arises in the context of interpretation. Interpretation requires the distinction between true belief and false belief. The evidence in interpretation, as we saw in chapter one, is instances of holding true. A speaker holds true an observation sentence and the interpreter attributes truth conditions on the basis of the shared situation. But to hold true a sentence is just to believe the sentence is true. And since speakers are not always correct, interpreters must be prepared to attribute false beliefs. Indeed, without error, there would be no need to attribute beliefs: “But of course it cannot be assumed that speakers never have false beliefs. Error is what gives belief its point.”\textsuperscript{153}


\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., p. 170.

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., p. 168.
Because the concept of belief is necessary in the context of attributing truth and error to creatures we are interpreting, Davidson claims that the concepts of truth, belief, and error necessarily arise in the context of interpersonal communication:

If this account of radical interpretation is right, at least in broad outline, then we should acknowledge that the concepts of objective truth, and of error, necessarily emerge in the context of interpretation. The distinction between a sentence being held true and being in fact true is essential to the existence of an interpersonal system of communication, and when in individual cases there is a difference, it must be counted as error. Since the attitude of holding true is the same, whether the sentence is true or not, it corresponds directly to belief. The concept of belief thus stands ready to take up the slack between objective truth and the held true, and we come to understand it just in this connection.\(^{154}\)

We can see in this passage the same interrelation between having beliefs and having the concepts of belief, truth, and error that we saw in our discussion of concept possession. Indeed, once Davidson makes the connection between concepts and beliefs or judgments, he relies on the same sorts of arguments to make the case that having one concept requires the others. The important point to note is the conceptual relationship among the concepts of belief, truth, and error. Simply put, error is the wedge that separates belief and truth. If a creature were never in error, there would be no reason for attributing beliefs to the creature, since the creature would always be right. But if there is no reason for attributing beliefs—which, in interpretation, is holding a sentence true—then there would be no reason for attributing truth conditions to the speaker’s utterances. At best, the creature could only be said to react to or discriminate objects in its environment. For such a creature’s responses, there is no distinction between right and wrong.

\(^{154}\) Ibid., pp. 169-170.
One more point of significance is Davidson’s claim that these concepts arise in the context of interpretation. As we have seen in our discussion of “Rational Animals,” Davidson came to admit that while it is plausible that the concepts of belief, truth, and error are necessary for interpretation, he did not have an argument to show interpretation is necessary for these concepts. We will see in the next section how inborn similarity responses triangulating an object are both necessary for these concepts and provide a framework for their emergence. Next, though, I want to return to work Davidson did in the late period concerning the relation between concepts and error. This will also provide background helpful for understanding how Davidson sees triangulation making possible the concept of error and why he thinks linguistic communication is also required for this concept. We will also once again see the very close connection between concepts having determinate content and the concept of error.

In the ’99 paper “Interpretation: Hard in Theory, Easy in Practice,” Davidson writes: “The simple concept of error is necessary, but it seems likely that a mind cannot accept the idea of error without some notion of how error is to be explained.” In response to a paper by Follesdal published the same year, Davidson distinguishes between discrimination and having concepts and thought:

We are built to discriminate objects, to keep track of them, expect them to emerge from their holes or from behind trees, and in some cases to feed or eat us. But these finely tuned abilities are not the same as thinking of things as objects and events. This demands the apparatus of propositional thoughts with truth conditions and the awareness of possible error. I don’t think of the awareness of possible error as an abstract cautionary warning; it takes shape rather in the light of the reasons we have and can give for our beliefs, and therefore the explanations

155 Ibid. 145, p. 42.
we can give of specific mistakes.\textsuperscript{156}

In the previous section we saw that concept possession requires the ability to make judgments, where judgments are beliefs that things fall in a certain class. Judgments also involve awareness that error is possible. And as we have just seen, the attribution of beliefs requires the same. But perhaps what distinguishes judgments is that while one can have a belief caused by perceiving an object, thus requiring no other reasons for holding that belief, a judgment involves awareness of possible error and so the giving of reasons in favor of the judgment and possible explanations for errors.

One of Davidson’s reasons for this very strong requirement on concept possession involves the other function of triangulation, content determination. Davidson’s claim is that until creatures can come to explain errors, we cannot attribute determinate content to their concepts. As we have seen, Davidson distinguishes between having a concept and having a mere disposition to discriminate. The difference is normative; errors can occur with concepts, not with dispositions. Thus, to attribute a concept to a creature requires making this distinction between mere discrimination and concept possession with awareness of possible error. Error, however, requires distinguishing between cases of error and cases of difference of concept. If no such distinction can be made—and therefore a determinate content cannot be assigned the creature’s concept—then this is grounds for saying a creature is merely discriminating, not applying a concept. In the 2001 article “What Thought Requires,”\textsuperscript{157} Davidson considers this problem of


distinguishing a speaker’s employing a different concept and employing the same concept in error. If I respond to a horse in the way I have responded to cows in the past, this could indicate one of two things: my concept covers both horses and cows, or I mistakenly believe the horse is a cow.

The problem is just the one we have been discussing: how to account for failure to apply a concept correctly, given that what one person might count as an error may just be another person applying a different concept. Kripke’s suggestion is that if a learner fails to apply a concept (or word) as his teacher would, the learner has made a mistake. Unfortunately this does not distinguish between failure to apply a concept correctly and applying a different concept correctly—the very distinction in need of explication.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 143-144.}

As we saw in chapter two, Davidson rejects the idea that speakers must speak similarly to communicate and with that rejects accounts of concept normativity based on the idea that error occurs when a child, say, applies a concept differently than an adult. In the present case, Davidson says Kripke’s solution begs the question at issue, which is if the child uses a word differently from the adult, does the child have a different concept, or has the child erred in the application of the same concept.

Davidson suggests that there are two ways in which the distinction between error and difference of concept can be made. The first relies on relations of evidential support.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 144-145.} Relations of evidential support, which play an important role in interpreting more theoretical and less observational terms and sentences, can also help in the interpretation of observational concepts such as “cow” and “bull.” But these relations supply what Davidson characterizes as “powerful clues.” It is in fact not until errors can be explained that we can distinguish between cases of error and difference of concept.
But the large and necessary step is learning to explain errors. It is when one has learned to say or to think “That looks green, “That man seems tall,” “I thought it was an oasis,” when one has said or thought that something blue was green, or that the large man in the distance was small, or that what looked like an oasis was a mirage, that one has truly mastered the distinction between appearance and reality, between believing truly and believing falsely. It is also at this point that the distinction becomes clear between falsely thinking a bull is a cow, and simply applying the word 'cow' to both.\(^{160}\)

The conclusion of the last section was that for Davidson, determinate content and the concepts of truth, belief, and error are necessary for concept possession. Here we have a better understanding of what having the concept of error amounts to and what is required for its possession. The important point is that judgments concerning concept application involve an awareness of error, and this awareness requires the ability to explain errors. A thinker is someone who has beliefs, has reasons for those beliefs, and has reasons or explanations for false beliefs. The concept of error therefore has its home in the practice of reason giving. Moreover, one reason concept possession requires explaining error is that, in the attribution of concepts, one must distinguish error from difference of concept.

It is important to keep this connection between determinate content and error in mind in the next section, where we will look at triangulation’s role in making both possible. We should also keep in mind the necessity of linguistic communication for concept possession, since Davidson claims that for triangulation to be sufficient for concept possession and thought, the triangulators must go linguistic; they must be able to communicate the contents of their thoughts, and explain their errors, with one another.

\(^{160}\) Ibid., p. 145.
Triangulation and the concept of error

Originally, triangulation’s introduction involved the claim that intersubjective truth is necessary and sufficient for objective truth. In particular, triangulation and therefore intersubjective truth is necessary for the concept of objective truth. Later, at the start of the late period and after the introduction of the causal thesis in the middle period, Davidson reintroduced triangulation as a necessary condition on having determinate content, for triangulation was necessary to pick out the shared, distal cause in ostension. Not until later did Davidson begin to make clear how triangulation creates space for the concept of error to have application. And finally, with triangulation’s two roles of determining content and making error possible, Davidson claims in papers toward the end of the late period that only linguistic communication could make possible the communication of determinate content and error, and so make possible the corresponding concepts. In this section I will look at passages that show this progression of theses, and I discuss them in light of the interpretation of triangulation I have given so far.

The concepts of truth and objectivity appear as topics in “Rational Animals” where, as we know, Davidson introduces triangulation marking the beginning of what I consider Davidson’s second or middle period. In that article, Davidson gives more or less the same argument found in “Thought and Talk” in the early period, namely: in order to have thoughts, one must have beliefs; in order to have beliefs, one must have the concept of belief; and the only way to have this concept—the contrast between truth and belief—is via intersubjective truth, i.e., the contrast arises in the context of interpretation. Unlike the earlier paper, in “Rational Animals” Davidson admits that he does not know
how to show that the *only* way to come to the concept of objective truth is via
intersubjective truth. He instead offers triangulation as a suggestive analogy. But
neither role of triangulation is present: Davidson does not claim triangulation picks out
the distal stimulus, and he does not claim that triangulation makes error possible. Indeed,
the notion of relevant similarity in terms of which I have characterized triangulation is
absent. Instead, Davidson’s claim is that the concept of objectivity requires triangulating
an object and communicating linguistically about that object. Here is the passage:

> Our sense of objectivity is the consequence of another sort of triangulation, one
that requires two creatures. Each interacts with an object, but what gives each the
concept of the way things are objectively is the base line formed between the
creatures by language. The fact that they share a concept of truth alone makes
sense of the claim that they have beliefs, that they are able to assign objects a
place in the public world. The conclusion of these considerations is that
rationality is a social trait. Only communicators have it.\(^{161}\)

Davidson here introduces the topics that will concern him in the early part of the late
period: the notions of objectivity and in particular the role of objects and creatures
interacting with common objects. But again, Davidson does not mention triangulation’s
two functions, and in particular there is no mention of error or the concept of error.
Although we know that for Davidson the concept of error is necessary and sufficient for
having beliefs and the concept of truth, triangulation’s connection with determinate
content would await its reintroduction in the *Conditions of Thought*, and triangulation’s
connection specifically with error would appear even later. As we will see, the one
theme common to all uses and discussions of triangulation is the concept of objectivity.
And as I suggested in the first chapter, the problem of objectivity is what lies in the background to his introduction and development of the notion of triangulation.

In the last chapter, I noted that Davidson does not discuss the concept of error in “The Conditions of Thought.” And although he briefly mentions having the concept of an object and the concept of objectivity, he only hints at how triangulation might make possessing these concepts possible. His claim there is that the sharing of similarity responses marks an “objective location in a common space” and that this is a matter of “two private perspectives converging to mark a position in an intersubjective space.” This I explicated in terms of the difference between a creature finding objects similar, and two creatures finding the same object similar. Davidson claims that nothing in this picture yet shows that the creatures involved have “the concept of the objective.” All that has been shown is what is “necessary if there is to be any answer at all to the question what its concepts are concepts of,” or in other words, what is necessary if there is a determinate content.  

Davidson’s reason for saying such triangulation is not sufficient for determinate content is that the creatures must be aware of the triangulation if they are to have a concept of the object triangulated. “Unless the creatures concerned can be said to react to the interaction, there is no way they can take cognitive advantage of the three-way relation which gives content to our idea that they are reacting to one thing rather than another.” Since the object is picked out by overlapping similarity responses, to have a concept of the object the creatures must recognize the existence of the triangle. And to

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do that, the creatures must be in linguistic communication. The reason: the creatures must know of each other that they have the same object in mind, and this requires communicating the content of the concept and so propositional contents. In other words, the creatures must communicate what they find relevantly similar, and this Davidson claims requires linguistic communication:

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 has the same object in mind. But then the second 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.

So the focus of the *Conditions of Thought* paper is determinate mental content. What connects this triangulation with the triangulation of the *Rational Animals* paper is the claim that linguistic communication about a triangulated object is required for the notion of objectivity. The reason language is necessary is to make possible the communication of a determinate content.

Two years later, in “Epistemology Externalized,” Davidson makes a similar claim that triangulation is necessary for the concept of objectivity, but only linguistic communication can supply it: “the presence of two or more creatures interacting with each other and with a common environment is at best a necessary condition for such a concept.” And:

Only communication can provide the concept, for to have the concept of objectivity, the concepts of objects and events that occupy a shared world, of objects and events whose properties and existence is independent of our thought,

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163Ibid., p. 199.
requires that we are aware of the fact that we share thoughts and a world with others.\textsuperscript{164}

Also published in ‘91, Davidson’s “Three Varieties of Knowledge”\textsuperscript{165} clearly connects triangulation with the notion of objective truth, though the only mention of error occurs in a quote from A. J. Ayer. Davidson suggests that “Someone who has a belief about the world—or anything else—must grasp the concept of objective truth, of what is the case independent of what he or she thinks. We must ask, therefore, after the source of the concept of truth.”\textsuperscript{166} Davidson traces this concept to interpersonal communication, since only communication can supply a “standard of objectivity.”\textsuperscript{167} Triangulation makes its appearance in answering the question—again, as in “Rational Animals”—why an intersubjective standard should be an objective standard, and why an objective standard can only be had intersubjectively: “Until a base line has been established by communication with someone else, there is no point in saying one's own thoughts or words have a propositional content…the triangulation which is essential to thought requires that those in communication recognize that they occupy positions in a shared world.”\textsuperscript{168} Davidson’s reason for thinking that knowledge of another mind requires knowledge of the world appeals to the determination of the stimulus provided by triangulation and the necessity of being aware that the other has the same object in mind. He goes on to say, “Objectivity itself we have traced to the intersections of points of


\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., p. 209.


\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., p. 213.
view—for each person, the relation between his own reactions to the world and the reactions of others.\textsuperscript{169} This is a clear reference to shared similarity responses and the points of view involve the objects each creature find similar. What must be communicated linguistically are just those objects found similar.

Not until the 1993 article “The Third Man”\textsuperscript{170}—eleven years after “Rational Animals” and four years after “The Conditions of Thought”—does Davidson introduce triangulation specifically as a source of error. He explains that error is made possible in triangulation by the introduction of expectations concerning joint reactions. Failure of joint reactions to the same objects allows for a notion of error.

When the second person enters the scene, he or she can correlate my responses with his or her own responses; for the first time it makes sense to speak of responses being "the same," that is, relevantly similar. And for the first time, there is reason to speak of responses being responses to external objects rather than to immediate sensations; when two (or, of course, more) creatures can correlate their responses, those responses triangulate the object. It is the common cause of the responses, a cause that must have a location in a shared, interpersonal space. When we can notice that we share reactions, the possibility of a check or standard is introduced, the possibility of occasional failures of expected joint reactions and hence of error.\textsuperscript{171}

The sharing of similarity responses allows, first, for the object to be triangulated. But second, the sharing of responses allows for a standard of similarity to be applied to those responses. And so third, correlations between similar objects and similar responses cause expectations that can then be met or not. Failures of expected joint reactions allow for a notion of error. Davidson concludes that “the essential element on which the concept of

\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., p. 218.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., pp. 160-161.
an autonomous object (and world) depends [is] an intersubjective measure of error and success, of truth and falsity.” 172 So the concept of objectivity depends on two functions of triangulation, the determination of content and making possible the concept of error.

Recall from our discussion of error in the previous section that from “Thought and Talk” Davidson claimed that the notion of belief is one that arises in the context of interpretation, error driving a wedge being belief and truth. In the ’97 article “Seeing Through Language,”173 makes clear triangulation’s role in making possible a concept of error, which is to distinguish between belief and truth.

What more is there to linguistic communication and developed thought? The answer is, I think, two things that depend on the basic triangle, and emerge from it. The first is the concept of error, that is, appreciation of the distinction between belief and truth. The interactions of the triangle do not in themselves automatically generate this appreciation, as we see from the example of simple animals, but the triangle does make room for the concept of error (and hence of truth) in situations in which the correlation of reactions that have been repeatedly shared can be seen by the sharers to break down; one creature reacts in a way previously associated by both creatures with a certain sort of situation, but the other does not.174

The picture, as I see it, is this: by making possible the concept of error—making room for its application—triangulation makes possible the distinction between belief and truth.

And by making possible this distinction, triangulation makes possible the concepts of belief and truth. And with the concepts of belief, truth, and error comes the concept of objectivity.

172 Ibid., p. 165.
174 Ibid., pp. 140-141.
Although it may be clear in what way Davidson sees triangulation as making possible the concept of error, it may not be clear why he thinks triangulation is necessary for that concept. That is, one might grant that triangulation is necessary for the concept of error to arise in the context of interpretation, but still think that there are other contexts sufficient for this concept that do not involve interpretation and so triangulation. Davidson, however, maintains that triangulation is necessary simpliciter. Understanding why depends on considering carefully the role of relevant similarity. In the last chapter we saw the way in which shared similarity responses pick out what is relevantly similar about their situation. This convergence of similarity responses allows for a sense of objectivity to emerge in the difference between things found similar and things being similar. This appearance-reality distinction is necessary for beliefs and therefore concepts.

With concepts come beliefs, and with beliefs comes the distinction between the true and the false. To have this distinction is to have the concept of objectivity, that is, to appreciate the fact that many things are as they are however we think of them. One cannot have beliefs about most aspects of the world without grasping the fact that things may seem, look, or appear to be other than they are. A creature finding things similar is analogous to belief states, and its similarity responses analogous to holdings true. Just as creatures with beliefs cannot compare their beliefs with the causes of those beliefs to arrive at a concept of objectivity, so a creature lacking beliefs cannot compare objects found similar and the objects themselves to arrive at a sense of objectivity. Only the responses of a second creature can provide for the needed comparison. Only triangulation can provide a sense of objectivity with respect to the content of their responses. Triangulation is also necessary to distinguish correct from

\[175\] Ibid. 1, p. 40.
incorrect responses. As Davidson puts it discussing triangulation in “Indeterminism and Antirealism,” “Without a second person there is, as Wittgenstein powerfully suggests, no basis for a judgement that a reaction is wrong or, therefore, right.\(^{176}\) Since similarity responses just are responses of a creature that indicate what the creature takes to be similar, a lone creature—in not being able to distinguish appearance and reality—has no standard by which to judge the correctness of its own responses. Only the responses of a second creature can provide such a standard.

Perhaps one way to bring together what has been said so far in my interpretation of triangulation is in terms of Davidson’s uses of triangulation, and on which elements of the triangle Davidson is focusing with each use. First, in the last chapter, we saw triangulation’s role in making possible the notion of an object. Here, the focus is on both creatures and how their inborn similarity responses allow for them to triangulate objects found similar. Second, in this chapter we have seen how triangulation makes objectivity possible by making possible a determinate content. The focus is again on both creatures, but this time the focus is on the side of the triangle by which they are connected through the use of language. The concept of objectivity requires that the creatures communicate the determinate content made possible by triangulation. Third, triangulation makes objectivity possible by making error possible. The focus here is on one of the creatures and the correlation between the other creature and the object. Breakdowns in correlations make space for the concept of error to have application. And finally, the concept of objectivity is made possible by the communication of error. Here, the focus is on the

back line of the triangle once again. Now, in the next chapter we will see a different role of triangulation, that of providing the concept of objectivity by making linguistic normativity possible. There the focus will be on the first creature, and how the second creature’s responses to the first creature provide an objective check on the first creature’s responses.

What we have seen in this and the previous chapter is how a convergence of inborn similarity responses of two creatures on a common object provides the framework for content and error. As a result, given the intimate relations among the concepts of truth, belief, and error, triangulation provides a context in which all of these concepts can arise. Triangulation also provides for the possibility of what would be sufficient for possessing these concepts, namely linguistic communication. In the next chapter, we will look at how triangulation makes possible linguistic communication. First, though, in the next section I would like to turn again to Peter Pagin’s interpretation of triangulation and contrast my interpretation of how triangulation makes possible a concept of error with his discussion of that same topic.

**Pagin on triangulation and the objectivity of thought**

In the last chapter’s discussion of Peter Pagin’s article “Semantic Triangulation,” we looked at his interpretation of what he calls Davidson’s first triangulation, by which he means triangulation as “a way of determining relevant stimuli. In this section, I look at what he calls Davidson’s second triangulation, or triangulation’s role in “securing the objectivity of thought.”

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Before beginning, we can already note a difference between my interpretation and Pagin’s. On my interpretation, the initial function of triangulation was, to put it simply, make possible the notion of an object. It is true that this involves determining relevant stimuli, but the important role played by triangulation is making possible a distinction between objects found similar and objects objectively similar. In the present chapter we have seen the relationship between the way triangulation makes possible a concept of objects and the concept of objectivity. Davidson’s claim is that the triangulating creatures must communicate the content of their concepts—what they find similar—in order to have a concept of objectivity. So on my interpretation, triangulation’s role in determining relevant stimuli cannot be separated, as Pagin does, from its role in providing for a concept of objectivity. Moreover, I have tried to make clear the relationship between the two functions of triangulation in making possible a notion of objectivity. On the one hand, the way in which triangulation makes possible a determinate content also makes error possible. On the other hand, distinguishing error from difference of concept is required for attributing determinate content.

Pagin considers Davidson’s use of triangulation in the argument that thought requires linguistic communication. As Pagin understands it, this argument has two steps: to have beliefs one must have the concept of belief or truth; and to have the concept of truth one must communicate with others. He then considers triangulation’s role in grasping the concept of truth. His discussion, however, draws on little more than the presentation of triangulation found in “Rational Animals.” In particular, he does not consider triangulation’s two roles in providing for a concept of objectivity: making
possible determinate content and making possible a notion of error. Instead, he considers Davidson’s claim that “grasping the concept of truth requires communication with others.”

Pagin finds in Davidson two arguments in support of the claim that the concept of truth requires linguistic communication: “According to the one there is something special about coming to have the idea of truth, which requires communication, and according to the other, thinking in general requires language, which in turn requires communication.”  The first line of argument involves the sheer empirical speculation that the concept of truth would not occur to a creature unless that creature had a particular causal history. Pagin rejects this first line of argument with this brief response:

Even if the claim is empirically true, this is of no direct philosophical significance. Maybe the brain doesn’t develop properly unless the child receives impulses from interaction with adults. This would not show that grasp of the concept of truth in any philosophically interesting sense depends on social interaction, because that sense would be no different from the sense in which grasp of the concept of truth depends on the presence of oxygen.  

Surely something has gone wrong. Not only does Davidson not take himself to be making a purely empirical claim, but also he attaches considerable philosophical significance to his views. Oddly, Pagin makes this comment after supplying a passage from Davidson’s ’94 paper “The Social Aspect of Language” in which Davidson gives a pretty clear characterization of how triangulation provides for a notion of error and therefore the concept of truth. In the passage, Davidson does not, however, put things in terms of relevant similarity. Instead, he explains how the responses of two creatures to a

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178 Ibid., pp. 11-12. In this chapter, I discuss only the first of these two lines of argument. The second line of argument involves the use of triangulation in making sense of linguistic normativity, discussion of which I have left for the next chapter of the dissertation.

triangulated object make possible error in the breakdown of the sorts of correlations we have discussed: “Once the correlation is established it provides each of us with a ground for distinguishing the cases in which it fails. Failed natural inductions can now be taken as revealing a difference between getting it right and getting it wrong, going on as before, or deviating, having a grasp of the concepts of truth and falsity.”  

The point here is not the empirical one that the concept of objectivity would not occur to a lone creature. The point is the conceptual one that depends on the background provided by Davidson’s concern with the problem of objectivity. By claiming that only beliefs can support other beliefs, and that beliefs are caused by distal objects, Davidson finds himself unsure how to account for a notion of objectivity. It cannot come from comparing beliefs and world, since this results only in more beliefs. Davidson’s suggestion is that the causal relation between object and speaker that makes interpretation possible provides for a notion of objectivity. We saw in the previous chapter the way in which inborn, shared similarity responses to objects provides for a way of picking out objects as similar and so for a distinction between objects seeming similar and being similar; and in this chapter we have seen how correlations between objects found similar and responses found similar engenders in each creature expectations that can be frustrated. In such cases of failed natural inductions the distinction between finding things similar and their being similar is made possible. The point is not about how such failed natural inductions somehow influence the mind-brain in such a way as to develop a concept of objective truth; the

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point is about what makes possible an emergence the interrelated concepts of truth, objectivity, and error.

Pagin does mention in a footnote that Davidson at times indicates that the necessity of triangulation for error is a conceptual rather than empirical matter.

As regards the possibility of error Davidson sometimes presents the matter as a purely conceptual one. In (Davidson 200x, 4) he speaks of “mak[ing] space for something that can be called error”, and in (Davidson 200x, 9) of the basic triangle as needed “for anything to count as error”. But the claims are stated without argument.\footnote{Ibid., p. 12.}

Although I might normally sympathize with someone’s claim that Davidson has stated something without argument, I cannot in the present case. These references are to Davidson’s “Externalisms,” which contains an extended discussion of relevant similarity that is completely absent from Pagin’s discussion of triangulation. Indeed, we looked at passages from that paper in the previous chapter’s discussion of why triangulation is necessary both for securing content-determining causes and for making error possible. Here, I think, is the diagnosis of Pagin’s ills with respect to triangulation. Davidson suggests that it is a fact about creatures like us that we find distal objects relevantly similar; and the fact that we share such inborn standards of similarity is necessary for anything like ostensive learning to take place. Moreover, the sharing of similarity responses allows for what a lone creature cannot do, namely distinguish between those thing it finds similar and things that really are similar. This sharing of similarity responses thus makes possible distinguishing between responding to objects—i.e., discriminating objects—and responding to things as objects—as things that exist.
independently of our thought and may be different than we think of them. The same sharing of similarity responses that makes possible the concept of objects also makes possible the concept of error, where here the focus is not on the distal stimulus but rather the correlation between stimulus and response and the occasional breakdown of such correlations. The convergence of shared similarity responses that is necessary for all of this to take place just is, I maintain, triangulation.
Chapter 5: Response Similarity, Linguistic Norms, and Ostensive Learning

In this final chapter, I look at what Davidson wrote toward the end of his career about triangulation’s role in grounding linguistic norms and our concept of objectivity. I will suggest that there is a change in emphasis in Davidson’s characterization of triangulation, from concern with the relevant similarity of distal stimuli to the relevant similarity of creatures’ responses to those stimuli. With this change in emphasis comes a change in perspective from the second person to first person—the learner’s perspective rather than the teacher’s—and an emphasis on the importance of ostensive language learning. Late in his career, Davidson emphasizes a different way of looking at ostensive learning; rather than being a matter of passing on a language, in ostensive learning the child learns a new language, one similar to the adult’s. In light of this way of thinking about ostensive learning, Davidson is able to clearly articulate why the meaning creation thesis, discussed in chapter two, holds: why, that is, in ostensive learning, meaning is not passed on but created. The significance of the meaning creation thesis is that it grounds Davidson’s claim, also discussed in chapter two, that the reason we cannot doubt our most basic empirical beliefs is because in such cases, what causes the belief
also determines its truth conditions. We will also see what I believe is a related and significant shift in Davidson’s characterization of radical interpretation: rather than seeing the native as the speaker and the interpreter as the listener, in analogy to his characterization of communication; he comes to see the native as the adult and the interpreter as the child, in analogy to ostensive learning. The result of this shift and the changed characterization of ostensive learning is this: in interpretation, meaning is created—the interpreter learns a new language, one similar to the native’s—and so the interpreter cannot doubt the original ostensions made by the native. This characterization of interpretation provides us with a clear understanding of Davidson’s solution to both the problems of error and objectivity.

This chapter has four sections. In the first I introduce Davidson’s claim that response similarity depends on the responses of an interpreter. I suggest that with this change of emphasis comes a change of perspective, from second or third person to first person, and the addition of one more element to the triangle: the teacher’s responses to the learner. The teacher’s responses provide a criterion of responses similarity for the child. In section two, I contrast three articles, in order of publication, dealing with response similarity. In the first, Davidson claims that response similarity depends on the responses of a second creature, but he does not claim that the responses of the second creature play any role for the first creature. In the second, Davidson argues that the responses of an interpreter provide the norm for a speaker in linguistic communication, but he fails to make any connection in this regard to triangulation. In the third, Davidson brings together the elements of the first two articles and argues that the teacher’s
responses provide a criterion of response similarity for the child in ostensive language learning. In the third section, I discuss two Wittgensteinian theses that Davidson introduces late in his career: the meaning as use thesis and the no doubt thesis. According to the meaning as use thesis, in ostension a sound is given a use. According to the no doubt thesis, because ostension initially involves the non-normative association of sound and object, initial ostensions cannot be doubted. In the fourth and final section, I look at Davidson’s discussion of interpretation in terms of ostensive learning, and I suggest that in light of the meaning as use thesis and the no doubt thesis we get a clearer understanding of Davidson’s claim, discussed in chapter two, that the solution to the problem of objectivity is to be found in radical interpretation.

**Similarity of response**

In this section I want to suggest that toward the middle of Davidson’s late period—seven years after the publication of “The Conditions of Thought”—four changes of emphasis took place in Davidson’s characterization of triangulation. Three of these changes were not absolute, but rather a matter of perspective and emphasis; a fourth was the addition of a significant element. And the changes were intimately related, the last three changes occurring within the context of the first change. Briefly, they are:

1. A change in emphasis from the similarity of objects to the similarity of responses to objects.

2. A change in emphasis from primitive triangulation to ostensive learning when discussing response similarity.
3. A change of perspective from the second or third person to the first person when discussing response similarity in ostensive learning.

4. The addition of a response type when characterizing the triangulation that occurs in ostensive learning: the responses of the teacher to the responses of the learner, serving as an indication to the learner whether or not the learner’s responses are correct.

So my suggestion is that as Davidson came to emphasize response similarity, he also came to consider the role of the teacher’s responses in ostensive learning from the learner’s point of view. The reason, as I hope to make clear, is that while primitive triangulation is a basis for determinate content for both creatures equally, only in ostensive learning do the responses of the teacher come to serve as a check on whether or not the learner is correct. Only in ostensive learning does whether or not the learner is responding similarity become relevant, and only then do the responses of the teacher serve as a check on similarity. I will start by reminding ourselves of how Davidson characterized triangulation in the *Conditions of Thought* paper and then look briefly at how that characterization changed when considering the topic of response similarity.

In “The Conditions of Thought,” Davidson emphasizes triangulation’s role in determining the distal stimulus as the cause of a creature’s responses. His focus consequently is on the aspect of the triangle that determines the distal stimulus, namely

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182 Recall that primitive triangulation is that which can occur among creatures that lack thought and language. It involves two or more creatures associating responses of the other creatures found similar with objects found similar. The contrast with ostensive learning that I am emphasizing here is this: in primitive triangulation, the second creature does not respond to the first creature’s responses, but simply finds those responses similar.
the fact that the two creatures find the distal stimuli similar as revealed by their similarity responses. Of course, triangulation requires associating distal objects with the responses of another creature. As for why the creatures find the responses of the other similar over time, Davidson merely says that the creatures naturally find the responses similar.

Involved in our picture there are now not two but three classes of events or objects the members of which are naturally found similar, by us, and by the child. The child finds tables relevantly similar; we also find tables similar; and we find each of the child’s responses to tables similar. Given these three patterns of response it is possible to locate the relevant stimuli that elicit the child's responses. They are objects or events we naturally find similar (tables) which are correlated with responses of the child we find similar.  

Although this is an example of ostensive learning, notice the symmetry. If we consider either creature’s point of view, that creature finds two things similar: the object and the responses of the other creature. There is no difference from the point of view of either creature. Both associate objects with the responses of the other creature. The only thing in this description of ostensive learning to distinguish it from primitive triangulation is that the perspective of the teacher is considered and as a result Davidson does not mention the child finding the teacher’s responses similar. And although we know the child does respond in this way—triangulation requires the child find the adult’s responses similar, too—this omission is an artifact of seeing ostensive learning from the adult’s perspective. Again, this will change.

In a characterization of triangulation just a couple of years later, Davidson breaks this symmetry, according to which both the similarity of the object and of the responses of the other creature are naturally found similar. Instead, he claims that the similarity of  

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stimulus is defined in terms of similarity of response, and responses are in turn made similar by another creature finding them similar. Davidson describes a learning situation as in the passage above, but adds: “And even so, another classification is required to complete the point, for the class of relevant causes is in turn defined by similarity of responses: we group together the causes of someone's responses, verbal and otherwise, because we find the responses similar.”

He then asks what makes these the relevant similarities in response, and answers:

The answer again is obvious; it is we, because of the way we are constructed (evolution had something to do with this), who find these responses natural and easy to class together. If we did not, we would have no reason to claim that others were responding to the same objects and events (i.e. causes) that we are.

So while Davidson moves away from the symmetry of the description found in “The Conditions of Thought,” claiming that similarity of cause is defined in terms of similarity of response, his account of this similarity is still given in terms of what is found natural.

In another paper published the same year, Davidson makes the same point in terms of the second creature’s responses providing a criterion on the basis of which the first creature’s responses can be said to be similar. So even though he is moving away from the symmetry found in earlier characterizations of triangulation, he has yet to emphasize that the second creature’s responses to the first creature’s responses are the criterion—of the similarity of the first creature’s responses.

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186 “The criterion on the basis of which a creature can be said to be treating stimuli as similar, as belonging to a class, is the similarity of the creature’s responses to those stimuli; but what is the criterion of similarity of responses? This criterion cannot be derived from the creature's responses; it can only come from the responses of an observer to the responses of the creature.” Davidson, D. (1991) “Three Varieties of Knowledge.” In Davidson, D. (2001) Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective. New York: Clarendon Press, p. 212.
Indeed, there are four asymmetries that must be in place for the teacher in ostensive learning to come into play a role as criterion of responses similarity for the child:

1. Similarity of distal stimuli must be defined in terms of similarity of response.

2. The responses of the second creature must serve as the criterion of the similarity of the first creature’s responses.

3. The perspective of the first creature must be taken up.

4. The first creature must use the responses of the second creature to its own responses as a criterion of the similarity of its own responses.

Not until 1994 does Davidson put in place the last two asymmetries and take up the first person perspective concerning response similarity. In “The Social Aspect of Language” Davidson asks the question: How can I know that my responses are the same over time? His concern is that to have a notion of error, I not only must correlate your responses to objects over time, but I must also compare this correlation with my own response to the given object (type); if your response on this occasion seems to me dissimilar to your responses to the same object type in the past, but my response to the object is similar to my past responses to the object type, then the idea of error is made available. But how do I know if my response on this occasion is similar to my responses in the past? Davidson’s answer is that only your responses to my responses can serve as the objective check.

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Davidson introduces this point about the similarity of one’s own responses in Wittgensteinian terms, claiming that a lone creature cannot determine objectively—in the sense of being able to be mistaken—the similarity of its own responses, since whatever seems similar to the creature will be similar. We saw this contrast between the way things seem and the way they are in chapter three where the concern was with content determination. There I suggested that although creatures like us are born finding distal stimuli similar, only the introduction of a second creature can make for a contrast between things found similar and things being similar. In the present case, the problem is not that objects may seem similar and yet not be; the problem is that my responses to objects may seem similar and yet not be. Not that these questions are unrelated; as we have seen, similarity of objects is determined by similarity of response—shared similarity responses—and similarity of response is in turn determined by the responses of the other creature. Davidson puts this point about response similarity over time in terms of “going on as before.”

Suppose that each time I point to my nose you say 'nose'. Then you have it right; you have gone on as before. Why do your verbal reactions count as 'the same', i.e., relevantly similar? Well, I count them as relevantly similar; I find the stimulus in each case the same, and the response the same. You must also, in some primitive sense, find my pointings similar; the evidence for this is your similar responses. But there is nothing in the offing to let you tell whether or not your reactions are relevantly similar. No matter what the stimuli, your similar reactions will indicate that you found something similar in the situations; and apparently dissimilar responses to the same stimulus can equally be taken to show that you took the stimulus to be different, or that for you this is a similar response. As Wittgenstein says, by yourself you can't tell the difference between the situations seeming the same and being the same. (Wittgenstein, many commentators hold, thought this point applies only when the stimulus is private; I think it holds for all cases.)
Notice that with the change to the first person perspective—more accurately, he is the teacher, but considering what you, as learner, have to go on to make sense of the similarity of your responses—the example is ostensive language learning and not primitive triangulation. We have in place all four asymmetries in this example: stimulus similarity is defined in terms of response similarity, rather than both being merely a matter of what the other creature finds similar; the criterion of similarity of responses is in turn specified in terms of the responses of the other creature; and the first person perspective is taken up, so that the responses of the second creature serve as a criterion of responses for the first creature. Of course, this is not to say Davidson did not describe ostensive learning in terms of primitive triangulation; we just saw this in the example from “The Conditions of Thought.” My point rather is that response similarity is simply not an issue when discussing primitive triangulation, since the focus of primitive triangulation is picking out the shared, distal cause of the creature’s responses. As Davidson came to emphasize response similarity, he did so in the context of ostensive learning.

**Response similarity and linguistic norms**

In chapter two I suggested that we can see the roots of triangulation in two developments in Davidson’s middle period. First, in Davidson’s causal thesis, we see the role of causation in the determination of content. Triangulation makes this possible, we saw in chapter three, in determining the common cause of the responses of speaker and interpreter. And as we just discussed, Davidson’s characterization of triangulation in such cases is in terms of primitive triangulation. Second, in Davidson’s characterization
of communication, we see what speaker and listener must do to successfully communicate. In this section, we will see the role of the listener in providing a norm for the speech of the speaker. We will then look at how, by providing a criterion of similar response, the triangulation that occurs in ostensive learning makes this possible.

Davidson’s concern with the listener’s role in providing a norm for the speech of a speaker historically coincides with two things. First, in the middle period, Davidson published “Communication and Convention”188 in 1982, rejecting the necessity of linguistic conventions for linguistic communication. He followed this up with his account of communication in “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs”189 in 1986. In these papers we see Davidson’s characterization of communication in terms of the speaker making himself interpretable to the listener. Second, between these publications, Saul Kripke published “Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language”190 (1984) and Warren Goldfarb191 published a response to that paper. Based on an interpretation of Wittgenstein, Kripke raised the question whether or not a lone creature can be said to speak a language, where this involves following rules in the use of language. His answer was that this is impossible, since for a lone creature, a distinction could not be made between seeming to follow a rule and in fact following a rule. Kripke’s solution to this problem appeals to linguistic conventions, according to which the linguistic community provides the

resources necessary for making the distinction between following a rule and merely thinking one is following a rule. Davidson rejects this answer based on Golfarb’s paper:

Furthermore there is the question how the content, however it is determined, is recognized as the same from one occasion of utterance to another, for Kripke's answer leaves us with another question. Kripke's answer is that an agent goes on in the same way as before (that is, means what he did before, or is following the same 'rule') if he goes on as others do or would. The further question is Warren Goldfarb's: he asks, if we can't tell when a single speaker's replies constitute his going on in same way, how can we tell when the replies of one speaker are relevantly like those of another speaker (Goldfarb 1985).  

Davidson’s answer to the question of how we know that a creature has gone on as before does appeal to another creature. Davidson’s claim however is not that the creatures must go on similarly—that we must assume a similarity between the responses of different creatures—but that each creature’s responses must be similar with their past responses in the eyes of the other creature. In what follows I want to look at three papers in which Davidson discusses both his characterization of communication and his emphasis on response similarity in triangulation. I will suggest that what connects the two is this notion of going on as before.

The first time Davidson mentions having an objective check on the use of language is in the “91 article “Three Varieties of Knowledge,” published only two years after the reintroduction of triangulation in “The Conditions of Thought.” It is also, I believe, the first time Davidson mentions Wittgenstein in this regard. Whereas Kripke appeals to linguistic conventions, Davidson appeals to actual linguistic communication,

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but both appeals make essential reference to the normativity of word use. It is here that Davidson makes mention of a check on the correct use of language.

The central argument against private languages is that, unless a language is shared, there is no way to distinguish between using the language correctly and using it incorrectly; only communication with another can supply an objective check. If only communication can provide a check on the correct use of words, only communication can supply a standard of objectivity in other domains, or so I shall argue. We have no grounds for crediting a creature with the distinction between what is thought to be the case and what is the case unless the creature has the standard provided by a shared language; and without this distinction there is nothing that can clearly be called thought.¹⁹³

I should remind the reader here that my interpretation of triangulation presented in chapter three makes crucial use of this sort of distinction between what is thought to be the case and what is the case. I suggested that the distinction between a creature finding objects similar and their being similar is the primary motivation for introducing a second creature in picking out the distal stimulus. Without this distinction between the way things seem and the way they are, we cannot distinguish between what is in the extension of a concept and what, because of error, is thought to be in the extension of a concept. It is for this reason that I have characterized the role of primitive triangulation as making possible determinate or objective content.

Davidson’s current argument hinges on claims concerning criteria for response similarity. Here, one asymmetry is introduced. While in “Conditions of Thought” Davidson claims that both stimulus similarity and response similarity are equally determined by what the second creature naturally finds similar, here he claims that the criterion of stimulus similarity is response similarity, and the criterion of response

similarity is the second creature finding the responses of the first creature similar. But notice that these criteria are not said to be criteria for the creatures themselves.

Davidson’s claim is the third-person perspective claim that we cannot attribute thought to a creature without the objective standard provided by language. Indeed, later in the paper Davidson explicitly introduces themes we have seen in connection with triangulation’s role in response similarity, and yet his approach remains third person.

All creatures classify objects and aspects of the world in the sense that they treat some stimuli as more alike than others. The criterion of such classifying activity is similarity of response. Evolution and subsequent learning no doubt explain these patterns of behavior. But from what point of view can these be called patterns? The criterion on the basis of which a creature can be said to be treating stimuli as similar, as belonging to a class, is the similarity of the creatures’ responses to those stimuli; but what is the criterion of similarity of responses? This criterion cannot be derived from the creature’s responses; it can only come from the responses of an observer to the responses of the creature. And it is only when an observer consciously correlates the responses of another creature with objects and events of the observer’s world that there is any basis for saying the creature is responding to those objects or events rather than any other objects or events.\(^\text{194}\)

So while the similarity of the stimulus is defined in terms of response similarity, and response similarity in terms of the responses of another creature, the other asymmetries discussed in the previous section are absent. The first creature’s perspective is not taken up, and so the second creature’s responses do not yet serve as a criterion for that first creature as to the similarity of its own responses. Instead, the triangulation described here is not different from that described before; the only difference is a matter of emphasis. The claim Davidson is making is that a lone creature cannot be said to be responding to distal objects rather than, say, proximal stimuli. The reason is that the only way to pick out what is found similar to the creature is if another creature, sharing inborn

\(^{194}\) Ibid., p. 212.
standards of similarity and similarity responses, correlates the responses of the creature with objects the observer find similar. This is not enough to make the claim that the observed creature’s responses have a determinate object; Davidson’s claim is merely that the observer is necessary if those responses are to have a determinate object at all.

Only one year later in the paper “The Second Person” Davidson introduces two themes. First, he introduces the notion of “going on as before,” or using a word or phrase consistently over time. Second, he introduces the idea that the normativity of word use is provided by the speaker’s intention to be interpreted in the way intended (derived, of course, from what I have called the basic intention in connection with Davidson’s account of communication in chapter two). Oddly, however, although “going on in the same way” is just another way of saying the responses of the speaker are the same over time, Davidson nowhere in this article discusses triangulation’s role in making sense of such similarity. Instead, he presents triangulation as part of a separate argument, found at the end of the article, for the thesis that thought requires language.

Davidson’s topic in “The Second Person” is what role the second person plays in thought and language, and in particular why the second person is necessary for thought and language. More specifically, why is a listener necessary for the speaker to speak a language. In the background is Saul Kripke’s interpretation of Wittgenstein’s arguments concerning rule-following introduced above. The arguments involve the norms associated with meaning. To use a word correctly is to follow the rule for its use. But such rules are not descriptive, they are normative; the rules do not say how speakers do

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use a word, but how speakers *ought* to use a word. Kripke argues that speaker
dispositions cannot account for such normativity—since *ought* would collapse into *do*—
and so only shared linguistic rules or conventions can provide for a notion of normativity.
Davidson, as we have seen, rejects any central role for conventions in meaning. In “The
Second Person” Davidson gives his own account of such normativity.

Davidson’s account of normativity is an account of what it is to *go on similarly*—
be consistent—in one’s use of language. There are two ways that Davidson puts this
notion of going on: from the second person perspective, he asks how the interpreter can
know what language a speaker is speaking in terms of forming correct expectations
concerning how the speaker *will go on*; from the first person perspective, he asks how the
speaker can know he has *gone on as before*. Taking the perspective of the interpreter,
Davidson asks the question: How can a person be said to speak a specific language, i.e.,
one language rather than another?

The problem can be stated in a temporal mode, and addressed to an interpreter. If
you (the interpreter) do not know how a speaker is going to go on, you do not
know what language she speaks, no matter how
much she has said up until now.\(^\text{196}\)

To say how a speaker will go on is necessary if one is to claim the speaker speaks one
language rather than another. This is clearly seen if we think about radical interpretation,
in which case one has no knowledge of how the speaker has gone on in the past, but on
the basis of observation can begin to predict how the speaker will go on in the future.
The point was made by Kripke in terms of following rules: to say what language
someone is speaking requires saying what rules they are following, which determines

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\(^{196}\) Ibid., p. 110.
how they should speak. Considering the problem framed above, Davidson continues:

“The longer we interpret a speaker with apparent success as speaking a particular language, the greater our legitimate confidence that the speaker is speaking that language—that is, that she will continue to be interpretable as speaking that language.”197 Davidson’s answer to the question—how the interpreter knows what language the speaker is speaking—involves expectations: the speaker’s own dispositions to go on in a certain way cause the listener to form expectations concerning how the speaker will go on. “Our dispositions to interpret and a speaker’s dispositions to go on in certain ways are not shadowy or mysterious: they are real features of brains and muscles.”198 Davidson’s claim is that interpreting someone is a matter of expectation formation, in particular the formation of expectations about how someone will go on: “The point of the answer is that there are not two questions, one about reasons for believing a speaker is speaking one language rather than another, and a second question about how we naturally form expectations; the first question is simply a case of the second.”199 Although Davidson does not discuss triangulation in this connection, from what we know about triangulation, we know what is involved in naturally forming expectations concerning the responses of other creatures to shared objects: what makes this possible are shared inborn similarity responses. We have seen the way in which objects found similar and responses found similar are correlated in triangulation, and the way in which breakdowns in such correlations make room for a notion of error. Davidson does not yet make this background explicit, however.

197 Ibid., p. 111.
198 Ibid., p. 111.
199 Ibid., p. 111.
Norms enter in communication for Davidson with the introduction of speaker intentions. Against the background of the account of interpreter expectations just provided, Davidson claims that the speaker’s intention to be interpreted in a particular way—what I called in chapter two the basic intention—provides for the wanted normativity. For if the speaker wishes to be interpreted correctly—as speaking one language rather than another—the speaker must cause the interpreter to form the correct expectations. Indeed, the interpreter must know the speaker’s intention: “There is another aspect of interpretation, however, that is essential to our concerns: an interpreter (correctly) interprets an utterance of a speaker only if he knows that the speaker intends the interpreter to assign certain truth conditions to his (the speaker’s) utterance.”

This particular intention provides Davidson with a notion of normativity and therefore his own solution to Kripke’s problem.

The presence of intentions is important, since it gives content to an attribution of error by allowing for the possibility of a discrepancy between intention and accomplishment. Intention, like belief and expectation, does not require attention or reflection, and intentions are not usually arrived at by conscious reasoning. Intentions are not normally attended by any special feelings, nor is our knowledge of our own intentions arrived at (usually) by inference or resort to observation. Yet intention has an indefinitely large scope, for intentions depend on the belief that one can do what one intends, and this requires that one believe nothing will prevent the intended action. Thus intention would seem to have just the properties needed to make sense of the idea that a speaker has failed to go on as before.

The original problem, recall, was this: what determines how I should “go on” so as to correctly use language? The answer involves the two elements just discussed. On the one hand, the interpreter naturally forms expectations about how the speaker will go on, and so what language the speaker is speaking. On the other hand, the speaker intends to

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200 Ibid., pp. 111-112.
201 Ibid., p. 112.
be interpreted in a certain way, which in this instance means: the speaker intends the interpreter to expect the speaker to go on in a certain way. The speaker fails in this intention if the interpreter forms expectations contrary to the speaker’s intention: the speaker intends the interpreter to expect the speaker to go on one way, but the interpreter comes to expect the speaker to go on in a different way. In such a case, the speaker has made a mistake. So how should the speaker go on? The speaker should go on so as to be interpreted as going on as the speaker intends to be interpreted as going on. “The answer is that the intention of the speaker to be interpreted in a certain way provides the ‘norm’; the speaker falls short of his intention if he fails to speak in such a way as to be understood as he intended.”

If this picture is correct, Davidson has answered the question he began with, namely why the second person is necessary for speaking a language. His answer is that “without an interpreter no substance can be given to the claim that the speaker has gone wrong—that he has failed to go on in the same way.”

Davidson concludes that the “distinction between thinking one means something and actually meaning it can be made in terms of the success of the speaker’s intention to be interpreted in a certain way.”

We already have at hand the resources necessary to say in what way triangulation makes this picture of communication possible. Indeed, given the dependence of relevant similarity on the inborn similarity responses of creatures, it is easy to see why Davidson would think triangulation is necessary for the sort of normativity he is discussing. However, in the current paper he claims only that on this picture of communication the

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202 Ibid., p. 116.
203 Ibid., p. 116.
204 Ibid., p. 117.
presence of the second person is necessary. There may be, that is, other accounts of normativity according to which the second person is not necessary. Davidson instead provides the sketch of triangulation given in the *Conditions of Thought* paper, and so triangulation’s role in making possible determinate content, as a reason for thinking a second creature is necessary in an absolute sense.

Two years after the publication of “Three Varieties of Knowledge,” Davidson brings together the points about the normativity of language and triangulation’s role in response similarity in “The Social Aspect of Language.” Davidson there argues against the necessity of shared linguistic conventions for linguistic communication. But of course conventions are suggested as a way of making sense of linguistic normativity, and Davidson accepts that giving an account of normativity is essential: “I accept the fundamental importance of the question: an adequate account of meaning must provide a test of what it is to go on in the same way, that is, to continue to speak as one has previously spoken.” He then admits that, “I have given no answer to the question what it is to go on as before. As a corollary, neither have I given any reason to think meaning is an essentially social phenomenon.” It is here that Davidson takes up the first person perspective in the context of ostensive learning and connects the notion of going on the same with the notion of relevant similarity.

205 Ibid., p. 117.
206 In other words, Davidson has given a set of conditions sufficient for linguistic normativity, and relative to that set of conditions the second person is necessary; he has not given an argument that rules out the possibility of another set of conditions that are sufficient for linguistic normativity relative to which the second person is not necessary.
208 Ibid., p. 123.
Suppose that each time I point to my nose you say 'nose'. Then you have it right; you have gone on as before. Why do your verbal reactions count as 'the same', i.e., relevantly similar? Well, I count them as relevantly similar; I find the stimulus in each case the same, and the response the same.210

Here we have the question that triangulation was introduced to answer: Why do things count as relevantly similar? Recall that when Davidson originally reintroduced triangulation, he claimed that similarity responses are required for saying two classes of things are the same: distal stimuli and responses to those stimuli. His claim was that in both cases inborn similarity responses determine what is grouped as similar. Here, Davidson’s focus is on the second class, the responses of creatures made to stimuli, and he is claiming that what make the verbal responses of the leaner relevantly similar are the responses of the teacher. But he goes further, considering the first person’s point of view, and asks how the speaker knows whether or not the speaker’s own responses are relevantly similar.

But there is nothing in the offing to let you tell whether or not your reactions are relevantly similar. No matter what the stimuli, your similar reactions will indicate that you found something similar in the situations; and apparently dissimilar responses to the same stimulus can equally be taken to show that you took the stimulus to be different, or that for you this is a similar response. As Wittgenstein says, by yourself you can't tell the difference between the situations seeming the same and being the same.211

So, continuing with Davidson’s example, suppose you see me point to my nose and you say “snose.” From my perspective, I must decide if you think I am pointing to my snose rather than my nose—where snoses are the class comprised of noses and some other class of things—or if you think “snose” and “nose” are the same. From your perspective alone, there is no way to distinguish the stimuli being the same and merely seeming the same.

210 Ibid., p. 124.
211 Ibid., p. 124.
As we have seen, determining stimulus similarity is the role of triangulating with another creature. Davidson’s claim here is that the same goes for your own responses: on your own, there would be no way to distinguish responding similarly from thinking one is responding similarly. Only my responses to your utterance of “snose” can tell you if “snose” and “nose” are similar or not. The teacher, therefore, provides the criterion of responses similarity for the learner.\textsuperscript{212}

\textbf{Two Wittgensteinian theses}

Beginning in ‘97, Davidson introduced a Wittgensteinian thesis that I will call the no doubt thesis: at the beginning of ostensive learning, the learner cannot question or doubt the teacher’s ostensions.\textsuperscript{213} Two years later Davidson introduces a second Wittgensteinian thesis, that meaning is use. These two theses serve to explain why from the primacy of ostension and the rejection of conventions it follows that meaning and content are created in the process of ostension; and also why Davidson claims that one cannot be generally mistaken in one’s beliefs about the world.

\textsuperscript{212} It might be objected that the teacher’s responses to the child’s responses must themselves form a class, and that if the responses of the child are in turn appealed to, a vicious regress is generated. Indeed, Davidson at one point seems to acknowledge this. I am not so sure, however. Given the role of the teacher in providing feedback to the child as to whether or not the child is going on as before, it is not clear why a need would arise to give a further objective check on the teacher’s responses; in other words, the child’s inborn similarity standards will determine what responses of the teacher seem similar or not, and I am not sure why we need be concerned to make room here for a contrast between seeming similar and being similar. Moreover, in typical cases of ostensive language learning—thought of as a case of operant conditioning—the teacher’s responses need only indicate to the child that the child is going on the same. The responses of the adult in such instances are likely the same only in being reinforcing: the adult could pat the child on the head, or say “good boy,” or give the child a cookie, and so on. And presumably in more sophisticated forms of communication what indicates to the speaker that he or she has gone on the same or not is successful communication and the achievement of non-linguistic goals.\textsuperscript{213} Davidson does not identify this thesis as Wittgensteinian until 1999.
I want to suggest that understanding why these two theses hold depends upon making a distinction between two ways of viewing ostensive learning. One way—the natural way—is to imagine the child learning a preexisting language, either that of the teacher or the teacher’s language community. Another way is to imagine the child learning a new language, one that is similar to the adult’s language and so allows for communication. If we imagine the former, the object ostended provides the evidence for a preexisting practice. If we imagine the latter, the object ostended is essential in being the content of the newly learned bit of language. This difference is important because only on the latter view—Davidson’s view—are objects essential to thought and meaning. I will suggest that this view is essential to understanding Davidson’s solution to the problem of objectivity.

Davidson’s introduction of the no doubt thesis occurs in the context of rejecting linguistic conventions. His alternative to the view that in ostension the child is learning a language constituted by linguistic conventions is the view that I have called the meaning creation thesis, namely that in ostension meaning is not passed on but created. From the meaning creation thesis follows the no doubt thesis:

At the start, there could be no point in the learner questioning the correctness of the teacher's ostensions. The learner may or may not be learning how others in some linguistic community speak, but the learner can discover this only later. In the private lesson, a meaning is being bestowed on words quite apart from any use those words may have at other times and with other people. If we think of ostension only as the teaching of a socially viable meaning we miss the essential lesson, which is that for the learner ostension is not learning something already there. The learner is in at a meaning baptism.214

While this passage makes clear the sense in which ostensive learning is not the passing on of a socially viable meaning, in claiming that the learner cannot doubt the teacher’s ostensions Davidson seems to be suggesting that the meaning bestowed in this process is the teacher’s meaning. Certainly if ostension does not involve learning the linguistic community’s practice, then the child cannot doubt the teacher’s ostensions in the sense of wondering if the teacher is getting it right from the language community’s perspective. But it is still conceivable that the teacher is failing to follow his own practice on this occasion. This passage seems to leave open the possibility that the learner is learning a socially viable meaning, where the society has only one member—the teacher. However, if this were correct, the object would serve as evidence for a preexisting practice, albeit a practice of one. This view would not accord with the claim that in ostension a meaning is being created. We need some reason for thinking the teacher is not teaching his own language to the child. This reason is given in the context of the second Wittgensteinian thesis, the thesis that meaning is use, and in particular the sense in which meaning is use.

In ’99 Davidson introduces the Wittgensteinian thesis that meaning is use. Davidson says that he learned this not from Wittgenstein, but from Quine—what was discussed in chapter two as the public nature of meaning thesis, namely that whatever there is to meaning is open to an appropriately placed and equipped observer. Davidson suggests that this Wittgensteinian thesis has been misappropriated by those who would claim that just any use is relevant to meaning. Davidson’s interpretation of use is narrower and involves the use that is bestowed on language in the process of

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ostension. He also suggests that the meaning as use thesis has been unappreciated “by those who treat Wittgenstein’s slogan as gesturing at a way of discovering a meaning already embedded in an expression.”\(^{216}\) In the context of ostensive learning, the mistake would be to take ostension as passing on a preexisting meaning rather than as a process of meaning creation: “What wants emphasizing is not that use points the way to preexisting meanings, but that it creates, and so constitutes, meaning.”\(^{217}\) This use as meaning thesis is therefore what we have called the meaning creation thesis, but I will suggest that the sense in which meaning is use is more refined than anything Davidson presents in his earlier papers.

The same year, in the context of discussing skepticism, Davidson is clearer about the sense in which meaning is use. Davidson begins with the a statement of the no doubt thesis:

> Can both interpreter and informant be mistaken regularly? From the start? No; as Wittgenstein points out, the interpreter (learner) is not in a position to doubt the ostensions he observes.\(^{218}\)

Again, that the learner cannot doubt the ostensions he observes is consistent with a meaning being created and a meaning being passed on. But Davidson claims this no doubt thesis follows from the fact that meaning is created in ostension. And here he connects the creation of meaning with the meaning as use thesis. Understanding the connection depends on the notion of use Davidson has in mind. For the learner, “the new sentence is being given a content. For him, whatever is seen or thought to be ostended is

\(^{216}\) Ibid., p. 80.

\(^{217}\) Ibid., p. 80.

the only content he has to work with, though further contexts can reinforce or modify this content.”\textsuperscript{219} The reason “At the start the learner does not register anything more than an association between object or situation and sound or gesture. The value of the association is supplied by the teacher or the environment in the form of reward.”\textsuperscript{220} The sense in which Davidson is endorsing a use theory of meaning is just that at the beginning of ostensive learning, a use is given not to a word but to a sound.

In the beginning there is not a word but a sound being given a use. The teacher sees the learner as picking up a bit of language with a meaning already there; the learner has no idea of prior meaning or use: for the learner, what was meaningless before now takes on significance. In the early stage of ostensive learning, error has no point for the learner, for there is nothing for him to be wrong about, and where error has no point, there is not a concept or thought.\textsuperscript{221}

I would suggest that this notion of use is perhaps one of the most important results of considering ostensive learning from the child’s point of view. Initially, the child only hears a sound and sees an object. In the context of ostension, this sound is given a use, but the initial ostension cannot be doubted because there is nothing to doubt. Doubt would only make sense if error made sense, but as we know from our discussions of triangulation, only in the context of triangulation does error make sense. The way to understand Davidson’s claim, I suggest, is that at the beginning of triangulation, error is not possible. Triangulation is a process that involves making associations, and so these associations must come first:

I spoke just now of learning words and concepts; but something else must come first: simple conditioning of sounds to sights. “The origin and the primitive form

\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., p. 165.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., p. 14.
of the language game is a reaction; only from this can more complicated forms
grow. Language—I want to say—is a refinement. "In the beginning was the
deed".\footnote{Ibid., p. 14.}

We have already seen the sense in which error arises for Davidson: creatures engaging in
triangulation associated objects found similar with responses found similar. Failed
natural inductions, as Davidson sometimes puts it, then allow for a notion of error. In the
previous section, we saw that in the case of ostensive language learning, the adult’s
responses provide the criterion of similarity, and so of going on the same, for the child.
But ostensive learning begins with an ostension, and the issue that concerns us is the role
of that initial ostension. Davidson’s claim is that from the perspective of the child, the
teacher’s initial ostension is not part of a language game; it is instead the basis for the
game that is about to start. Only once the child begins to respond to the object with
sounds of its own does the question of error and so doubt arise.

This remark of Wittgenstein's is in the same vein as his remark that 'The basic
form of our game must be one in which there is no such thing as doubt’. Once one
has mastered a concept, or words that express it, one can always doubt whether it
applies in a given case. But one cannot doubt the application from the start.\footnote{Ibid., p. 14.}

More specifically in terms of triangulation, the view seems to be this: the teacher points
to an object and utters a sound; the object belongs to two classes: objects found similar by
the teacher, and objects found similar by the child. Thus far, there is no distinction
between how things seem and how they are; that distinction can only come later, once the
initial class of objects found similar is established. Next, the child responds, let us
assume, to a different object the child finds similar. If the teacher finds the current object
similar to the previous one, as well as the child’s response similar to the previous one, the
teacher reinforces the response, perhaps by making a sound the child finds similar to the sound of the original ostension; if the teacher finds either the object or child’s response to be dissimilar, the teacher fails to reinforce or extinguishes the response, again perhaps by making a sound dissimilar to that made in the original ostension. The original ostension therefore cannot be doubted; it is playing the role of the meter stick, so to speak. The original ostension is the standard against which later responses are measured.

Here is a way of putting this central point: from the learner's point of view, the word—the sound—is being endowed with a meaning. This is why doubt makes no sense at the start. The first examples, the first things ostended, must, from the learner's point of view, belong to the application of the expression….From the learner's point of view, any mistakes or doubts must come later.²²⁴

Of course, not all words express concepts that correspond to our natural, inborn standards of similarity. It is therefore instructive to ask what this account implies about the following case of ostension: the teacher points to a dog and says “quadruped.” It is likely that the result will be a child that says “quadruped”—or something similar—in the presence of and only of dogs. Indeed, on Davidson’s account as I understand it, this sound will come to mean whatever the inborn similarity standards of the child take to be similar to the originally ostended object. So, when the child says, in the presence of a dog, “quadruped!!!”, we should understand this to mean there is a dog present. It is in this sense that the child is not learning the adult’s language, but instead is learning a new language: “The question what others besides the learner, even his teacher, means by the sound is irrelevant; the sound has been given a meaning by the learning process itself, and we will misinterpret the learner if we assume that for him it has any meaning not

connected with that process." Of course, the normal practice of ostensive learning involves teachers reinforcing responses similar to the teacher’s in the presence of objects grouped by the teacher’s concepts. In cases where the child deviates, we might say something like: “oh, she means bottle by ‘baba’” and continue to give the child bottles in response; or “oh, she means dogs by ‘quadruped’” and the family begin joking that Rover is “the family quadruped.” Eventually, though, deviations from the norm are weeded out. Nevertheless, Davidson’s view is that this is not a process of the child gradually coming to speak the language of the teacher, but rather the child developing a language of its own that gradually comes to resemble that of the adult—and others in the community—and so facilitates communication. The role of the adult is not that of passing on preexisting meanings. The role of the adult is providing the normative check that allows the child to develop a language of its own.

**Radical interpretation, meaning creation, and objectivity**

It will be recalled from chapter two that Davidson made two claims concerning the problem of objectivity. First, concerning the causal relation which, according to the causal thesis, determines the meaning of sentences held true: the interpreter’s taking into account this causal relation is the source of our sense of objectivity. Second, that understanding the source of our concept of objectivity will provide us with reason to think our beliefs are in the main true. In this section I want to look at what Davidson has to say about radical interpretation in light of what we have seen in this chapter and suggest how we can understand these two claims concerning objectivity.

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225 Ibid., p. 15.
Davidson has written that a change in his thinking occurred when the lesson of ostensive learning finally sank in. He never really explains what that change was, but I will suggest one now concerning his view of radical interpretation. We have seen in our discussion of Davidson’s characterization of communication that the norm in communication is provided by the interaction between the intention of the speaker to go on in a certain way, and the criterion of success provided by the listener. In this context, Davidson uses the words “interpreter” and “listener” interchangeably: the listener or interpreter is interpreting the speaker, and so the listener or interpreter provides the criterion of going on as before or similarity of response for the speaker. So we have (where the arrow indicates providing a check on response similarity):

Speaker/native

\[
\uparrow
\]

Listener/interpreter

Now consider what we know about ostensive learning. The adult provides the norm of response similarity—of going on as before—for the child. So, since the adult and listener play the same role for the child and speaker, we have:

Child/speaker

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\uparrow
\]

Adult/listener

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So we should expect the following:

Child/ native

\[\uparrow\]

Adult/interpreter

But, as we will see, when Davidson considers interpretation in light of ostensive learning, he considers the interpreter to be the learner, and so the interpreter is analogous to the child. We thus get the following:

Child/interpreter

\[\uparrow\]

Adult/native

If this is right, then the following should hold:

Child/interpreter/speaker

\[\uparrow\]

Adult/native/listener

In other words, in interpretation, the interpreter is the speaker, and the native is the listener. I will soon present passages in which Davidson treats the interpreter as the speaker, but let me first consider further why this view might be surprising.
Consider the case of normal linguistic communication. Of course both members of the dyad will be both speaker and listener. But depending on which perspective is taken, the role of the other will change. On Davidson’s account of communication, the listener provides the norm for the speaker; the speaker attempts to go on as before in the eyes of the listener, and the listener provides the criterion of success. Now, a natural way of thinking of interpretation is that the native is the speaker. The native tries to get the interpreter to assign an intended interpretation to his words, and if the interpreter does so, the native has successfully communicated with the interpreter. So on this view, the interpreter provides the criterion of success for the native’s intention. In terms of going on as before, the native tries to go on as before, and intends the interpreter to form the corresponding expectations. If the interpreter forms the correct expectations, then the native has succeeded in going on as before.

However, if this is right, then the interpreter plays a role analogous to the adult in ostensive learning; just as the adult provides the norm for the child, the interpreter provides the norm for the native. However, when Davidson discusses interpretation in the light of his view of ostensive learning, he treats the interpreter as analogous to the child, and the native as analogous to the adult. In particular, the native utters an observation sentence in response to an object. This is analogous to the adult pointing to an object and uttering a word in ostensive learning. The interpreter, then, imitates the native, and the native then becomes the source of the criterion of response similarity for the interpreter. Davidson’s view is that in interpretation, the interpreter is learning a newly created language, one modeled on that of the native and similar to it. The native is
therefore analogous to the adult in ostensive learning. On this picture, the interpreter, just as the child and speaker, is attempting to communicate; the interpreter is attempting to get the native to form the correct expectations about how the interpreter will go on. And to the extent that the interpreter goes on the same in the eyes of the native, the interpreter is correct. It is this shift that I suggest is apparent in Davidson’s latest publications and is a result of thinking about interpretation in light of triangulation as a model of ostensive learning. Let me turn now to the passages where this shift is apparent.

In Davidson’s ’02 paper “Quine’s Externalism,” Davidson introduces this view according to which interpretation is analogous to ostensive language learning. Considering the usual differences seen between interpretation and ostensive language learning, Davidson writes:

This difference is mainly illusory. All the translator knows about the use to which the alien is putting his sentence the translator has picked up from observed causal interactions between the world and the alien. We have been thinking of the translator then asking himself what sentence of his own language he would use in the same situations. But we do better to say he is acquiring the alien’s sentence. For him, this new sentence has been baptized, given a content, by the situations in which he has been working at translation. If the interpreter were to use the sentence himself, it would mean just what these situations have contributed to it (plus, of course, whatever has been contributed by observed relations to other sentences, etc.), but no more.227

The material in this passage should be quite familiar by now. We see here the role of objects in ostension and the claim that the meaning of the acquired sentence is determined by the ostensive situation and nothing more. Moreover, in ostension the native is not passing on an old meaning—that of the community or of the native—but

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instead the interpreter is learning a new language. This new language, in virtue of the
shared object, will be similar enough to the native’s language to serve for communication,
however: “…the two users’ dispositions to use their sentences will be nearly enough
alike to serve. The postulation of a ‘meaning’ shared by alien and translator is neither
needed nor justified by this procedure.”

As we have seen, the fact that ostension begins with a gesture or deed makes the
objects constitutive of the meaning of the newly baptized sentence. The object is not
therefore evidence for some preexisting meaning:

The point is easily missed because of our natural way of thinking about
translation. We are told it preserves meaning, and so we summon up visions of
meanings learned and then shared. But there is nothing shared except the common
world of objects and events about which we communicate. We think of ostension
and other forms of inculcating language as providing no more than evidence for
meanings. But in fact they provide the communicative charge our words have.
The process of acquisition confers meaning; it doesn’t identify a preexisting
meaning.

Moreover, because of the central role of the initial gesture and object, we have seen that
the no doubt thesis follows, according to which the learner cannot doubt initial ostensions.
This holds too with ostension as it occurs in interpretation:

…it should be clear that at the primitive level of assents to observation sentences,
there is no way most assents can fail to be mostly correct. Since the situations that
typically trigger such assents constitute the contents of those assents, they also
constitute the contents of the utterances to which assent is won. Wittgenstein
makes a point of the fact that the learner of a new word through ostension is not in
a position to doubt that the word (embedded in a sentence, pronounced “Dog” or
“That’s a dog”) truly applies in those situations.

228 Ibid., p. 288.
229 Ibid., p. 288.
We saw in chapter two the central place of the causal thesis in Davidson’s work from the middle period on. According to that thesis, the causes of speaker’s holding true observation sentences determine the content of those sentences. We can now see more clearly why this is so. On the present view of interpretation as analogous to ostensive learning, the speaker’s holding true an observation sentence is analogous to the teacher gesturing to an object. The object will therefore constitute the meaning of the sentence the interpreter learns from the speaker.

Davidson’s view is therefore that both the interpreter and the child are learning a new language, not the language of the native or adult. The new language is similar to the language of the other, but it is new, meaning being created in the process of ostension.

It may seem that there is no real difference between the two pictures of language I have been trying to contrast. According to one picture, there is a social enterprise (“game”, Wittgenstein misleadingly calls it) which the learner of a first or second language learns to engage in. This is certainly how the learner, and society, consisting of teachers and parents and friends, see it. According to the alternative picture, the learner is acquiring a new language more or less closely modeled on that of others, a language that is apt to be pushed more and more nearly into socially acceptable shape by exposure.231

The important difference between the two views is that on Davidson’s view, objects are constitutive of content. Objects play an indispensible role in determining content.

The difference seems vanishingly small because in the first scenario as well as the second perfection isn’t there at the start; both stories reveal a learner usually anxious to be as much in the social swim as possible. But there is a difference, which is that only on the second story is there an indissoluble connection between words and what they are about.232

231 Ibid., p. 290.
232 Ibid., p. 290.
It is here that we have, finally, a clear understanding of the way in which the causal role of objects in interpretation can reveal something about how we come to have a concept of objectivity and also of why our beliefs should be mostly correct. The initial use given to the sound associated with an object is the standard by which later responses will be judged correct or incorrect; this is why what we believe cannot float independently of the world, and why our basic empirical judgments must for the most part be correct.
Conclusion

In this final chapter, I want to bring together several of the main ideas of this dissertation in a way that hopefully will make clear what triangulation is all about. As I wrote in the introduction, Davidson is a non-reductionist about the mind. His alternative to reductionism is emergence. His proposal, as I understand it, is to give non-intentionally specified necessary conditions for the emergence of thought. In particular, Davidson has maintained from early in his career that the concepts of belief, truth, and error are interrelated and cannot be reduced to either the non-intentional or to concepts simpler or more basic. Our understanding of these concepts comes in our understanding of their relations to one another and to the sorts of evidence we have for their application. Moreover, conceptual content requires such concepts and inherits its normative features from occurring in judgments along with possible error. Error allows for the distinction between belief and truth in interpretation and gets its grip in that context. To provide a non-reductive account of the emergence of conceptual content therefore requires a non-intentionally specifiable set of conditions that would allow for the emergence of determinate content along with the concepts of belief, truth, and error, as well as linguistic communication. The goal of this dissertation has been to explicate triangulation as just such a set of necessary conditions. Indeed, triangulation is perhaps best seen as a framework that makes possible the emergence of thought and language.
The first chapter of the dissertation traced the roots of triangulation to the debate between Davidson and Quine over the location of the stimulus that provides the interpretation of observation sentences in radical interpretation. Quine favors proximal stimulation of the sense organs because of its secure connection with verbal behavior and so the avoidance of error. While this is appropriate for his epistemic goal of accounting for how people come to have a theory of the world—all along with the reification of objects—from the paltry evidence provided by their proximal stimuli, for Davidson this starting point would not work. Davidson rejects the notion of proximal, mediating, non-conceptual evidence. Simply put, causes of beliefs are not reasons for beliefs. Beliefs exist in the space of reasons. While objects in the world cause our beliefs, Davidson rejects any foundationalist picture according to which we can compare our beliefs with their causes so as to provide evidence of reasons for those beliefs. As he stressed in the Coherence Theory paper, only beliefs can serve as evidence for beliefs. But this rejection of foundationalism led to two related problems, the problems of error and objectivity. The former is the interpretive analogue of the later, more squarely epistemic problem. The problem of error is making sense of how error or false belief can occur given the rejection of foundationalism and the resulting coherence theory of justification. The problem of objectivity concerns how to make sense of our beliefs representing the world correctly given access to nothing outside our own web of beliefs. The problems are intimately related since, for Davidson, error is wedge that separates belief and objective truth.
In chapter two we looked at the work Davidson did in his middle period, after the introduction of triangulation as an analogy suggesting why the concept of objectivity requires linguistic communication but before its reintroduction as a framework for the emergence of that concept. I suggested that two theses were of particular importance for Davidson’s later work on triangulation. The first was the causal thesis, according to which the objects that cause speakers to hold true observation sentences determine the content of those sentences. The importance of this thesis was seen in Davidson’s claim that a solution to the problem of objectivity would not be found in an account of objectivity—in the sense of comparisons of beliefs with the outside world—but rather in an account of our concept of objectivity. Davidson suggested that while a believer cannot compare his or her own beliefs with their causes, an interpreter of the speech of that believer must take into account the causes of the speaker’s holding sentences true. In light of this and the causal thesis, an understanding of interpretation should give us an understanding of what makes possible our concept of objectivity and also why we have reason to think our beliefs are for the most part true. We saw in the last chapter the way this played out in Davidson’s final account of interpretation on the analogue of ostensive learning. A native’s ostension gives a use to a sound that then becomes the basis for the interpreter’s acquisition of a new language; as a result, the interpreter cannot doubt these initial ostensions, since there is nothing to doubt, and the object becomes constitutive of the meaning of the newly created sentence. This, and the normative check provided by the native for the interpreter’s use of the new piece of language—whether or not he is going on as before—provide for both a notion of objectivity and error. The original ostension provides the objective standard against which subsequent uses of the new piece
of language are judged. Our concept of objectivity is therefore object-involving and interpersonal.

The other thesis from the middle period relevant to triangulation was Davidson’s rejection of linguistic conventions as playing a necessary or constitutive role in linguistic meaning. With this rejection we lose any hope of making sense of error and objectivity in terms of the practices of linguistic communities. The rejection of conventions also led to Davidson proposing his own account of communication. According to that account, the norm of communication is a function of the intentions of speakers to be interpreted in the way intended, and the listener providing the speaker with some indication of the success of this intention. We saw in the last chapter of the dissertation a connection between this account and the role of triangulation in making sense of responses similarity. This connection was forged by the notion of going on as before, Davidson’s substitute for the notion of following a rule. In communication, the speaker intends to go on as before in the use of language, and the listener provides the normative check on the success of this intention. Triangulation makes this possible by providing a framework in which response similarity has an objective check.

In chapter three we saw for the first time the way in which triangulation provides for a framework in which thought and language can emerge. In contrast to those interpretations according to which triangulation is a common-cause account of content, I suggest that the common cause is picked out by triangulation. I claimed that triangulation is best understood as the convergence of shared similarity responses of two creatures on a single object. The figure below illustrates this.
Figure 1. Triangulation

The arrows within the triangle represent the inborn standards of similarity of each creature as metaphorically reaching out to an object. Because the creatures share such similarity standards, the same objects are found similar by both creatures. As a result, the object (and objects found similar) causes the similarity response of each creature—
represented by the arrows outside the triangle. Finally, by correlating objects found similar and responses of the other found similar, a distinction between objects found similar and objects that are in fact similar is made possible. This distinction is necessary for determinate content, and for distinguishing between mere discrimination and concept possession, since it makes for a distinction between things in the extension of a concept and things that seem or appear to be in the extension. In this sense, to have determinate content is also to have the concept of an object, something that exists independently of the responses of the creature.

In the next chapter we looked at what Davidson has to say about the concepts of error and objectivity and how triangulation provides a framework for their emergence. We also discussed Davidson’s reasons for claiming that that linguistic communication is also necessary for these concepts. We saw that concepts inherit their normativity from judgments in which they occur, judgments to the effect that an object in question belongs to a certain class. Such judgments require the awareness of possible error. We then saw that Davidson’s discussion of triangulation in the first part of the late period is primarily concerned with such judgments and the necessity of the linguistic communication of the content of such concepts for the concept of objectivity. We then saw Davidson’s later discussion of triangulation is concerned with the way in which triangulation makes possible error in the breakdown of correlations between objects found similar and the similarity responses of the other creature. Such breakdowns are not sufficient for the concept of error, but they do provide space for the application of a concept of error. To have this concept requires not only the awareness of error but also the ability to explain
error by means of linguistic communication. Concept possession therefore requires
language use in the giving of reasons for judgments and reasons for error. Concepts find
their home in the practice of reason giving and so resist reduction or naturalization.

In the final chapter, we looked at the way in which triangulation makes possible
linguistic communication. Here, we brought together Davidson’s characterization of
communication with triangulation as it occurs in ostensive language learning. We then
saw how reflection on ostensive learning resulted in a shift in Davidson’s view of
interpretation; the consequence is Davidson’s final account of objectivity. The figure
below illustrates the analogous way in which ostension figures in ostensive language
learning, interpretation, and linguistic communication.
Consider first ostensive language learning. The adult says a word and points to an object; this is the arrow at the top of the triangle indicating the adults old or preexisting language. This ostension cannot be doubted by the child. The inborn similarity standards shared by adult and child allow for the triangulation of the object; both find the object to belong to the same class, and the child finds the spoken word to belong to a class. The child then imitates the adult (or not), responding similarly when the child encounters objects found similar to the originally ostended object. This is the child’s new bit of language—the bottom arrow representing this correlation—and the adult provides the new language.
normative check—the arrow on the left—as to whether the child has gone on as before or is in error. The result, often enough, is that the new language of the child resembles the old language of the adult and so allows for increasingly sophisticated communication and so the emergence of language and thought.

Next, consider linguistic communication. Davidson does not consider ostension in connection with his characterization of communication, for the obvious reason that ostension does not typically occur in linguistic communication. Nevertheless, the other elements of the triangle are present in his account. According to that account, communication is successful when passing theories converge. This requires that the speaker make himself interpretable to the listener. In particular, the speaker must intend to be interpreted in a certain way; the speaker must believe that the listener will be able to recognize this intention; and the speaker must be justified in this belief. As I suggested, the connection between ostensive learning (and triangulation) and Davidson’s characterization of communication is provided by notion of going on as before. If the listener is to interpreter the speaker correctly, the listener must form correct expectations as to how the speaker will go on. The speaker, therefore, must intend to go on in a certain way, intend the listener to recognize this intention, and be justified in believing the listener recognizes this intention. We can now ask the question: in virtue of what are the responses of the speaker relevantly similar? Davidson’s answer is that the responses are similar in virtue of the responses of the other creature. That is, the responses of the speaker are similar—the speaker goes on as before—as determined by the responses of the listener. The listener therefore provides the normative check for the speaker. If we
consider the case of a malapropism, the analogy with ostensive learning becomes clearer. The speaker uses a word in an unusual way. The listener is able to infer the intended meaning given contextual clues and background knowledge. The speaker goes on in the same way in this non-standard use of the word, and the listener continues to give it the non-standard interpretation. The speaker has, in a sense, created a new language, but as long as the speaker goes on in the same way, the listener is able to assign the interpretation intended by the speaker. And whether or not the speaker has gone on in the same way is determined by the responses of the listener.

Finally, consider the case of radical interpretation. The native utters an observation sentence in the presence of an object. The interpreter imitates the utterance, and goes on to produce similar utterances in the presence of objects found similar. As in ostensive learning, though, the original pairing for the interpreter is sight and sound; what the native or the native’s community mean by such utterances is irrelevant. A sound is being given a use, and the process of ostension establishes this use. Subsequent utterances of similar sounds by the interpreter will have as their content objects relevantly similar to the object involved in the original ostension. The similarity of the interpreter’s utterances over time will be determined by the responses of the native. In this way, the interpreter has learned a new language, one modeled on the language of the native.

The significance of ostension becomes clear if we think of it as having two stages. In the first, non-normative stage, the native utters a word or phrase (a sentence) and gestures to an object. The shared similarity standards of interpreter and native pick out the same object, and the object then serves as the standard of comparison of subsequent
responses of the interpreter. For this reason, doubt in the case of the original ostension is impossible; the original pairing is a non-normative, causal association for the interpreter. In the next stage, the interpreter responds to the object with a sound similar to the utterance of the native, though this similarity is not necessary. What is necessary is that the interpreter go on as before, meaning that whatever response he makes to the object, he responds similarly to objects found similar in the future. The responses of the native then serve as a check on whether the interpreter is succeeding in going on as before. In the standard view of interpretation inherited from Quine, these responses of the native will be assent and dissent, and so the normative check on the speaker’s use of the new sentence is provided by assent and dissent by the native to the speaker’s use of the sentence. The second stage of ostension therefore introduces an element of normativity by making error possible. In this way, the interpreter comes to speak a new language of his own, but one that because it is modeled on that of the native will serve for the purposes of linguistic communication.

With this two stage view of interpretation we have Davidson’s solutions to both the problems of objectivity and error. We see with the first stage why the no doubt thesis holds. The first ostension lacks normativity and the object ostended comes to play a constitutive role in the content of what will be the interpreter’s future verbal responses. The importance of this for objectivity is that while neither native nor interpreter can compare their beliefs with what cause them, a brute causal relation between native and object grounds the content the interpreter’s responses will come to have. A standard of objectivity is therefore made possible by both the original object ostended and also the
inborn similarity responses shared by native and interpreter that determine what objects are relevantly similar to the original object. With the second stage we see how error is made possible. Relative to the original ostension, the native’s responses serve as a check on the responses of the interpreter. When the interpreter makes a mistake in the eyes of the native, the native’s response serves to indicate that the current object is not relevantly similar to the originally ostended object or that the current response is not relevantly similar to the interpreter’s past responses. Both the object and the native provide essential elements in the standard against which the interpreter’s responses are measured. This is not to say that the native could never make a mistake. The native’s view of objects and the interpreter’s responses are certainly not infallible. But what insures that it is not that case that our beliefs, though coherent as a whole, might not be true of the world is the constitutive role the world and the responses of others play in the content of our most basic thoughts and speech.
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