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Modelling Speech and Speakers: Gadamer and Davidson on dialogue, agreement, and intelligible difference

Abstract

This paper examines Gadamer's and Davidson's dialogical models of interpretation. It shows them to be comparable, but importantly dissimilar with respect to the kind of agreement they require for communication to be possible. It is argued that this difference entails different concepts of alterity: they model not only how we talk, but implicitly who we can intelligibly talk to. Another important contribution of this paper is to uncover a distinction in Gadamer between two kinds of agreement missed so far by all commentators. The final section of this paper defends a second thesis, namely that the degree of agreement required by the models is proportional to the conceptual difference it can make intelligible. Hence, the extent of graspable cultural difference is not only an empirical matter, but is entailed by our choice of model.

No consensus is likely to be reached on the formula for a philosopher's impact factor. The scales for measuring philosophical importance vary so widely with the measurer's interests, affinities and membership in philosophical traditions, that few are likely to strike an agreement. Many might concur, however, that a variable in the equation would be the degree to which a philosopher's views are brought into contact with other philosophers. It may therefore not be too controversial to state that a measure of Gadamer's impact is the frequency and relevance of his comparison with other philosophers, especially from other philosophical traditions and currents. Gadamer's role in Frankfurt school polemics, in endorsements and critiques from poststructuralists and deconstructivists, to name a few, is well-known. Less so, however, is a focus of comparison from the analytical tradition which has been gaining traction in recent decades, namely Donald Davidson's philosophy of interpretation. Indeed,

the Gadamer-Davidson encounter is for some the most promising rapprochement of the two traditions of Western philosophy, the continental and the analytic (see Braver 2011, 149; Føllesdal 2011, xii).

Within the broad orbit of philosophy of language, Hans-Georg Gadamer's and Donald Davidson's points of intersection are many and not exhaustively charted. Both develop extensive treatments of the topics of interpretation, understanding and truth, and, despite starting from incommensurable backgrounds, eventually arrive in the same intellectual neighborhood (see Davidson 1997). My focus in this paper is Gadamer's and Davidson's respective models of dialogue. I argue that their dialogical theories of communication impinge not only on what they are theories of, but determine the picture of our interlocutors: their models of speech implicitly model other speakers. I structure my paper as follows.

In the first section, I show how both Gadamer and Davidson endorse comparably similar dialogical models of communication. In the second section, I argue that both models share an important condition of possibility: agreement between the speakers. I claim, however, that the kind of agreement required is radically different: the Davidsonian model presupposes an agreement *posterior* to linguistic interaction, whereas the Gadamerian requires one *prior* to it. Finally, I argue for the first thesis of this paper: the two models entail different pictures of our conversational interlocutor. Davidson models the other as linguistically singular, Gadamer as plural. In the third section, I argue for my second thesis: the degree of agreement and semantic conformity between speakers postulated by each model is proportional to that of the conceptual and semantic difference it can make intelligible. In this section, I develop an example showing that Davidson's theory excessively restricts the context of significance making it insufficient to account for the correct interpretation of the other. I then argue that Gadamer's alternative can satisfactorily deal with the case and thus allows for more intelligible conceptual divergence between speakers. I conclude that Gadamer's model is better equipped for making sense of cultural difference than Davidson's.

1. Dialogue

Dialogue as the paradigm of linguistic understanding and communication is among the better covered aspects of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. As is well known, *Dialog* or *Gespräch* designates for him the very "structure of linguistic understanding" (1972b, 474) and, since for Gadamer understanding is essentially linguistic, "the basic model of all understanding" (1968, 116). Famously, Gadamer fashions his conception of dialogue after the example of Pla-

tonic dialectic (Gadamer 1985, 368-384)[1]. In fact, Gadamer's entire hermeneutic project is oriented to Socratic dialogue, the *elenchus* (1973, 497), which he considers paradigmatic of every dialogue (Gadamer 1985b, 370). In the following, I will assume the reader knows the Gadamerian conception of dialogue in its broad outline and will confine myself to aspects relevant for my purposes here.

The basic model of the hermeneutical situation, the dialogue, is first of all not conceived as a binary relationship between interlocutors. Its configuration is instead triadic, as it includes the two partners as well as the subject matter of the conversation, its *Sache.* Only this completes the dialogical triad. Understanding is then conceived as an agreement reached between interlocutors concerning the subject matter (Gadamer 1985, 297): its joint possession, its being held in common by the partners, is what secures understanding.

Additionally, the great insight Gadamer discovers in Platonic, and especially Socratic dialogue, is the structure of question and answer, which for him describes the essence of all hermeneutic or interpretive experience (Gadamer 1985, 373, 383). According to him, we can only ever understand an item if we understand it as an answer to a question: "no assertion is possible that cannot be understood as an answer to a question, and assertions can only be understood in this way" (1966b, 226; translation from Gadamer 2007, 84). The hermeneutical priority of the question has important consequences for the concept of meaning. If we only understand an assertion by grasping it as an answer to a question, then its meaning will be relative to the question it answers. Consequently, only by asking the right questions can we truly understand all that the other – our conversation partner, whether person or text – has to say to us. As such, question and answer are thoroughly interconnected: just as an answer is relative to a specific question, so a question can only be understood in relation to what might be an answer to it (1981b, 46). The logic of question and answer is in fact a dialectic of question and answer where they are ultimately "dissolved in the movement of understanding" (ibid., 47).

Furthermore, since an answer's meaning is relative to the question it answers, what one interlocutor means in dialogue depends on the response of the other, and vice versa. As such, what we mean depends on what others can make of what we mean and vice versa.[2] There is no such thing as a meaning-in-itself, an ideal currency exchanged between conversation partners: meaning is always

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[1] Gadamer 1985 refers to the German edition of *Truth and Method* and Gadamer 1989 to the English translation. When quoting from the latter, I give the page for both the original and the translation.

[2] See Kertscher (2002, 144-146) for a more detailed analysis of this idea in Gadamer.

relative to the interpreter (Gadamer 1985, 477). This explains why, for Gadamer, "words exist at all only in conversation" (Gadamer 1985b, 371) and language "is only fully what it can be when it takes place in dialogue" (Gadamer 1996, 128; see idem 1985, 449; 1972a, 207). The dialectic of question and answer ultimately describes the mechanism by which partners achieve a fusion of their different horizons. Only through this dialectic can we gain a common understanding of the subject matter and achieve that dialogical transformation "in which we do not remain what we were" (Gadamer 1985, 384; idem 1989, 371).

In several later essays, Davidson also elaborates on the connection between Socratic dialogue and his own thinking. He too will see in the *elenchus* a model of the only method available for arriving at an understanding of other creatures, for coming to an agreement with them on the meaning of their concepts and achieving clarity about what we mean ourselves (Davidson 1992a, 250). Elsewhere, he describes it as "a model of every successful attempt at communication" and a "microcosm of the ongoing process of language formation itself" (Davidson 1994b, 254, 248). Davidson echoes Gadamer very closely when stating that dialogue, "particularly in the form of the elenchus, provides the forum in which alone words take on meaning" (ibid., 250). In addition, what the Socratic *elenchus* models so well, for Davidson, in the way in which it leads, seemingly of its own momentum, to lexical clarification and conceptual change: it is "an event in which the meanings of words, the concepts entertained by the speakers, evolve and are clarified" (ibid., 254). New meanings and novel concepts are created through dialogical intersubjective exchanges, through the "interaction of minds in which words can be bent to new uses and ideas progressively shaped" (ibid., 255).

A fortuitous but illuminating coincidence has it that both Davidson and Gadamer use events in the smithy to illustrate the process by which dialogue allows overcoming difference. Like the blacksmith's foundry, dialogue is for Davidson a "crucible in which some of our most important words, and the concepts they express, are tested, melted down, reshaped, and given a new edge" (ibid., 258). In dialogue, speaker and hearer must adapt to each other's idiosyncrasies, they must understand their partner's words as they were intended. And whether they understand them in concert, and hence understand each other, or mean anything intelligible at all, "only the process of question and answer can reveal" (ibid., 255). This closely parallels Gadamer's description of understanding as a 'fusion of horizons' which can only be achieved through the dialogical interplay of question and answer.

Davidson would thus second Gadamer's claim that "dialogue has a transformative force" (Gadamer 1972a, 211). For Davidson, both participants poten-

tially stand to gain greater conceptual clarity through dialogue, thus not remaining as they were (Davidson 1994b, 254). Another core principle of Davidson's view is that meaning as an abstract entity has "no demonstrated use" (Davidson 1967, 21) in the study of language. Davidson is thus in agreement with Gadamer that "people mean what others can take them to mean; to learn what we mean *is* to learn what others we talk with mean" (Davidson 1992a, 250; see idem 1990, 62)[3].

Though Davidson makes these connections later in his career, the dialogical model of communication, in one form or another, has been a constant feature of his thinking at least since the early 70s. Indeed, it is an essential feature of his analysis of radical interpretation, specifically regarding the evidence necessary to support interpretations of a speaker. As is well known, the evidence Davidson requires is the behaviorally manifested attitude of holding a sentence true under specified conditions at certain times. Davidson's chief claim is that this will yield correct (radical) interpretations absent a shared language (see Davidson 1973, 135-137; 1991, 157-159). It is therefore an essential feature of his project that the knowledge required for interpretation is built up exclusively from evidence gathered in the dialogical interactions between speakers and the interpreter.

Later in his career, Davidson will elaborate on the interpersonal exchanges required for radical interpretation. Additionally, with the development of his thinking, the model of the dialogue will grow in significance beyond this initial project. In Davidson's so-called 'triangulation papers', in fact, interpersonal interaction becomes necessary for the very possibility of thought and language. In his paper "Three Varieties of Knowledge" (1991), Davidson offers a more detailed picture of the interlocutors' engagement in radical interpretation. This requires that an interpreter find a regularity in a speaker's behavior which he can correlate with objects or events in their environment. Absent this condition, the interpreter cannot discover any thought or meaning behind the speaker's utterances. Therefore, it provides a determination that the behavior observed is indeed linguistic:

> For until the triangle is completed connecting two creatures, and each creature with common features of the world, there can be no answer to the question whether a creature […] is discriminating between stimuli at the sensory surfaces or somewhere further out, or further in. Without this sharing of reactions to common stimuli, thought and speech would have no particular content—that is, no content at all. (1991, 159; see 1992b, 263)

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[3] See Glüer (2018) for more on the interpreter's role in determining meaning in the radical interpretation papers.

Triangulation, then, is the process by which interlocutors locate the common cause of their reactions, which in turn allows each to correlate observed reactions of the other with their own stimuli from the world. Interpersonal engagement with others is alone what gives content to thought and speech: "interaction among similar creatures is a necessary condition for speaking a language" (Davidson 1992b, 264). Although Davidson requires quite a different triadic framework to Gadamer's, they agree on the essential point that unless two interlocutors correctly identify the object talked about as common to both, determining whether they are saying anything at all is impossible.

The most explicitly dialogical conception of communication appears in Davidson's so-called 'anti-conventional papers'. In this series of papers, spanning more than a decade, Davidson motivates his rejection of the idea that communication requires semantic conventions. The general model of communication he provides in his (1986) and (1994a) centers exclusively on the dynamic of *speaker* and *hearer/interpreter* and aims to fully explain linguistic communication in the absence of shared language (see Davidson 1982, 276-267; idem 1986, 96, 103; idem 1994a, 115, 110, 119). We will dwell on this model in greater length in the next section.

For now, I would like to draw the reader's attention to some fundamental points of convergence between Gadamer's and Davidson's dialogical conceptions of understanding. First, the dialogue is not a dyad, but a triad, comprising the two interlocutors and what, very broadly, they speak about. Secondly, the speakers' utterances are interconnected in that their content depends on the interlocutors' responses to them: the meaning of what is said depends on the hearer's interpretation of it. The process of linguistic interpretation, modelled as dialogue, constitutes the content of the *interpretandum*: in other words, there is no meaning outside the dialogue. And so, "a language cannot have a life of its own, a life apart from its users" (Davidson 1994b, 258; see also idem 1993, 170; idem 1994a, 120, 122; Davidson and Glüer 1995, 81).

As mentioned, this is a point of agreement between Davidson and Gadamer. In a paper written for the *Library of Living Philosophers*' volume on Gadamer, Davidson expresses approval for the latter's view that

> Language has its true being only in conversation, in the exercise of understanding between people." This saying of Gadamer's goes far beyond the linguist's insistence on the primacy of spoken over written words, for it implies that only in the context of discussion does language come to have a content, to be language. (1997, 274)

Where he disagrees with Gadamer, however, is on whether conversation requires a shared language. For Gadamer, "every conversation presupposes a

common language, or better, creates a common language" (Gadamer 1985, 384; idem 1989, 371). Davidson's position, as mentioned, is that it does not:

> It seems wrong to me to say agreement concerning an object demands that a common language first be worked out. I would say: it is only in the presence of shared objects that understanding can come about. (Davidson 1997, 275)

While scholars agree that Davidson misunderstood Gadamer's position and has thus misplaced the true locus of their disagreement, they have not reached a consensus on where it lies. Certainly, they are right to indicate that Gadamer is not a conventionalist in the sense Davidson seems to assume (Malpas 2011b, 209; Vessey 2012, 35; Lynch 2014, 361). In fact, Gadamer led an attack on a version of conventionalism decades before Davidson did (see Gadamer 1985, 405-410). As he later states, agreeing with recent developments in linguistics and implicitly Davidson himself:

> The term "[linguistic] competence" … cannot be described simply in terms of the application of rules or merely as the rule-governed manipulation of language. (1985a, 5/6; translation from Gadamer 1997, 42)

Nevertheless, it is true that one affirms what the other rejects. However, their concepts of language differ so substantially that one's requirement of shared language cannot easily be compared with the other's denial. As such, many have argued that the essential divergence is to be found in their accounts of language, and in fact their positions are not in tension with respect to the common language issue (Malpas 2002, 210; idem 2011b, 267; Lynch 2014, 368). Moreover, some have suggested that Gadamer might even subscribe to Davidson's view that communication does not presuppose shared language (Braver 2011, 149; Malpas 2002, 210; Vessey 2012, 37; Lynch 2014, 368; but see Dostal 2011, 181 against this view) and that the true difference lies in their different accounts of conversation (Braver 2011, Vessey 2011, 254; idem 2012, 36, 38; Fultner 2011, 227-228).

In the following, I will reorient this debate and argue that the disagreement is less about whether language must be shared for communication, than the kind of sharing required. Although Davidson and Gadamer concur that some form of agreement is a necessary condition for language and understanding, their conceptions differ radically. The next section will detail these differences and establish their consequences for the concept of the *other*. I argue here that the two models of speech differently model the other speaker, beginning with Davidson's views.

2. Agreement

2.1. Davidson

For Davidson, the exclusive requirement for communication is that speaker and hearer share an understanding of the speaker's words. Agreement on what the speaker's uttered sounds mean is the necessary and sufficient condition for understanding (1994a, 110). For communication to succeed, "speaker and hearer must assign the same meaning to the speaker's words." (Davidson 1982, 277; see idem 1986, 96; 1991, 157)

That communication should require speakers to hold something in common is not only etymologically perspicuous, but an ancient idea[4]. Davidson's famous innovation comes however in detaching communication from the idea of sharing a language, hence not reducing the required agreement to shared semantic conventions. Accordingly, the resulting concept of agreement is one that is not *prior* to the interaction. A core principle of Davidson's philosophy of language in general is that linguistic competence is best modelled as a theory. Put in these terms, the idea is that speaker and hearer need not share a theory for interpreting each other's words before an utterance is made. Instead, their theories must coincide "*after* an utterance has been made, or communication is impaired" (Davidson 1982, 278).

Davidson provides a more detailed account of this process in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' (1986). Here, he differentiates between 'prior' and 'passing' theories. As they enter a linguistic interaction, speaker and interpreter both possess a 'prior theory' for one another. This corresponds, for the interpreter, to how he is prepared to interpret an utterance by the speaker, while for the speaker, it expresses what she believes the interpreter's prior theory to be. Understanding is then achieved when speaker and hearer both understand the speaker's words in the way she intended them to be understood. And the way a speaker intends to be understood corresponds to the theory she intends her interpreter to apply. This will then be the 'passing' theory, namely, for the interpreter, the theory he uses to interpret the speaker, and, for the speaker, the theory she intends the interpreter to use. Communication succeeds if and only if these coincide.

With each successful interaction between speaker and hearer, their prior theories for one another may adjust, preserving elements of the coinciding passing theories. But they need not. There is no reason, at least not one relevant for communication, why any speaker should persist in speaking the way they have been doing. If communication doesn't require interlocutors to speak the same

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[4] See Aristotle *De interpretatione* 16a.

language, neither does it require them to remain constant in their idiolect. As such, Davidson's view is more radical: communication doesn't demand that the two participants share a language at all, either ahead of their interaction of after it. Consequently, the theories used by interpreters to understand speakers are "geared to the occasion" and thus remain occasion-dependent (Davidson 1986, 101).

Davidson's illustration of this procedure with the well-known malaprop example does not need to be rehearsed here. What must be retained from these considerations is that for him understanding presupposes an agreement between speaker and hearer on what the speaker's words mean which is both *posterior* and *momentary*: it needn't be in place *before* the interaction nor persist after it. The prior/passing theory mechanism of communication explains it sufficiently without presupposing or enforcing linguistic homogeneity.

But there is an additional type of agreement which Davidson considers necessary for interpretation. In several papers from the 1970's, he develops the position that "understanding can be secured only by interpreting in a way that makes for the right sort of agreement" (1984a, xvii). This sort of agreement is not a shared understanding of what the words used mean, but an agreement *in beliefs*. The main driving force of these arguments is that absent such an agreement, disagreement would be impossible because meaningful content could not be individuated. In other words, no evidence could allow an interpreter to distinguish between unintelligible noise and meaningful utterance. As is well known, these arguments are intimately connected to the Principle of Charity and the methodology of radical interpretation. But in order not to complicate matters I will not bring these issues up, focusing instead exclusively on the notion of agreement at play here.

Now, Davidson is not implying in these papers that agreement is the goal of interpretation. The purpose of communicating is to understand; agreement or disagreement on what is spoken are subsidiary issues. The point in emphasizing agreement is instead that disagreement is only intelligible against a wider, shared, background (Davidson 1974a, 153). What Davidson is after, therefore, is explaining the possibility of meaningful disagreement (Davidson 1974b, 196, 197; idem 1977, 200). If speakers had nothing in common, there could be no telling what they disagree about. And the more things a speaker and an interpreter will agree on, the better they'll understand their points of disagreement (see Davidson 1973, 137 and also 1974b, 184).

Moreover, the beliefs interlocutors must agree on are mostly true: Davidson takes it for granted that "belief is in its nature veridical" (Davidson 1983,146). He argues that what individuates a belief is its location in a doxastic

pattern, which determines the belief's content. As such, "there must be endless true beliefs about the subject matter" for anything to become a subject matter at all (Davidson 1975, 168). If this vast agreement generally remains invisible, it is because the "shared truths are too many and too dull to bear mentioning" (Davison 1974a, 153; see idem 1977, 200). The imagery frequently used by Davidson in these arguments is visual. As believers we may of course be wrong. But if we were not generally right in what we believed, we could not tell what, if anything, we were wrong about. In other words, "the more things a believer is right about, the sharper his errors are. Too much mistake simply blurs the focus." (Davidson 1975, 168; see idem 1974b, 197)

Davidson argues that this kind of agreement is necessary for radical interpretation and, since he generalizes this account to all linguistic understanding, for any understanding whatsoever. The question now emerges: is agreement in beliefs equally posterior and momentary? It is immediately obvious that it cannot be momentary. Speakers cannot agree on what they believe for the duration of an interaction and then radically change their views. This would be in tension with their being mostly right. Moreover, to judge that an interlocutor has changed their mind about something, an interpreter must still identify the matter at hand, which requires, as mentioned, a vast background of shared beliefs.

But the other aspect of our question demands further examination: must we *already* be in an intersubjective agreement before a communicative interaction? It would seem so, given Davidson's requirement that people's beliefs be predominantly constant and true for them to be intelligible creatures at all:

> We must find others largely consistent and right in what they believe as a condition of making them intelligible, that is, as having thoughts at all. But since what we find is what is really there, it follows that rational creatures, creatures with thoughts, must be largely consistent and correct in their beliefs. (Davidson 1992a, 245; see also idem 1980, 7)

Elsewhere, Davidson again claims that any language must "depend upon a largely correct, shared, view of how things are" (Davidson 1977, 199) and that successful communication proves that such a view exists. Coupled with the claim that radical interpretation depends on massive overlap in beliefs between interlocutors, we may surmise that all creatures must possess a shared, and mostly true, worldview, which would make communication between them possible. If humans generally have true beliefs and share most of them, they must share them before any new interaction. Not infrequently, in fact, interpreters[5] have read Davidson as claiming that understanding depends on this sort of prior

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[5] See Malpas 2011b for a brief overview of this interpretation of Davidson.

commonality, embodying something like a common human nature, and that the requisite agreement couldn't be posterior, but would have to be prior, communitarian.

I do not share the view. Summarizing his arguments in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (1974b), Davidson insists that what he has shown is not that communication is possible in the absence of a prior shared conceptual background or scheme, simply because there is no basis on which to establish their difference. We simply could not discover others had beliefs or concepts radically different from our own. But "if we cannot intelligibly say that schemes are different, neither can we intelligibly say that they are one" (ibid., 198).

This conclusion is strengthened by later developments. The triangulation papers, in fact, as we saw briefly already, provided a picture of the dependence of thought, language, and hence beliefs, on mutual interaction and successful communication between rational creatures. There must be interaction for there to be interpersonal agreement about anything, whether it be the common causes of our perceptions, our beliefs, or the meanings of our words. And so, it is successful triangulation that determines the contents of our thoughts, beliefs and sentences, not vice versa.[6]

Not few commentators emphasize the continuity of Davidson's views on the agreement required for communication and the associated picture of the social. On this view, Davidson presents a diverse but unified body of work on the social nature of language and thought, the central tenet of which is that the kind of agreement necessary for understanding is not prior to the interaction. Davidson's departure from this more common idea involves the claim that social, linguistic, or behavioral regularities in fact develop in the interaction between people instead of enabling it. The view he endorses is well formulated by Malpas: "*understanding*, whether of others or the world, cannot depend on the existence of any form of preexisting, determinate, "internalized" *agreement*" (Malpas 2011b, 260; see Malpas 1999, 139; idem 2010, 270; Brandom 1994, 39, 599, 659n50). The only form of agreement, in beliefs or meanings, that counts for communication and linguistic understanding is therefore *posterior* to the interaction.

2.2. Gadamer

Gadamer shares Davidson's commitment to agreement as a necessary condition for understanding. However, the sort of agreement he requires is diametrically opposed to Davidson's. Contrary to what some interpreters suppose,

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[6] This is a version of semantic externalism that Verheggen calls interpersonal externalism (see Myers and Verheggen 2016, 65).

Gadamer is committed to a concept of agreement prior to the dialogical interaction.

Before examining Gadamer's views, we must note that behind 'agreement', as found in most translations of Gadamer's texts, lie several German words. Conceptually the most important are *Einverständnis* and *Übereinkunft*, which can be decompounded as 'one understanding' and 'coming over to become one', respectively.[7] In the following, however, I will keep referring to them in the original. My intention is to draw attention to a conceptual distinction missed, to my knowledge, by commentators. In this section, I will examine the kinds of agreement Gadamer considers necessary for communication, starting with *Einverständnis*.

We already noted that Gadamer establishes a tight conceptual link between agreement and understanding. In *Truth and Method*, *Einverständnis* is described as the goal of communication (Gadamer 1985, 297). Interlocutors will understand one another if they reach an agreement, i.e. a shared understanding, or 'one understanding', of the matter at issue. Consequently, for Gadamer, "understanding is, primarily, agreement (*Einverständnis*)" (Gadamer 1985, 183; idem 1989, 180). As such, 'goal' here has the sense of *telos*, rather than 'purpose': *Einverständnis* describes the relation between the conversation partners concerning the subject matter once understanding is achieved. Understanding demands *Einverständnis* since reaching an understanding with a partner is impossible unless the two agree on what is at issue.

This account, however, is not straightforwardly at odds with Davidson's. If understanding demands agreement on the subject matter of the exchange, it is not necessary that it should precede it. In fact, in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer seems sometimes to veer in a direction consistent with Davidson on this matter. And there have been scholars making this argument (Malpas 2011; idem 2002, 210). However, as Gadamer clarifies his views over subsequent decades, the real distance between the two becomes much clearer.

In his later work, most often in explicit opposition to Schleiermacher, Gadamer returns to the notion of *Einverständnis*. Naturally, this paper would not be the place for rehearsing Gadamer's criticism of Schleiermacher, were it not for the fact that it brings out illuminating points of contact between him and Davidson. As is well known, Schleiermacher's hermeneutics depends on the assumption that "misunderstanding results as a matter of course and understanding must be desired and sought at every point" (Schleiermacher 1998, 22). The task he sets a theory of understanding is to explain how a fundamental disunity

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[7] I borrow these translations from Dostal 2022, 122.

between interpreter and interpreted can be methodically bridged. Consequently, he defines it starting from *misunderstanding*, which makes this concept theoretically and logically fundamental.

Gadamer concedes that Schleiermacher's description is not entirely wrong: surely the strangeness and unfamiliarity of the *interpretandum* can easily lead to misunderstandings (Gadamer 1966b, 222, 223). Indeed, he sees the problem of overcoming alterity as a central motif of any hermeneutics (Gadamer 1976a, 285), as well as "the most difficult of human tasks" (Gadamer 1990, 346). Gadamer claims, however, that the analysis of understanding must be divorced from a picture which prioritizes the disturbances, disruptions, and obstacles: this for him restricts (Gadamer 1966b, 222, 223; 1967, 233) and distorts the hermeneutic phenomenon (Gadamer 1978, 313). What must be recognized, instead, is that prior to any misunderstanding there is *ein tragendes Einverständnis*, a sustaining agreement (Gadamer 1966b, 223; see 1970a, 187-188; 1978, 317).

It is therefore impossible to actively and methodically seek to avoid misunderstanding in advance. Instead, "agreement is presupposed wherever there is a disruption of agreement." (Gadamer 1970a, 186)

The appeal to a Schleiermacherian "targeted search for understanding" is motivated only by the relatively rare obstacles in the pre-existing agreement (ibid.). Even *addressing* another in dialogue, before any understanding occurs, presupposes a deep agreement between interlocutors (Gadamer 1966b, 223). Misunderstanding and otherness are hence not primordial, to be overcome by an interpreter, but it's the other way around: "it is firstly the support of the familiar and agreement that makes the venture into the alien possible" (Gadamer 1966b, 230; translation from Gadamer 2007, 87, slightly modified).

Note the obvious affinity to Davidson's argument. Gadamer anticipates here the Davidsonian claim that disagreement is inconceivable without a shared background in agreement. Misunderstanding and disagreements require that conversation partners agree on an overwhelming number of items for understanding to be possible. The real distance between Gadamer and Davidson however lies in the claim that the agreement reached in interaction, as *telos*, is not sufficient for understanding. Communication, for Gadamer, is grounded in an agreement which is explicitly *prior* to the conversation:

> [E]very effort at grasping meaning [...] must already rest on a general agreement that is binding, if it is to come about that one understands and is understood. (1968, 114-115; translation from Gadamer 2007, 68, modified)

Without a prior *Einverständnis*, in other words, understanding is not possible. Where no agreement unites the two partners, a dialogue cannot be achieved, and hence, to add the superfluous, neither can understanding of any sort: "coming to an understanding can only succeed on the basis of an original agreement" (1972b, 465; idem 1989, 569). In the postscript to the 3rd edition of *Truth and Method*, he articulates what such agreement consists in:

> All coming to understanding in language presupposes agreement not just about the meanings of words and the rules of spoken language; much remains undisputed with regard to the "subject matter" as well—i.e., to everything that can be meaningfully discussed. (ibid.)

We may want to ask, however, in what sense this prior agreement is consistent with Gadamer's account of interpretation and *Gespräch*. We saw that for him dialogue designates an interpretive event which constitutes the meaning of what is interpreted. But if there are no meanings outside of dialogue, then the question whether two people, independently of interpretation, agree on a given item, is left with no determinate answer. Simply because disagreement requires massive agreement, we are not justified in assigning any determinate content to a prior 'sustaining agreement'. There is therefore a tension between the statement that interpretation can never reveal massive disagreement and the inference that hence interlocutors must agree prior to it.

For Gadamer, dialogue has an additional dimension Davidson ignores. Every *Gespräch* is such that it transcends any single interaction: Gadamer speaks of 'the infinite dialogue ... that we are' (Gadamer 1966b, 230; translation from Gadamer 2007, 88). Conversation therefore constitutes not only the meaning of what is said, but the being of the speakers. We are therefore already engaged in conversation before any new interaction, we are, as Gadamer puts it, *mitten im Gespäch* (1992, 408). The inference from the impossibility of massive disagreement to the priority of agreement is hence justified by the speakers' prior participation in the endless conversation that goes on in and through tradition. Gadamer can meaningfully speak of an agreement prior to any new interaction because he conceives of language as a "repository of understandings that have settled into it" and which are shared and passed down through tradition (Sokolowski 1997, 228).

This makes it plain that *Einverständnis* is unfit for explaining all instances of understanding, because it cannot account for interlingual communication. To apply it to cross-linguistic exchanges would miss the point that *Einverständnis* only describes the kind of agreement existing in a particular language and culture and required for linguistic interaction in it. So, acquiring another language cannot presuppose it. It would also be wrong to conclude that cross-

linguistic understanding does not depend on any prior agreement. This would obviously conflict with the claim that understanding within a language does. It is in order to preserve the necessary priority of agreement in both cases that safeguarding the Gadamerian distinction between these concepts – which, when discussed at all, are always fused into one (see Di Cesare 2007, 190; idem 2016, 232; Dostal 2022, 122) – is so important. I now turn to the concept of *Übereinkunft*.

Übereinkunft plays in Gadamer's conceptual apparatus a different role compared to *Einverständnis* and it surfaces in a different range of arguments. In *Truth and Method*, this notion first appears as a translation of the Greek *syntheke* in Aristotle's conception of language. Gadamer introduces it when discussing the relation of language to the world. He stresses that Aristotle does not isolate the sphere of linguistic meanings from the world they refer to, expressing agreement with his view that signs are meaningful in virtue of their being *symbola*, which are not natural, but *kata syntheken*, an expression usually rendered as 'by convention'[8] (see Aristotle, *De Interpretatione* 17a). Gadamer however stresses that Aristotle is not describing an instrumental theory of signs:

> Rather, *Übereinkunft*, according to which the sounds of language or the signs of writing mean something, is not an agreement on a means of understanding—that would already presuppose language; it is the agreement on which human community … is founded. (Gadamer 1985, 435; idem 1989, 430, translation modified)

Übereinkunft therefore is a necessary condition for language because it is presupposed by human community. Accordingly, Gadamer continues, the more restricted kind of agreement manifested in the usage of linguistic signs and sounds (what elsewhere he calls *Einverständnis*), is an expression of this more foundational agreement (*Übereinkunft*) on which it depends:

> "*Syntheke*" should express only the basic structure of linguistic understanding and linguistic communication: mutual agreement [*Übereinkommen*]. (1985c, 353; translation from Gadamer 2000a, 12)

Few pages later, shortly before returning to the concept of *Übereinkunft*, Gadamer discusses the intimate connection between social life and language: "All forms of human community are forms of linguistic community" (Gadamer 1985, 450; idem 1989, 443, modified). He brings out this interdependence by considering artificial languages. Such made-up languages, he claims, are never

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[8] This is also how the English translators construe *Übereinkunft* here, as *convention* (TM 430). For Gadamer's critique of this translation of *syntheke*, see his 1985c, 353.

actual languages, because they necessarily presuppose a community of life, in which there is lived understanding between partners in a living dialogue. Any agreement reached in an artificial language belongs in fact to a natural language. But:

> In a real community of language … we do not first decide to agree but are always already in agreement [*übereinkommen sind*]. (Gadamer 1985, 450; see 1960, 73-75)

Therefore:

> Without our having always already come to an agreement [*übereingekommen sind*] in this sense, no speech would be possible. … Language is a communicative event in which human beings have come to an agreement [*übereingekommen sind*]. (1981a, 260)

Gadamer's formulation is very revealing here. That an agreement is 'always already' presupposed indicates that *Übereinkunft* is prior and "there is in it no first beginning" (Gadamer 1985c, 354; see idem 1985, 436). It is not something one picks up, but a commonality on which any learning and socializing depends. The reader will identify here a similarity with Davidson. For him too, the possibility of teaching depends on interaction:

> Interaction ... demands that each individual perceives others as reacting to the shared environment much as he does; only then can teaching take place and appropriate expectations be aroused. (Davidson 1994a, 125)

In fact, however, Gadamer is here in opposition to Davidson. For Gadamer, interaction means engagement in *shared* practices. Gadamer's essay *Zur Phänomenologie von Ritual und Sprache* (1992) is perhaps the clearest working out of the idea that the commonality of language and conversation is grounded in the commonality of ritual, communal practices and common engagement. For reasons of space, this may only be indicated here.

Much remains to unpack regarding this notion and its relationship to *Einverständnis*. However ungratifying in general, the following summary should satisfy the demands of this paper. First, we saw that *Übereinkunft* is presupposed by language and that *Einverständnis*, as an agreement on the uses of words, is a manifestation of it. Moreover, we noted that it characterizes the nature of the sociality that defines language. Additionally, insofar as it is presupposed by communication, *Übereinkunft* is obviously a prior agreement consisting of mutual engagement in shared practices, which always already, logically and chronologically, precedes language.

Summing up, this section detailed the different kinds of agreement pre-supposed by Davidson's and Gadamer's dialogical models of communication. They outlined contrasting accounts of the kind of sociality required for linguistic communication. Both, Gadamer and Davidson, argue that language is essentially social. For Davidson, "interaction among similar creatures is a necessary condition for speaking a language" (1992b, 264). But the required group does not necessarily contain more than two members. In addition, Davidson does not conclude that these demands shared linguistic practices. Instead, the only requirement is that members of the social group are able to interact with one another and understand the linguistic practice followed by the others. This rests on an agreement constructed in the interaction, rather than preceding it. For Gadamer, instead, it is a condition of possessing language that members of social bodies follow shared practices, including linguistic ones. The group, therefore, must be largely homogeneous in their use of language. They must be exactly what Davidson so vehemently denies: "rough linguistic facsimiles of their friends and parents" (Davidson 1982, 278), i.e., share a language.

Davidson and Gadamer therefore endorse two very different pictures of the sociality of language. To employ a terminology proposed by Robert Brandom, who was inspired by Davidson's work, Davidson argues for an *I-thou* picture of sociality, whereas Gadamer upholds an *I-we* account (see Brandom 1994, esp. 598-607)[9]. Consequently, the Davidsonian and Gadamerian dialogical paradigms of interpretation entail different concepts of the *other*. Davidson's account models the interlocutor as linguistically *singular*. There is no reason, Davidson urges, "why speakers who understand each other ever need to speak, or to have spoken, as anyone else speaks, much less as each other speaks" (1994a, 115). For Gadamer, instead, our partner in dialogue is never a mere solitary individual, but plural, conceptually inseparable from a wider linguistic group:

> There is nothing like an I and a thou as isolated, substantial realities. (Gadamer 1966b, 223; translation from Gadamer 2007, 81)

Language, according to Gadamer, belongs "not to the sphere of the I, but to the sphere of the we" (Gadamer 1966a, 151) and it presupposes an agreement which enables it and "constitutes the 'we' that we all are" (Gadamer 1966b, 223; translation from Gadamer 2007, 81). Accordingly, Davidson has an *I-thou* model of alterity, whereas Gadamer advocates for an *I-they* model.

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[9] See also McDowell (2002) for a defense of the Gadamerian version of the *I-we* picture against some criticisms by Brandom.

In the remainder of this paper, I will argue that this difference bears not only on how these models conceive of dialogue and its interlocutors' relationship to one another and other potential conversation partners, but also that it has important implications for interpretation and interpretability.

3. Understanding the other

Gadamer's hermeneutics has often been criticized that it improperly conceptualizes understanding the *other*. According to many, Gadamer's emphasis on agreement implies that the other is always made to conform to the interpreter's perspective. Understanding thus reduces the other to the self (see Kogge 2001; Kapsch 2007). Gadamer recognizes this as "the weightiest objection" to his philosophy, but nevertheless stands his ground (1972b, 465). In opposition to it, Davidson's *I-thou* model seems superior insofar as it does not presuppose a prior agreement between self and other. My aim in this section is not directly to defend Gadamer against this criticism, though this will be one of its results. Instead, it argues for the unintuitive thesis that the degree of agreement and semantic conformity between speakers postulated by each model of alterity is proportional to that of the conceptual and semantic difference it can make intelligible. The more conformity we presuppose, the more deviation we can detect.

The way towards this conclusion starts in the interpretive situation and the interpreter's point of view. This choice is explained by considerations internal to the models, namely that the bounds of intelligibility are shaped by what an interpreter can understand. A good method for testing these limits is by analyzing cases of interpretive equivocity and the theoretical interpreter's choice between interpretations. Forced to choose, he will have to use everything at his disposal to tell the right interpretation apart from the wrong. Failure to judge correctly is a good test of a model's adequacy, since it entails inability to lead to understanding.

Let's imagine, therefore, a dialogue where an ambiguity arises in the interpretation of a sentence s uttered by the speaker. On one interpretation, call it I_1, the interpreter understands the speaker as uttering s with meaning M_1, whereas on another interpretation I_2, as uttering it with M_2. I_1 and I_2 are mutually exclusive and exhaustive: they are incompatible and the only possible interpretations of s. Furthermore, let M_2 be the intended meaning of the speaker's utterance of s, and hence I_2 its correct interpretation. For ease of distinction between the two situations, let *Donald* play the role of the interpreter in the Davidsonian model, and *Hans* be his Gadamerian counterpart. I begin with the former.

When faced with two possible interpretations of an utterance, Donald may call upon evidence of two kinds for narrowing down its intended meaning. First, he may prompt further utterances from the speaker. He may ask her for instance what she meant on that occasion, or to elaborate on her utterance of s, to explain it differently, to employ a synonym, and so on. Assume this fails to resolve the ambiguity. At this point, Donald will have a different sort of evidence at his disposal, namely that of his own beliefs. Before considering this option however, let us analyze the Gadamerian situation.

Now, Hans seems to have access to a further kind of evidence for distinguishing wrong from right interpretations. Given Gadamer's requirement that speakers of a language conform in their use of it, Hans will be able to rely on this conformity in verifying his assumptions. Unable to assign a unique meaning to s, Hans can therefore attend to other speakers' utterances of s, call upon them to explain its meaning, its use by other speakers, etc. If, in the case of most others, I_2 is the predominantly more likely interpretation of utterances of s, or if I_1 is excluded by some other factors, then Hans seemingly has good reason to prefer I_2 as the correct interpretation of the utterance of s above. The conformity required by the model, and the exclusivity of I_1 and I_2, dictates that it must be correct.

However, it is clear that the kind of evidence Hans has is essentially negative: useful in discounting faulty comprehension and narrowing down interpretive options, but unfit for picking out the right one. The discovery that speakers radically conflict in their use of words and concepts, under some interpretation, is good indication for Hans that his attribution of meaning is mistaken in at least one case. The requirement of conformity demands that it be revised to account for both. Nevertheless, his evidence will never count *in favor of* some interpretation: no amount of conformity will confirm that one is correct. Even if some interpretation could unambiguously be given to all speakers' utterance of a sentence, it remains in principle open-ended and susceptible to revision.

We may conclude, then, that Hans has a wider evidentiary base than Donald's which, by steering him away from misinterpretations, can make for better results. The more regularity between the members of the relevant community Gadamer presupposes, the more evidence Hans will have at his disposal to sharpen his interpretive capacities. But this is of course not to say that Donald's can only be too dull. While we may suppose that Hans is in a markedly better position, practically speaking, or even that Donald – due to contingent facts about speakers' abilities to explain themselves to an interpreter – will frequently be unable to go very far in his attempts, we have not thus identified a fault with the Davidsonian model.

This is because whatever amount of negative evidence is available to the interpreter simply corresponds to the amount of conformity required by the model. As such, Davidson may in fact grant Hans' abundance of evidence while insisting that it is superfluous. As we saw, for him all that is in principle relevant to interpreting *s* as uttered by a speaker is internal to the interaction between her and the interpreter. The context of significance is the interaction, which is sufficient for determining the meaning of *s*. And so, while Hans may rely on several interactions to hone his interpretive skill, the chief claim Davidson makes is that there is no need for many where one was in principle enough. The interpretation of one speaker should not therefore have any bearing on the interpretation of another. Consequently, the challenge Davidson presents us in reply is to show that Donald could not *in principle* get from a single speaker, or communicative interaction, what Hans can get from many.

Let's therefore modify the example to fit the challenge. We may preserve the general outline of the case: the speaker utters *s* and the interpreters find her utterance consistent with (only) two incompatible interpretations. I_1 wrongly assigns meaning M_1 to *s*, whereas I_2 correctly assigns it M_2. Moreover, assume that according to I_1 the speaker is understood as saying something truthful and expressing a correct belief, by the interpreter's own lights, whereas I_2 reveals her to be holding a false belief. The perceived relative truth value of *s* will soon come into play. Furthermore, grant that the evidence Hans has access to, all other utterances of *s*, remains inconclusive with respect to I_1 or I_2. Hans now runs into the same ambiguity in his interpretation of the many, as Donald faces in the one.

Under this description, all the advantage of the Gadamerian model seems to dissipate. For even though Hans has more evidence at his disposal and a wider background to check his interpretations against, this now makes no difference to his ability to correctly attribute meaning. Hans' evidence, for all its abundance, is evidence merely for the indeterminacy of utterances of *s*, hence powerless in ascertaining the correctness or otherwise of I_1 or I_2. Therefore, it indeed seems superfluous.

This *prima facie* vindicates Davidson's claim that one interaction provides all the evidence needed for interpretation. Because it appears that both interpreters must appeal to identical resources to decide the case. If further interactions with the speaker (or speakers, for Hans) leads both to the same crossroads, then the only alternative evidence is that of their own beliefs. The truth, what we hold to be right, is then the last arbiter where no further interaction can determine whether our interlocutor is wrong, or we've misinterpreted them. It seems, therefore, that Gadamer's *I-they* picture fares no better than Davidson's

more austere *I-thou* model. They are both left, in this case, with a single leg to stand on, the evidence of their own beliefs. And so, both Hans and Donald seem to have good reason for choosing I_1, because it chimes with what they believe to be true. Neither model, therefore, is sufficient to account for understanding here. In the following, I will argue that this is not true for the Gadamerian model.

But first, let us consider the Davidsonian arguments underlying the choice of I_1. As noted, Davidson requires rational creatures to be consistent and mostly right in their beliefs. This justifies the inference from the interpreter's *beliefs* to the speaker's *meanings*: if speakers mostly have, and therefore express, true beliefs, interpretation can assume that beliefs coincide while decoding the idiom expressing them. Accordingly, Davidson states that the task of interpretation is accomplished by "assigning truth conditions to alien sentences that make native speakers right when plausibly possible, according, of course, to our own view of what is right" (Davidson 1973, 137). Certainly, the assigned truth values are not excluded from amendment: as new evidence comes in, interpretations needing revision will receive it. But the basic principle remains that "a good theory of interpretation maximizes agreement" (Davidson 1975, 169; see idem 1974b, 197)[10]. Therefore, Donald is forced into a state of pseudo-agreement, since he does not have sufficient resources to tell an expression of a wrong belief apart from a wrong interpretation. The model thus cannot account for comprehension in this case.

Now, much like Davidson, Gadamer also assumes most of our beliefs must be true. He couches this insight in terms of the positivity and inescapability of prejudice as a condition of all understanding (Gadamer 1985, 270-290). Our insight and comprehension, Gadamer argues, are perpetually guided by the anticipatory structure of our prejudices and fore-understandings. As such, they make up our historical situation and horizon (Gadamer 1985, 281). Prejudices, however, are obviously not always positive and certainly do not always lead to correct understanding. And so, the problem of filtering the true from the false remains: even if most of what we unquestioningly hold to be true is in fact so, there is no telling *which* of our beliefs or prejudices are not.

Gadamer formulates this problem immediately after discussing the fore-structure of understanding and introducing his notion of prejudice:

> [T]he fore-meanings that determine my own understanding can go entire-ly unnoticed. If they give rise to misunderstandings, how can our misun-derstandings of a text be perceived at all if there is nothing to contradict

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[10] Davidson's later talk of *optimization* instead of *maximization* has no bearing on Donald's choice here, which remains the same.

them? How can a text be protected against misunderstanding from the start? (Gadamer 1985, 273; idem 1989, 271)

For Gadamer, this problem will later become the fundamental epistemological question of hermeneutics, namely: "What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from the countless others which it is the undeniable task of critical reason to overcome?" (Gadamer 1985, 281; idem 1989, 278). As noted in Gadamer's critique of Schleiermacher, a methodical and pre-emptive foregrounding of the distorting and negative prejudices is impossible, as any recognition of distortion can occur only against a background of taken-for-granted agreement. Thus, Gadamer's reply to his own worry will be negative: a text cannot be protected against misunderstandings from the start. Instead, his solution will involve the notion of temporal distance:

> Often temporal distance can solve the critical question of hermeneutics, namely how to distinguish the *true* prejudices, by which we *understand*, from the *false* ones, by which we *misunderstand*. (Gadamer 1985, 304; idem 1989, 298, modified)

What temporal distance provides here are the requisite prompts which solely make us aware that we have inherited merely one of several possible perspectives on reality. Since, for us to become aware of a prejudice, it must be 'provoked' by the encounter with alterity (Gadamer 1985, 304). As Gadamer later came to realize, however, the required distance needn't be temporal. In his *Attempt at a self-critique* (1985a), objecting to his earlier exclusive focus on historical distance, Gadamer admits that the concept of distance in general would have been better suited for demonstrating the significance of the alterity of the other and the fundamental role of dialogue. He insists therefore that not only *historical* distance, and not even strictly *temporal* distance, but distance *simpliciter* may aid us in overcoming the "false overresonances and distorted applications" of our prejudices (1985a, 9; see the emendation in Gadamer 1985, 304n228).

The necessary distance, therefore, can exist between contemporaries, people searching through dialogue for a common ground, for instance, but most of all in cases of cultural and linguistic difference. The productive significance of temporal distance, therefore, as well as its role in eliminating distorting prejudices, also applies to cultural distance: "it not only lets local and limited prejudices die away, but allows those that bring about genuine understanding to emerge clearly as such" (Gadamer 1985, 304; idem 1989, 298). Gadamer thus writes that:

> Every encounter of this kind allows us to become conscious of our own preconceptions in matters which seemed so self-evident to oneself that one could not even notice one's naïve process of assuming that the other person's conception was the same as one's own, which generated misunderstanding. (Gadamer 1985a, 9; translation from Gadamer 1997, 45)

In the remainder of this paper, I readopt the interpreter's perspective and fill in the gaps in Gadamer's description of this filtering process. I argue that the Gadamerian model does not fall into the same traps as the Davidsonian, and can account for correct understanding in the case described.

First, it must be noted that the encounter with cultural distance does not rid Hans of his prejudices:

> If a prejudice becomes questionable in view of what another person or a text says to us, this does not mean that it is simply set aside and the text or the other person accepted as valid in its place. (Gadamer 1985, 304, idem 1989, 298)

Instead, Hans' situation can be construed as the hermeneutic experience of the foregrounding of false prejudices.

The encounter with otherness, the experienced tension between I_1 and I_2, provokes Hans' awareness of his preconceptions and of cultural distance. This will consequently lead to the suspension of his prejudices, to their being brought into play, the sole means for Hans to experience the truth of the other's claim (Gadamer 1985, 304). This suspending procedure, in turn, will have for Gadamer the logical structure of the question and thus he perceived ambiguity will represent for Hans the dawning of a question, and of different possibilities of being (see Gadamer 1985, 304). For,

> When a question arises, it breaks open the being of the object, as it were. (Gadamer 1985, 368; idem 1989, 356)

In our case, of course, the object whose being breaks open is the *Sache* of *s*, what the sentence was about, and the question addressed to it opens up its different possibilities (see Gadamer 1985, 304). The tension between I_1 and I_2, therefore, confronts Hans with the different possibilities of this object. The awareness of I_1 and I_2 as possible interpretations of *s* represents the awareness of two possible answers to the question addressed to its *Sache.* And this is a clear step towards recognizing I_2 as the correct interpretation of *s*:

> Recognizing that an object [*Sache*] is different, and not as we first thought, obviously presupposes the question whether it was this or that. (Gadamer 1985, 368; idem 1989, 356)

As already noted, understanding a question requires that one must ask it oneself (Gadamer 1985, 369). Hence, it implies the explicit anchoring of one's presuppositions which determine how the object being questioned shows itself (*ibid.*). Now, Hans' recognition that the object of *s* was different than what he first thought is due to the fact that asking this question presupposed the suspension of his own beliefs. In other words, it required that Socratic *docta ignorantia* essential to genuine dialogue, the knowledge that one does not know (Gadamer 1985, 368-369).

Consequently, once Hans faced the question, in the form of the interpretive ambiguity, the validity of his own prejudices was already suspended: they had already been foregrounded. And this is exactly the crucial step, the idea that distance provokes an awareness of *negative* prejudices. The contact with otherness has the force of an impact which makes Hans aware of what doesn't fit in with his guiding fore-meanings (Gadamer 1985, 372). Distance carries the realization that he misunderstood and a recognition of what he misunderstood.

In other words, it is sufficient for Hans to encounter the tension between I_1 and I_2 to already recognize the former as wrong. Here we may reserve judgement as to which view was true of the *Sache* of *s*. There is nothing in Gadamer's account to suggest it requires the other to be right and express a true belief about the world. Instead, the point to recognize is that it made conceptual difference intelligible *as difference*. Once a challenge to the interpreter's perspective asserts itself in the way described here, it has already, so to say, overthrown its rival. Hans is therefore not in the position of someone choosing between alternatives with equal subjective probability. The correct choice, in a sense, was already given. Distance granted Hans the ability to tell his true prejudices apart from the false, and thus a way to distinguish between an expression of a wrong belief and a wrong interpretation. This is sufficient to account for correct comprehension.

The *I-they* picture of alterity and the extension of the context of significance to the observed community is crucial to this accomplishment. The fact that, after examination of the linguistic group, I_2 remains a possible interpretation of *s* is indication of communitarian agreement. A single utterance contradicting I_2 would be enough to discount it, but its absence leads to the conclusion that I_2 is potentially true of the object, in other words that the speakers can mean *s* with M_2, and hence have the appropriate belief. The persistence of I_2 at a communitarian level is sufficient for Hans to realize that the possible perspectives on the object do not reduce to his own. On the other hand, the equal possibility of I_1 indicates agreement between the observed community and the interpreter's beliefs. Hans' choice of I_2 is justified by the greater probability that a linguistic group be in agreement with one another than that they be in agreement

with one another *and* an external interpreter. This is implicit in the idea of the fusion of horizons:

> the interpreter's own horizon is decisive, yet not as a personal standpoint that he maintains or enforces, but more as an opinion and a possibility that one brings into play and puts at risk […] I have described this above as a "fusion of horizons." (Gadamer 1985, 392; idem 1989, 390)

To summarize, what was crucial in my description of Hans' choice was the idea that communitarian agreement, which is prior to the interaction, is mor significant than what can be reached in it. And so, in cases of persistent ambiguity, the opposing view, so long as it is supported by communitarian evidence, weighs heavier in the balance. For Gadamer, the interpreter's own horizon remains an opinion and possibility even given the opportunity to maximize agreement. This is an inference which, as well as the evidence grounding it, Davidson's *I-thou* picture of alterity excludes. The model rules it out because the relevant context for interpretation is the interaction. We may speak therefore of an *interpersonal contextualism* in Davidson's case. The inference is well supported, on the other hand, by Gadamer's *I-they* picture of alterity because for him the context in which an utterance is meaningful is communitarian. His is a *communitarian contextualism*.

The analysis of the two models' treatment of ambiguity concludes with the proportionality thesis outlined at the start of this section: the amount of agreement and semantic conformity between speakers required by each model is proportional to that of the conceptual and semantic difference it can make intelligible. And this is in turn proportional to the available evidence. As argued, Gadamer's model, in virtue of its *I-they* picture of alterity, can account for more intelligible difference – grounded in more available evidence – than Davidson's *I-thou* model.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown how both Gadamer and Davidson build their approaches to language on the foundation of those events in which language and understanding play out between intelligent speakers: conversations. I have argued that both models presuppose some agreement between the speakers as a condition of possibility of the interaction, but that the kinds of agreement presupposed differ substantially. Davidson only demands that an agreement exist at the end of an interaction, whereas Gadamer requires it before as well. The dis-

tinction between a prior and posterior agreement is shown to entail significant differences in how the two models conceive of alterity and our encounters with it. Finally, I argued that the Gadamerian *I-they* model can make more conceptual alterity intelligible to the interpreter than Davidson's, which is insufficient to account for understanding in the case developed.

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