

Neo-Carnapian Relativism and the Idea of Framework

Daniel Lewin

The Relativist Interpretation of Carnap

In “Carnap’s Metaontology”, Matti Eklund explores four plausible interpretations of Rudolf Carnap’s ontological position. I intend to provide a neo-Carnapian view on what he calls the “relativist” interpretation of Carnap. Eklund conceives of the relativist interpretation as a more radical extension of the “language pluralist” interpretation. Central to the language pluralist interpretation are the following claims: there are many possible languages, the meaning and therefore truth value of a single sentence can vary across languages, and the language we speak is just one possible language (Eklund 231). The major difference between the language pluralist interpretation and the relativist interpretation lies in two further claims. First, that linguistic frameworks¹ are not mere language fragments, in the sense that a framework is merely a fragmentary set of linguistic instruments (semantics, meanings, etc.) for engaging in a certain discourse, but rather are in some way perspectival insofar as they constitute our method of interpreting the world (Eklund 233). And second, that the proposition expressed by a given sentence is only true or false internal to some linguistic framework (Eklund 233). To summarize then, a neo-Carnapian relativist view roughly holds the following claims:

1. There are many possible linguistic frameworks.
2. The linguistic framework we operate within is just one possible linguistic framework.
3. Linguistic frameworks are in some sense perspectival.

¹ I use the terms linguistic framework and language equivalently.

4. A single semantically identical sentence can express various non-identical propositions across linguistic frameworks and therefore have different truth values across linguistic frameworks.
5. The truth value of an identical proposition can vary across linguistic frameworks.

My plan is to argue for propositions one through four by extending Donald Davidson's notions of "Prior theory" and "Passing theory" from his paper "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" to a notion of individual general linguistic frameworks and to place that notion in the context of a fluid aggregate conception of natural language. This allows me to distinguish between the de jure English language and the de facto natural English language. I model the latter as a fluid aggregate of points of linguistic similarity on which speakers broadly converge over time whereas the former is a reified representation of that aggregate. These points of linguistic convergence are in turn models of how various people speak and interpret as represented by their individual general linguistic frameworks. I hypothesize that if we measure the linguistic habits of a body of speakers and interpreters over repeated linguistic interactions and then model their similarity or dissimilarity over time, then what will emerge is a fluid aggregate of points of linguistic similarity or dissimilarity which models the convergent and divergent linguistic tendencies within a body of language users and thereby models the de facto natural language of those users.

Within this model I can properly develop a notion of framework sufficient for a neo-Carnapian relativist view and provide an account of linguistic communication despite the linguistic framework relativity entailed by my view. I will do so by discussing my notion of the tendency toward linguistic convergence among speakers and interpreters and how this tendency is an essentially pragmatic phenomenon. As the final condition for an adequate relativist view, I will discuss John Searle's arguments for the relativity of literal meaning and their application to relativizing truth and argue against the possibility of synonymous meanings between individual general linguistic frameworks. I will then

conclude with a discussion of the prospects for ontological inquiry and the application of my view to Fictionalist discourses.

Davidson and The Problem of Malapropisms

In his paper “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs”, the anti-conventionalist² philosopher Donald Davidson utilizes the case of malapropisms to develop his notions of “Prior theory” and “Passing theory”. This was inspired by the problems generally posed by malapropisms³ to traditional conventionalist accounts of language, particularly their accounts of literal meaning. Davidson describes literal meaning as traditionally consisting of three principles⁴: that it is systematic, shared, and governed by learned regularities or conventions (Davidson 254). The first principle states that a competent speaker or interpreter must be able to interpret utterances based on the semantic properties of the components (words) of utterances and their structure, and that this necessarily requires systematic relations between the meanings of utterances (Davidson 254). The second principle, that literal meaning is shared, requires that regular and successful communication between speaker and interpreter depends on a shared method of interpretation based on the systematic relations described by the first principle (Davidson 254). The third principle, that literal meaning is governed by learned regularities or conventions, requires that the systematic linguistic competence of the speaker or interpreter be learned prior to acts of interpretation and that this systematic competence is conventional (Davidson 254).

In “Literal Meaning”, John Searle echoes this summary of orthodox opinion, saying: “The literal meaning of a sentence is entirely determined by the meanings of its component words... and the syntactical rules according to which these elements are combined” (Searle 207). Moreover, traditionally speaker meaning is sharply

² Anti-conventionalism in this context means support for the claim that linguistic conventions are sufficient but not necessary for language. This entails that it is logically possible to have a language without linguistic conventions.

³The misuse or distortion of a word or phrase. E.g., “Don’t put all your baskets in one egg” or “She’s an effluent senator”.

⁴ According to a conventionalist account.

distinguished from literal meaning though a speaker can mean what a sentence literally means (Searle 207). Most importantly, it is traditionally held that “The literal meaning of the sentence is the meaning it has independently of any context whatever” (Searle 208). This body of opinion implies that there is some acontextual space for the interpretation of sentences where the literal meaning of a sentence is determined only by its semantics which are governed by a systematic, shared, and conventional method of interpretation.

Davidson’s criticisms of the traditional conventionalist account are informed by his general case which concerns instances where the interpreter comes to an utterance with an interpretive theory in advance of the utterance which informs them of the meaning of a given arbitrary utterance of the speaker (Davidson 258). The speaker then utters something with the intention that it be interpreted in a particular way, and the expectation that the interpreter will conform to that intention (Davidson 258). However, the speaker’s intended interpretation is outside the scope of (or contradicted by) the interpreter’s theory for understanding utterances (Davidson 258). Despite this, the speaker is understood because the interpreter adjusts their theory to include the speaker’s intended interpretation (Davidson 258). The commonality across such cases is that communication succeeds, despite an insufficient interpretive theory in advance of the utterance, because of a change to the interpretive theory simultaneous with the utterance which produces a theory that accommodates the speaker’s intended meaning. Beyond the fact that such an accommodation is possible the speaker may reasonably expect such an accommodation from their interpreter. Generally, such instances are either instances of substitution, where an old word is given a new meaning or vice versa, or invention, where a new word with a new meaning is introduced.

The general case threatens the third principle, that first meanings are governed by learned conventions or regularities which entails both that the competence of speaker and interpreter is learned in advance of acts of interpretation and that this competence is conventional. The general case threatens this in two ways. First, according to the general case a competent interpreter can alter their interpretive theory simultaneous to an

utterance, if that utterance is outside the scope of, or contradictory to, their interpretive theory in advance of the utterance. This means that the theory must be capable of alteration simultaneous to the utterance through the attribution of new first meanings. If the third principle were correct, then such alterations should have been learned in advance or governed by conventions learned in advance. But they are not, and the interpreter is able to accommodate them anyway. Second, according to the general case a competent interpreter can add new proper names to their interpretive theory and there seems to be no general convention for adding new names in advance of their utterance (Davidson 259). For example, if my friend gives me the new nickname “Slowpoke” by saying “Catch up Slowpoke!”, then I must add that into my interpretive theory by linking that new proper name to the cluster of descriptions which I associate with my own name. This is an addition I could not account for prior to my friend’s teasing, and moreover there seems to be no rules for whatever name he can give me. This threatens the third principle because if it was correct then such additions must be capable of incorporation into my interpretive theory under rules given prior to the utterance. But they are not, as attested to by the many humorous and seemingly random nicknames my friend has given me over time. Therefore, the third principle is incorrect, and some mechanism is needed to account for how interpreters can alter their interpretive theories simultaneous to an utterance.

To remedy this Davidson introduces the crucial distinction between “Prior theories” and “Passing theories”. Prior theories are how the interpreter is prepared to interpret an utterance of the speaker prior to the utterance and what the speaker believes to be the interpreter’s prior theory (Davidson 260-1). Essentially, it describes all the assumptions the speaker and interpreter have towards each other which inform their linguistic interaction. This includes factors beyond the linguistic⁵ part of the speaker’s and interpreter’s linguistic competence such as assumptions about the intelligence or

⁵ Linguistic in the sense that the factors are beyond language in the sense of basic competency. For example, basic grammar is truly linguistic while knowing how to speak to someone of higher social standing is not truly linguistic.

social standing of the other party. Also, prior theories are audience specific because they depend on the relation between the speaker and the interpreter. So, the closest they come to generality is a prior theory aimed at an average speaker or interpreter of which nothing is known beyond their basic linguistic competence.

Passing theory is the theory that the speaker intends their interpreter to use and the theory that the interpreter uses to interpret the speaker's utterance (Davidson 260-1). For communication to be successful passing theories must converge with each other⁶. In every linguistic interaction both speaker and interpreter come with prior theories and form passing theories to facilitate successful communication. Moreover, passing theories are context-specific because they may or may not transfer knowledge from a particular occasion to another, and if they do then that range may be limited (Davidson 260-1). For example, if I pass by some teenagers and they tell me my outfit is "on fleek" and I correctly interpret that as slang for "stylish" then I have a successful passing theory. Suppose that I walk by a very inebriated person and my companion tells me that they are "on fleek" I might successfully interpret that as slang for some illicit drug. In the two prior examples the knowledge only generalizes to specific contexts. Sometimes it is for one use only, such as when a malapropism is uttered. On such occasions I simply construct a passing theory which interprets the malapropism into what I think the person intended to mean. For example, "Don't count your hatches before they've chickened." obviously was intended as "Don't count your chickens before they've hatched.". So, for that occasion I interpret it as such but that passing theory may not generalize to other occasions.

⁶ In each speech transaction both speakers arrive with prior theories about how to interpret each other. A prior theory, for the reasons outlined above, is insufficient for interpretation. Hence the construction of a passing theory is necessary for successful interpretation. Successful interpretation constitutes the passing theories of both speakers converging. Such a convergence simply means that what I think you mean very much resembles, it converges with, what you think you mean and therefore I can understand you and communicate successfully.

An Account of Individual General Linguistic Frameworks

Thus far I have been carried by Davidson, now I will walk. My proposal is to extend his notions of Passing theories and Prior theories by placing them within the notion of an individual general linguistic framework. The general framework as a concept is necessary to organize the various prior theories an individual may have towards other speakers and interpreters into a coherent account of individual linguistic competence. For example, my general framework is a linguistic framework for speaking and interpreting English, and my prior theories about various speakers and interpreters are all substantially informed by that general framework⁷. But these prior theories do not emerge *ex nihilo* and depend on other linguistic resources that generalize across prior theories such as knowledge of general English grammar. Thus, the notion of a general framework provides the necessary connection between the general linguistic resources that allow language users to construct various prior theories across linguistic interactions over time. The individual general linguistic framework is therefore necessary to provide sufficient linguistic resources to construct a prior theory, and a prior theory is necessary but not sufficient for a passing theory. Therefore, a general framework is necessary but not sufficient for a passing theory. The main advantage of individual general linguistic frameworks is that they ground passing theories as contextual modifications which override the prior theory and general framework while being substantially informed by them.

My introduction of individual general linguistic frameworks and a fluid aggregate model of natural language is my attempt to reimagine the third principle, that literal meaning is governed by rules or customs learned in advance of the interpretation of utterances⁸. To reiterate, I hypothesize that if we compare the individual general

⁷ Some may wonder which comes first: the general linguistic framework or the prior theory? Assuming that language is learned by repeated linguistic interactions, and that in the first instance there is neither a general linguistic framework or prior theory, then the two must be simultaneous because the first instance both provides some basics linguistic resources for the general framework and resources for constructing a prior theory.

⁸ On a traditional conventional account, which Davidson rejects.

linguistic frameworks of a sufficient body of speakers and interpreters across repeated linguistic interactions, then what will emerge is a cluster of greatly overlapping or similar points between those individual general linguistic frameworks. I call the individual points within the cluster *points of mass linguistic convergence*. These points are those areas where the frameworks of many people substantially converge in the sense that there is a high degree of similarity among many language users. These areas of convergence thus signify de facto linguistic custom among speakers and interpreters of a natural language at a given time. This view models natural language as a fluid aggregate where natural language is substantially composed of points of mass linguistic convergence between individual general linguistic frameworks which provide necessary but not sufficient grounds for interpretation by encouraging convergent tendencies in interpretation, leading to more frequently appropriate prior theories and convergent passing theories (in the sense that the former encourage convergent passing theories by providing accurate information and the latter converge with other passing theories for successful interpretation).

On my account the notion of a language on the traditional account is therefore a mistake which misidentifies an abstract representation of natural language, though well-informed by broad persistent points of mass linguistic convergence, as the natural language itself. This abstraction is what I call de jure language. Thus, the de jure English language is a socially constructed abstract representation of de facto natural English. Its function is to systematize and rationalize language so that institutions such as dictionaries and schools can encourage linguistic conformity for various ends. The mistake of the conventionalist account is to reify that abstraction as if it really was the de facto natural language instead of a representation of it. But the de facto natural language is a fluid aggregate of individual general linguistic frameworks and even that aggregate is itself a representation of those fundamental individual general linguistic frameworks. Hence when a speaker refers to the conventional literal meaning of a sentence, they are

at least partly referring to their prior knowledge of that reified abstract representation of natural language, of *de jure* language.

In summary, Prior theories and Passing theories are audience specific interpretive theories of which the former is prior formed prior to interpretation and the latter is former simultaneous to interpretation to facilitate successful communication. However, Prior theories and Passing theories have insufficient grounding in general linguistic resources for their own construction or to provide a general account of linguistic competence. Thus, I introduce the notion of an individual general linguistic framework to resolve these difficulties. From there I use this notion to develop an account of natural language as a fluid aggregate of points of mass linguistic convergence between the individual general linguistic frameworks of language users. On this account our individual linguistic frameworks develop and change over time and the aggregation of those individual frameworks allow us to understand natural language as an ever-evolving cluster of points of mass linguistic convergence formed by those developments. Therefore, it is true that there are many possible linguistic frameworks of which our present linguistic framework is merely one possible framework.

How are Individual General Linguistic Frameworks Perspectival?

It now remains to show how individual general linguistic frameworks are perspectival. I argue that the degree to which an individual general linguistic framework is perspectival largely depends on what is included in that framework. Remember, the general framework cannot be a Prior theory because Prior theories are audience specific assumptions, but it must necessarily inform those Prior theories. Moreover, the general framework, as the basis of a given Prior theory, is what is occasionally medially modified by a Passing theory. On that basis, what must constitute the general framework? It must include the following: a basic grammar with rules for modification and extension, an individual's vocabulary, core strategies for linguistic formation (basically equivalent to our usual style of speech), strategies for exceptional cases (new words, etc.), and perhaps general assumptions about other speakers. Altogether, this

picture of an individual's linguistic framework is highly individualized because it is dependent on the experiences which have contributed to the development of that general framework across linguistic interactions over time such as their conception of the meaning associated with a given word. This is intuitively plausible because, quite simply, everyone speaks differently and has different experiences. Moreover, this causal model is advantageous because it allows us to connect the impact of social factors into our model of linguistic competence.

To use an analogy as an example, many Christians believe in Christ but how many believe precisely the same thing when they say "Christ"? If the murky depths of theology are any indication, there are many Christians and many different interpretations of Christ within that Christian tradition. And these interpretations often have many social, historical, and linguistic causes which vary across time and place. This shows how many individual general linguistic frameworks can all accommodate the same word and yet have significantly non-identical meanings for that word as influenced by various causal factors. Therefore, insofar as the individual general linguistic framework is the product of a causal chain of experiences formed over time across linguistic interactions, it is perspectival because no two individuals have an identical causal chain of experiences which result in an identical linguistic framework. A necessary consequence of this view is that the same individual will have a different general linguistic framework at different times because of the causal effect of linguistic interactions. This means that as we live and gain in experience our linguistic framework develops with across linguistic interactions resulting in, hopefully, an ever-improving general linguistic framework. Indeed, my linguistic framework at twelve was not the same as mine at twenty-two nor will it be the same at fifty. Our linguistic frameworks grow through our experiences of linguistic interaction over time and therefore they are perspectival.

Relativizing Sentence Meaning and Sentence Truth

The next challenge is to show how a single semantically identical sentence can express various non-identical propositions across linguistic frameworks and therefore

have different truth values across linguistic frameworks. Suppose that there are two ontologists: Glaucon the Platonist and Thrasymachus the Nominalist. According to my theory they both have individual general linguistic frameworks. Assume that in their respective frameworks there are the semantic resources to utter things such as “There are numbers”. Both ontologists have a general framework dependent Prior theory for interpreting each others’ utterances into their own respective individual linguistic frameworks. Suppose that Glaucon the Platonist says, “There are numbers”. For the Platonist, this sentence expresses a proposition about numbers as mind independent entities under a Platonic theory which is dependent on his linguistic framework. Now suppose that Thrasymachus the Nominalist, having realized the utility of numbers, believes in a nominalized theory of mathematics, and utters “There are numbers”. For our Nominalist, this sentence expresses a proposition about numbers as entities under a Nominalist theory of mathematics which is dependent on his general framework. Both sentences are identical semantically, but they express different propositions because the speaker’s general framework conceptualizes numbers within a nominalist theory. Further suppose that Thrasymachus the Nominalist has retracted his former position and totally excludes numbers from his ontology. If he were to say “There are numbers” it would, according to his new general framework, be trivially false because such entities simply do not exist within his general framework insofar as it includes his ontological beliefs. Therefore, the sentence “There are numbers” can express various propositions across individual general linguistic frameworks and therefore differ in truth value across individual general linguistic frameworks. Therefore, a single semantically identical sentence can express various non-identical propositions across linguistic frameworks and therefore have different truth values across linguistic frameworks.

Relativizing Propositional Truth and The Problem of Synonymy

The next challenge is to show that a single sentence, when expressing the same proposition, can differ in truth value across different frameworks. However, this phrasing is problematic because it assumes that there can be synonymous propositions

between linguistic frameworks such that they can express the same proposition which in turn assumes that there are linguistic framework independent propositions. But a relativist theory must attack the assumption that there are linguistic framework independent propositions. This is because for a theory of linguistic framework relativity to succeed it must not allow propositions to have synonymous meanings between linguistic frameworks because that would imply that the proposition has a meaning which is external to and independent of linguistic frameworks. The challenge here is to explain why propositions cannot have synonymous meanings between linguistic frameworks. This is so because propositional meaning is totally dependent on the individual linguistic frameworks⁹ of the participants (speaker and interpreter) within a linguistic interaction. This is because speaker and interpreter meaning are ultimately products of linguistic competence as modelled within individual general linguistic frameworks which are in turn the causal products of linguistic interactions and experience over time. And since no one has an identical framework, it follows that no one can express propositions with synonymous meanings. However, by denying that propositions can have synonymous meanings between linguistic frameworks I am not denying the possibility of communication. It is still very possible through sufficient linguistic convergence during linguistic interactions, which is enabled by Prior theories and Passing theories as informed by the individual general linguistic frameworks of the participants.

The framework dependency of meanings that I am describing is a type of contextual dependency. John Searle in "Literal Meaning", raises some important arguments that are favourable to my view. Searle argues that "for a large number of cases the notion of the literal meaning of a sentence only has application relative to a set of background assumptions... and... these background assumptions are not all and could not all be realized in the semantic structure of the sentence" (Searle 210). This is because each sentence is only intelligible against background assumptions that dictates its

⁹ And its subcomponents and dependents such as Prior theories and Passing theories

application (Searle 211-212). But those assumptions call in other assumptions without any limiting principle (Searle 214-216). Therefore, such assumptions could not all be specified within the sentence.

This argument is much more damning for abstract entities because unlike Searle's "cat on the mat" they are intangibles nestled within linguistic assumptions. For those assumptions to be applied they must be within the interpreter and, even if they are partially non-linguistic, must be located within the interpreter's individual general linguistic framework or some dependent interpretive theory. If "the cat is on the mat" is only literally meaningful relative to a set of indefinite and variable background assumptions, then it is implausible that loaded abstract entities such as "God" or "numbers" are literally meaningful independent of any individual linguistic framework. Therefore, it is highly probable that theoretically loaded abstract entities such as "God" or "numbers" are only literally meaningful relative to a set of theoretical background assumptions and linguistic resources. If so, then those background assumptions and linguistic resources are mediately or immediately localized within some individual general linguistic framework which differs from other individual general linguistic frameworks and itself over time.

Therefore, the propositional truth of a sentence can differ across individual general linguistic frameworks because the framework provides the background assumptions and linguistic resources which render the proposition meaningful and provide the truth-conditions for its application. Therefore, such propositions are only true or false relative to some individual general linguistic framework. However, due to my denial of the synonymy of meanings between linguistic frameworks I can only maintain that semantically identical propositions vary in truth-value across frameworks. This is because if by "identical proposition" I imply synonymy of meaning between identical propositions then my arguments would entail that there are no identical propositions. This would be too far, so I restrict my criterion for an "identical proposition" to semantic identity. In conclusion, the truth value of an identical proposition can vary across

linguistic frameworks due to the framework relativity of propositional meaning and the impossibility of synonymous propositions between linguistic frameworks.

Conclusions and Prospects for Fictionalist Discourse

Given this theory, what are the prospects of ontology generally and what application does this have for Fictionalist discourses? On my account the criteria of theory choice in ontology becomes external utility and internal consistency because the abstract objects under discussion are treated as mind-dependent entities through the linguistic framework dependency of their meanings. Thus, discourse between ontologists about the status of entities such as numbers is not a dispute over reality as such but rather a dispute over the consistency of such entities internal to linguistic frameworks, the external utility of such entities, and the convergence between linguistic frameworks. Therefore, the best ontological theory will maximize internal consistency within its linguistic framework, external utility, and convergence of meaning between different frameworks. In simpler terms, is it compatible with other entities, is it useful for acting in the world, and can others successfully communicate about it?

This is like the criteria for evaluating fictional discourses: what external purposes does it satisfy, is it internally consistent, and can others understand it? It thus lends itself well to Fictionalist views which aim to resolve the problems entailed by discussing fictional objects on a Quinean ontology. Under such an ontology, fictional talk would entail the existence of such entities which poses serious problems. However, using the notion of individual general linguistic frameworks we can describe such objects as existing as mind-dependent entities or beliefs which are interpreted through a Prior theory or framework component. Thus, inter-subjective fictional entities such as “Santa Claus” or “the inherent value of money” really consist in points of mass linguistic convergence between the relevant Prior theories or framework components of a body of language users. Furthermore, truth-claims about such entities can now be seen for what they are: arguments about the degree or content of the points of mass linguistic convergence which constitute those entities. Moreover, the notions of Prior Theory and

Passing theory can now explain how individual communication can eventually lead to changes in the character of these entities over time as changes in the character of the points of mass linguistic convergence which constitute those inter-subjective entities.

Lastly, this account of fictional objects lends itself well to preface Fictionalist views. For example, for those Fictionalists interested in the application of context to fictional games this theory provides a platform for describing that game-related competency as a subcomponent of the individual general linguistic framework, with Prior theories as the prefacing context and Passing theories as the act of using linguistic competency to construct convergent interpretations to correctly participate in such games. Another advantage for Fictionalists is that the problems of object-fictional claims like “Sherlock Holmes was a detective” implying a real Sherlock Holmes resolve themselves as ultimately referring to things that only exist within linguistic frameworks mediated by contextual assumptions rather than real language independent entities. Therefore, this resolves the problem of fictional entities by placing them as mind-dependent and linguistic framework dependent entities of a less demanding ontological status. Thus, insofar as such things exist, they exist within that linguistic dependency and not in the challenging language independent sense implied by ontologists such as Quine. It is my hope that this neo-Carnapian relativist view can provide a valid attempt at an alternative ontological stance.

Works Cited

Davidson, D. (2010). *The Essential Davidson*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Eklund, Matti. "Carnap's Metaontology." *Noûs*, vol. 47, no. 2, 19 Oct. 2011, pp. 229–249, 10.1111/j.1468-0068.2011.00830.x.

Searle, John R. "Literal Meaning." *Erkenntnis*, vol. 13, no. 1, Jan. 1978, pp. 207–224, 10.1007/bf00160894.