

---

# Radical Interpretation, Hermeneutics, and Practice Theory

Martin Stokhof  
Department of Philosophy  
School of Humanities  
Tsinghua University

October, 2015

## **Preliminary**

This is the third and last in a series of three intensive seminars that were given in 2014 – 2015, under the overall title ‘Understanding, Meaning, Interpretation: Three seminars’.

The common theme of the series is that of understanding: how does understanding of language and action come about? What kinds of understanding are at stake here? What role does linguistic meaning play? What should a proper theory of natural semantics look like? How does the historical and cultural background shape our understanding and evaluation of language and action? What is needed for radical interpretation to succeed?

The three seminars explore different aspects of this common theme: the first seminar focusses on the type of practical understanding that is explored in Wittgenstein’s later work, in particular in connection with ethics and religious belief, rituals, and aesthetic experience. The second seminar investigates some of the basic philosophical and methodological assumptions of modern formal semantics, in order to give a critical appraisal of what formal semantics can and can not contribute to an overall theory of understanding. The third and last seminar explores the central philosophical thought-experiment of radical interpretation, and brings together insights from both the analytic as well as the continental traditions in modern Western philosophy.

## **1 Goals and contents**

The problem of radical interpretation is simple, but profound: how are we able to come to understand the utterances of speakers of a language that is fully foreign to us? Some reflection reveals that the problem also arises with respect to our own language: what exactly is it that guarantees that we understand

---

the meanings conveyed by utterances made in a familiar tongue? An appeal to the notion of a ‘shared language’ is obviously of no help here: we need recourse to factors outside language proper to be able to define the notion of a shared language as such. The solution to the problem of radical interpretation points toward the existence of an intrinsic relation between the linguistic meaning of utterances on the one hand and the non-linguistic context in which such utterances are made on the other hand: interpretation is always and necessarily connected with the ways and views of speaker and hearer, writer and reader.

## **2 Approach**

Within modern analytical philosophy this aspect of interpretation has been questioned and investigated by, among others, Quine and Davidson. Central to their concerns is the so-called ‘principle of charity’, that, roughly, states that the utterances of others are interpretable only against a background of maximised agreement between their beliefs about the world and ours.

In Wittgenstein’s later work ideas can be found that at first sight are in line with this. His notions of a ‘practice’ within which meaning functions and that of a ‘form of life’ that we must share for interpretation to be possible, seem consonant with the principle of charity. But unlike the latter Wittgenstein’s practices and ‘form of life’ are not confined to doxastic attitudes only: they have a clear social and practical flavour. This leads to a different notion of the subject and its relation to meaning and language.

Within the continental tradition in philosophy the intrinsic relation between interpretation and context constitutes a hallmark of the hermeneutic approach: interpretation does not take place ‘in vacuo’, but against a background of views and opinions that in their turn are extended and modified by the results of the interpretation process. Traditionally, hermeneutics is concerned with the interpretation of historical texts. But in Heidegger’s transformation of the hermeneutic tradition, as worked out into a theory of interpretation by Gadamer, this perspective is given a distinct ‘practical’ twist, that at certain points seems congenial to some of the ideas of Wittgenstein.

## **3 Course material**

All reading materials will be made available electronically.

## **4 Schedule**

The seminar runs for three weeks, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, from 07.20 to 09.45 PM, except the last meeting, which takes place on Monday. The first

meeting is on Tuesday, October 13, and the last one will take place on Monday, October 26. The venue will be announced later.

Each session will consist of a 90 minutes lecture, followed by 45 minutes questions and discussions period. Students are asked to prepare questions for each session and email them to the lecturer before 12.00 AM. Use this email address: m.j.b.stokhof@uva.nl. For students who want to take the course for credits there will be two interim and one final assignment.

*Session 1, Tuesday, October 13*

Topic: Davidson: radical interpretation and the principle of charity

Material: Davidson (1973, 1986a)

*Session 2, Thursday, October 15:*

Topic: Davidson: conceptual schemes and prior and passing theories

Material: Davidson (1974, 1986b)

*Session 3, Tuesday, October 20:*

Topic: Heidegger & Gadamer: the hermeneutical circle and the historicity of interpretation

Material: Heidegger (1962, chapter V, §§ 31–34), Gadamer (1989, Part 2: II.1 & II.3.C).

*Session 4, Thursday, October 22:*

Topic: Wittgenstein: rules, normativity and practices

Material: Wittgenstein (1953, §§ 138–55, 179–243), Wittgenstein (1967, fragments)

*Session 5, Monday, October 26:*

Topic: Practice theory: subject, practice and interpretation

Material: Schatzki (1996, chapters 2, 3, 4).

## References

- Davidson, Donald. 1973. Radical interpretation. *Dialectica*, 27, 313–28. Reprinted in Davidson (2001a).
- . 1974. On the very idea of a conceptual scheme. *Proceedings and Addresses of The American Philosophical Association*, 47. Reprinted in Davidson (2001a).
- . 1986a. A coherence theory of truth and knowledge. In: Lepore, Ernie, ed., *Truth and Interpretation. Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, pp. 307–19. Blackwell, Oxford. Reprinted in Davidson (2001b).
- . 1986b. A nice derangement of epitaphs. In: Lepore, Ernie, ed., *Truth and Interpretation. Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, pp. 433–46. Blackwell, Oxford. Reprinted in Davidson (2005).
- . 2001a. *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2nd edn.

- . 2001b. *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. Clarendon, Oxford.
- . 2005. *Truth, Language and History*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1989. *Truth and Method*. Crossroad, New York.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Schatzki, Theodore R. 1996. *Social Practices. A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- . 1967. *Zettel*. Blackwell, Oxford.