Is Thought without Language Possible?

Diana I. Pérez
University of Buenos Aires, and CONICET

Abstract

In this paper,[1] *I discuss Davidson's ideas about the relationship between mind and language. First, I consider his arguments for the claim that there cannot be thought without language, and I examine the assumptions the arguments presuppose. In the second place, I consider the idea of "thought" Davidson adopts, and its essentially normative and holistic character. Third, I try to show the adequacy of this conception of thought in order to deal with epistemological problems, and the inadequacy of this notion in solving the problem of the "emergence" of thought. Finally, I sketch an alternative account of such an "emergence," looking for continuities between pre-linguistic and linguistic thoughts.*

Davidson has been one of the most systematic philosophers in the twentieth century. His ideas in each philosophical field he thought about – especially philosophy of language, epistemology and philosophy of mind – are so tightly entrenched that it becomes difficult to isolate a thesis from the other, and an argument from the others. One of the most remarkable traits about his philosophy is the close connection he found between language and mind, assuming in both cases the notion of "radical interpretation" as a basic element of his theory. I would like to discuss here his ideas about the relationship between language and thought. In the first place, I present the arguments Davidson gives in order to prove that there cannot be thought without language, and I examine then the assumptions the arguments presuppose. In the second place, I consider the idea of "thought" Davidson adopts, and its essential normative and holistic character. Third, I try to show the adequacy of this conception of

© *Principia* 9 (1–2) 2005, pp. 177–191. Published by NEL – Epistemology and Logic Research Group. Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), Brazil.

thought in order to deal with epistemological problems, and the inadequacy of this notion in solving the problem of the "emergence" of thought. Finally, I sketch an alternative account of such an "emergence," looking for continuities between pre-linguistic and linguistic thoughts, in order to solve this last problem, and I try to show that there is no thought without language (but in a weaker sense).

1. Arguments for the Conceptual Connection between Language and Thought

Davidson (1975, 1982) holds the strong thesis according to which only those individuals who can communicate with each other by means of a spoken language can have thoughts. His main argument is quite simple, but every premise needs a special defence because they are very disputable. The main argument goes as follows:

(i) *Every propositional attitude (every thought) requires a background of beliefs.* This means that although beliefs are not basic in the sense that we cannot reduce all propositional attitudes to beliefs, we can attribute a propositional attitude to an individual just in case we attribute at the same time many beliefs to her. Without beliefs there are no propositional attitudes. Thus, the rest of the argument will be centred on beliefs.

(ii) *In order to have a belief it is necessary to have the concept of belief.* This is the most disputable premise of the argument. Davidson's argument for it is based upon the most peculiar feature of "thought" according to his view: its rationality. The idea is this: given the fact that every belief entails a number (infinitely many) of other beliefs and other propositional attitudes, and that every belief is capable of being revised in the light of other beliefs, to have a belief is to be prepared to change our beliefs in the light of new information, i.e. we have to be prepared to distinguish what we merely believe from what is objectively true. In brief, to have a belief is to be in a state governed by ra-

tionality, and rationality and objective truth go hand in hand; therefore to have a belief is to have the concept of belief, i.e. the concept of objective truth.

(iii) In order to have the concept of belief one must have language. This is Davidson's weakest premise. In fact, he admits he can only prove that the concept of objective (inter-subjective) truth suffices as a basis for beliefs, but not that the only way to have the concept of belief is by having the notion of objective truth, i.e. by triangulating[2] with another speaking person and communicating with each other using a shared language (1982) or interpreting each other utterances (1975).

(iv) (Conclusion) There are no thoughts without language.

There is a second argument in Davidson 1982, which is based upon another important feature of thought: its holism. According to Davidson there is no sense in attributing an isolated propositional attitude to a given person; it is always necessary to attribute a big set of propositional attitudes to a person, including many beliefs, in order to attribute her a given thought. Davidson considers the case of Malcolm's dog, to which we tend to ascribe the belief that it thinks that the cat went up the oak tree, after we see the dog following the cat, and barking before the tree. And he says:

> We identify thoughts, distinguish among them, describe them for what they are only as they can be located within a dense network of related beliefs. If we really can intelligibly ascribe single beliefs to a dog, *we must be able to imagine how we would decide whether the dog has many beliefs of the kind necessary for making sense of the first.* It seems to me that no matter where we start, we very soon come to beliefs such that we have no idea at all whether a dog has them, and yet such that, without them our confident first attribution looks shaky. (1982, p. 98, my italics.)

I think that Davidson's argument at this point is the following:

(i) *Holism of thought:* The attribution of a single propositional attitude to someone makes sense only in the context of a network of other attributed propositional attitudes.
(ii) There is no way to decide among too many different networks of possible propositional attitudes when we consider the case of a non-speaking being.
(iii) Therefore, only if a person can talk, we have a way (i.e. linguistic communication) to settle the question and attribute genuine propositional thoughts to the individual.

As we saw, Davidson's arguments are based on his understanding of the mental. Let us take a look at his idea of "thought."

2. Davidson's Conception of Thought

When Descartes asked to himself what was a "thinking thing," he answered: "A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions" ("Second Meditation"). Descartes himself acknowledged that the two last modes of thought – imagination and sensation – could only be possible in a thinking thing attached to a body, but the other ones could be modes of a bodiless self. Descartes's view on the nature of mentality influenced many discussions in the philosophy of mind till our days. However, Davidson is an exception; he has a more restricted notion of thought than Descartes because, according to him, sensations, raw feels, after-images and the like are not part of our mental life, or at least not so-described.

In "Mental Events" Davidson wondered what does it mean to say that an event is mental. And he gives the following answer. An event is a mental event if it is describable in mental terms. Mental verbs are those which express propositional attitudes, i.e. verbs which are able to create non-extensional contexts (i.e., contexts where the rules of substitution break down). According to Davidson "the distinguishing feature of the mental is not that it is private, subjective or immaterial [as Descartes claimed], but that it exhibits what Brentano called *intentionality*" (1970, p. 211, my ital-

ics). The linguistic superficial distinguishing feature of the mental is that it is describable in terms of a verb (a propositional attitude verb), which connects an individual with a sentence, a sentence in the language of the interpreter – as he says in 1989 – or more precisely, with an utterance of the interpreter. Every event, even physical events such as *yesterday's eruption of the Vesuvius*, can be described in mental terms, for example as "the first news I read today in the newspaper," but some events have a description in terms of intentional verbs which are essential to them. This is not the case as to sensations and raw feels, whose usual description does not involve intentional verbs, i.e. verbs with a that-clause. The place where Davidson draws the line dividing the mental from the physical is not the usual post-Cartesian place: it excludes phenomenal consciousness.

Davidson (1970) mentions two additional features of the mental, which are responsible for its irreducibility to the physical: the same two features of the mental responsible for the arguments in the last paragraph, normativity and holism. First, the mental is *holistic*, i.e. beliefs and desires affect behaviour only as mediated by other beliefs, desires and intentions. Therefore, definitional reduction of the mental to the physical (the kind of reduction aimed at by logical behaviourists such as Carnap) is impossible. Second, the mental is *"governed" by normativity principles*, such as the principle of rationality and the principle of charity. But the physical is not governed by normative principles. And two realms holding different constitutive principles cannot be connected by strict laws. Therefore, a reduction by means of bridge-laws, following the model proposed by Nagel (1961), is also impossible.

These three features of the mental – intentionality, holism and normativity – stem from the more basic idea of "radical interpretation" from which Davidson builds his philosophy of meaning and his philosophy of mind. It is from the point of view of the interpreter that we can ascribe beliefs and other propositional attitudes to the speaker as well as meanings to her utterances. Both processes are to be done in a single act of interpretation, ascribing a host of beliefs, desires, intentions, actions and linguistic meanings to the agent at the same time, and these ascriptions are governed by nor-

mative principles such as rationality and charity. So, from Davidson's point of view these three features of the mental are intrinsically linked. This conception of the mental also coheres with decision theory, the scientific theory Davidson prefers to use to understand psychological phenomena. In effect, Davidson's understanding of the mental, I think, is designed in order to fit the idea that mental phenomena are reasons for our actions, i.e. the idea of rationality underlying decision theory.

It is interesting to note that although Davidson's answer to the mind-body problem is a special kind of monism (his celebrated anomalous monism), his conception of the mind entails a deep dualism. It is not an ontological dualism, but a conceptual dualism: mental and physical concepts – as he says – are not "made for each other"; they are radically different because of the differences in the "principles" governing each realm. This deepest dualism is the basis for the anomalism of the mental that Davidson strongly held.

3. Relations with other Davidsonian Theses

3.1. Davidson's Ideas about Epistemology

Davidson's conception of belief nicely fits Davidson's epistemology. As it is well known, he defends a coherentist theory of knowledge according to which there is no epistemological "basis" for knowledge outside our beliefs: as he says, "nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief" (1982, p. 141). Sensations, sense data, raw feels, etc., do not belong to the realm of the intentional/mental, so they are out of the "space of reasons" (although they are causes of our beliefs). Davidson's deep conceptual dualism reflects the gap no naturalism can fill: the gap between a normative and a descriptive realm, between reasons and causes.

Davidson's conception of the mental also coheres with his rejection of the myth of the subjective: there are no objects before the mind to which we have a special access or epistemic connection grounding all our knowledge of the world and of other people's minds. To have a belief is just to be in a certain physical state (be-

cause Davidson's anomalous monism entails case physicalism), which can be described by a third person (the interpreter) as a relational state in which the agent is related to an utterance of the interpreter.

The orthodox epistemic projects fail, according to Davidson, because they do not recognise the mutual interdependence of three kinds of knowledge: knowledge of the propositional contents of our minds, knowledge of other minds, and knowledge of the external world. These projects accept a wrong view of the mind, according to which there are two different kinds of knowledge, namely knowledge of the physical and of the psychological. The modern project fails because it takes self-knowledge as basic, and tries to explain knowledge of the external world and knowledge of others based on it. The scientistic/naturalist project fails because it takes as starting point the knowledge of the external world and tries to explain psychological knowledge from the third person perspective, but it can never accommodate the first person perspective of our own minds. According to Davidson we have to give up the idea of explaining first person knowledge from third person knowledge or vice versa, i.e. we have to accept that there are three kinds of knowledge irreducible to each other: knowledge of the propositional contents of our minds, knowledge of other minds, and knowledge of the external world. These three vertices of the triangle are all of them equally basic. In his own words:

> Knowledge of the propositional contents of our own mind is not possible without the other forms of knowledge since there is no propositional thought without communication [and communication presupposes (because of the triangulation thesis, see next paragraph) causal connections with events and objects placed in an objective world, i.e. knowledge of the external world]. It is also the case that we are not in a position to attribute thoughts to others unless we know what we think since attributing thoughts to others is a matter of matching the verbal and other behaviour of others to our own propositions or meaningful sentences. Knowledge of our minds and knowledge of the minds of others are thus mutually dependent. (1991, p. 213.)

> If I am right, our propositional knowledge has its basis not on the impersonal but in the interpersonal. (1991, p. 219.)

3.2. The (Problem of the) Emergence of Thought

There is one point where Davidson's view on mind seems unsatisfactory to me. It is the problem of how it is possible for the mental to arise from the physical, i.e. how it is possible for us to understand the connection between the mental and the physical. Davidson himself was concerned with this question. Davidson 1970 calls this relation *supervenience*; and many philosophers during the 80s were concerned with the explanation of this idea: the idea of a dependency but non-reductive relation. In the 90s, a certain scepticism about the possibility of a relation with these characteristics was the major view (see Kim 1993). Davidson himself, while insisting on his idea of supervenience, in spite of the many difficulties to make sense of it, offered since the late 80s an alternative approach to answer this question: he offered his triangulation hypothesis (1988a, 1988b, 1997). "Triangulation" is the name for the description of the objective/physical situation that constitutes the necessary (but never sufficient) condition for the emergence of thought. This situation is constituted by three vertices, I (the interpreter), you/the other (the speaker) and the external/objective world. These vertices are connected with each other by causal relations. But it is also a necessary condition for thought to emerge that the first two vertices are able to be engaged in linguistic communication: there are no thoughts without concepts, and no concepts without predication.[3] The interpreter assigns, by means of a process of radical interpretation, a meaning to the speaker's utterances and, at the same time, attributes to her a big number of propositional attitudes. The third vertex, the external world, is necessary in order to warrant conditions of satisfaction for those propositional attitudes. This triangular situation allows Davidson to add a fourth feature to the mental: its externalism.

It is important to remark two things. First, the situation described is not a sufficient condition for thought, and there will

never be sufficient conditions by adding more details to this description, because if it were possible to settle these sufficient conditions, thought could be reducible to the physical, an idea that Davidson rejects time and again. Second, the idea of "triangulation" is used by Davidson in different contexts for different purposes. He admits (Davidson 2001) three different applications of this idea: First, as a description of the necessary (fully non-intentional) conditions for thought; second, as a description of the learning situation where one creature is learning his first language (the situation where thought and language "emerge"); and third, as the situation where the contents of our perceptual beliefs are determined. As Davidson remarks, triangulation is not an empirical explanation of the process of language acquisition, but an account of the conditions of possibility of thought, language, ostension, and perceptual content. There is a further triangular situation, the original one in Davidson's thought, where the triangle was implicit for years, namely when two people do not share the same language but speak different languages, the situation of radical interpretation.

The idea I would like to present is the following: if we add to Davidson's triangle an empirical theory about the way in which children learn the concept of "belief" and other mental concepts, there would be a way to fill the gap that Davidson did not want to fill. In this way, we would have a non-Davidsonian answer to the problem of the emergence of thought.

4. In Search of Continuities: an Alternative Understanding of "Thought"

Since Davidson presented the triangulation hypothesis in the mid 80s, a lot of work has been produced in the field of developmental psychology (and also in anthropology, ethology and primatology) in order to give an answer to the problem of the way in which human beings acquire a theory of mind. Leaving aside many differences between the theorists, and trying to be as neutral as possible in this field, I will use in what follows the expression "a theory of mind" in

order to refer to the network of interconnected mental concepts that normal, adult human beings possess, such as believe, desire, know, think, hope, etc. This is the end-stage of the acquisition process of a theory of mind.

There is convergent evidence pointing to the fact that children do not acquire all mental concepts at the same time.[4] On the contrary, the evidence suggests that two years old normal children usually understand the concepts of "pretend" and "desire"; that three years old children understand concepts such as "know" and "think"; and that four years old children understand the concept of "belief", i.e. they understand situations in which people can have different beliefs about the same state of affairs, situations where someone can have a false belief and act according to this false belief, erring because of his error; in Davidson's terminology, such children acquire the concept of objective truth, i.e. the idea of misrepresentation. The test to verify the acquisition of the concept of belief is known as the "false belief task," and it was widely discussed in the last 20 years.

Given the fact that there are two years between the acquisition of the concept of "desire" and the concept of "belief," it seems to me natural to put into question the extreme "holism of the mental," which Davidson held. Some people (kids between 2 and 4) do have the concept of desire but do not have the concept of belief. We always have the possibility of saying that the concept of desire before the age of 4 is different from the concept of desire after this age, but it seems to me that this is simply an *ad hoc* move to retain Davidson's extreme holism.

This fact also puts into doubt premises (i) and (ii) of the argument given above. If there are no beliefs without the concept of belief (ii) and if there are no desires (as a special case of propositional attitudes) without beliefs (i), it follows that there are no desires without the concept of belief; however, this is exactly what is the case for very young children, according to developmental psychology: between 2 and 4 kids have the concept of desire but do not have the concept of belief; one of the premises has to be given up.

Finally, the strong principle of rationality, which according to Davidson governs our mental concepts, also becomes doubtful. Young children under 4 usually explain other people's actions by means of reasons, for example saying things like "He wanted a candy" or the like. But they lack the concept of belief. So, not *all* explanations we give using mental concepts are constrained by the strong rationality of practical reasoning, which governs mental concepts if we follow Davidson's ideas.

According to my view, even if the processes, mechanisms and abilities underlying the acquisition of mental concepts are not completely understood nowadays, a great progress has been made in this field. And the facts we know about the gradual process of the acquisition of mental concepts help us to solve the problem Davidson did not want to solve: the problem of the emergence of thought. The recent studies in developmental psychology helps us to understand the way in which the concept of thought, understood in terms of opacity (i.e. as propositional attitudes), and perhaps externalism, is built. It remains to understand how normativity and holism emerge as features of thought, but, as I said above, these are two specific Davidsonian features of thoughts, and the main view on the mental does not include these two features as essential for thought.

I want to conclude with two remarks about the way in which Davidson anticipated many of the discussions going on nowadays in developmental psychology. First, the triangular situation described by Davidson is the very same situation needed, according to many psychologists, in order to acquire a theory of mind. According to Baron-Cohen's (1994) proposal, there exists a non-propositional triangular situation (but not purely causal/physical either), which underlies the propositional triangular situation essential to a theory of mind: the situation that appears by 9–14 months of age, in which the baby represents not only what another person sees (or wants) and not only what the self sees (or wants), but whether the self and other person see (or want) the very same external thing (the mechanism underlying this triangle is called the "share attention mechanism"). This third triangle is between the physical and the fully intentional one, and points also to a continuity to fill our gap.

First we have the physical triangle, described by Davidson: two people and the external world holding causal relations amongst them. Second, we have a pre-linguistic, non-propositional situation where the baby can be interpreted as having thoughts about the external world, for example when babies desire and perceive objects of the external world. In such situations babies have thoughts (many people think they have non-propositional thoughts, but, according to Leslie 1987 and 1994, they have full blown propositional attitudes, since they are able to "pretend," and the structure of pretending has the main feature of propositional attitudes: opacity). But kids younger than 4 do not have the concept of belief; so, if Davidson is right and if we have to possess the concept of belief in order to have beliefs, babies have no beliefs. (If Davidson is wrong we can also attribute to babies beliefs about the world, although they are not beliefs about other people's beliefs). In the third place, babies acquire the concept of belief, while succeeding with the false belief task, and then have full-blown beliefs about the world and about other minds.

The second remark I want to make is about the topic of this paper: the relation between thought and language. There are lots of discussions among psychologists on the role of language in the development of a theory of mind. But there are no doubts about the fact that both capacities develop, at least, together: deficits in the acquisition of a theory of mind appear together with deficits in the pragmatic understanding of language, in the understanding of conditional and counterfactual sentences, and of course in the semantics of mental terms. So, according to my view, Davidson was right: there is no propositional thought without language, but this fact is not a conceptual consequence that stems from the holism and normativity of mental concepts, but an empirical consequence of the way in which our interpretative or "mind reading" capacities develop.[5]

References

Baron-Cohen, S. and Swettengham, J. 1994. "The relationship between SAM: and ToMM: two hypothesis." Reprinted in Carruthers and Smith 1996.

Carruthers, P. and Smith, P. 1996. *Theories of theories of the mind.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Davidson, D. 1970. "Mental Events." Reprinted in Davidson 1980, *Essays on Actions and Events*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—. 1975. "Thought and Talk." Reprinted in Davidson 1984, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—. 1982. "Rational Animals." Reprinted in Davidson 2001, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—. 1983. "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge." Reprinted in Davidson 2001, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—. 1988a. "The Myth of the subjective." Reprinted in Davidson 2001, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—. 1988b. "Las condiciones del pensamiento." *In* Davidson, D. 1992, *Mente, mundo y acción.* Barcelona: Paidós.

—. 1989. "What is present to the mind?" Reprinted in Davidson 2001, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—. 1991. "Three varieties of knowledge." Reprinted in Davidson 2001, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—. 1997. "The emergence of thought." Reprinted in Davidson 2001, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—. 2001. "Comments on Karlovy Vary Papers." *In* Kotatko, P., Pagin, P. and Segal, G. (eds.), *Interpreting Davidson.* Stanford: CSLI.

Garfield, J., Petersen, C. and Perry, T. 2001. "Social Cognition, Language Acquisition and the Development of the Theory of Mind." *Mind and Language* **16** (5): 494–541.

Kim, J. 1993. *Supervenience and Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Leslie, A. 1987. "Pretence and representation: the origins of "Theory of mind." *Psychological Review* **94**: 412–26.
—. 1994. "Pretending and Believing: issues in the theory of ToMM." *Cognition* **50**: 211–38.
Nagel, E. 1961. *The Structure of Science*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Keywords
Mental concepts, theory of mind, triangulation.

Diana I. Pérez
University of Buenos Aires and CONICET
dperez@filo.uba.ar

Resumo

Neste artigo, discuto as idéias de Davidson sobre a relação entre mente e linguagem. Primeiro, considero seus argumentos em favor da alegação de que não pode haver pensamento sem linguagem, e examino os pressupostos desse argumento. Em segundo lugar, considero a idéia de "pensamento" que Davidson adota, e seu caráter essencialmente normativo e holístico. Terceiro, tento mostrar a adequação dessa concepção do pensamento para lidar com problemas epistemológicos, e a inadequação dessa noção para resolver o problema da "emergência" do pensamento. Finalmente esboço uma explciação alternativa para tal "emergência," buscando continuidades entre pensamentos pré-lingüísticos e lingüísticos.

Palavras-chave
Conceitos mentalistas, teoria da mente, triangulação.

Notes

[1] I would like to thank L. Skidelsky and the audience at the *Fourth Principia International Symposium* (held in Florianópolis on August 8–11, 2005) for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.
[2] See 3.b.
[3] See Davidson 2001, p. 293.
[4] Even those who adopt an innatist position accept that there is a fixed sequence, according to which mental concepts are activated. I will be neutral on this issue; everything I say could be rewritten from an innatist perspective.
[5] See Garfield, Petersen and Perry 2001.