

Understanding Dead Languages

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(ABSTRACT)

Dead languages present a case where the original language community no longer exists. This results in a language for which the evidence is limited by the paucity of surviving texts and in which no new linguistic uses can be generated. Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that the meaning of language is simply its use by a language community. On this view a dead language is coextensive with the existing corpus, with the linguistic dynamic provided by the community of readers. Donald Davidson argued that the meaning of language is not conventional, but rather is discovered in a dynamic process of “passing theories” generated by the speaker and listener. On this view a dead language is incomplete, because such dynamic theories can only be negotiated by participating in a living language community and are thus not captured by the extant corpus. We agree with Davidson’s view of theories of meaning and conclude that our interpretations of dead languages will suffer epistemological underdetermination that removes any guarantee that they reflect the meanings as heard by the original language community.

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καγὼ δέ σοι λέγω ὅτι σὺ εἶ Πέτρος, καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρᾳ
οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ πύλαι ᾗδου οὐ
κατισχύσουσιν αὐτῆς. (Matthew 16.18, Nestle-Aland 26th
ed.).

“I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock
I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not
overpower it.” (Matthew 16.18, New American Standard
Bible, 1995 Update).

We often treat texts such as the one above as we would any foreign language text that needs to be translated into English. We use a grammar to figure out the syntax of the sentence and a lexicon to determine possible word meanings. Working with the context (for example, this text occurs in the middle of a book) and with our knowledge of the culture, we formulate an appropriate translation. However this text is quite different from an article we might find in German or Spanish, for it is written in a dead language, in this case Koine Greek. A dead language is one that is no longer spoken by a native language community, i.e. a community in which people learn the language from birth. I want to focus on texts in a dead language because they offer a boundary case for the problem of understanding, where not only the original author but the original language community no longer exists. The question I want to pursue in this paper is how the lack of a living language community affects the interpretation of texts in a dead language.

Dead languages pose an interesting problem because although there is generally agreement among interpreters on the basic meaning of a dead language text, there are

often vast disagreements about the finer points of meaning. These disagreements seem to be more severe than those between interpreters of a text in a living language. Often with a text in a living language, interpreters disagree about the author's theme or purpose, while interpreters of dead language texts disagree about the detail of the meaning of the text itself. We will examine two possible suggestions of a theory of meaning for dead languages that seek to explain this discrepancy. The first is the reconstruction view of dead languages, based upon an interpretation of Wittgenstein's theory of meaning. On this view a dead language is epistemologically the same as a living language and the discrepancy found in interpretations comes solely from the pragmatic limitations of a dead language. The second is the replacement view of dead languages, based upon an interpretation of Davidson's theory of meaning. On this view a dead language is epistemologically underdetermined compared to a living language, and the discrepancy in interpretations comes primarily from this fact.

All of the information about a dead language comes from the writings and artifacts of the extinct language community. No new uses of words can be generated. This forms an information bottleneck that we normally lack when we work with living languages. For a living language, we may inquire directly of native speakers or participate in the language community ourselves. The language community of a living language is constantly modifying the language, adding words and changing meanings. These are not options with the dead language. There are two ways in which examining this special case can help us better understand the philosophy of language. First, the meanings of words in a dead language are fixed by the textual corpus. In Koine Greek, for example, the meanings that we give to words are derived for the most part by examination of their use in the parchments that we have found. Thus, a dead language

has limited and stable content, often consisting of only a few hundred texts. We can think of a dead language like a slice through an ice core or a single frame of video.

Second, a dead language contravenes the method by which many philosophers pursue arguments in the philosophy of language, as dialogues with native speakers who are available for discussion, inquiry, and correction. For example, Quine in *Word and Object* (1960) sets forth his radical translation theory using the interaction between a translator and a native speaker, most memorably concerning a rabbit. Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations* (2001) explores language by designing mini languages and examining them, and by having an interlocutor raise questions of potential interpretations. Donald Davidson in “Radical Interpretation” uses Kurt’s comments on the weather (1973). Certainly the most natural way of discussing language is using examples from everyday speech, yet the presupposition of a living language community seems ubiquitous in the literature of the philosophy of language. Since the philosophers listed above are interested in language in its broadest formulation, perhaps it is not surprising that they refrain from mentioning a particular sub-category of language such as dead languages. Even so the investigation of a dead language will be able to shed light on some of these theories.

In this paper I will examine two philosophers’ theories of meaning with respect to the special case of a dead language. The first is Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose *Philosophical Investigations* has been a springboard for many philosophers of language. Wittgenstein argued that, for the most part, the meaning of a word is just its use by a language community. One way to look at a dead language is as a language that is coextensive with its textual corpus; that is, a dead language is completely described by the texts that have survived from antiquity. Meanings of words are determined by their

use in the corpus. On this view dead languages are easier to understand than living languages, because their meanings are fixed by a small set of uses that cannot change. The only difficulties that we might encounter in a dead language are caused by the practical limitations of the surviving texts.

The second philosopher is Donald Davidson, who argues that the meaning of a sentence is what would be the case if the sentence were true as judged by the language community. Further, Davidson departs from the traditional view that interpreting language involves a shared set of rules and meanings. He argues in “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs” (1986) that people interpret language using dynamic interpretive theories that change based upon the speaker and situation. Here is another way to look at a dead language, as a living language whose rules have been “fossilized” in the corpus. On this view a dead language might be said to be incomplete, in that the dynamic interpretive theories that were used by speakers to understand the language are absent from the corpus. I will examine the conclusions of both theories with respect to dead languages, and the resulting impact this has for interpreters of dead languages.

Chapter 1: Engaging with an Extinct Language Community

The concept of the language community will form the basis for our study of meaning. For our purposes, a language community is a group of people who communicate with each other in a common language and who hold in common certain behaviors and attitudes that provide context for the language. If language consists of a syntax (i.e. rules to determine how to form well-formed utterances) and a semantics (i.e. rules to determine the meaning of well-formed utterances) then these behaviors and attitudes form a third part of language that bridges the gap between syntax and semantics. Thus, a language is composed of grammatical rules and lexicography, but also presupposes the commonly held behaviors and attitudes of the people in the language community, which provide a context or a background against which they understand the language. I will call these behaviors and attitudes the linguistic clues of the language community. They form the contextual hints that enable a participant of the language community to take the raw utterances and transform them into meaningful sentences.

As a practical example of the difference between syntax or semantics and a lexical clue, I will relate a misunderstanding I had with Chinese food delivery driver, for whom English was a second language. At the conclusion of my order when asked for my street I replied with, “Dogwood Lane”, and the man taking the order, unable to hear me clearly said, “Dogwood Street?” Since there are no other “Dogwoods” in our town I said, “Yes. Close enough.” I got a call a few minutes later from the restaurant complaining that there was no “Dogwood Street” and requesting my address again. This time I made sure to emphasize “Dogwood Lane” and my food arrived shortly thereafter. The problem was not one of syntax or semantics. It is true that in English “Lane” and “Street” are different,

but in a town with only one road named “Dogwood” the linguistic clue is that the suffix of the street name is unimportant. “Dogwood” alone as a street name is enough to direct a competent speaker of English to my road. The driver knew enough English syntax to communicate, but he was missing this linguistic clue. This example brings up two important points about linguistic clues that will be vital to our discussion of dead languages. First, linguistic clues are highly context sensitive. Notice that not only does this clue concern a particular point of English grammar (proper nouns that are street names) but also a particular circumstance (in which the street name is not duplicated in a small region via a different suffix). Second, linguistic clues are rarely mentioned or discussed. They are learned and become part of the background of assumptions that people in the language community make when speaking to one another. Whereas the syntax and vocabulary of English can be found in grammars and dictionaries, the linguistic clues must be learned via interaction with another native speaker.

There are three main categories of linguistic clues that are learned by participating in the language community. First, there are the many highly situational rules like the one illustrated above that I will call the “fine print” of a language. These rules vary widely between regions and across time. They are the little things that native speakers giggle at when a person who is learning the language is ignorant of them. Next, there are the connotations of words. Words have a denotation, their lexical meaning or meanings, and a connotation, their emotional meaning. The connotation of a word is its emotional force, apart from its actual definition.

An example is the word “liberal” which even when used to mean “generous” still retains its political connotations for many people. I once told a friend he was a “liberal giver” and he replied, “Don’t ever call me liberal.” Another example is the word

“niggardly” which just means “stingy” but, because it sounds like another word that is a highly charged racial epithet, acquires a correspondingly negative connotation for many people. Some would argue that in this case there is nothing in the word’s denotation or history that justifies the negative connotation; it is mere happenstance of homonymy. Of course, epithets of all kinds have strong connotations quite apart from their meanings. A good lexicon will attempt to discern the connotation of a word, but since connotations shift they are often inaccurate or out of date. For the most part, the connotations of words must be learned by participating in the language community.

Finally, there is the body language of a language community, consisting of quite a few physical postures, gestures, and voice inflections. Much of the information content of our communication is emotional, yet the primary path for that emotional information is behavioral instead of verbal. The physical cues for emotional content are mere conventions of the language community that must be learned. For example, in English we raise our voice at the end of a phrase to indicate sarcasm. As another example, in English we give the “thumbs up” to indicate approval. Not only do these behaviors vary widely between language communities, but many of them occur without intention, that is, they are automatic learned responses. In many cases the speaker is often not aware of the physical cues she is sending. Like the other linguistic clues, body language is rarely catalogued in a lexicon or grammar or explained in writing. It is learned as part of the life of the community.

To participate in a language community is to participate in a dynamic language environment. The community adds new words, changes existing meanings, and even modifies grammar over time. Speakers of the language adjust continually to these changes, which may take years or decades to become widespread. During this process

parts of the language will be in flux, with speakers in different regions having different meanings or uses until such time as the meanings stabilize throughout the language community. Subgroups within the community may have a set of meanings, called “jargon”, that are particular to that group. Figures of speech and idioms may be invented only to fall out of favor later. All of these factors lead to a vibrant and shifting pool of meanings for the language.

It is possible for any one person to participate in more than one language community, as long as she was able to associate the proper behaviors and attitudes with each respective language. This means that language communities are the primary “unit” of social language groups, and as with other social groupings the boundaries of a language community are often unclear. A language may diverge geographically or socially with the creation of a dialect. There may be multiple dialects within the language community which differ from the parent language in pronunciation, word choice, word order, and idiom. These differences of dialect are not normally severe enough to warrant declaring the dialect a separate language from the parent.

In addition to geographical or social divergence, the language may diverge temporally with the creation of a descendant language. As a normal part of the language process, words are added or deleted, pronunciation is altered and even syntax is modified. For example, the English word “nice” which today means “pleasant” used to mean “foolish” (Oxford English Dictionary). Since languages evolve constantly there are no clear breaks between related languages. Ultimately it is the language community that determines whether a language has diverged, usually by ceasing to use the old language.

In both the geographical/social and temporal processes of language divergence there are dialects or languages which become abandoned. These are the dead languages,

such as Classical Greek, Koine Greek, Akkadian, Ancient Egyptian, Classical Latin, and Classical Hebrew. They are no longer spoken by a living language community and they are divergent enough from the language that the community is currently speaking to be considered a separate language. It is common for a dead language to be taken up by scholars or specialists for a particular purpose, but this does not change its status. The lack of a living language community speaking the language leads to two consequences. First, the dead language often has a limited set of texts from which to derive meanings. Second, the dead language cannot gain new uses or meanings. The dynamic process of language evolution driven by the native speakers has ceased.

The lack of a living language community requires interpreters to turn to other sources for the syntax and semantics of the language. There are four sources used in interpreting a dead language: the actual texts of the dead language, translations of texts into other languages made at the time the dead language was still spoken, grammar and vocabulary from descendant or cognate languages, and archeological evidence about the extinct language community. These sources vary with respect to their applicability and reliability in interpreting a dead language. The texts themselves and archeological evidence are the most applicable source of interpretive material but often the least reliable. Translations are interpretations of the dead language, and so are secondary sources as far as application. They can also be unreliable, especially since the translator's language is normally also now a dead language. Cognate and descendant languages can be very reliable, especially if they are living languages at present, but they are often not very applicable to the dead language in question.

The existence of cognate and descendant languages might lead us to think that there is no such thing as a dead language. After all, we can trace links between Koine

Greek and Modern Greek and between Classical Latin and Scholastic Latin. Modern Hebrew was consciously reborn from Classical Hebrew. One might argue that since most dead languages have descendant languages that diverge only slightly that much of what constituted the dead language can be found within them. Koine Greek is a good example of such a language, whose direct descendant is Modern Greek spoken by millions of people in a dynamic language community.

The Koine language continued to develop and change through time, inheriting vernacular and vulgar elements during the Byzantine period (Palmer p. 196). In reaction, the church and state of the Eastern Empire tried to recapture the formalism of Classical Greek. “Thus in the course of centuries the gap widened between the backward-looking official language and the living language of the people, which constantly grew and developed in response to the needs of life” (Palmer p. 197). This led to the eventual split between the formal *katharevousa* of the state and the *demotic* of the common people that developed from Byzantine Koine. In 1976 *demotic* was recognized as the official language of Greece, ending the division between the archaic state language and the language of the people. Thus, Modern Greek is a direct descendant of Byzantine Koine, which developed from the Koine of the ancient period. During this time there have been changes in vocabulary, grammar, and phonology. There are probably as many differences between Modern Greek and Koine as there are between Modern English and Old English, as one would expect of a language that was in use by the language community for two millennia (Wallace p. 17). It is clear, however many the similarities, that the people of Greece no longer speak Koine Greek, but rather Modern Greek.

Another way that we could argue that there is really no such thing as a dead language is by using translations. One might argue that if we had an unbroken chain of

translations from the dead language, made while both the dead language and the language it was translated to were living languages, then the language would not be dead. For example, if we had translations from Koine Greek into Latin and from Latin to Old French and from Old French to French, we would have a chain of meanings from the dead languages to a living language. Since at each point in the chain the original language and the translation language were living, the problem of a dead language never occurs. There was a living language community available at every point of the translation chain. There are two ways this could happen. First, all of the texts we have from a language could exist in such translations. In this case, we would have every text translated for us into languages which were living at the time. In this case it would be difficult to consider the language dead. Second, we could have enough texts translated such that we could construct a comprehensive syntax and semantics for the language. In this case we would use our findings to translate other texts.

There are several problems with this latter argument, however. First, a translation is only a secondary witness to a language, because the translation is itself an interpretation. Thus, although a translation may be helpful in determining the meanings of words, for example, it is not a record of the syntax and semantics of the dead language, rather it is a record of the syntax and semantics of the translator's language that reflects the original language. Second, translations were often made in antiquity because the original language of the source document became inconvenient for the current language community. At that point the status of the source language as a living language is already in doubt. Some think that the Septuagint, for example, was translated from the Hebrew Torah so that it could be used in the synagogue and for instruction of the Jews in the Hellenistic world who were more comfortable with Greek than Hebrew (Peters p. 1096).

At this point Hebrew was the language of scholars and rabbis, certainly not of the common people. It is debatable, then, whether the Septuagint was translated from living language to living language and not from a dead (or at least dying) language to a living language. Finally, not all translations are of equal quality. Some are summaries or outlines of a work, while others have an ideological bias.

We can further analyze this argument by looking at the history of one of the most important written works in the Western world, Homer's *Iliad*. Although translations were made from Greek into Latin during the first century BCE, when both languages were living, they did not survive. The first Latin translation that has reached modern times was the *Ilias Latina*, a rather poor summary made in the first century CE (King p.1). This is indeed a translation made between two living languages, but it is unfortunately a very poor and partial one. A full translation from Greek into Latin that can be connected to modern times was not made until 1360 CE by Boccaccio, well after Latin had ceased to be a living language of the people (King p. 7). In 1608 CE George Chapman translated the *Iliad* into English, but using the Greek text instead of the Latin. Thus, the second link in this chain is broken. Even for the *Iliad*, a book which was an important national treasure for the Greeks, the translation chain does not hold. In order to provide an accurate record of the syntax and semantics of the language in question we would need many hundreds of documents translated via unbroken translation chains. The fact that perhaps one of the most important documents of ancient Greek and Roman civilization, the *Iliad*, was not translated in an unbroken chain mitigates against this possibility.

Dead languages do not have a living language community and so differ from living languages in two important respects. First, a limited number of texts in the

language survives into the present, usually only a few thousand. The limited corpus is our primary source for the syntactic and semantic description of the language. Second, the dead language can no longer have new meanings or uses. The dynamic nature of the living language community has ceased. There are two ways to view the stagnant nature of the corpus of a dead language. In the first view, which I will associate with Wittgenstein's theory of meaning in Chapter 2, the dead language is described solely by the static set of meanings that we have available to us. That is, Koine Greek, for example, just is the language that is described by the surviving texts. In the second view, which I will associate with Davidson's theory of meaning in Chapter 3, the dead language is a language reconstituted from the limited sample of the original language by the addition of our own dynamic interpretive theories. That is, Koine Greek, for example, is the language that we recreate from the limited evidence we have remaining from the language once spoken by the Greeks around the 1st Century CE.

In the rest of this Chapter, however, I will describe the consequences of a limited corpus on the understanding of a dead language. The physical limitation of the corpus of a dead language applies to both of the above views of dead language, because it is not an epistemological limitation. An example of an epistemological limitation of language is the underdetermination that Quine speaks about concerning living languages (1960 §15-16). In Quine's view meanings in a translation are underdetermined because there is no way to reduce the possibilities of what the speaker meant without resorting to further communication (questions, clarifications, etc.) that require the meaning of words to be known. For Quine, this circular loop means that underdetermination is intrinsic to the task of translation.

In the case of dead languages, however, the meaning is only underdetermined because our sample set of the language is limited by the paucity of surviving texts. We can envision a “comprehensive corpus” that expressed examples of every syntactical and semantic rule in the dead language. The fact that this corpus is possible yet not probable means that the limitations of the corpus of a dead language are merely pragmatic difficulties, albeit with strong implications for interpreters. Since our primary source for the rules of the language comes from the texts of the language and since the texts of the language are limited in number, our picture of the rules of the language will be incomplete.

Word definitions are the first casualty of the incomplete corpus. Because the language community is extinct, one of the primary ways that we must learn the meanings of words is by examining their use in writing. There are two problems with this methodology caused by the limited number of texts at our disposal. The first is an uneven distribution of word samples. Words have multiple meanings, which can vary depending on context. In order to discern the meaning of a word from its use in context, we need to examine a large number of common applications of the word. The usage needs to be broad enough to cover all the possible meanings of a word as well as to show the relative frequency of variant meanings. That is, it is important to know that a particular meaning of a word is rare, so that if we confront a new text we consider that meaning appropriately.

As an example consider attempting to find the meaning of the Koine Greek word κεφαλή (*kephale*). By examining the occurrence of the word in the texts of the Koine Greek corpus, most Koine lexicons (Louw-Nida and BAGD) list the definition as “head” as do the Classical Greek lexicons, since in this case the two dialects agree on the use of

this word. However, Liddell-Scott also lists a reference to Herodotus using the word to mean “source” as in the source of a river. So, by the textual evidence it looks like the word *kephale* in Koine Greek means “head” and the word *kephale* in Classical Greek means “head” but can rarely mean “source”. Suppose, however, that our incomplete corpus is missing those Koine texts where the context makes clear that *kephale* means “source”. In this case our lexicon would be missing a secondary meaning for the word. We can extend the argument further. Suppose that in most occurrences of the living Koine language the word *kephale* meant “source” and was rarely used for “head”. In that case the corpus would just happen to contain texts that use the secondary meaning of *kephale* while lacking texts that show the more ordinary usage. It might sound far-fetched, especially using a common word such as “head”, but given the incomplete nature of the corpus it is not impossible. The lexicons of dead languages are updated with every major textual find. Without a comprehensive corpus we can only have “approximate” meanings of words from their use, because we are dealing with a limited sample of the language.

The second problem with finding word meanings from a limited corpus is that word meanings change through time. There can be variation in the use of a word over less than a generation. It is often the case, due to the rarity of surviving texts, that the textual corpus of a dead language could span centuries. For example the Koine word ἄρτος in Classical Greek means “a loaf of bread” (Liddell-Scott) while in Koine Greek the meaning has broadened to include “any type of food” (Louw-Nida). We can imagine any number words that have changed meaning but for which the corpus lacks clear examples. It is interesting that dead languages have words that are categorized as *hapax legomena*, that is, words that occur only once in the corpus. In the case of these words,

there is only one sample of the word's use in the texts we have at our disposal. Needless to say, the lexical entries of such words need to be used with caution. Most words have more than one meaning, so we have no way of knowing if the one example of the word that we have was found in the context of its primary or secondary meanings. If there are words in our corpus that occur only once, there are another set that occur only twice, and still others that occur only three times.

Word definitions are not the only part of language to suffer from the physical incompleteness of the textual corpus. In some cases the syntax of the language is in doubt as well. In the case of Koine Greek, for example, there is controversy over whether the cases of the language are based on formation or usage (Brooks and Winbery p. 2). This has the result of different grammars classifying the language as having either five or eight cases, depending on the opinion of the author on the issue. Since the case of a word in Greek will in part determine the role it plays in the sentence, disagreements about the number of cases can change how we interpret a word in circumstances where other clues are missing. The five-case system follows the form of the word rather than the function, so that a given word could have multiple functions. The eight-case system follows the function of the word and so a given word can only have one function. (Wallace p. 32). Thus for any given word the interpreter from the five-case school could see it operating in multiple ways within a sentence, while the interpreter from the eight-case school would see it operating only in one way. This could lead to differences in interpretation between the two interpreters: "In Mark 1:8...Following the eight-case system, one must see ὡς αὐτῷ as either instrumental or locative, but not both. In the five-case system, it is possible to

see ὕδατι as both the means and sphere in which John carried out his baptism” (Wallace p. 32).

The meanings of figures of speech can also suffer from a physically limited corpus. Idioms are phrases whose meaning has little to do with the meaning of individual words. In a living language community we learn the true meaning of idioms such as “you drive me up the wall” and “cut on the light”. In a dead language idioms are often difficult to discover and when we can tell that something is an idiom, it can be difficult to figure out the true meaning. If the corpus only contains one example of an idiom, it might never be discovered. Likewise, even when context makes the idiom plain, we have no way of knowing how widespread the idiom was in the language community. Of the two English idioms listed above, only the first one is common. The second one is restricted mostly to the South. An example of an idiom in Koine Greek is in the Bible from John 2.4 where Jesus says to his mother: “τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί, γύναι”. Literally this means, “What is it to you and me woman?” but idiomatically it is meant to convey annoyance and is normally translated as “Woman, what does this have to do with us?” As with other consequences of the incomplete corpus, it is quite possible that there are many texts that are idiomatic that we have not recognized.

Other figures of speech in a dead language have problems similar to those found in examining idioms. The text at the start of this paper contains a pun on the name “Peter” (Πέτρος) and the Koine word for “rock” (πέτρα). In this case the pun is obvious because both uses of the word occur together, however it might be that a word is being used as a pun of another word that does not appear in the corpus. Similar problems might also occur with euphemisms. Since euphemisms concern events and behaviors that the author wants to avoid mentioning, they are normally not explained. We are left to

determine if a seeming non-sequitur is in fact a euphemism. An example of a euphemism in Koine Greek is “πάντες οὐ κοιμηθήσόμεθα” in the Bible in 1 Cor 15.51 translated as “we will not all sleep” and referring to death as sleep. One final figure of speech that would be nearly impossible to discern would be malapropism. This is the purposeful misuse of the language. It would be difficult to tell in an incomplete corpus whether there was a misuse of the language, and if there was whether it was intentional or not. In fact, we could conceive of the coincidence of a malapropism with a *hapax legomena*. In this case we would take as the meaning of the word the one occurrence in which it was used incorrectly. We will speak more of malapropism when we discuss Davidson.

Chapter 2: Ludwig Wittgenstein and Dead Languages

Wittgenstein's theory of language is most thoroughly developed in his *Philosophical Investigations*. He begins with a discussion of meaning, upon which much of his argument turns. Wittgenstein wants to disabuse us of the notion, inherent in Augustine's description of language with which he opens the book, that "Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands" (§1). Wittgenstein denies that this is necessarily so. Not every word is a name or referent for the world. It is trivially true that words have no inherent connection to the world, that whatever connection there is exists because we make it so. Wittgenstein, however, argues that it is only by our determination that words mean anything at all.

Wittgenstein calls the whole process of learning a language, the definitions of words as well as the training that goes along with them, a "language-game" (§7). The term is meant to convey the non-referential nature of meaning, much like the rules of a game need not refer to any part of the world aside from the game. It is also meant to convey the social nature of meaning. "Here the term '*language-game*' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of a language is part of an activity, or of a life-form" (§23, italics original). The community that participates in the language-game abides by the rules of the game. Meaning, normally, comes from the use of words in this game. "For a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. And the meaning of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its bearer" (§43). There is no intrinsic metaphysical or deeper "meaning" that the community grasps though language; the meaning is determined by how the community uses the word in their

language-game. Any sort of connection between the “meaning” of a word and the world itself has been constructed by the community. It is there because the community says it is there.

Thus, Wittgenstein fashions his theory of meaning in contrast to Augustine’s theory and that which he developed in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. This is why, at the beginning of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein quotes Augustine’s theory of meaning which he learned as a child, “Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified” (§1). Augustine views words as names for objects in the world. The referent for each of the names is taught to him by those who already know the language. Quite contrary to Augustine’s concept of meaning, Wittgenstein’s view denies any referential connection with the world. We might call this the constructivist view of meaning, since language communities construct the meaning as mere convention. Different language communities can construct different meanings, since there is no such thing as a metaphysical entity called “meaning”. Meanings arise from the rules of a particular language-game as played by a particular community. To ask whether there is a real meaning is to ask whether there is a reason the queen in chess can move in any direction. There is no answer to this question except that that is how the rules of chess go. Such a thing is merely the custom, whether in language or in chess (§199). Likewise, the reason a word means whatever it means is because that is how the rules of the language-game go.

Now we want to investigate how Wittgenstein’s constructivist theory of meaning might need to be modified in the case of a dead language. It must be noted that Wittgenstein does reference dead languages in the *Philosophical Investigations* in the

introductory quote from Augustine (§1) in Latin and in later references to Moses taken from the Hebrew in the Bible (§79, §87). In neither case does Wittgenstein make mention that these are texts from dead languages, and he treats them as he does any of his examples in German. The Augustine text, however, was written by a participant in the Latin language community. Thus the meanings of the words in the text were determined by a language community that no longer exists. Wittgenstein is generally favorable to “normal” language and its uses, so it is unsurprising that he would treat dead language texts once translated in the way that most people do—as if they were normal texts. We want to know if there is something in Wittgenstein’s theory that accounts for the way he uses these texts or if he is indeed using them in accordance with his theory.

In order to examine what Wittgenstein makes of dead languages, as a first step, we must investigate how Wittgenstein treats foreign languages. The basis of Wittgenstein’s theory of meaning is that the meanings of words are constructed by a language community through their use in the language. It is possible for someone to know multiple languages because a person can participate in multiple language communities. For example, if I learn German I can participate in the German language community. At first, I will participate as a native-speaking child would participate, but with practice and experience I could become quite fluent at German. Because German is a living language, there is a language-game that I can learn the rules to and participate in. Wittgenstein uses the term “language-game” specifically to convey the idea that speaking a language is an activity or a form of life (§23). But for Wittgenstein, playing a language-game is the same as playing any other game, in that the game is played if the rules are followed. This is why he says that rules must be obeyed *blindly*; justification does not figure into it. “When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule *blindly*” (§219, italics

original). Likewise a language-game is played when the rules to the language-game are obeyed. There is nothing deeper involved in playing a language-game for Wittgenstein. It is possible for us to make a mistake in following the rules, or to have a language-game in which the rules are vague (§197). This does not change the fact that we are merely playing a game. “To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique” (§199). All there is to a language-game is the technique.

It would be wrong, however, to identify the technique of language with some sort of calculus performed with the rules of language. This is just the sort of thing that Wittgenstein argues against in an earlier section of the *Philosophical Investigations*; that following the rules of language is not at all like operating some sort of calculus based upon grammar and lexical usage (§81). In fact, the rules can be ambiguous or even lacking. We are following the rules of a language, not when we are in agreement with some ideal calculus of syntax and semantics, but when we are understood. Wittgenstein uses the example of a signpost: “The sign-post is in order—if, under normal circumstances, it fulfils its purpose” (§87). Judgments concerning our understanding and being understood occur within the language community: “To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (uses, intuitions)” (§199 italics original). The language community creates the customs and judges our speech, and we do likewise as members of the community.

Wittgenstein speaks of those who share a language-game as sharing a “form of life” (§19). The term is used by Wittgenstein to emphasize the interactive nature of language. “Here the term ‘*language-game*’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (§23). His

emphasis is on language as a part of life as opposed to being an approximation of an idealized calculus, as he argued in the *Tractatus*. Language is a natural expression of the activities of a community, of its form of life. The community developed its language-game from the daily lives and customs of its people.

A dead language no longer has a language community to make judgments about whether the rules are being followed, to make and enforce the conventions of the language-game. We only have access to the set of grammar rules and vocabulary that are available by examination of the corpus. In other words, we have texts that follow the rules, and from these texts we can extrapolate the rules themselves. Thus, the theory of meaning for a dead language on this view is reversible from the results of that theory (that is, from texts generated by the theory). Although as we discussed in Chapter 1, this is often practically very difficult and fraught with error, we can imagine a dead language that has a comprehensive corpus, i.e. a corpus containing all the rules of the language-game. Since the texts in the corpus are the results of judgments by the community, and since meaning is determined by the usage within the community, we can reconstruct the meanings of the dead language from its corpus.

A related characteristic of dead languages is that they no longer mutate in accordance with the needs of a living language community. It is impossible for a dead language to acquire new meanings or for words to be used in new contexts by the activity of the community. We may find additional texts as part of an archeological discovery, but these are not the same. Many occurrences of words occur in new contexts, since a finite vocabulary is capable of producing an infinite number of sentences. Wittgenstein mentions this concept, “If you have to have an intuition in order to develop the series 1 2 3 4...you must also have one in order to develop the series 2 2 2 2...” (§214). Part of the

dynamic of language is the use of words in contexts they have never occurred before. The language community determines if the usage is correct or not. “*This is how these words are used*...One might rather call them a ‘signal’; and we judge whether it was rightly employed by what he goes on to do” (§180 italics original). In a dead language, there are no new uses. The dynamic process of evolution of the language has ceased. Normally a language evolves to be able to express the beliefs of the language community as they change. If we take Wittgenstein’s use of “form of life” as an expression of the interactive nature of language within a community, then a dead language, which no longer has such a community, is a petrified language.

If we take this interpretation of Wittgenstein, then a dead language is the language that we reconstruct from the corpus. The corpus records the result of judgments by the extinct language community. The only concerns we have with meaning in this scenario are pragmatic concerns about the probability of having a comprehensive corpus. If we have a comprehensive corpus, then we have all the judgments necessary to interpret texts in the language. This view of a dead language accords well with the way in which Wittgenstein himself used dead languages in the *Philosophical Investigations*. For there, he quoted Augustine’s Latin as if it were any living language. Since we have available all the uses of a dead language, and since meaning is use, we can discern the meaning of any text written in a dead language.

Wittgenstein also argued that a language-game is derived from the activities and daily life of the language community. The act of speaking or reading a language requires us to make decisions about usage based upon our participation in the language community. It might be argued that when we take up a dead language and learn its syntax and semantics, we become the language community of the dead language. If this is true

we might question whether the dead language will change and grow as part of the natural dynamic process of language. In the case of a real dead language where we do not have a comprehensive corpus, we will need to make decisions about meaning while lacking the experience of participating with the extinct language community. When we do this, we essentially reconstruct the dead language by using the rules of the dead language combined with our judgments about meaning and use. It is therefore possible that our meanings will diverge from those of the original language community. The more evidence we have for the usage (and thus meanings) of a dead language, the closer our meanings will be to those of the extinct community. Thus, although a dead language is a viable language-game, it may not be the same language-game played by the extinct language community.

I suggest that for Wittgenstein a dead language represents a language-game derivative of but ultimately different than the original language spoken by the living language community. So, for example, Koine Greek was a language spoken by certain groups of people during a given era, but the language that we can reconstruct from the texts that have survived from that period are not Koine Greek but rather Reconstructed Koine Greek. We have reconstructed the language based upon the texts and information from cognate and descendant languages. It is related to the original language, because it is based in large part on the texts written in that language. The more evidence we have for a language, the closer it will be to the original language. Given a comprehensive corpus we have the original language. Using Wittgenstein's terminology we might say that since language-games are played by living communities, it is thus impossible to play a dead language-game. What a living community can do, however, is play a

reconstructed language-game using rules derived from the texts of the language in question.

On this view a dead language has some interesting properties. First, the grammar and vocabulary of the language-game are fixed by the corpus. This means that we have, for example, every use of the word *kephale* in Koine Greek. There can be no new uses and there will normally not be (barring the unearthing of a library) any additional examples of use. The dead language will thus be far less ambiguous than a living language. There will still be problems associated with diachronic changes in the time span represented by the corpus, and there will often be practical limitations on the uses we have, both of which can result in ambiguity. But we no longer have ambiguity caused by the open-endedness of language used in a living language community. Any ambiguity that exists is due to our lack of examples of usage. In this sense a dead language is easier to interpret than a living language, because in a dead language the meanings cannot change through different usage.

Second, any interpretations that we make within the reconstructed language are relative to the reconstructed language and not the original living language. Since all our uses come from the corpus, any texts are interpreted within the context of the corpus. Furthermore, since we are participants in the reconstructed language-game, we may make modifications to the language based upon our needs and beliefs. For example, in Chapter 1 we examined the use of the word *kephale* in Koine Greek and found that it meant “head” but that, unlike Classical Greek, there were no examples of it meaning “source”. We might argue that in English the word “head” can be used to describe the source of a river, the “headwaters”, and that it probably had this meaning in Koine Greek as well. This, however, is a judgment that we make as speakers of the reconstructed language. It

is the sort of extension that we can expect when experienced and competent language speakers pick up the grammar and vocabulary of a language with limited evidence.

Language changes in a living language community, even if the rules of the language come from a static and petrified language.

Chapter 3: Donald Davidson and Dead Languages

Donald Davidson's theory of meaning is presented in part in the article "Radical Interpretation" (1973). Here he discusses a theory of interpretation based upon Tarski's theory of truth. Tarski's theory defined the truth predicate in terms of a formal language. Thus Tarski's theory may be given as "s is true if and only if p, where p is a translation of s into the formal language." Such a sentence is called a T-sentence. Davidson argues that the community determines which T-sentences are true, "the totality of T-sentences should ... optimally fit evidence about sentences held true by native speakers" (1973 p. 139). In order to do this we must assume that the native speakers are attempting to tell the truth. This "principle of charity" is necessary if we are to build a series of T-sentences in order to create a theory of interpretation. Davidson explains that "widespread agreement is the only possible background against which disputes and mistakes can be interpreted. Making sense of the utterances and behavior of others ... requires us to find a great deal of reason and truth in them" (1974 p. 153). The consequences of this theory is that the meaning of a sentence is what would be the case (the 'p' in the T-sentence) if the sentence were true as judged by the speech community.

However for Davidson the speech community does more than assent to the truth of T-sentences. In a later article, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (1986), he discusses the phenomenon of malapropism. A malapropism is an intentional misuse of language in order to make a joke or stress a point. Since a malapropism involves a violation of the rules of the language, it cannot be the case that the rules of language are conventional (1986 p. 467). If they were, the malapropism would be unintelligible. We can

understand malapropisms, however. This means that we must be mistaken about language as a structured set of shared rules.

It comes to saying that the ability to communicate by speech consists in the ability to make oneself understood, and to understand. It is only when we look at the structure of this ability that we realize how far we have drifted from standard ideas of language mastery. For we have discovered no learnable common core of consistent behavior, no shared grammar or rules, no portable interpreting machine set to grind out the meaning of an arbitrary utterance (1986 p. 475).

If malapropisms can be understood then there is no “shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases” (1986 p. 475). On this account language is not a codified set of rules that people learn and apply but a sequence of responses that are negotiated on the fly. A person who interprets what a speaker is saying begins with a “prior theory” that takes into consideration the speaker, the situation, and such things as names known by both parties, etc. As the speaker talks, the interpreter alters his theory against the new evidence presented by the speech (1986 p. 471). This is the “passing theory”. The speaker performs a similar process, first using a “prior theory” concerning the listener and then modifying that theory to make himself understood to create the “passing theory”. Thus, according to Davidson every instance of communication requires both speaker and interpreter to dynamically create and alter theories of meaning.

However, a dead language no longer has a living language community that can participate in this process. Furthermore, since linguistic clues are not captured by grammars and lexicons in a living language, neither would they by the texts of a dead language. Although the limited corpus we discussed in Chapter 1 would in some ways deny the syntactical and semantic rules of a language, this is a purely pragmatic concern.

We can imagine the corpus of a dead language having enough examples to completely define the language in this manner. But according to Davidson's view of the dynamic creation of theories of meaning by speakers, the grammar and lexicon of a language provide only the background to the real task of communication.

The more serious problem with a dead language for Davidson is that it does not afford us the possibility of negotiating the rules of language on the fly. Passing theories are created and discarded for each interaction. They consist in large part of shared information between the speaker and interpreter as well as what we classified as the linguistic clues of the language community in Chapter 1. If we had a comprehensive corpus that contained all of the syntax and semantics of the dead language, it would not give us everything that we need to interpret the language. "There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases" (1986 p. 475). Davidson's position here challenges the idea that we can come up with such a shared structure even for living languages, so it would likewise be impossible to create it from the texts of a language that is no longer spoken. If Davidson is right, then there is no longer a large set of formal rules to master, but there is now a passing theory that is "derived by wit, luck and wisdom from a private vocabulary and grammar, knowledge of the ways people get their point across, and rules of thumb for figuring out what deviations from the dictionary are most likely" (1986 p. 475). The reason that we can successfully interpret living languages is that we have the interactive ability to alter our passing theories on the fly in this way. We cannot do this with a dead language.

There are several types of clues that would be missing from any corpus, regardless of its completeness. They are transmitted by the language community as one participates

in the daily life of the community, during the process of negotiating interpretive theories. Earlier we examined three classes of linguistic clues that are learned as part of a living language community: the “fine print” rules of language, the connotations of words, and emotive language. The “fine print” rules of language are difficult to observe in a dead language. We can sometimes guess that this is the case when we find a text that is queer. But since we have such a limited corpus to begin with, we have to make many guesses concerning syntax and vocabulary anyway. One example in Koine Greek is the final greetings in the book of 1 Peter from “she who is in Babylon” (1 Pet 5.13). This is a curious phrase which has caused no end of discussion among interpreters. Does it refer to the actual city of Babylon, or is Rome being called Babylon, or does it refer to being at odds with the government in some general way? It seems to be a piece of jargon language of the Christian subgroup within the Koine language community. It looks like one of the “fine print” rules in action, something that we would know if we were a part of the language community.

The connotation of a word can often be discovered by examining in what cases a given word is used when its synonym would also suffice. Assuming that the word choice is deliberate, it is sometimes possible to discern a connotation. For example, in the bible there is the narration of the death of Lazarus, a friend of Jesus. Jesus is described as being “deeply upset” (John 11.33). The Koine Greek word translated in this instance is *ταράσσω*, which has the basic meaning “to be in great mental distress”. It is also the word used elsewhere to indicate a group of people who “prompted a crowd to riot” (Acts 17.8). Likewise, there are other more neutral words that could have been used to indicate distress (*συνέχομαι* or *οδυνάομαι* perhaps). Thus we can argue that the word has a strong negative connotation, perhaps even extending to the idea of violence. However, given the

paucity of information this is merely a conjecture. In fact we do not know the connotations of the word that were held by the linguistic community of the time.

The body language of Koine Greek is also mostly lost to us. We do have some examples of physical language captured in the corpus. For example, in Acts 24.10 we have “Ἀπεκρίθη τε ὁ Παῦλος νεύσαντος αὐτῷ τοῦ ἡγεμόνος λέγειν” which is “When the governor nodded for him to speak, Paul answered”. Thus we have an example of one of the non-verbal gestures in use (nodding) in Koine Greek. However, we only have a bare description of the act. We do not know if nodding was considered formal or informal, or if the fact that he nodded instead of speaking was meant as an insult. Since we do not participate with the Koine language community, we can only guess at the significance (or lack of significance) of the event.

Another aspect of dead languages is that they no longer change to fulfill the needs of a living language community. It is impossible for a dead language to acquire new meanings, apart from further archeological discoveries of texts. There is no language community to formulate new words, change the meanings of words, or modify the syntax of the language. Davidson views the process of interpretation as a dynamic interaction between speaker and interpreter against a background of previously negotiated communications. This background consists of the accepted syntax and semantics of the language, and it grows by the incremental changes wrought by individuals within the community negotiating passing theories. Over time, these negotiated theories cause words to be added or change meaning. They may also cause syntactical structures to change and develop. Thus, the language grows via the dynamic process of theory negotiation carried on by speakers and interpreters.

A dead language no longer has this process active, so that there can be no new words or new uses of existing words. However, we as language speakers will continue to attempt to make the sorts of changes that naturally occur when we modify our passing theories in response to reading a text from the dead language. A living language poses no such problem, since even in written communication we have the practice of negotiating theories within the language community that we can apply to the task. A dead language never affords us an opportunity to negotiate passing theories in the extinct language community. Thus, we will attempt to create new uses of words even in a dead language, where such new uses are impossible. This will lead us to incorrect interpretations.

I suggest that for Davidson a dead language represents the fossilized remains of a living language. Whereas we argued that Wittgenstein would see a dead language as a complete language-game, I believe Davidson would view a dead language as a partial language. We can use the example of nodding in Koine Greek to illustrate the consequences of a dead language for Davidson's theory of meaning. According to his view, we create passing theories of interpretation based upon the situation and the speaker using the rules of the language as a backdrop. In the passage cited, the governor's nod is interpreted by Paul as he creates a passing theory that indicates the meaning of the nod. Likewise the governor is modifying his theories as he gauges Paul's reaction to his communication. We do not have these theories, or how these theories were constructed, we only have a description of the results of the application of these theories. In the text quoted, we do not even have enough information to judge whether Paul interpreted the nod to mean "go ahead" or "go ahead you criminal" or "go ahead sir". All we know is that Paul began making his defense after the nod. Such things normally do not have a single meaning. In English it is possible for the nod to mean any one of the three.

Suppose that we had a comprehensive corpus with all the meanings of the words clearly discerned for us by example, and we knew that a nod could have any one of these three meanings. Davidson argues that even in our living languages we are constantly re-evaluating our theories of meaning and making adjustments during communication. We adjust our behavior based upon the feedback we receive from other speakers. Since we use nodding in our language community, we are apt to substitute our usage of nodding for the Koine equivalent in the construction of our passing theory. We are not sure exactly what the governor meant by the nod, so we assume that it means the same thing that we mean by nodding. This is a natural enough response in a living language, where we have feedback to guide us as to the correctness of our guess. But in a dead language, we have no such feedback. If we consider the nod to be have a positive connotation and if there are no texts that counter that view, we might judge it to be correct. However, it might also be the case that nodding was an insult, but lacking the experience of negotiating passing theories in Koine Greek, we miss that nuance. This experience cannot be gained by merely reading more Koine Greek or by finding a comprehensive set of grammar and vocabulary rules in Koine Greek. It can only be gained by participating in a living language community. Since that experience is impossible for us with respect to Koine Greek, we cannot read texts in that language in the same way that a native speaker once did.

The breach between interpretations in the original living language and the interpretations we can offer based upon the remnants of the dead language is severe. We may be able to understand such texts with a basic grasp of grammar and vocabulary, but we will be missing much of the nuance that normal linguistic communication provides. When we read English, we apply English passing theories in order to interpret the text.

We have learned English theories through years of practicing them with other English speakers. Likewise, when we learn German we first speak in a very stilted and unnatural way, like a child. This is because we are relying more on the structured rules of grammar and vocabulary than on our ability to negotiate German passing theories. If we are young enough, as we practice we begin to negotiate German passing theories as well as English ones and become truly bilingual.

If we read a text in a dead language such as Koine Greek, however, we will forever be at the childlike stage of language acquisition. We will rely solely on the formal rules of the language, because we have no experience with creating and modifying Koine Greek passing theories. In this case we will tend to use whatever passing theories we have learned in English and apply them to texts in Koine Greek. We are using the Koine Greek background of syntax and semantics but interpreting them according to an English system of passing theories. In this case we can view the language not as Reconstructed Koine Greek, but as Replaced Koine Greek. For we have replaced what is most important to language interpretation, the creation and modification of theories of interpretation, with our own. While Wittgenstein's theory allowed us to participate in the Reconstructed Koine Greek language-game, Davidson's theory will only allow us to speak English using Koine syntax and vocabulary. On Davidson's account learning a dead language is like playing a game of dress-up. Whatever it is that we do, it bears little resemblance to what the ancient Greeks did.

Conclusion

If we attempt to discover the meanings of a dead language from its textual corpus, even with the help of translations and descendant languages, we gain an incomplete description of the language. Pragmatically speaking, the description of the dead language will be physically incomplete due to the paucity and irregularity of textual samples. The physical incompleteness will make it difficult to adequately describe the grammar and lexicography of the language. If we take Wittgenstein's view of language, then the language that we recover from the remnants found in the corpus *is* the dead language for all intents and purposes. Using the example of Koine Greek, the language-game that we can reconstruct using the texts of Koine Greek is not the same as the language spoken by the Ancient Greeks in their time. It is a separate language-game. This language-game is fully described by the uses of words in the textual corpus. Because of this, a dead language will be less ambiguous than a living language. We will have available every example of usage in the dead language. However, as language speakers we will continue to make judgments and additions to the language in the course of our normal means of processing language. Over time we make the dead language our own, by incorporating our customs and beliefs into the language. We may not do this by word creation (although this is done in Latin, for example), but we will still adapt the language to our language community.

Our interpretation of Wittgenstein depends upon two key points. First, Wittgenstein denies that language is referential, but rather believes that it is the custom of a language community. Language is a game that is played by rules, and these rules no

more essentially refer to the world than the rules of chess do. We argued that Wittgenstein would see a dead language as a language defined by the uses of the words found in the texts of the dead language. He also argued that these rules are not a calculus that can be learned and applied, but rather the result of judgments made by the language community. What we have in the corpus is the result of judgments that were made by the community. It is possible that when the dead language was alive that the community made judgments that we do not have record of. Furthermore, a living language community is continuously making judgments that slowly change the language. However, these are pragmatic concerns. In the case where a dead language has a set of texts that reliably reproduce the uses necessary to understand the language we would have no need to make our own judgments. Thus, if we interpret Wittgenstein in this way, I argue that the meanings we assign to texts in a dead language will be different to a certain degree than the meanings the extinct language community would have assigned. Furthermore, we have no way of knowing how divergent our meanings are. The more evidence we have for a dead language, the closer it will resemble the original language spoken by the extinct language community.

One might argue that living languages contain ambiguity of meaning and yet we are able to understand them. We often lack the ability to make judgments about meaning for our native language if our vocabulary or experience is lacking. People misunderstand each other when speaking the same language. The difference is that if our understanding of the meanings for our native language are incorrect, then the language community will correct us. That is the job of the language community according to Wittgenstein; to enforce the custom of the language. A dead language lacks this and so all meaning must

be reconstructed from the texts of the language. A comprehensive corpus gives us all the uses of a word and so all the meanings.

On this view there is no difference between our native language, a foreign language, or a dead language other than the amount of evidence we have for meanings. Here, our interpretation of Wittgenstein views dead languages as philosophically identical to living languages, but lacking in the breadth of evidence for word meaning and syntax. They are the same as living languages but with less attestation. However, the reconstruction view of dead languages cannot account with all of the phenomenology of translating dead languages. Generally, we do think that we can understand dead languages, and use linguistic methods to build up evidence for syntax and semantics. However, there is often disagreement about the fine points of meaning within a text. On the reconstruction view the only source of this disagreement would be the limited textual evidence of the dead language. It is true that more evidence tends to produce more understanding, especially when the corpus is expanded by archeological finds. So, for example, the Hebrew word *selah*, found often in the Psalms, was not well understood until after the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. There it was found that it was probably a musical notation indicating a pause. However, since this is only a pragmatic concern, it does not seem to explain what appears to be a categorical difference in interpretation between living and dead languages.

However much agreement there may be over the basic meanings of texts in a dead language, there are normally many disagreements about finer points. This is because even with a full set of meanings in our lexicon, the syntax of a language often lends itself to multiple interpretations. There are ambiguities in language that cannot be determined by examining the syntax and inserting the appropriate definitions. A good example of

this is malapropism, the figure of speech upon which Davidson based his argument that theories of meaning are not conventional.

For Davidson, usage is the starting point for a theory of meaning, not the ending point. Wittgenstein held that under most circumstances the meaning of a word is just its use by a language community. Davidson, while investigating the phenomenon of malapropism, determined that meaning comes from dynamic theories that are modified on the fly by speakers and interpreters. In direct opposition to Wittgenstein, he argued that meaning could not be governed by convention. Malapropisms defy convention, that is their very nature, yet they are perfectly understandable and meaningful.

When Davidson's theory of meaning is applied to dead languages we find that while we can recover the usage of words from the corpus, this is only the starting point for meaning. What we cannot recover are the passing theories that speakers and interpreters use to understand each other. Creating passing theories depends upon experience with the language community in a process that by its very nature cannot be recovered by examining the results of that process (1986 p. 475). As language speakers, we naturally create passing theories as we have learned them in our native language. It is possible, after extensive experience participating in a foreign language community, to create passing theories that are very close to those of native speakers. If we are young when we learn them, we may even become truly bilingual. However, a dead language does not grant us this opportunity. Since there must be passing theories in order for there to be understanding, we substitute our native passing theories to make up the lack of passing theories in the dead language. Thus, we replace the dead language with a language that uses the dead language's syntax and vocabulary interpreted via our native passing theories. Such a language is a hybrid of the dead language, and though similar,

cannot be said to be the same language that was originally spoken by the extinct community.

On this view, dead languages are categorically different from living languages. It is true that this interpretation of Davidson raises pragmatic concerns in the same way as our interpretation of Wittgenstein did. The syntax and vocabulary that provide the background against which passing theories are negotiated suffers from the same practical limitations that dogged the reconstruction view. However, on the reconstruction view we could posit a comprehensive corpus which would cause the understanding of a dead language to be the same as that of a living language. This is not possible on the replacement view. Here even a comprehensive corpus provides us only with a solid foundation upon which to negotiate passing theories. We lack the theories themselves. Thus, the interpretation of a dead language on this account faces an epistemological underdetermination. In this case it comes from the impossibility of learning passing theories from completed communications.

One might argue that on Davidson's account the understanding of dead languages would be impossible, which flies in the face of the phenomenology. We seem to be able to grasp dead languages; it is the nuances of meaning that often escape us. However, Davidson does not deny that meanings are systematic or shared, only that they are not learned conventions. Grammar and vocabulary do play a part in communication, as the background or starting point for creating passing theories. When people miscommunicate, they do not speak gibberish to each other. Much of the meaning does indeed get transmitted. Miscommunication occurs when at least part of what the speaker intended to convey is not transmitted, but it is by no means an all or nothing affair. A similar case could be made for dead languages. Lacking the experience in generating

passing theories in a language does not mean that the language is gibberish. In fact, Davidson talks about such elements of the passing theories as proper names, words or phrases uses peculiarly, etc. If a name, for example, is misinterpreted then the entire communication is not gibberish. The meaning of that name is taken wrong, but not every part of the communication. Likewise with a dead language the replacement of the extinct language community's passing theories with our own does not render the reading of texts in the language impossible. Rather, it makes it more likely that we will misunderstand, or understand only partially.

Our interpretation of Wittgenstein found that everything necessary to understand the meaning of a text could be recovered from a comprehensive set of recorded or completed communication. In other words, since the meaning of language is solely found through the usage, having the usage gives us the meaning. Davidson suggests that the meaning of language is gotten by a process that is not customary. The process of communication, oral or written, requires the creation of dynamic theories of meaning that take as inputs such things as the speaker, the situation, the context, peculiar vocabulary, and more. This process cannot be recovered merely by examining the results of successfully negotiating the passing theories. As such it is not reversible in the same way that meaning as usage is reversible. This means that given the corpus of a dead language we cannot recreate the theories used to arrive at the meaning of the text. We will, however, have the usage of words and syntax (granted a comprehensive corpus) such that we can discern basic meaning, much in the same way a child or someone who has recently learned a foreign language can. We can neither recover nor learn to use the passing theories of the extinct language community. Thus, although dead languages are

not gibberish to us, our interpretations of them often reflect more upon us and our language than that of the ancient language community.

Malapropism is the perfect example of the type of communication that we would be hard pressed to recognize in a dead language if we think meaning is usage. Since the process is reversible, the malapropism would appear to us to be just another usage. We would add this use to the other uses for the word in the lexicon and miss entirely that it was an example of a misuse. Other figures of speech would be difficult to detect as well. In fact, our theoretical comprehensive corpus would have to spell out all idioms, malapropisms and other figures of speech in order to be considered comprehensive. As we saw in Chapter 3 there are examples in Koine Greek that we think are idioms and figures of speech and the texts of Koine Greek fall far short of a comprehensive corpus. In fact, the ability to discern things like idioms in a dead language would seem to suggest that our process of understanding is more complicated than applying customary rules.

If we accept this interpretation of Davidson's theory of meaning, then we can account for the phenomenology of dead languages. We can grasp the basic meaning of texts by knowing grammar and vocabulary and applying our own passing theories. Since our passing theories receive no feedback from the speaker (as we have no experience with the extinct language community), different interpreters come to different conclusions about meaning. Furthermore, there is no language community to correct us. Thus, interpreters disagree about the meaning of dead language texts to a greater extent than texts in a living language. These disagreements are often exacerbated by the practical reality of a physically limited corpus, that restricts our knowledge of syntax and semantics. This seems to be a more thorough explanation of the problem than is provided by our interpretation of Wittgenstein. On the reconstruction view the only explanation

for disparity in interpretation came from the practical limitations of the corpus, but there was no philosophical reason why dead languages could not be understood as well as living languages. On the replacement view there is an epistemological difference between a dead and living language that cannot be bridged by the accumulation of evidence. If we accept the replacement view of dead languages then the meanings that we give to texts will often reflect our language community to the same extent that they reflect the extinct language community. In other words, the meanings we give to the texts are as much our meanings as those of the long-vanished speakers of the dead language.

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