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# Avner Baz's Ordinary Language Challenge to the Philosophical Method of Cases

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Avner Baz argues that the philosophical method of cases presupposes a problematic view of language and linguistic competence, namely, what he calls “the atomistic-compositional view”. Combining key elements of social pragmatism and contextualism, Baz presents a view of language and linguistic competence, which he takes to be more sensitive to the open-endedness of human language. On this view, there are conditions for the “normal” and “felicitous” use of human words, conditions that Baz thinks are lacking in the context of the philosophical method of cases, and which make the question that philosophers are prone to ask in that context and the answers they give to that question to be pointless. However, in this paper, I argue as follows. First, Baz’s conditions for the “normal” and “felicitous” use of human words are in tension with the open-endedness of human language and the use of human words. Second, it is not even clear that those conditions are really missing in the context of the philosophical method of cases. And third, even if we grant that those conditions are missing in that context, this does not licence his damning conclusion on the philosophical method of cases since we are not forced to embrace the view of language and linguistic competence on which that damning conclusion is plausible. This last move is secured by advancing and defending a skill or virtue-based view of language and linguistic competence inspired by the later work of Donald Davidson.

The philosophical method of cases (henceforth, PMOC) arguably plays some role in how philosophers investigate issues of great philosophical interest like knowledge, free will, and reference.<sup>1</sup> In this practice, a philosopher would

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<sup>1</sup> There is evidence of the use of the method outside the Western tradition of philosophy (Boh 1985).

28 describe a certain scenario, whether real or hypothetical, and invite us to  
 29 say whether the case so described would count as falling under the relevant  
 30 property or term or concept under investigation. The judgement formed on  
 31 the described scenario is then enlisted in arguing for or against certain philo-  
 32 sophical views.<sup>2</sup>

33 The question then is, what linguistic competence guides this practice? In  
 34 some very illuminating works, Avner Baz (2016, 2017) argues that the PMOC  
 35 presupposes a problematic view of language and linguistic competence, what  
 36 he calls the atomistic-compositional view. The atomistic-compositional view  
 37 as he presents it is presupposed by defenders of the method in mainstream  
 38 analytic philosophy and critics of the method, including experimental philoso-  
 39 phers. Combining key elements of social pragmatism and contextualism, Baz  
 40 presents what we might call a “social pragmatic view of language”, a view  
 41 he thinks enjoys better empirical support and is more sensitive to the open-  
 42 endedness of human language. On this view, there are “normal” and “felic-  
 43 itous” conditions for the use of words and human language, conditions he  
 44 takes to be lacking in the context of the PMOC and the questions philosophers  
 45 are prone to ask in that context such as: “Does *X* know *Y*?”

46 However, in this paper, I argue as follows. First, Baz’s conditions for the  
 47 normal and felicitous use of words and language stand in tension with the  
 48 open-endedness of words and language. Second, it is not even clear that those  
 49 conditions are really missing in the context of the PMOC. And third, even if  
 50 we grant that those conditions are missing in that context, this does not licence  
 51 any damning conclusion on the PMOC since we are not forced to embrace the  
 52 view of language and linguistic competence on which that conclusion seems  
 53 plausible. This last move is secured by advancing and defending a skill-based  
 54 view of language and linguistic competence inspired by Donald Davidson  
 55 (1986).

56 The paper proceeds as follows. In section 1, I discuss what Baz calls the  
 57 “minimal assumption” about language which he says is presupposed by both  
 58 armchair philosophers and their experimental counterparts. I show that the  
 59 assumption expresses two worries. The first is the correctness worry and the  
 60 second is about the kind of linguistic competence we rely on in the PMOC,

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2 In recent times, there have been serious discussions about the evidential status of these judgements, in particular, whether this status is due to their being intuitive (Cappelen 2012, 2014; Deutsch 2015; Earlenbaugh and Molyneux 2009; Ichikawa and Jarvis 2009; Irikefe 2020; Williamson 2007). I would set aside this issue in this paper by staying neutral about the evidential nature of these judgements since nothing here hangs on it.

61 which he calls the “atomistic-compositional” view. I briefly respond to the  
62 first worry, and I indicate that the second worry is more pressing and would  
63 therefore be of present concern. In section 2, I discuss Baz’s social pragmatic  
64 view of language and linguistic competence, which he takes to have better  
65 empirical support than the atomistic compositional view. I explore some of  
66 the ingredients of the social pragmatic view, its negative implications for  
67 the PMOC and why we might worry that some aspects of the view do not  
68 seem consistent with recognisable features of the PMOC and the nature of  
69 human language itself. In section 3, I explore how we might look to defend or  
70 rely on the PMOC without any problematic assumptions about language and  
71 linguistic competence and without either the atomistic compositional view  
72 or Baz’s social pragmatic view. I end the paper by showing how the present  
73 defence of the PMOC meshes with a broader trend in the epistemology of  
74 philosophy and lends independent support to it.

## 75 **The Atomistic-Compositional View of Language and the** 76 **Philosophical Method of Cases**

77 The philosophical method of cases is a standard practice in analytic philosophy.  
78 A philosopher wants to argue for or against certain views about knowledge,  
79 causation, free will or moral permissibility. An imaginary scenario is described,  
80 and we are asked whether or not a certain property, term or concept obtains  
81 in the described scenario. For example, in Gettier’s 10-coin case, we are asked  
82 the question whether the protagonist in the described scenario knows some  
83 particular proposition, that is, whether the protagonist knows that the man  
84 who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket ([Gettier 1963](#)).

85 According to Baz ([2016](#), [2017](#)), the method depends on a “minimal as-  
86 sumption” about language to get off the ground, namely, the assumption that  
87 questions like that as presented in the context of the PMOC are

88 in principle, in order—in the simple sense that they are clear  
89 enough and may be answered correctly or incorrectly—and that,  
90 as competent speakers, we ought to understand those questions  
91 and be able to answer them correctly, just on the basis of the  
92 descriptions of the cases and our mastery of the words in which  
93 the questions are couched. ([Baz 2017](#), 6)

94 We can distinguish two kinds of worries in the minimal assumption. The  
 95 first one is the correctness worry, namely, the worry whether the questions  
 96 at stake in the method of cases can be answered correctly or incorrectly,  
 97 rightly or wrongly, and what the ontological status of such answers might be  
 98 like, precisely whether these answers would be about concepts or the world  
 99 independent of concepts (Baz 2017, 6). Baz links this worry with what he calls  
 100 the “representational-referential” view of language and traces it to Timothy  
 101 Williamson (2007), Herman Cappelen (2012) and Frank Jackson (2011). On  
 102 this view, *the primary function* of language at any given moment or as he puts  
 103 it “the fundamental aim of (all?!) discourses” (Baz 2017, 74, n.6) is to say true  
 104 or false things about the world. Although this is not the worry I intend to  
 105 address in this paper, I believe that friends of the PMOC do not need to commit  
 106 themselves to any problematic assumption here. On the contrary, I think *pace*  
 107 Baz, what they need to hold is that *among other things that human language*  
 108 *is for*, human language is used to say true or false things about the world (I  
 109 would return to this in section 3). In the same vein, friends of the method may  
 110 not need to settle the issue of what the answers to the questions at stake in the  
 111 method of cases would be true of, whether they would be true of our concepts  
 112 or items in the world existing independently of our conception of them. As  
 113 Ernest Sosa noted: “We can conduct our controversies, for example, just in  
 114 terms of where the truth lies with regard to them, leaving aside questions of  
 115 objectual ontology” (Sosa 2007, 100–101).

116 The second worry in the minimal assumption is the more pressing one.  
 117 And it is the one I wish to address in this paper. It says that

118 as competent speakers, we ought to understand those questions  
 119 [i.e., the questions at stake in the method of cases] and be able to  
 120 answer them correctly, just on the basis of the descriptions of the  
 121 cases and our mastery of the words in which the questions are  
 122 couched. (Baz 2017, 6)

123 Baz notes that this is an assumption about language that derives from and  
 124 is dependent on the atomistic-compositional view of language. In this view,  
 125 the meaning of the whole of an utterance comes from the fixed meaning of  
 126 the parts of that utterance. Baz traces the atomistic-compositional view of  
 127 language to Jackson (2011), who presents it as the linguistic competence that  
 128 the method depends on. Jackson says that how a sentence like “it is raining  
 129 outside” represents things is a

130 function of the representational contents of its parts and how  
131 they are combined.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, we have a grasp of the representa-  
132 tional contents of these parts, and of the way various modes of  
133 combination into sentences generate representational structures  
134 whose contents are a function of the contents of their parts and  
135 the way the parts are put together. (Jackson 2011, 472)<sup>4</sup>

136 In Jackson (2011), this view of language and linguistic competence goes side  
137 by side with a view of conceptual competence. On this view, in learning  
138 philosophically significant terms like “knowledge” we are latching onto the  
139 pattern or rule or categorisation of “knowledge.” Thus, he says:

140 How did we acquire the word “knowledge”? We came across lots  
141 of examples. We were told a bit about what mattered. Perhaps, we  
142 were simply instructed that if it is false, it cannot be knowledge.  
143 At some point we latched onto *the* pattern. (Jackson 2011, 474)

144 This rule or pattern on Jackson’s view in turn guides our knowledge ascrip-  
145 tions, that is, it enables us to say whether or not the protagonist in a Gettier  
146 text knows or does not know a given proposition.

147 In the next section, I consider Baz’s argument that the atomistic-  
148 compositional view of language is problematic and his argument that in  
149 the context of the PMOC the conditions for the normal and felicitous use of  
150 words and language are lacking. As we shall see too, Baz takes himself to  
151 be establishing a demarcation of the boundary of linguistic sense, one that  
152 makes clear that the PMOC is outside that boundary and that the questions  
153 philosophers are prone to ask in that context are fundamentally problematic.

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3 Compare the atomistic-compositional view with the view of Paul Elbourne: “Suppose you are interpreting an uttered sentence. In a series of extremely intricate processes that are largely subconscious, you access the sentence’s words in your mental lexicon and find their meanings; you work out the intended sense of any ambiguous words it might contain; you work out the references of indexicals in the sentence; you work out the sentence’s syntactic structure and resolve any structural ambiguities there may be; and you combine the contents of the words in the compositional semantics... If implicit content is not mediated by means of covert indexicals (and thus covered by the second step mentioned above), you add some of this too. Finally, you have worked out the content of the sentence, as uttered on that occasion” (Elbourne 2011, 131; cited in Baz 2017).

4 Although differently expressed, Baz identifies Williamson as holding this view as well: “[E]xpressions refer to items in the mostly non-linguistic world, *the reference of complex expressions is a function of the reference of its constituents*, and the reference of a sentence determines its truth value” (Williamson 2007, 281, emphasis mine).

## 152 **Baz's Social Pragmatic View of Language and Linguistic** 155 **Competence**

156 The way Baz shows the atomistic-compositional view of language to be prob-  
157 lematic is by presenting and defending an alternative view of language that  
158 he takes to enjoy better empirical support. He finds support from a scientific  
159 study of how children acquire their first natural language (Bartsch and Well-  
160 man 1995). But Karen Bartsch and Henry Wellman were not interested in  
161 natural language acquisition for its own sake. More specifically, they were  
162 tracking the natural development in the use of belief-desire terms in children  
163 between ages one and a half to six years. Six of these children are boys and four  
164 are girls. One of them is African American and the others are not. Because of  
165 their interest, Bartsch and Wellman were necessarily selective. They were cod-  
166 ing only for terms expressing genuine psychological reference, where this is  
167 judged so if with respect to a suitable context it referred to psychological states  
168 like desire, belief, or knowledge. As a result, they discounted conversational  
169 use of belief-desire terms like when a child says “you know what?” when  
170 seeking to get someone’s attention; repetition of phrases uttered by someone  
171 else, for example, a mother saying “tell him you know where it is,” to which  
172 the child responds “I know where it is”, and so on.

173 For present purposes, let us focus on what the study uncovered about  
174 the term “knows” and its cognates. The authors found (as Baz pointed out)  
175 that the word “knows” and its cognates do not admit of a simple formula.  
176 More specifically, they found that children use “knows” and its cognates to  
177 refer to instances of belief “felt to be justified, assumed to be true, or that  
178 enjoys markedly higher conviction than one described by *think*” (Bartsch  
179 and Wellman 1995, 40). Later on in their development, they use it to refer to  
180 “situations involving successful actions or to correct statements” (Bartsch and  
181 Wellman 1995, 60). In other words, there is no single pattern that a child is  
182 trying to master in being a competent user of “knows” and its cognates.

183 What is interesting about this study as Baz rightly observed is that it is one  
184 of the few scientific studies that have focussed on philosophically interesting  
185 terms like “knows” and its cognates. Most scientific studies about words and  
186 concepts are usually too broad in their scope and coverage to tell us what we  
187 need to know in doing philosophy. This is important because although the  
188 empirical result is not yet conclusive, it indicates that ordinary words like  
189 “table” are not just like philosophically interesting words like “knows”; the

190 latter is more complex and traces no single or simple pattern *pace* Jackson.<sup>5</sup>  
191 It also indicates, as Baz argued, that human language is open-ended, that is,  
192 capable of being used to make completely new moves not just at the level of  
193 the whole of an utterance but at the level of the individual parts or words in  
194 a way that is problematic for the atomistic-compositional view of language  
195 and linguistic competence. For present purposes, we can take the current  
196 empirical evidence for granted, and inquire into how to make sense of it.

197 Baz thinks that the best way to make sense of the data is a view that combines  
198 contextualism and social-pragmatism, a view whose central ingredients  
199 come from Wittgenstein's (1953) *Philosophical Investigations* and Merleau-  
200 Ponty's (2002). Following Wittgenstein, Baz argues that we need to think of  
201 meaning as use in the sense that the significance of words depends not on  
202 their referring to items but "on whether and how we use the words, on our  
203 *meaning* them in one way or another, in a context suitable for meaning them  
204 in *that way*" (Baz 2017, 130). The advantage of the usage view in Baz's opinion  
205 is that it shows clearly that our words need not be representational and need  
206 not be thought of as naming items in the non-linguistic world to be suitable  
207 for different uses.<sup>6</sup>

208 Following Merleau-Ponty, Baz argues that we need to reclaim the place  
209 of the *actual speaker* in the speech act, "the person who finding herself in  
210 some particular situation or other, may find herself moved, motivated, to  
211 speak (or think)" (Baz 2017, 131). This means that understanding the speech  
212 of another is not merely the putting together of the already fixed meaning  
213 of her words, but "coming to see her point," meaning coming to see her  
214 cares, her commitments, her history, how she sees the situation, and so on.  
215 In a significant sense therefore, the view reverses the direction of linguistic  
216 meaning implied in the atomistic compositional view: we understand the  
217 parts of speech by first understanding the whole of it, and that requires  
218 understanding the point of the actual speaker. In this connection, Baz notes  
219 that:

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5 In fact, we do not need the study of how children acquire "knows" and its cognates to realise that words like "knows" do not trace a simple pattern that can be framed in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions for all instances of knowledge. We already have reasons to suspect that this is so from the failure to produce a simple account of necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge in analytic epistemology (Shope 1983).

6 Baz says too that Wittgenstein's comparison of words to game pieces also lends credence to this idea of language.



The notion of “motive” is very important to Merleau-Ponty’s avoidance of both mechanistic and intellectualist approaches to the understanding of behavior in general and linguistic expression in particular (see (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 48–50)). On Merleau-Ponty’s way of looking at things, our speech (and behavior more generally) is normally *motivated*, in the sense that we are not merely *caused* mechanically to speak, and in the sense that our behavior manifests an *understanding* of the phenomenal world to which we respond. (Baz 2017, 131, n.14)

Baz argues that this view of language and linguistic competence gives support to a social-pragmatic account of conceptual competence inspired by Michael Tomasello (2003, 2008). On this view, in being a competent employer of “knows” and its cognates, what the child learns is different actual constructions of speech and their communicative functions, or more plainly, “stored exemplars of utterances” (Baz 2017, 162) “and what commitments (liabilities, risks) one takes upon oneself when using the words in one way or another, and in responding in one way or another to other people’s use of them” (Baz 2017, 169).

Furthermore, Baz thinks that if we accept this way of thinking about language, linguistic competence, and conceptual competence, the PMOC would be found to be seriously defective. How so? Well, if understanding the speech of another is coming to see the point of an *actual* speaker, which means coming to see her *cares*, her *commitments* vis-à-vis the question, and what *risks* and *liabilities* she may assume in answering the question one way or the other, and what empirical options we might explore to investigate whether things are thus and so, and what practical interest makes that question intelligible either to us or to the speaker, and how what is said in that context may influence what we do after; it seems clear that these conditions are lacking in the context of the PMOC. And it is because Baz thinks these conditions—let us call them “social-pragmatic conditions”—are not so realised in the PMOC that he takes the PMOC to be deeply defective and the questions asked in that context to be pointless as well. Put more generally, the view is the following:

THE SOCIAL PRAGMATIC VIEW OF LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE. If Hearer *H* in a context *C* understands the speech of a speaker *S*, *H* does so only if the social pragmatic conditions are realised in context *C*.

256 Notice that the view is silent as to the further question of whether the social  
257 pragmatic conditions are the only conditions required for linguistic under-  
258 standing to be possible or for words to be meaningfully used. It merely says  
259 that the social-pragmatic conditions are essential or necessary for words to  
260 do their work and for questions to have intelligibility.

261 One urgent question is, why commit Baz to the broader goal of demarcating  
262 the region of the meaningful use of words rather than the more modest view  
263 that the questions asked by the practitioners of the PMOC are problematic  
264 or pointless?<sup>7</sup> Or put differently, why think that Baz's criticism concerns the  
265 descriptions of the PMOC rather than the questions themselves and whether  
266 or not the questions are pointless? Well, the short answer is that the questions  
267 themselves are pointless precisely because the social pragmatic conditions  
268 for the felicitous use of words by both hearers and speakers are lacking in  
269 the description of the case. Baz says this precisely when he tries to show  
270 how his project fits within a broader demarcation argument that goes back to  
271 champions of experimental philosophy such as Jonathan Weinberg (2007),  
272 and more recently Edouard Machery (2017). This kind of argument relies on  
273 showing that there is a discontinuity between the scenarios described in the  
274 PMOC and the scenarios that we regularly encounter in everyday situations  
275 in a way that makes the former bad and the latter good. However, doing that  
276 often requires coming up with a set of properties defining one context but not  
277 the other context.<sup>8</sup> Here is textual evidence that lends support to construing  
278 Baz in this way.

279 The argument of this book is meant to show that the discontinuity  
280 is primarily a matter, not of *the sorts of cases* theorists have tended  
281 to focus on, as Weinberg has suggested, but of *the peculiar context*  
282 in which we attend to those cases and try to answer the theorist's  
283 questions. (Baz 2017, 33, n.33)

284 And again:

285 [But] if as I will argue, the ordinary and normal *conditions* for  
286 the felicitous use of the word (or concept) under investigation are  
287 lacking in the theoretical context—and, again, lacking by design—

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7 An anonymous reviewer for this journal pressed me on this objection.

8 For replies to Weinberg's claim of discontinuity, see Cappelen (2012) and Nado (2015); and for a reply to Machery, see Nado (2022).

288 then there is good reason to worry that the theorizing is bound to  
289 distort what it aims to clarify. (Baz 2017, 3)

290 Notice that the theoretical context is also the peculiar context. Notice too that  
291 if we seek to restrict Baz's demarcation only to occasions of speech when  
292 terms like "knows" and "cause" are featured, this would be *ad hoc*. The reason  
293 these terms retain philosophical interest is due to their everyday provenance.  
294 Indeed, 'knows' and its cognates are some of the most ubiquitous terms in  
295 human language.

296 There are two worries I would like to point out here. The first is this. Baz's  
297 claim of discontinuity implies that in the peculiar context of the PMOC, some  
298 essential conditions for the felicitous use of human words are lacking in a  
299 way that problematises the kind of questions philosophers are prone to ask  
300 in that context, as well as the answers they give. But this stands in tension  
301 with the open-endedness of human language. How so? The idea that language  
302 is open-ended, if it means anything really, means that whatever set of  
303 conditions we can identify and establish as part of the normal and felicitous  
304 use of language and words, there would always be occasions where those  
305 conditions are unmet, and yet a speaker with some ingenuity employs it in a  
306 meaningful way; a way that transmits knowledge or understanding or that  
307 serves other useful functions. Of course, language is not a human practice  
308 where anything goes. However, the thought is that given proper context, speakers  
309 and hearers can always tell the difference between what is meaningful  
310 and what is not without any predetermined criteria. Further, the thought is  
311 that these criteria, if any, would not be something that can be captured in  
312 any principled way and articulatable as something like some social pragmatic  
313 conditions. Moreover, the realm of meaning and meaningful questions and  
314 answers involving terms like "knows" and "cause" is not correctly restricted  
315 to the realm of the pragmatic or the practical for creatures like us. And that  
316 is because human beings have a capacity to engage meaningfully in things  
317 that transcend their self-interest. It seems that for evolutionary reasons, this  
318 would be a good thing. Information that has no pragmatic import for a hearer  
319 in a given context and at a particular time can have life-saving significance  
320 for that agent in a different context at a future time or perhaps for close kin.  
321 Edward Craig has a similar story of how our practically oriented concept of  
322 knowledge evolved into a more objectivised and demanding standard, where  
323 a high degree of reliability even in an improbable world is built into it. Thus,  
324 he says:

325 In saying that someone knows whether  $p$  we are certifying him  
326 as an informant on that question, and we have no idea of the  
327 practical needs of the many people who may want to take him  
328 up on it; hence a practice develops of setting the standard very  
329 high, so that whatever turns, for them, on getting the truth about,  
330 we need not fear reproach if they follow our recommendation.  
331 (Craig 1990, 94)

332 Perhaps it is also why “knows” and its cognates have some exceptional quali-  
333 ties such as being lexical universals, with the rare quality of being in the core  
334 vocabulary of all known human languages (Haspelmath and Tadmor 2009),  
335 and having a one-word equivalent in all natural languages (Goddard 2010).

336 The second worry: Baz is assuming that in the theoretical or peculiar con-  
337 text of the PMOC, nothing hangs for the hearers and speakers, or the thought  
338 experimenter and his or her audience except for a theoretical interest, namely,  
339 the affirmation or the refutation of a view. But can we take that assump-  
340 tion for granted? I think not. For very often, the success of counterexamples  
341 or more generally, philosophical cases is decisive for the dominance of a  
342 particular theory and field of research. Think about the debate between com-  
343 patibilism and incompatibilism, internalism and externalism, physicalism  
344 and anti-physicalism and the decisive role that thought experiments played  
345 in those debates like Mary the colour scientist case (Jackson 1982), Gettier  
346 cases (Gettier 1963) and Truetemp case (Lehrer 1990). True enough, we only  
347 care about the truth or facts that obtain or do not obtain in those cases rather  
348 than their instrumental value. And yet because of the role those cases play  
349 in the rise and fall of certain fields of research and research prospects, it is  
350 fair to say that the facts that obtain or fail to obtain in those cases make those  
351 cases stand in the same relation to real or actual situations that are of interest  
352 to Baz: They are not idle issues to which we feel unconcerned and to which  
353 our interests, cares, and commitments are unrelated.<sup>9</sup>

354 In the next section, I discuss a further challenge for Baz's account, namely,  
355 the problem of malapropism, which shows that sometimes the conditions for  
356 the ordinary use of our words are violated, and yet linguistic understanding

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9 In the same vein, it is not clear that there is nothing we can do to find out whether the verdict in the cases is correct or incorrect. Indeed, this is what experimental philosophers have been doing. Although one might argue that consensus or corroboration is not correctness of intuitional judgements. But so too are perceptual judgements.

357 is possible. This then sets the stage for presenting and developing a Davidson-  
358 inspired alternative view of language and linguistic competence.

### 359 **3 The Skill or Virtue-Based Account of Language and** 360 **Linguistic Competence**

361 In his later writings, Davidson found the problem of “malapropism” very  
362 perplexing. Dealing with this problem led him to a view of language that  
363 affirms a continuity between linguistic competence and intellectual abilities  
364 more generally. To be sure, malapropism is a ubiquitous phenomenon in  
365 human language and registers

366 our ability to perceive a well-formed sentence when the actual  
367 utterance was incomplete or grammatically garbled, our ability  
368 to interpret words we have never heard before, to correct slips of  
369 the tongue, or to cope with new idiolects. (Davidson 1986, 95)

370 On the standard view of language and linguistic competence, what a hearer  
371 needs to be able to interpret a speaker is something like a complex theory or  
372 rule plus the ability to use this rule or theory or generalisation in a systematic  
373 way to make sense of novel situations. Further, because this capacity is taken  
374 as a learned convention, one that is shared between hearers and speakers,  
375 it is something that the hearer has in advance of the occasion of linguistic  
376 exchange. Notice that this standard view is also the view defended by Jackson  
377 as previously presented and discussed (Jackson 2011). Recall that on that view,  
378 namely, the atomistic-compositional view, language is like the numbering  
379 system where there are finite numerals that can be used to generate complex  
380 ones infinitely. Speakers and hearers have this system in advance of particular  
381 linguistic exchanges.

382 However, the phenomenon of malapropism challenges this notion because  
383 the competence (or capacity) that it calls for from the hearer is not part of  
384 what normally constitutes one’s basic linguistic competence, mastered in  
385 advance of the occasion of linguistic exchange. Indeed, as Davidson points  
386 out, the fact that makes the theory or rule general equally makes it unsuitable  
387 to cope with the particular linguistic habits of different individuals, say that  
388 of Mrs. Malaprop’s “nice derangement of epitaphs” being “nice arrangement  
389 of epithets”.<sup>10</sup> More generally, the theory or rule is unhelpful in coping with a

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10 Malaprop was a character famous for her verbal blunders in Richard Sheridan’s play *The Rivals*.

390 particular speaker at a particular time in a particular occasion. This applies to  
391 Baz's account too since for him there are "ordinary and normal conditions for  
392 the felicitous use" of human words or concepts (Baz 2017, 3), conditions which  
393 he thinks are lacking in the context of the PMOC. But then, in malapropism  
394 such as grammatically garbled utterances and slips of tongues, those normal  
395 conditions for the felicitous use of words and for their "functioning as they  
396 do" in ordinary discourse (Baz 2017, 22) are violated. Further, it is not the case  
397 that for Baz there is one generic condition, namely, that one's utterance has a  
398 point. On the contrary, that one's utterance has a point is fixed by it satisfying  
399 "the ordinary and normal conditions" for the felicitous use of human words  
400 and for meaning words one way or the other. For he says:

401       And the basic problem with so much philosophizing, both tradi-  
402       tional and contemporary—the basic problem with the method of  
403       cases as commonly practiced, for example—is that the philoso-  
404       pher either takes his words to mean something clear even apart  
405       from *his* meaning something clear by means of them, or else takes  
406       himself to be able to mean his words in some determinate way,  
407       *even though the conditions for thus meaning his words are missing*  
408       *in his particular context* and cannot be created by a sheer act of  
409       will, or by concentrating one's mind in some special way. (Baz  
410       2017, 141, italics mine)

411       Here is an additional challenge from malapropism to any generic view  
412       of language and linguistic competence. Sometimes in linguistic exchange,  
413       linguistic understanding is transmitted despite the hearer completely mistak-  
414       ing the speaker's verbal communication and vice versa. Davidson gives an  
415       example of such a case:

416       When I first read Singer's piece on Goodman Ace, I thought that  
417       the word 'malaprop', though the name of Sheridan's character, was  
418       not a common noun that could be used in place of 'malapropism'.  
419       It turned out to be my mistake. Not that it mattered: I knew what  
420       Singer meant, even though I was in error about the word; I would  
421       have taken his meaning in the same way if he had been in error  
422       instead of me. We could both have been wrong, and things would  
423       have gone as smoothly. (Davidson 1986, 90)

424       Here as elsewhere, learned convention breaks down and the conditions for  
425       the normal and felicitous use of words are violated and yet linguistic under-

426 standing is transmitted or made possible. The question is, how is this possible?  
 427 What capacity does the hearer (and speaker) depend on? Davidson makes the  
 428 following suggestion:

429 This characterisation of linguistic ability is so nearly circular that  
 430 it cannot be wrong: it comes to saying that the ability to communi-  
 431 cate by speech consists in the ability to make oneself understood,  
 432 and to understand. It is only when we look at the structure of this  
 433 ability that we realise how far we have drifted from standard ideas  
 434 of language mastery. For we have discovered no learnable com-  
 435 mon core of consistent behaviour, no shared grammar or rules,  
 436 no *portable* interpreting machine set to grind out the meaning of  
 437 an arbitrary utterance. We may say that linguistic ability is the  
 438 ability to converge on a passing theory from time to time—this is  
 439 what I have suggested, and I have no better proposal. But if we  
 440 do say this, then we should realise that we have abandoned not  
 441 only the ordinary notion of a language, but we have erased the  
 442 boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way  
 443 around in the world generally. (Davidson 1986, 445–446, italics  
 444 mine)

445 We can summarise the import of this account as follows:

446 THE SKILL OR VIRTUE-BASED ACCOUNT OF LANGUAGE AND LIN-  
 447 GUISTIC COMPETENCE. If Hearer *H* in a context *C* understands the  
 448 speech of a speaker *S*, *H* does so in virtue of her skills or virtues.

449 The rationale for speaking of skills or virtues here is two-fold. First, it is to  
 450 pick up on a suggestion by Davidson when he talks about the skillful hearer  
 451 (and speaker) as being one that can get along well in linguistic exchanges and  
 452 performances without needing mastery or knowledge of Gricean principles,  
 453 because these general principles “are a kind of *skill* we expect of an interpreter  
 454 and without which communication would be greatly impoverished” (David-  
 455 son 1986, 437). Relatedly, he talks about virtues such as practical wisdom,  
 456 intelligence, and wit as the non-linguistic competencies we rely on in getting  
 457 things right from time to time, occasion to occasion (Davidson 1986, 446).  
 458 Davidson also mentions luck. But here luck is not a capacity of speakers or  
 459 hearers. Rather, it merely refers to their being in a favourable environment  
 460 such that under normal circumstances, when they attempt to understand one

461 another in linguistic exchange, they achieve that aim. Further, I persist in  
462 speaking of “skills and virtues” because although all skills can be classified  
463 as virtues of agents, not all virtues can be classified as skills. One particular  
464 exception to this is practical wisdom (Stichter 2018). Let us take these points  
465 in turn. First, virtues are skills because acting well is much like working well  
466 (Annas 1995) and both involve practices of self-regulation to achieve a goal:  
467 in one case, the goal of acting well, and in the other case, the goal of working  
468 well (Stichter 2018). And second, although practical wisdom involves some  
469 elements of skills, namely, making good judgements in particular situations,  
470 it also involves other dimensions, namely, considering how one’s action fits  
471 into an overall conception of the good life (Stichter 2018). So, while it might  
472 be true that agents rely on some aspects of practical wisdom in order to act  
473 well in particular situations and to get along in a linguistic exchange, practical  
474 wisdom in itself is too broad and varied to be classified merely as a set of skills.

475 Furthermore, the competent hearer (and speaker) would also recruit other  
476 capacities of the virtuous agents. Of particular importance in the present  
477 context would be “sensibility.” In her discussion of the virtues (and the vices  
478 of the mind), Alessandra Tanesini defines sensibility as a disposition to “use  
479 one’s perceptual capacities in distinctive ways in the service of epistemic  
480 activities” (Tanesini 2021, 27). The example she gives is the observant person:

481 The person who is observant has reliable vision but he also experi-  
482 ences as salient those features of the visual field that are relevant  
483 to his epistemic aims. He directs visual attention to these aspects of  
484 the environment. By directing attention to them, and thus putting  
485 them at the centre of his visual field, he is able to take in more  
486 detail about these items since foveal vision has a higher degree  
487 of resolution than peripheral vision. Had those items remained  
488 at the periphery of his vision, many of their features would have  
489 remained undetected. If this is right, being observant is the com-  
490 plex disposition to detect the salient aspects of the environment  
491 by experiencing feelings that direct one’s attention towards these  
492 features. (Tanesini 2021, 27–28)

493 Applied as a competence essential to linguistic understanding, sensibility is  
494 an auxiliary competence, an enabler of visual and auditory competencies of  
495 agents. And what that means precisely is that it makes it possible for one to put  
496 to use those primary competencies in picking up what is being passed across,



497 verbally and non-verbally, where this is something that can be missed easily  
 498 if one is not attentive to another's peculiar linguistic habits in the context of  
 499 linguistic exchange.

500 The second rationale for the skill, or virtue-based model, is that it allows  
 501 us to cash out the Davidson-inspired view in a way that makes the relevant  
 502 competence an instance of a more general and familiar kind of know-how.  
 503 One difficulty that we can resolve in Davidson's account if we take seriously  
 504 the virtue or skill-based model is how to understand a practice that is non-rule-  
 505 based and yet rational and well-ordered. And the thing to say is that in both  
 506 virtue and skills, we already have human practices that are well-regulated  
 507 without the agents relying on rules. Take the skill-based model. Following  
 508 this model, I am suggesting that knowing a language is much like knowing  
 509 how to drive a car. In the beginning, the driver learns rules of thumb such as  
 510 "shift up when the motor sounds like it is racing and down when it sounds  
 511 like it is straining."<sup>11</sup> As Dreyfus and Dreyfus who have studied human skills  
 512 in various domains of performance argued:

513 It seems that beginners make judgements using strict rules and  
 514 features, but that with talent and a great deal of involved experi-  
 515 ence the beginner develops into an expert who sees intuitively  
 516 what to do without applying rules and making judgements at all.  
 517 (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1991, 235)

518 On this thinking, if one is following rules in a practice, that just shows one  
 519 is not yet proficient in that practice. The same story applies to the virtuous  
 520 agent. As Linda Zagzebski puts it: "Persons with practical wisdom learn how  
 521 and when to trust certain feelings, and they develop habits of attitude and  
 522 feeling that enable them to reliably make good judgments without being  
 523 aware of following a procedure" (Zagzebski 1996, 226). Notice too the role of  
 524 the virtues and skills here: they are dispositions that allow agents to act in a  
 525 systematic and organised way and to do so well in a context where the relevant  
 526 practice is not rule-governed. Plausibly, the reason this is so is because both  
 527 skill and virtues have a kind of *logos*, in the sense that they have an intrinsic  
 528 intellectual structure built into them (Bloomfield 2000). Mastering a skill,  
 529 including language, is mastering this *logos*; and thus, possessing the practical

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11 Such rules of thumb are just heuristics or generalisations about language that hold for the most part.

530 intelligence to act and to sensibly follow the actions of others and to solve  
531 problems in the relevant domain or activity.

532 From this standpoint, we can appreciate another respect in which the skill  
533 or virtue-based account and Baz's view diverge. On Baz's account, the motive  
534 of the speaker plays an essential role in coming to see the point of the speaker.  
535 Notice that "motive" here does not mean intention. It means rather the "moti-  
536 vating factors", which are internal to the perspective of the speaker, namely,  
537 the cares, the commitments, the risks and the liabilities of the speaker. On the  
538 other hand, for the skill or virtue-based account, that component is not always  
539 essential even though it sometimes can form a part of the process of coming  
540 to see the point of the speaker's utterance. Indeed, I believe that that form  
541 of internalism about linguistic sense, or meaning, was part of the tradition  
542 of thought that Gilbert Ryle tries to wean analytic philosophy from (see also,  
543 [Putnam 1975b](#)) when he argued that we should think of understanding as  
544 *knowing how* and linguistic understanding including, as an exercise of that  
545 *knowing how*. He writes:

546 Understanding a person's deeds and words is not, therefore, any  
547 kind of problematic divination of occult processes. For this divi-  
548 nation does not and cannot occur, whereas understanding does  
549 occur. Of course, it is part of my general thesis that the supposed  
550 occult processes are themselves mythical; there exists nothing  
551 to be the object of the postulated diagnoses. But for the present  
552 purpose it is enough to prove that, if there were such inner states  
553 and operations, one person would not be able to make probable  
554 inferences to their occurrence in the inner life of another. ([Ryle](#)  
555 [2009, 41](#))

556 Let me elaborate more on what this rejection of the internalistic picture in  
557 the motivating sense means by commenting on what Ryle is getting at here.  
558 Suppose I am playing chess with Magnus Carlsen, the Norwegian grandmaster.  
559 He makes a particular opening move that seems initially surprising to me.  
560 But as a fellow grandmaster who is equally skilful or competent in the game  
561 and who has sufficient experience dealing with a move like that, I can know  
562 what that move is about without caring about what has made Carlsen make  
563 this move. I can know that a move like that in a context like this means that a  
564 particular form of attack on my king is imminent and that moving my pieces  
565 in a specified way is the best way to counter it. The same is true of "moves" in

566 linguistic performances, as Baz would like to call human utterances or the use  
 567 of words in language. Hearers can tell that an utterance like this in a context  
 568 like that means so and so without caring about what has moved the speaker  
 569 to say so and so.

570 With this view of language and linguistic competence in mind, let us address  
 571 two challenges in connection with the PMOC. The first challenge here is to  
 572 explain how, as competent speakers, we are able to understand and answer  
 573 the questions that philosophers often ask in the context of the PMOC, such  
 574 as, does the protagonist in that scenario know so and so? And the second  
 575 challenge is how to make the aim of using the PMOC intelligible in the light  
 576 of the complexity of human language, that is, without glossing over that very  
 577 complexity. I take each in turn.

578 On the skill or virtue-based view, competent speakers can understand and  
 579 answer the questions of the sort “does *X* know *Y*?” not because they have  
 580 latched onto the pattern of “knows” *pace* Jackson or because they possess  
 581 stored exemplars of utterances and knowledge of the communicative motives  
 582 of speakers *pace* Baz. On the contrary—when they do, that is in virtue of their  
 583 having mastered a technique in the use of “knows” and its cognates. In fact,  
 584 this suggestion finds its earliest expression in the later Wittgenstein when he  
 585 says:

586 The grammar of the word “know” is evidently closely related  
 587 to the grammar of the words “can”, “is able to.” But also closely  
 588 related to that of the word “understand” (*To have ‘mastered’ a*  
 589 *technique*). (Wittgenstein 1953, sec. 150–151, italics mine)<sup>12</sup>

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- 12 Should we read Wittgenstein’s suggestion as the mastery of grammatical rules or relationships? There is abundant evidence in the text and elsewhere that that is not what Wittgenstein had in mind. To start with, in the paragraphs that followed this statement (i.e., Wittgenstein 1953, sec. 151–152), he says that it is conceivable that the relevant formula (or rule or grammatical relationship) might occur to the speaker and yet the speaker fails to understand. Further, in an unpublished manuscript, translated by Norman Malcolm (1989), Wittgenstein writes: “Often one can say: this pattern looked at so, must have this continuation. I want, however, to stipulate an ‘interpretation’ [*Auffassung*], (something like the old ‘Proposition’), which determines the series like an infallible machine through which a conveyor belt runs. So that only this continuation fits this interpretation. In reality, however, there are not two things that here fit together. But one can say: You are by your training, so adjusted [*eingestellt*], that always, without reflection, you declare some definite thing to be that which fits. Something that agrees with what others declare to be what fits” (Wittgenstein, Unpublished manuscript, 86–87; cited in Malcolm (1989)). On this view, it is by one’s training as a member of a shared community and practice that one is able to reliably employ terms like “knows” and extend the practice in similar situations. For Wittgenstein, that

590 Such skills or techniques are suitably grounded in experience in such a way  
591 that the agents exercising them can always be counted upon to answer such  
592 questions in a range of situations, not only in actual ones but in possible ones  
593 that bear similarity to the actual ones, where what is “similar” cannot be  
594 established in any rigid way, for example, through the claim of discontinuity  
595 between the context of the PMOC and everyday contexts. Indeed, as argued  
596 earlier, being competent users of “knows” and answering questions such as  
597 “does X know Y?” in a range of situations might be part of our evolutionary  
598 heritage. Also, a recent trend in cognitive science seems to lend support  
599 to this skill-based suggestion. Here is Lawrence Barsalou and colleagues  
600 summarising the emerging consensus here:

601 [C]onceptual knowledge is not a global description of a category  
602 that functions as a detached database about its instances. Instead,  
603 conceptual knowledge is the *ability* to construct situated con-  
604 ceptualizations of the category that serves agents in particular  
605 situations. (Barsalou et al. 2003, 89)<sup>13</sup>

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picture of a skill or technique grounded in training replaces the picture of the grammatical rule acting like an infallible conveyor belt that determines its extension in novel situations.

- 13 As previously pointed out, Baz argues that the atomistic-compositional view seems to go side by side with the assumption that the primary purpose of language is to transmit information, that is, it seems to go side by side with the representational-referential view of language. Again, there is no need to hold on to that problematic assumption. All that is necessary for the philosophical method of cases to get off the ground once the atomistic-compositional view is set aside and the skill or virtue-based view is assumed is that among other things, language can be used to transmit information, where again given appropriate context agents can tell when this is the case. In fact, the empirical study that Baz analyses in support of his view does not presuppose otherwise. To see this, notice that although in Baz's discussion of this study, he cites the frequency with which children refer to their own mental states as clear vindication of his view of language, the data also show that this frequency diminishes as the children grow older. Bartsch and Wellman also note that “our data provide no evidence that a representational understanding of beliefs is a significantly later achievement, following only on the heels of an earlier ‘connections’ misconstrual of beliefs” (Bartsch and Wellman 1995, 57). Further, even in their first-person reference to mental states, the data do not contradict representational presuppositions. As the authors put it “[W]hen children first use *know* to refer to people's knowledge in our data, in their utterances coded as genuine psychological references, they primarily refer either to situations involving successful actions or to correct statements” (Bartsch and Wellman 1995, 60). And lastly, in an earlier study of our everyday conception of knowledge as manifested in words like “knows” and “knew”, Perner (1991) shows that knowledge is associated with success and successful actions, with factual states of affairs and is formed by exposure to the relevant information or experience.

606 Now the second challenge. Using the PMOC, Edmund Gettier drew the  
607 attention of the philosophical community to an aspect of knowledge, namely,  
608 that the term is a success notion; the term does not apply to someone whose  
609 belief is chancy or accidental. Does that gloss over the complexities in our use  
610 of “knows” and its cognates? Baz thinks so (see Baz 2017, 122). But there are  
611 good reasons to doubt that conclusion. To start with, notice that the idea that  
612 knowledge is a success term is implied in the result of the study of Bartsch  
613 and Wellman (1995). Further, imagine as we do in the analysis of knowing  
614 that we highlight “success” or “achievement” as a salient feature of the term  
615 “knows” and explain knowledge in terms of these notions (Greco 2010). I  
616 argue that doing so does not obscure the subject matter of philosophy as  
617 Baz implies. On the contrary, doing so advances our understanding of the  
618 subject matter. Indeed, this is closely related to scientific practice. Biologists  
619 know that the term “fish” picks out various kinds of properties such as having  
620 fins, having scales, having a tail, breathing underwater, being oviparous, not  
621 suckling one’s young, and being cold-blooded. But from the point of view of  
622 understanding, and classifying future unknown cases, they merely highlight  
623 a fewer set of properties rather than all of the above, especially those that are  
624 natural and explanatory so that the term “fish” is used to refer to a completely  
625 aquatic, water-breathing, cold-blooded craniate vertebrate (Slote 1966). I be-  
626 lieve the same story applies here to the PMOC in the analysis of knowing. In  
627 highlighting the fact that knowledge is a success term, we are able to track  
628 something important, deep and explanatory about this phenomenon, some-  
629 thing we can also use to understand other terms or concepts or issues. For  
630 example, knowledge firsters use the suggestion that knowledge is a success  
631 term to understand the notion of intellectual ability or competence (Kelp  
632 2021).

633 Let us conclude this section by noting how the skill or virtue-based model  
634 of language and linguistic competence shares something positive with Baz’s  
635 social pragmatic account. Clearly, both recover the place of the speaking  
636 subject and reject the idea implied in the atomistic-compositional view that  
637 human words can speak for themselves, “over our heads as it were—and of  
638 language as a system of significant signs that does not depend on speakers (and  
639 listeners) for its ongoing maintenance” (Baz 2017, 96). Indeed, in evaluating  
640 Gettier cases, for example, we often need to tell whether or not and in what  
641 relevant sense the cases we are evaluating resemble clear instances where  
642 the property or term is clearly instantiated in a case. And “which way one  
643 goes depends on what one finds normal or natural, which partly depends


644 on the past course of one's sense experience" (Williamson 2007, 190). Notice  
645 that the capacity to tell that something is "normal or natural" is much in  
646 line with the capacity that comes with practical wisdom, which is shaped by  
647 experience, including sense experience, and expressed in habits of attitude  
648 and feeling that enable one to reliably make good judgements without being  
649 aware of following any rule. Moreover, in a non-actual instance of a Gettier  
650 case, readers often need to follow "in their own imaginative construction the  
651 lead of the author of the examples" (Sosa 2009, 107), and they have to fill  
652 out the details of the stories, which are often partial and incomplete. Here as  
653 elsewhere too, one needs to tell whether or not and in what relevant sense the  
654 case one is evaluating resembles clear instances where the property or term  
655 is clearly instantiated. Moreover, which way one goes depends on what one  
656 finds normal or natural. Notice also that if the kind of story that particularists  
657 such as Jonathan Dancy tell about the use of thought experiments in moral  
658 philosophy is true, namely, that no suitable supply of general principles can  
659 help the moral agent in picking out what is morally salient about a case  
660 (Dancy 1985), then we have good reason to believe that even here what the  
661 agent does is to recruit the kind of capacities that the skill or virtue-based  
662 model highlights. In any case, a theory of language and linguistic competence  
663 begins from the correct assumption that ordinary speakers already do well in  
664 linguistic performances and presents an explanation of how speakers are able  
665 to so perform. I have argued that once we reject the atomistic compositional  
666 view, it does not follow that we must embrace the social pragmatic story and  
667 all the problems it poses for the PMOC.<sup>14</sup>

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- 14 An anonymous reviewer for this journal pressed the following worries. The first worry is that "the proposed virtue-based account of linguistic understanding is perfectly compatible with there being cases/situations in which it doesn't make sense to ask about a certain subject and a certain fact 'Does *S* know that *p*?' Hence, it seems to me that further argument is needed in order to make the case for the meaningfulness of the theorist's questions about the philosophical thought experiments discussed in Baz." Reply: The worry that there are particular cases, say some very outlandish cases, where it does not make sense to ask about a certain subject and a certain fact 'Does *S* know that *p*?' does not licence the general or global worry about the PMOC as discussed in Baz. Even mainstream philosophers themselves have expressed concern that some cases are so outlandish that they are not theoretically useful because they do not resemble cases we face in everyday life (Weatherson 2003, 8). Here is another related worry pressed by the reviewer: "Davidson will also need some distinction (or demarcation) between situations in which the utterances of a certain sentence, e.g., of the form '*x* knows that *p*' makes sense and situations in which it doesn't (because obviously, you cannot meaningfully utter just any sentence in any context). And it is not obvious to me that according to Davidson the first kind of situations won't be exactly the ones in which the relevant utterance has a point." Reply: It is not exactly clear why

## 664 Conclusion

669 In this paper, I have argued essentially that the philosophical method of cases  
 670 does not need to presuppose the problematic view of language and linguistic  
 671 competence Baz attributes to its practitioners or defenders—the atomistic  
 672 compositional view. And neither do friends of the PMOC need to embrace the  
 673 social pragmatic view that Baz presents with all its negative consequences for  
 674 the PMOC. Let me end with where the Davidson-inspired skill or virtue-based  
 675 view leaves us in terms of the epistemology of philosophy. In my opinion, it  
 676 lends independent support to the view, now current in the epistemology of  
 677 philosophy that the epistemology of philosophy is an application of social  
 678 epistemology. Williamson (2007); Nagel (2012) and more recently Irikefe  
 679 (2022) champion this epistemological thesis and it seems to me the right  
 680 way to explain how philosophical knowledge is possible and how it can be  
 681 defended against various challenges posed against it.\*

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we need such a demarcation to start with since we can get along without it, and if a theory of language is an attempt to model what people already do, that is exactly the kind of story our theory should also be telling. Further, one might wonder whether such a demarcation does not imply by its very existence that there is a rigid boundary of what counts as meaningful linguistic occasions and what does not count as so. It does in my opinion. And it is why in the history of philosophy these kinds of projects, which seek to demarcate some regions of language as linguistically acceptable and others that are not on the basis of some criteria have had little or no success. In any case, the Davidson-inspired view shows us a way to proceed without it.

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