

Improvisation, Ontology, and Davidson: Exploring the Improvisational Character of Language and Jazz

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At least since the 1990s, music theorists and practitioners alike have appealed to theories and philosophies of language, largely via analogy or metaphor, to conceptualise and explain jazz improvisation.¹ Perhaps the most notable is the metaphor, ‘improvisation as conversation’.² Under these models, music is presented as a ‘language’ where musicians learn a vocabulary of musical components and a grammar of how those components should be put together. The idea that there might be a relationship between jazz and language, however, is not a one-way transaction. Indeed, especially since the 2000s, philosophers of language are increasingly employing jazz improvisation as a model to understand language use. Improvisation is routinely offered to account for the way in which we spontaneously ‘do things with words’,³ the way in which language use can be novel or innovative,⁴ or, more simply, the way in which interlocutors reach congruence on that which is the subject matter of their conversation.⁵

Despite the clear reciprocity between linguistic communication and jazz improvisation, rarely are these themes taken up together so that we might uncover what linguistic communication

¹ This essay is concerned exclusively with ‘human’ performances and puts to one side considerations of ‘machines’, where George E. Lewis’s *Voyager* project is an obvious example.

² Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994); Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997); Keith Sawyer, ‘Music and Conversation,’ *Musical Communication*, ed. Dorothy Miell, Raymond MacDonald, and David J. Hargreaves (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 45–60.

³ Andrew Haas, ‘The Birth of Language Out of the Spirit of Improvisation,’ *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 20 (2012): 340.

⁴ Ian MacKenzie, ‘Improvisation, Creativity, and Formulaic Language,’ *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58 (2000): 173–79.

⁵ Laura Schroeter and François Schroeter, ‘A Third Way in Metaethics,’ *Noûs* 43 (2009): 1–30.

and jazz improvisation have in common. Those interested in jazz music tend to apply theories of language to explain jazz improvisation and, it would seem, give little thought to the improvisational character of language itself. Likewise, those interested in language deploy jazz improvisation to account for certain characteristics of language use, without providing insight into whether the structure of improvisation present in jazz is an appropriate model from which to develop an understanding of language. Given the diversity of accounts and the contradictions that abound—for instance, the improvisational account of language offered by Schroeter and Schroeter, where language is understood as something that occurs *in use*, is in tension with Monson's account of jazz improvisation, where language is thought to exist as a set of pre-existing rules that must be learnt—it is worth considering whether there is a genuine congruence between the improvisational character of language use and jazz music.⁶

The argument presented in the pages to follow is that Donald Davidson's philosophy of language possesses an improvisational character. I argue that not only is Davidson's account of linguistic communication improvisational, but that the improvisational structure of his philosophy offers insights into the nature of jazz. Since Davidson himself did not write about jazz or improvisation, this article will first and foremost highlight the improvisational character of his philosophy of language. It is not my intention to critique Davidson. Rather, by offering a generous reading of Davidson's work, I aim to highlight the way in which Davidson's philosophy of language may be understood as improvisational. Given that a central argument of this paper is that the basic structure of linguistic communication shares a variety of features with the structure of improvisation present in jazz, part of what is required is teasing out an understanding of improvisation from Davidson's work that is consistent with the nature of improvisation present in jazz.

The account of improvisation that emerges is not one that is particular to any specific manifestation of improvisation. It underlies Billie Holiday's idiosyncratic approach to improvisation, just as it does Ornette Coleman's (to select two jazz musicians who exhibit personal approaches to jazz that are in stark contrast with one another). The account of improvisation presented below should be understood ontologically. Considering this, it is not necessary to appeal to jazz to understand the account of improvisation presented herein. But, as noted, given the reciprocity between language and jazz, and the fact that their shared elements are rarely explored on their own terms, these elements will be my focus.

With respect to my consideration of jazz and ontology, it is important to note that my focus is not what Andrew Kania has labelled 'higher-level' musical ontology,⁷ or what is otherwise referred to as 'relativised' or 'derivative' ontology.⁸ 'Higher-level' ontology is common in the philosophy of music, but this mode of analysis involves delineating the basic components of a field or practice and is therefore exclusionary, and begins by narrowing the field of inquiry. For instance, Kania begins his ontology of jazz by excluding the jazz song tradition and jazz fusion, and so adds the caveat that his ontology of jazz 'should apply to *almost* all jazz.'⁹

⁶ Schroeter and Schroeter, 'A Third Way in Metaethics,' 1–30; Monson, *Saying Something*.

⁷ Andrew Kania, 'All Play and No Work: An Ontology of Jazz,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 64 (2011): 291.

⁸ Jeff Malpas, 'Introduction: Place and Architecture,' in *Rethinking Dwelling: Heidegger, Place, Architecture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 1–12.

⁹ Kania, 'All Play and No Work,' 392. Emphasis added.

'Higher-level' musical ontology is indeed relativised and, given that Kania assumes that one can already distinguish between standard form jazz, the jazz song tradition, and jazz fusion, his account already assumes certain ontological delineations, and so is derivative of the more fundamental ontology that underpins those different practices. Of course, 'higher-level' ontology is not illegitimate and can yield valuable insight. I draw attention to this primarily due to the prevalence of relativised or derivative ontology in the broader music literature, and I want to be clear that I am interested in a different mode of ontological inquiry: a mode of inquiry concerned with the *fundamental structure of improvisation* and not concerned with comparing different approaches to improvisation.

The way in which I interrogate improvisation, then, is more consistent with the thinking of Bruce Ellis Benson than it is with other scholars, such as Lee B. Brown, David Goldblatt, and Theodore Gracyk,¹⁰ who are critical of Benson's ontology of improvisation. Brown, Goldblatt, and Gracyk (who appeal to 'higher-level' ontology) appear to miss the point of Benson's fundamental ontology, which suggests that *all* creative activity is improvisational. Brown, Goldblatt, and Gracyk object to Benson's account on the grounds 'that [he has] now moved beyond the usual domain of improvisation.'¹¹ In rebuttal, they go on to propose five categories of improvisation present in jazz; however, they fail to acknowledge that these categories necessarily rely on the more fundamental ontology proposed by Benson.¹² The account of improvisation discussed in the pages to follow, with respect to both Davidson's philosophy and jazz, should be understood in the broad, basic, or fundamental sense in which Benson suggests. I am not discussing or appealing to certain instances or categories of improvisation, but the underlying structure that grounds those instances or categories.

While Davidson himself is primarily interested in epistemology rather than ontology, his philosophy of language is indicative of an ontological unveiling of the basic principles of linguistic communication. While this is clear in Davidson's own writing, that his philosophy of language has been discussed extensively alongside Hans-Georg Gadamer's explicitly ontological account of language further reinforces Davidson's affinity with ontology;¹³ at the very least, Davidson's philosophy of language is in the *neighbourhood* of ontology. Davidson is not concerned with *how we should use* language, nor with offering techniques for interpretation. Rather, he is interested in describing the prerequisites and foundations of language use. Just as Davidson's philosophy of language does not directly assist us in becoming better users of language, the discussion of improvisation presented below is not intended to be of immediate practical use. However, insofar as practitioners reflect on, and are informed about, the nature of their practice, which shapes the way they think about,

¹⁰ Bruce Ellis Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music* (New York: CUP, 2003); Lee B. Brown, David Goldblatt, and Theodore Gracyk, *Jazz and the Philosophy of Art* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

¹¹ Brown, Goldblatt, and Gracyk, *Jazz and the Philosophy of Art*, 196.

¹² Brown, Goldblatt, and Gracyk, *Jazz and the Philosophy of Art*, 197–200.

¹³ See David Couzens Hoy, 'Post-Cartesian Interpretation: Hans-Georg Gadamer and Donald Davidson,' *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lewis Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 111–28; Jeff Malpas, 'What Is Common to All: Davidson on Agreement and Understanding,' *Dialogues with Davidson: Acting, Interpreting, Understanding*, ed. Jeff Malpas (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 259–80; Pol Vandeveldde, 'Historicizing the Mind: Gadamer's "Hermeneutic Experience" Compared to Davidson's "Radical Interpretation",' in *Phenomenology and the Primacy of the Political: Essays in Honor of Jacques Taminiaux*, ed. Véronique M. Fóti and Pavlos Kontos (Cham: Springer, 2017), 87–106.

discuss, and teach that practice, an ontological account of improvisation has the potential to, in the ideal, impact practice itself.

Before moving on, it is worth mentioning briefly that I take it as axiomatic that musical works are ontologically *present* in the event of their happening. The work *is* what comes forth in performance.¹⁴ Thus, there is no ontological difference between performances of pre-composed works and performances of free improvisation, for instance. Musical works are situated in the place of their happening in a manner not dissimilar to the objects of Davidsonian triangulation (discussed below); just as interlocutors might discuss a tree that stands before them, the ‘work’ that musicians attend to during performance does not merely exist in the abstract but is *there* in the event of performance. I do not have the space here to explore the ontology of musical works in depth; I have, however, covered this topic elsewhere.¹⁵ Suffice to say, for the present inquiry, musical works should be understood as being *there* in the place of performance.

To unveil an ontology of improvisation, I focus on three key ideas from Davidson’s philosophy of language: the principle of charity; triangulation; and Davidson’s claim that there is no such thing as a language. I address these ideas under distinct subheadings to tease out the improvisational character of Davidson’s philosophy, and provide analogies with, and examples from, jazz music. I then offer an overview of the improvisational character of Davidson’s philosophy, where I argue that improvisation is an implicit yet fundamental aspect of his philosophy. Then, by considering the understanding of improvisation that emerges from analysing Davidson’s work, I consider the consequences of that account of improvisation for the way in which we understand and conceptualise jazz music.

The Principle of Charity

The principle of charity, or what Davidson has also referred to as the principle of rational accommodation,¹⁶ is, according to Davidson, a prerequisite for understanding. To understand someone, Davidson argues that we *necessarily* start from the charitable assumption that our interlocutor shares the same basic set of beliefs that we do, by virtue of the fact that we each occupy the same world, and therefore develop concepts that allow us to get by in that world. Charity is not a methodological tool in the sense that one may opt to interpret charitably or not. While Bjørn Ramberg describes the principle of charity as an ‘indispensable methodological principle,’¹⁷ the use of the term ‘methodological’ is somewhat misleading—perhaps more so to his readers than to Ramberg himself. Charity is a methodological *presupposition* rather than a methodological *tool* that may help us to resolve interpretive difficulties. Charitable interpretation is simply something we do when we understand, irrespective of whether we are aware of our charity; it is like the jazz musician who tacitly knows how to ‘swing’ or play ‘in the pocket’, where metaphors like these are employed to describe what is often an unconscious act when musicians play together.

¹⁴ My position on this topic is consistent with Jeffrey Maitland’s account of the ontology of art given in ‘Identity, Ontology, and the Work of Art,’ *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy*, 6.3 (1975): 181–96.

¹⁵ Sam McAuliffe, ‘Beyond the Performer: Gadamer, Pareyson, and the Hermeneutics of Musical Performance,’ *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology* (2022): 1–15; Sam McAuliffe, *Improvisation in Music and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming 2023).

¹⁶ Donald Davidson, ‘Expressing Evaluations,’ *Problems of Rationality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 35.

¹⁷ Bjørn Ramberg, *Donald Davidson’s Philosophy of Language: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 69.

Indeed, Davidson is clear that ‘charity is not an option, but a condition of having a workable theory ... Charity is forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters.’¹⁸ There is, necessarily, a familiar starting point from which linguistic communication arises. This starting point, however, is not a pre-learned system of grammar and syntax; it arises from the simple fact that both speaker and interpreter share the same world. Regardless of their cultural backgrounds, political views, and so forth, speaker and interpreter are not worlds apart but are united by being in-the-world.¹⁹ Simply put, Davidson’s principle of charity suggests that if we are to derive meaning from the utterances of another, we must first assume that the other’s beliefs are in general alignment with our own. We must grant that the objects or subject matters that the other refers to are the same objects and subject matters that we understand them to be.

Despite beginning our interpretation of a speaker’s utterances from the broad assumption that we each share a similar set of beliefs, the assignment of meaning by the interpreter is not a clear-cut process of aligning sign and signified. We must acknowledge, because of the indeterminacy of language, there is never only one way to interpret words and phrases. While the principle of charity provides a broad framework within which to interpret the speaker, based on our beliefs we may begin to suspect discrepancies between our respective understanding of certain words or phrases, or tensions in the way our intended meaning is being interpreted. This could be a result of the fact that we do not all use and understand the same terms in precisely the same way, nor are we immune to error.

The generative aspect of language use, then, is always situated—interpretation is something that happens *as we communicate*, it cannot be done in advance—and is grounded in history and tradition. Since the imperative to understand arises ‘in the moment’, as we say, we arrive at understanding by virtue of our ability to spontaneously and charitably engage with the situation in which we find ourselves. We each start with a basic set of beliefs, which we acquire by virtue of the world being as it is, from which we *begin* our interpretative process. The way in which we use words to discuss that world, however, is indeterminate and requires interpretation. This process of interpretation, as will be discussed below, necessarily involves attending and responding to the dynamic conversation in which we are involved.

Since there is always more than one way to say the same thing (jazz musicians, who can play the same tunes differently each time they perform, are obvious exemplars here), and since one can never be sure how another will interpret what one has said, communication is riddled with indeterminacy particular to *that* situation. Understanding is necessarily social. As Davidson notes, ‘the theory we actually use to interpret an utterance is geared to the occasion. We may decide later we could have done better by the occasion, but this does not mean (necessarily) that we now have a better theory for the next occasion.’²⁰ One does not understand what is said *exactly* as the speaker intends (assuming for a moment that speakers are capable of selecting words that convey *exactly* what they intend in the first place), as if one could simply map each word onto a pre-established and stable system of meaning. Rather,

¹⁸ Donald Davidson, ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,’ *The Essential Davidson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 207.

¹⁹ See section on triangulation in this article.

²⁰ Donald Davidson, ‘A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,’ *The Essential Davidson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 260.

to the extent that one understands at all, one reaches an understanding of *what has been said* that is in basic alignment with what the speaker hopes to convey. Interpretation is *produced* by virtue of *conversation*.

This is not to suggest that interpretation is merely subjective or relative. Rather, as we learn from Gadamer,²¹ whose views on language and conversation broadly align with Davidson's, understanding is not only mediated by an awareness of pre-existing views, it also emerges from an *engagement* with the subject matter at issue. Understanding is not so much produced *by the subject* but emerges from the dialecticity of conversation—a conversation that is *directed by the subject matter* toward which the interlocutors are oriented. Understanding emerges from the to-and-fro of conversation, such that the agreement reached is not reducible to either interlocutor alone.

Returning to Davidson, given that the foundation of one's beliefs is that we are each situated in the same world, it stands to reason that there is no real difference between the foundation of one's ability to communicate linguistically, and one's ability to play jazz. Just as we develop language in response to the world—we develop a certain lexicon to discuss music because music exists in the world—musicians develop performance practices because they recognise music and want to engage with it directly. Even the English avant-garde guitarist Keith Rowe's radicalisation of guitar playing did not occur in a vacuum (Rowe is known for playing the guitar on his lap or on a tabletop and may be seen to be partially responsible for a radical alteration of the way in which future guitarists approached the instrument).²² Rowe acknowledges that his abandonment of conventional technique was inspired by Jackson Pollock's drip paintings.²³ In much the same way that language users develop distinct languages, dialects, and idiolects by virtue of the culture and tradition in which they are immersed, so too are the idiosyncratic approaches to playing music developed in response to culture and tradition. It is, however, the basic and fundamental condition of being-in-the-world and encountering the music present in the world, as well as the broader culture and tradition to which music relates, that establishes the basic principles of music-making.

While the principle of charity describes the underlying beliefs that we each possess and assume are shared with others, this does not determine the particularities of language use. Jazz improvisation provides an apt analogy to describe this. Precisely what a jazz musician plays when improvising music can be understood as generative. While they will likely employ notes, rhythms, and phrases that they have played before—insofar as they are genuinely attentive and responsive to the improvisational situation in which they find themselves—their musical contributions will be specific to *that* situation. Just as interlocutors inevitably use the same words and phrases from one conversation to the next, so long as they are not applying those words and phrases normatively and allow those words and phrases to come forth *in response to the conversation in which they are engaged*, their conversing takes on a distinctly improvisational character. Their words and phrases are determined spontaneously or structured by the happening of the conversation. Improvisation in music, just as in verbal conversation,

²¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 401–22.

²² Dan Warburton, 'Keith Rowe,' *Paris Transatlantic Magazine*, paristransatlantic.com/magazine/interviews/rowe.html.

²³ Warburton, 'Keith Rowe.'

is not defined by its novelty; instead, it is defined by its responsiveness to the situation and the (perhaps implicit) attempt to subvert dogmatic behaviour. It is the principle of charity, taken in both linguistic and musical terms, that allows interlocutors and musicians to reach congruence on precisely what it is that they are attending and responding to, and so allows their contributions to be genuinely attentive and responsive to the indeterminate situation in which they find themselves.

Triangulation

What first appears in Davidson's work under the label of 'radical interpretation', the idea of which has been alluded to above with respect to the principle of charity, later evolves into the idea of 'triangulation'. Like the principle of charity, triangulation is not a heuristic device that we may or may not choose to employ. Instead, it describes the foundation of understanding. Among other things, triangulation draws attention to *the way in which we each come to the same basic beliefs*, which, as noted, is central to the principle of charity and improvisation.

For Davidson, understanding involves the subjective, the inter-subjective, and the objective.²⁴ That we have at least some access to the thoughts of others (inter-subjectivity) is because we can triangulate between these three elements. For instance, when a person speaks of 'the desk in the corner', I immediately assume that we share the same belief about what a desk is if I see a desk in the corner of the room. Drawing (hypothetical) lines back from the desk in the corner to the speaker and myself, I can close the triangle by connecting each of the points between the speaker, the object, and myself. Triangulation does not suggest that we share the same thoughts as others nor that we necessarily employ the same vocabulary, nor does it suggest we should. Jeff Malpas puts it succinctly when he writes:

Although we may not share the same descriptive vocabulary ... as our interlocutors, that does not mean that we do not stand in relation to the same objects, nor that we cannot use our own descriptive vocabulary in the process of coming to understand what may well be a different descriptive vocabulary on the part of our interlocutors.²⁵

Triangulation asserts that we know ourselves and others because we share the same world, as well as 'sharing many reactions to its major features, including its values,' as Davidson writes.²⁶

While Davidson primarily employs triangulation to describe the way in which we identify the objects of belief, it is also directly relevant to action. As Malpas notes, 'the objects about which we have beliefs are also the objects with respect to which our actions are variously oriented and directed.'²⁷ Triangulation, then, not only describes the foundation of linguistic communication, but also the foundation of improvisational engagement. The basis of improvisation, in the broadest sense of the term, is the spontaneous attending and responding to that which one encounters in the world.²⁸ Improvising with others, as when playing jazz, occurs on the grounds that each member of the ensemble attends and responds to the same

²⁴ Donald Davidson, 'Three Varieties of Knowledge,' *A.J. Ayer Memorial Essays: Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement: 30*, ed. A. Phillips Griffiths (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), 165.

²⁵ Malpas, 'What is Common to All,' 264.

²⁶ Davidson, 'Three Varieties of Knowledge,' 166.

²⁷ Malpas, 'What is Common to All,' 263.

²⁸ Sam McAuliffe, 'Defending the "Improvisation as Conversation" Model of Improvised Musical Performance,' *Jazz Perspectives* 13 (2021): 1-13.

'object', which, in the context of jazz, is the 'work' or 'referent' that the players are attending to. It is important to acknowledge that the 'work' does not have to be pre-composed. Performers engaged in free improvisation equally attend to the 'work' that they are playing. Solo players attend to the 'work' in much the same way as players in an ensemble; they sympathetically orient themselves toward the 'work' in the same way that they know others, such as the audience, also do. Triangulation is relevant in all instances of improvised musical performance. Indeed, the analogy of improvised musical performance is particularly insightful to elucidate what is at issue in triangulation with respect to language.

There can be no method for improvisation. That is, while people can become more experienced and consistent improvisers by virtue of the spontaneity and responsiveness required of improvisation, one cannot plan precisely how to improvise—to do so would negate the improvisational aspect of their actions. Thus, while jazz musicians will typically practice methodically, the *improvisational* element of their playing cannot be reduced to a 'method'. Indeed, the Latin *improviso*, from which our current term 'improvisation' derives, refers to that which is 'unexpected' or 'unforeseen'. One cannot prepare for the unexpected or unforeseen; improvisation is genuinely spontaneous. Given that improvisation involves spontaneously *attending and responding* to the world, and not merely generating or creating 'content' (musical or otherwise), improvisation is not merely subjective. It necessarily relies upon an engagement with what is beyond oneself. And to the extent that our actions are responsive to those unexpected or unforeseen elements of the world, improvisation relies upon an engagement with what is beyond us. We act in response to some-*thing* and that thing acts on us such that we orient and comport ourselves toward it in some way. That *thing*, at least in part, structures our actions; the possibilities of one's acting is limited by one's prior experience, physical capacity, and the culture and tradition in which they are situated. This is not to suggest a complete loss of agency for the subject; rather, that the thing, or 'object', plays a partial yet essential role in human engagement in the world. As triangulation highlights, our thinking and acting is always in response to that which exists in the world that we share with others.

When performing music in a duet, both players attend and respond to the work that exists between them. When the guitarist Jim Hall and bassist Ron Carter perform the jazz standard 'Alone Together,'²⁹ we notice the basic ideas of Davidson's philosophy of language enacted. While the players work within a preconceived structure determined by their choice of repertoire, they cannot predetermine what the other will play. They use no heuristic method to narrow down the possibilities. Rather, they work on the implicit assumption that the other player will attend to the same work as them and that they will both play in a manner consistent with the tradition and culture in which their performance occurs. While both players interact spontaneously, there is also a shared set of beliefs that provides the necessary context for their spontaneous actions. This is consistent with Davidson's principle of charity.

Triangulation occurs, again implicitly, to the extent that one could map a triangle between each player and the work. While the work possesses a certain identity and structure that precedes the performance, it is the work that comes forth in Hall and Carter's realisation that is of concern. By virtue of similar musical experiences, each player knows that the other will respond to the realisation of the work as presented in that performance. We are not consciously

²⁹ Jim Hall and Ron Carter, 'Alone Together,' track 2, *Alone Together* (Milestone, CD SMJ-6011, 1973).

aware of triangulation during verbal communication. Nonetheless, it shapes our thinking and acting, and serves as the foundation for improvisation and linguistic communication.

There Is No Such Thing as a Language

'There is no such thing as a language ... We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases,' asserts Davidson.³⁰ He is adamant that conventions are *not* a condition of language, arguing instead that 'language is a condition for having conventions.'³¹ Language use comes first; conventions are secondary. On Davidson's account, understanding and agreement are tied to the moment or occasion. The process of making oneself understood, and of understanding the utterances of another, cannot be reduced to shared rules or grammar. In contrast to the convention-based model of interpretation that has dominated philosophy of language, Davidson's account of this process hinges on the idea of 'passing theories' and is distinctly improvisational.

Davidson characterises the dominant conception of linguistic communication as reliant on what he refers to as 'prior theories', or conventions. The position that he argues against can be summarised as follows: first, language use is systematic and there are clear relationships between meanings and utterances; second, the systematic relationship between meanings and utterances must be shared by those who effectively communicate with one another; and third, the shared systematic knowledge is learned in advance of communication. Davidson's critique focuses primarily on the third point. He refutes the idea that meaning is '*governed by learned conventions or regularities*,' arguing that a characteristic of language is that speakers utter, and listeners interpret, words and phrases not covered by prior learning; Davidson uses malapropisms as his primary example to elucidate this fact.³²

Davidson's correction to the theory of language as 'convention' revolves around the idea of 'passing theories'. In contrast to 'prior theories', which, as the name suggests, are acquired *prior* to the act of speaking or interpreting, passing theories are 'geared to the occasion.' He highlights the difference between the two theories as follows: 'for the hearer, the prior theory expresses how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker, while the passing theory is how he *does* interpret the utterance.'³³ Davidson does not argue that conventions and prior theories do not exist; rather, he argues that the fact that there seems to be a convergence between our speech and our neighbour's speech throws 'no light on the essential nature of the skills that are thus made to converge.'³⁴ The 'skill' at issue here, which Davidson discusses in terms of 'passing theories', is, I suggest, improvisation, although we must be careful with what is meant by the term 'skill'. As Malpas and I have argued elsewhere:

Improvisation is not primarily the exercising of musical virtuosity, or the exhibiting of mastery of an instrument, musical genre, style, or structure, nor a demonstration of the collaborative possibilities of an ensemble. Rather, on the basis of a learned familiarity involving one's instrument, musical tradition and culture, and other performers ... one

³⁰ Davidson, 'Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,' 265.

³¹ Donald Davidson, 'Communication and Convention,' *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 280.

³² Davidson, 'Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,' 254.

³³ Davidson, 'Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,' 260.

³⁴ Davidson, 'Communication and Convention,' 278.

gives oneself over to the unexpected and unforeseen possibilities of the event, and so come to *belong* as well as contribute to a happening that is both singular and complex.³⁵

The skill at issue in improvisation does not refer to one's possession of a prior theory. The skill resides in being able to put one's prior theory aside, as it were, and *engage with* the peculiarities of the occasion of speech and interpretation—of *conversation*. One does not stand outside the conversation, looking in and determining objectively the utterances of one's interlocutor. Instead, interlocutors attend, as best they can, to the peculiarities of the specific conversation in which they find themselves. They attend and respond, both contributing and receiving, on the spur of the moment. They do not objectively analyse the utterances of the other based on determinative meanings that those utterances are known to convey. Rather, the interlocutors *are* the conversation. They are *in* the language of that particular conversation, which is not identical to any other conversation, and they are able to align their passing theories, which they generate and adjust in the moment.

Davidson writes that 'every deviation from ordinary usage, as long as it is agreed on for the moment (knowingly deviant, or not, on one, or both, sides), is in the passing theory as a feature of what the words mean on that occasion.' Given that the meanings of words and phrases are determined by the occasion in which they are spoken and interpreted (rather than agreed upon in advance), there can be no 'mastery' of language; each conversation relies upon passing theories particular to *that* conversation. Just as a jazz musician cannot plan in advance precisely what they will improvise, for to do so flies in the face of what it means to improvise, 'nor could such a language, if we want to call it that, be said to have been learned, or to be governed by conventions.'³⁶ For the jazz musician as for those engaged in verbal conversation, what counts is *experience*.

It is experience that allows us to become better communicators and, indeed, better improvisers. It is this experience or familiarity, however, that is perhaps one source of the assumption that language and improvisation in music is based upon a shared understanding of rules and conventions. One may be inclined to argue that long-standing ensembles—such as Keith Jarrett's famous 'standards trio' that ran between 1983 and 2014 and featured Jarrett on piano, Gary Peacock on bass, and Jack DeJohnette on drums—was so successful precisely because they were able to develop, over many years of playing together, a musical language of sorts. If we follow Davidson, however, such an argument is untenable.

The idea of experience offers an alternate solution. Rather than say that Jarrett's standards trio developed a musical 'language', it would be better to say, simply, that they became increasingly 'experienced' playing as a trio. To reference Gadamer, 'the experienced person' is 'radically undogmatic.'³⁷ The more experienced someone becomes, the less reliant they are on preconceived structures or rules and the more open they are to new experiences. In a long-standing ensemble such as Jarrett's standards trio, this also translates to trust within the ensemble, where players are granted permission to explore and seek new experiences. Rather than suggest a preconceived language or structure, what is distinctive about long-standing

³⁵ Sam McAuliffe and Jeff Malpas, 'Improvising the Round Dance of Being: Reading Heidegger from a Musical Perspective,' *Heidegger and Music*, ed. Casey Rentmeester and Jeff Warren (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022).

³⁶ Davidson, 'Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,' 261.

³⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 364.

ensembles is that the indeterminate character of their performances *increases*, rather than becoming more structured or pre-determined. To use Davidson's terminology, players *do not* develop an ensemble language; instead, they become more experienced in generating 'passing theories', and each player seeks ever new experiences.

Given that the way we use language derives from our ability to generate passing theories, and that language is specific to the conversation, it becomes difficult to specify precisely what language is. Language is not reducible to prior theories, because prior theories are not relied upon when we engage in linguistic communication. If one were to suggest that language refers to passing theories, then a new 'language' arises each time we engage in conversation. This also calls into question what it means to know or learn a language. Hence, Davidson claims that there is no such thing as a language. He argues that the basic ability to communicate by speech simply 'consists in [sic] the ability to make oneself understood, and to understand.'³⁸ What facilitates linguistic communication is not rule-governed repetition or convention—although these do describe a contingent feature of what is at issue in language use—but the ability to adjust one's theory of speech or interpretation in the moment by attending and responding to the singular occasion from which the imperative to communicate arises.³⁹ Linguistic communication thus rests upon our ability to improvise.

Improvising Linguistic Communication

I have argued that Davidson's philosophy of language, broadly conceived, refers to an essentially improvisational practice of speaking and interpreting. Central concepts or principles that span Davidson's career—the principle of charity, triangulation, and his argument that there is no such thing as a language—are largely consistent with the concept of improvisation. Beginning with the principle of charity, Davidson argues that we each share a similar set of beliefs. We reach agreement or arrive at an understanding based on a shared set of beliefs that derive from our shared existence in the world. When we converse with others, we keep track of the object or subject matter that is our concern through a process of triangulation. Triangulation is that which allows us to meaningfully engage with others in the world; however, the actual process or activity of communication itself relies upon our ability to improvisationally create appropriate passing theories. Given that there is no such thing as a language, we cannot rely upon pre-given rules or conventions to meaningfully communicate with others. Rather, Davidson suggests we develop a certain skill that, based on our shared set of beliefs, allows us to generate passing theories in the moment. This skill, while Davidson does not label it as such, is improvisation.

The centrality of improvisation for Davidson emerges primarily from his reversal of how philosophers have tended to describe our intersubjective relationships on the basis of subjectivity. Davidson's view, in contrast, treats inter-subjectivity, and so subjectivity, as explicable, because people exist in the same world. This is why Davidson argues that scepticism cannot 'get off the ground',⁴⁰ for scepticism problematically assumes that subjectivity can function in isolation. On Davidson's account, subjectivity itself cannot exist without the world in which that subject is situated. For it is the world itself that forms the very basis of subjectivity, and so too of inter-subjectivity.

³⁸ Davidson, 'Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,' 264.

³⁹ Davidson, 'Communication and Convention,' 278–80.

⁴⁰ Davidson, 'Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,' 241.

It is precisely Davidson's anti-subjectivism or anti-scepticism that renders his philosophy inherently improvisational. Our ability to derive meaning, understand, or reach agreement is never a purely subjective process. Rather, it necessarily involves *engagement* with the world and with others. However, there are no fixed rules or conventions for this engagement by virtue of the indeterminacy of interpretation. Thus, our engagement with the world requires the 'skill' of improvisation. The very basis of our ability to understand is tied to our ability to improvise. Of course, improvisation, as discussed here, is not to be considered a skill or talent in the sense that some people can do it and others cannot. Instead, like the principle of charity or triangulation, we have no choice but to improvise. Improvisation is the activity, common to us all, that we each participate in when we engage in conversation.

A Davidsonian Account of Jazz

'Jazz' is not a term that is easily defined. Indeed, many practitioners routinely labelled as jazz greats or pioneers—Duke Ellington and Charlie Parker, for instance—have at one point or another expressed a dislike for their music being referred to as 'jazz'.⁴¹ Jazz has never liked being pinned down or codified. As soon as a stable definition that might define the practice begins to emerge, the musicians seemingly attempt to expand their practice and subvert any clear-cut definition. Indeed, especially considering free jazz and free improvisation, as the improvising guitarist Joe Morris has highlighted,⁴² there is no defining method, system, or feature that can capture the myriad approaches to music making that would broadly fall under the banners of jazz, free jazz, or free improvisation. This would appear to echo Davidson's assertion, noted above, that language is a condition of having conventions. Equally, we may say that jazz is a condition of its subsequent codification.

Thus, we might borrow a phrase from Davidson and assert: *there is no such thing as jazz*, if by 'jazz' one is referring to a clearly defined, pre-existing, and shared system of music-making that exists prior to that music-making. Insofar as we reject the idea of a common approach to jazz music-making as the basis for 'jazz', it would be folly to attempt to give a Davidsonian definition of jazz. Indeed, such an endeavour would be rejected by both jazz musicians and Davidson himself. To the extent that jazz musicians improvise (which is typically the focus of jazz theorists who appeal to language to understand jazz and language theorists who appeal to jazz to understand linguistic communication), however, we can outline a broad, ontological account of improvisation that is consistent with the improvisation manifest in Davidson's account of linguistic communication.

There appears to be good reason for theorists of jazz music to routinely appeal to linguistics and philosophy of language to explain jazz improvisation. These theories, however, need not merely appeal to metaphor, for both linguistic communication and jazz improvisation share a similar improvisational structure—the spontaneous and undogmatic attending and responding to that which they encounter. The tendency in musicology, however, to compare the idiosyncratic approaches of different jazz musicians, or the tendency in philosophy of music to focus on the ontological puzzle thought to arise with respect to the relationship between works and the performances of those works, has perhaps obscured the underlying

⁴¹ Lloyd Peterson, *Music and the Creative Spirit: Innovators in Jazz, Improvisation, and the Avant Garde* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 21.

⁴² Joe Morris, *Perpetual Frontier: The Properties of Free Music* (Stony Creek: Riti Publishing, 2012), 1–28.

structure of improvisation. Before we begin a comparative analysis of different idiosyncratic approaches to jazz improvisation, for instance, we must be clear about what improvisation is in a fundamental sense. Given that both conversation and jazz are underpinned by improvisation, it can be argued that the principle of charity, triangulation, and the idea that conventions follow practice, constitute the foundation of jazz, inasmuch as they constitute the basic principles of linguistic communication.

The central themes from Davidson's philosophy of language that have been the focus of discussion—the principle of charity, triangulation, and Davidson's rejection of the idea that language is underpinned by a common conceptual scheme—can be used to understand jazz improvisation. From these themes we can assert the following: *language and improvisation depend upon the fact that we each already possess a similar set of beliefs because we are always situated in a world that we share with, and know that we share with, others. We do not possess prior theories of language and improvisation that we apply during linguistic communication or improvised musical performance; rather, we create language and jazz as we use and play it.* Given the ontological nature of this statement, it appears to lack any real prescriptive force that might assist the budding jazz musician. What is it, then, that jazz musicians might take away from such an account?

We receive a hint by considering Davidson's philosophy of language. As noted, Davidson is not concerned with offering techniques or tools to become a better communicator or interpreter. There is little we can do with Davidson's principle of charity, for instance. Davidson does not tell us how we *should* communicate with others. Rather, he describes the necessary conditions or principles that underpin linguistic communication. This is, following Davidson, what I have attempted to do for improvisation in jazz. Understanding the underlying principles of language and improvisation allows us to be consistent and informed in our *theories* of language and improvisation, *pedagogy* around language and improvisation, and the *practice* of linguistic communication and jazz improvisation, by virtue of possessing the right foundation upon which to base our theory, pedagogy, and practice.

Conclusion

Given the contradictions and inconsistencies in the way that philosophers of language have appropriated ideas of jazz improvisation and vice versa, it would seem pertinent to offer a foundation upon which these distinct but overlapping fields might be grounded. In this article, I hope to have taken the first steps to establish this foundation. I have argued that the reason each practice and/or theory appeals to the other is largely because they each rely upon improvisation. Thus, the effectiveness of the analogies and metaphors routinely offered on both sides is a result of the shared improvisational structure of linguistic communication and jazz music—a structure that, while largely overlooked, appears to be central to Davidson's philosophy of language.

About the Author

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