



Not agreement but understanding. Davidson, Viveiros de Castro, and the lived experience view on cross-linguistic disagreement

Julia J. Turska¹

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss two perspectives on cross-linguistic disagreement and propose a third. Specifically, I examine Davidson's rejection of the possibility of incommensurability of conceptual schemes and Viveiros de Castro's anthropological perspective that highlights radical differences, seeing translation as a form of equivocation. I motivate this interdisciplinary pairing of thinkers with the importance of philosophical discourse's engagement in the empirically informed debates on interpretative pluralism, in line with Viveiros de Castro's ontological anthropology. Through a critical analysis, I scrutinize Davidson's theory's trouble with accounting for interpretative asymmetry and Viveiros de Castro's stance for promoting the representational view on interpretation. As a central outcome of this examination, I synthesize these critiques to propose an alternative approach rooted in the phenomenological account of language and pragmatism. This perspective upholds interpretative pluralism, while rejecting the notions of strong incommensurability and relativism, thereby preserving the potential for meaningful cross-linguistic dialogue.

Keywords Ontological turn · Controlled equivocation · Interpretative asymmetry · Philosophy of anthropology · Phenomenological theory of language

.. but minimizing disagreement or maximizing agreement, is a confused ideal. The aim of interpretation is not agreement but understanding.

— Donald Davidson (2001, xix)

A philosophy, then, with other peoples in it: the possibility of a philosophical endeavor that places itself in relation to the nonphilosophy—simply, the life— of other peoples on the planet, beyond our own. Not only the common

✉ Julia J. Turska
julia.turska@wur.nl

¹ Knowledge, Technology and Innovation, Wageningen University & Research, Hollandseweg 1, 6706 Wageningen, KN, Netherlands

people, but above all with uncommon people, those that are beyond our sphere of “communication.”

— Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2013, 488)

1 Introduction

According to the standard definition, cross-linguistic disagreement is a type of disagreement which arises “purely due to the difference of linguistic norms” (Mizumoto, 2022, 1251). In this article, the possibility of the differentiation of the semantic and pragmatic components of meaning and thus distilling difference *purely due to the difference of linguistic norms* is put into question, seeing language as a necessarily social practice. In what follows, I consider how that matters for the study of cross-linguistic disagreement. Specifically, I argue that, conceptualized as such, cross-linguistic disagreement raises a variety of philosophical questions that are not limited to semantic theory alone. The challenges of cross-linguistic interpretation reveal the limits of the ability to understand others and provide an opportunity to reflect on one’s own assumptions situated in the interpretative apparatus. By engaging with these issues, one can deepen the understanding of the complexities of interpretation overall as well as develop more nuanced, productive, and respectful ways of engaging with difference.

With that in mind, conceptual relativism becomes particularly relevant in the investigation of cross-linguistic interpretation because of the variety of meanings that different communities attribute to the same concepts (Glock, 2002). This can be seen as posing a challenge to metaphysical realism, which typically assumes that there is a single truth that can be accessible through empirical observation and rational reasoning (Putnam, 2004). In contrast, conceptual relativism suggests that truth is contingent on cultural context and can vary according to cultural norms, values, beliefs, and practices. This raises questions regarding the reliability of testimony and other forms of evidence in cross-cultural interpretation. On top of that, conceptual relativism is criticized as yielding an incoherent view on the process of interpretation (Malpas, 2011).

In real-world cross-cultural interpretation, power dynamics are a central concern as interpretation is always situated within a field of complex social relations (Ludwig et al. 2023; Turnhout et al., 2020). Those who have the power to shape discourse often exercise their authority over those who do not have the same level of influence in meaning-making practices. These power dynamics affect how we understand and interpret differences between cultures and have important implications for the understanding of both the process and the ethics of interpretation.¹

To respond to these concerns, I argue that an account of cross-linguistic disagreement should be capable of describing the power-laden plurality of interpretative practices while simultaneously rejecting conceptual relativism. As the key result, I

¹ For example, Mizumoto (2022) identifies the *moral-political factor* as a key dimension which yields discrepancies in the truth predicates of English and Japanese.

develop a view of cross-linguistic difference as difference in lived experience in the phenomenological sense and argue that this perspective provides a view of interpretation where the goal of interpretation is understood pragmatically, i.e., as that of achieving understanding (and not agreement), overcoming the limitations of controlled equivocation as a theory of interpretative asymmetry, while preserving pluralism in interpretative frameworks. I accomplish this in dialogue with two accounts of cross-linguistic disagreement, and more precisely, through a critical analysis of the two.

Firstly, I look to Davidson's rejection of conceptual relativism (Davidson, 1974), focusing on its outlook on the phenomenon of interpretative asymmetry. In this and subsequent works, Davidson argued that interpretation is always in principle possible, regardless of cross-linguistic disagreement, viewing the process as a pragmatic, goal-oriented social activity, where the universality and the primacy of the concepts of truth and belief underscore overall understanding. In response, some have argued that such an account is of limited help in explaining the empirical reality of systematic failures of understanding, caused by cross-linguistic differences (Lynch, 2016; Taylor, 2017).

To reflect on this criticism, I then engage with *controlled equivocation*, a methodology of cross-cultural interpretation developed by Viveiros de Castro (2004). This cultural anthropologist is associated with the *ontological turn* in anthropology, which exhibits ties to debates on relativism and pluralism within philosophy (Palecek & Risjord, 2012; Turska & Ludwig, 2023). As previously argued by Turska and Ludwig (2023), considerations regarding ontology in anthropology can shed light on aspects of the philosophical debate on pluralism in philosophy, which are not sufficiently discussed, such as those relating to issues of the empirical realities of pluralism, praxis, and power. The proponents of ontological anthropology contend that differences between collectives are constitutive in interpretative asymmetries. Those differences should be understood at the *ontological level*,² meaning that the nature of the fundamental categories is to be discovered rather than assumed throughout the process of anthropological interpretation of interlocutors. This view of difference is consequential to the question on the possibility of successful interpretation.

Engaging with interpretative difference between agents in a communication scenario is thus seen as *equivocation* (Viveiros de Castro 2004), rather than relying solely on *translation*. This means that the possibility of fixing the referent as stable and expressible in different interpretative frameworks, as is assumed in the process of translation, is put into question. Ontological anthropology, as envisioned by Viveiros de Castro, was formerly linked to conceptual relativism and discussed in relation to Davidson's argument against conceptual relativism (Palecek & Risjord, 2012; Risjord, 2020). Aside from relativism, theoreticians and practitioners from within social science have been critical of the ontological understanding of

² It is important to recognize that *ontology* in anthropology stands for a heuristic tool for engaging with collective-dependent, knowledge-making, self-determined interpretative domains, which diverges from its standard use in philosophical literature (Turska and Ludwig 2023).

difference in anthropology, as, in their opinion, it presents an exoticizing (Bessire & Bond, 2014) and internally incoherent (Ingold, 2016) picture of how interpretative asymmetries come about and how they are dealt with in practice. “If anthropology is, as the ontological turn advocates, not a study of multiple ‘world-views’ but of essentially different ‘worlds’ altogether, how, we ask, does one approach this methodologically? To put it in other words, if we really believe in radically essential, fundamental ontological difference with what registers can we, then, conceive and describe ontological others in ways that do them ethnographic justice?”, Vigh and Sausdal (2014, 49) write.

To summarize, Davidson’s theory of interpretation, while providing the basis of understanding despite cross-linguistic disagreement and thus rejecting conceptual relativism, gives an unpalatable account of interpretative asymmetry, which is an empirical reality. Simultaneously, Viveiros de Castro’s controlled equivocation view sustains interpretative pluralism, while at the same time carrying the drawbacks reminiscent of conceptual relativism. In this article, I therefore ask: is it possible to synthesize the two views to arrive at a theory of cross-linguistic interpretation which would be both theoretically and empirically plausible?

In his paper from 2020, Risjord proposes to view the interpretation present in anthropological practice in line with Davidson’s semantic theory rooted in the principle of charity, as well as with the ecology of life strand in anthropology (Ingold, 2000), which views culture via the lens of phenomenology and active engagement with the environment. The present work goes further in this proposal, nuancing the validity of Davidson’s approach via a discussion of interpretative asymmetry. As a result, I suggest thinking of the equivocation present in instances of interpretative asymmetry as an equivocation not just of concepts or *ontologies* (in the anthropological sense) but of experiences, relations, and active engagements, which themselves are the building blocks of interpretative domains, moving away from representationalism in semantic theory. Such reconceptualized methodology for addressing interpretative asymmetry supplements Davidson’s framework with an answer to asymmetry and preserves Viveiros de Castro’s key goal of treating difference seriously. By linking the anthropological, empirically driven considerations based on the practice of interpreting across difference, with philosophical semantics, I intend to, as stated in the beginning, bring about a holistic reflection on the entanglement of theory and praxis of interpretation across cross-linguistic disagreement.

2 Cross-linguistic disagreement and interpretative asymmetry

The starting point of this investigation is the late-Wittgensteinian view of language as not just a system of symbols, but as an active engagement and a fundamental aspect of existing in the world (Wittgenstein [1953] 2010). On such an account, it is challenging to conceive of a purely semantic form of cross-linguistic disagreement, without considering the situatedness of linguistic norms and semantics within a network of the social dimension of language and other human practices, discursive or otherwise. To make this point clear, I link the discussion of cross-linguistic

disagreement to a broader concept of *interpretative asymmetry* (Lynch, 2016), meaning the difference in the interpretative toolboxes of speakers in a hermeneutic scenario.

Lynch (ibid.) describes interpretative asymmetry as a phenomenon in which participants of a conversation use incompatible interpretative schemes to process each other's words and behaviors. The problem extends beyond cross-cultural interpretation to other dimensions of difference between speakers, such as child/adult and expert/lay person. To demonstrate the key features of interpretative asymmetry, I will now compare and contrast it with another phenomenon, *information asymmetry* (Mishra et al., 1998, 277) from marketing theory. "Marketing relationships between buyers and sellers are characterized by information asymmetry, in the sense that the supplier possesses more information about the object of an exchange (e.g., a product or service) than the buyer. [...] For example, buyers of car repair services often face considerable ambiguity when trying to determine the true level of quality provided in a particular transaction." Imagine a customer purchasing a car. In the moment of purchase, she will not have the information necessary for ascertaining the long-term performance of the vehicle, as she has not used it for a long term at this point. This knowledge gap can, however, be (at least in principle) filled based on her experience of using a car.

Unlike information asymmetry, *interpretative asymmetry* is not a gap in information or knowledge which can be filled, if given enough resources, time, data, etc. Here, the difference between the participants of the interpretative scenario lies in their interpretative apparatuses, i.e., at the level of concepts. Therefore, the difference cannot be overcome by adding to each other's set of known facts. It is important to note that not all cases of interpretative asymmetry lead to disagreement; for instance, when speakers simply know different facts about different matters, asymmetry does not lead to disagreement. However, such scenarios can indeed arise.

Let us consider the following example. Since the emergence of plant neurobiology, the debate on plant consciousness has been animating the scientific landscapes of plant science and the philosophy of biology (Colaço, 2022). Admittedly, the complexity of this debate cannot be adequately captured in this short paragraph. For the purpose of our argument, we examine two issues dividing the proponents and skeptics of the existence of plant consciousness. The first concerns the question whether the functional analogy between the transfer of electrical signals through the animal nervous systems (which are recognized as enabling consciousness in animals) and the transfer of electrical signals in plants (which do not have a nervous system) is strong enough to support the claim that some plants are capable of conscious processing (ibid.). Secondly, there is disagreement as to whether the empirical findings which support the capability of plants to perform certain cognitive tasks related to communication and memory (Segundo-Ortín & Calvo, 2023) can be seen as signs of consciousness rather than simple learning, which is not a sufficient condition of satisfying the definition of primary consciousness (Mallatt et al., 2021), understood as "having any type of experiences or feelings, no matter how faint or fleeting" (ibid., 460).

While this is a fairly recent discussion, and lots of new empirical data in this area is bound to be generated, it is unclear whether that would significantly affect

these points of contention, as these specific disagreements can be analyzed as arising from interpretative asymmetry. The participants interpret the empirical evidence in accordance with different conceptualizations of consciousness and subscribe to divergent views on how justifiable claims inferred from analogy can be. What is more, the disagreement between the two positions extends beyond a superficial difference of preference with respect to the interpretation of the empirical results, as recognizing plants as sentient beings with complex cognitive capacities reorients the fundamental understanding of cognition, the relations between humans and non-humans, and the ethical responsibilities of humans towards plants (e.g., Gagliano, 2017). This example illustrates that disagreements arising from interpretative asymmetries fall under the larger category of *faultless disagreements* (Kölbel, 2004), i.e., “[w]hen two thinkers disagree on a non-objective matter of opinion.. [and] neither of them has made a mistake or is at fault.” (ibid., 53).

3 Only words apart³

The call for this Special Issue begins with the following question: “Is it possible for two people, or two groups of people, to disagree with each other and for their disagreement to be due solely to linguistic differences (linguistic norms or semantics of the respective languages)?” In this section, I will examine one possible answer to this question, based on Donald Davidson’s theory of meaning and rejection of conceptual relativism.

Davidson critically addressed the concept of *conceptual schemes*, theorized as the link between perceptible reality and the articulation of beliefs through language. This view of conceptual schemes as mediators between intersubjective reality and linguistic meaning suggested that divergent groups perceive reality through distinct conceptual schemes (e.g., Quine [1960] 2013). This would in turn lead to *indeterminacy of translation* (ibid.), i.e., the impossibility of assessing if people truly understood each other when their backgrounds were very different, under conditions of empirical equivalence. To return to the example of the previous section, provided that all evidence of plant cognition is equally presented and correctly evaluated by both speakers (empirical equivalence), indeterminacy of translation states that it is impossible to determine whether speakers in a dialogue between a skeptic and proponent are correctly interpreting each other (i.e., as intended by the speaker), given the differences between their *conceptual schemes*.

Davidson argued, contrary to this view, that the idea of deep differences obstructing interpretative engagement, even across vastly different linguistic communities, is predicated on a misconstrued understanding of the process of interpretation itself. This is because interpretation does not operate via schemes but is directly related with the intersubjectively observable reality. Therefore, the ideas of *different conceptual schemes* or a *universal conceptual scheme* are equally incoherent:

³ Davidson (1974, 189).

It would be wrong to summarize by saying we have shown how communication is possible between people who have different schemes, a way that works without need of what there cannot be, namely a neutral ground, or a common coordinate system. For we have found no intelligible basis on which it can be said that schemes are different. It would be equally wrong to announce the glorious news that all man-kind — all speakers of language, at least — share a common scheme and ontology. For if we cannot intelligibly say that schemes are different, neither can we intelligibly say that they are wrong. Davidson (1974, 20)

So, if language does not operate via conceptual schemes, then what is linguistic meaning? At the base of Davidson's semantic theory lies the assumption that when presented with a hermeneutic task, one can assume that the speaker is conveying a true belief (principle of charity). Furthermore, metaphysically, Davidson is a representative of the so-called *common-sense realism*, according to which both the interpreter and the speaker have access to intersubjectively observable reality. Using these two tools (principle of charity and common-sense realism), the interpreter can *triangulate* the meaning of the speaker's words to achieve *understanding*, the pragmatically oriented goal of interpretation. In this way, Davidson's approach eliminates the need for a Fregean distinction between referent and sense or mode of presentation by focusing solely on truth conditions. He argues that meaning derives from truth rather than an intermediary sense. This makes his theory a radical departure from traditional distinctions between referent and mode of presentation.

For Davidson, the choice of concepts used by the interpreter to express their theory of meaning is not theoretically significant, i.e., it does not influence the core meaning of the message the speaker aims to convey. Mistakes happen, small asymmetries are not only possible, but rather common in everyday communication. But ultimately, interpretation is in principle possible, along all dimensions of difference. "Conceptually divergent but empirically equivalent interpretations are 'only words apart' (Davidson, 1974, 189)" (cited in Lynch, 2016, 477). Thus, Davidson's theory advocates a version of interpretative universalism, i.e., the view that some kind of successful understanding is always possible.

4 Controlled equivocation

Since its disciplinary beginnings, anthropology has been grappling with questions concerning understanding across difference. Historically, in line with Eurocentric ideologies, non-Western societies were considered through a colonial lens with an attitude of epistemic superiority (Kuklick, 2009). Conversely, contemporary anthropology aims to develop a more nuanced view of cultural differences, recognizing the importance of diversity and challenging historical power imbalances. This section describes how this shift matters for the way interpretative asymmetry and disagreement is theorized and empirically engaged with by one of the leading figures of the field, the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. Specifically, I focus on the method of controlled equivocation, which

aims to bring to the fore a more egalitarian view of cross-cultural difference into anthropological interpretation that is considered and analyzed in the context of cross-linguistic disagreement.

Controlled equivocation (2004) has been shaped by Amerindian perspectivism, a metaphysical account present in the cosmologies of various Indigenous communities throughout Amazonia (e.g., Lima, 1999), according to which every creature, human or non-human, is a subjective agent who sees oneself and members of one's own kind as human and inhabits relations with other kinds of creatures and objects in a manner analogous to the way that human beings relate with other entities:

What changes when passing from one species of subject to another is the 'objective correlative,' the referent of these concepts: what jaguars see as 'manioc beer' (the proper drink of people ...), humans see as 'blood'. Where we see a muddy salt-lick on a river bank, tapirs see their big ceremonial house, and so on. Viveiros de Castro (2012, 6)

Culture, understood here as the web of relations between humans and other beings and objects, is fixed as a way in which different kinds of beings exist in the world; yet what changes from perspective to perspective are the entities situated in the nodes of this cultural web. Viveiros de Castro calls this a *multinaturalism* (one culture, many natures), to espouse the view's fundamental contrast with *multiculturalism* (one nature, many cultures) which dominates the modernist discourse. Interpretation across different kinds of beings, which is common practice in those communities (e.g., Kohn, 2013), relies on the ability to grasp the relational meaning of what is being communicated to find, through the web of analogies, the way back to the referent:

The problem for indigenous perspectivism is not therefore one of discovering the common referent (say, the planet Venus) to two different representations (say, "Morning Star" and "Evening Star"). On the contrary, it is one of making explicit the equivocation implied in imagining that when the jaguar says "manioc beer" he is referring to the same thing as us (i.e., a tasty, nutritious and heady brew). Viveiros de Castro (2012, 6)

What Amerindian perspectivism shares with anthropological practice is the prevalence of comparisons in both, through encountering divergent perspectives and interpreting across difference. Perspectival anthropology, which importantly should be understood as an ethnographic paradigm modelled on Amerindian perspectivism and not a metaphysical theory itself, requires a method to navigate through this complicated space of difference, and controlled equivocation is what Viveiros de Castro proposes to fulfill that goal. Ethnographic practice is, in this view, an exercise where full translatability, meaning a practice the aim for the practitioner is to find a term in their own language which refers to the exact same object as the term in the source language, is not achievable. Rather, the interpretation in ethnography is akin to *equivocation*, meaning that the anthropologist should be acutely aware of the possible divergence in foundational

categories between their and their interlocutor's languages, which makes the relation between term and referent much more complex. Equivocation is not seen as a fallacy or an error in interpretation, which would make anthropology futile or necessarily wrong. On the contrary, while it is considered a consequence of the empirical presence of incommensurability in instances of radical cross-linguistic difference, exploring the equivocation is the way truly novel, different, and imaginative engagements can emerge. Following Viveiros de Castro's nod to Frege's theory of meaning evident in the quotation above, this reorientation from translation to equivocation could be described as a move from prioritizing fixing the referent to aiming to determine the mode of presentation of the interlocutor's words in the course of ethnographic interpretation.⁴

The political importance of this shift in anthropological orientation from translation to equivocation, which Viveiros de Castro argues for, is of the highest priority. Performing controlled equivocation is proposed to shed universal applicability of the dominant Western dualist metaphysics in favor of marginalized ontological points of view, to comprehend something new and surprising, to imagine truly subversive politics, which, according to the anthropologist, is called upon by the Anthropocene, a moment of global and collective crisis.

It falls to the anthropologist to elucidate what indigenous concepts we are translating by "life" before saying these peoples "are wrong" They populate their worlds with agents differently constituted than the ones that inhabit ours ... and these different agents largely intersect at the level of the effects they produce on the phenomenal world. And most importantly, we have to ask what difference those differences make when it comes to live (in) the Anthropocene, considering the intersection, when not the sensible convergence, of their respective effects. Viveiros de Castro (2019, 304–305)

Viveiros de Castro's prescription for anthropologists is along these lines: proceed with interpretation as if you were in an encounter with a radically different metaphysical reality. Yet he does not commit himself to radical metaphysical relativism. The ontologies of the anthropologist and the interlocutor are heuristic approximations of the apparatuses, or interpretative domains, with which these individuals relate and come to understand their environments, containing their most fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality. Through ontological description guided by controlled equivocation, differences in these interpretative domains can become apparent. "Treating cognitive difference in terms of a difference in belief, Viveiros de Castro contends, distorts those differences and fails to take them seriously" Risjord (2020, 592). So, when faced with a description of reality inconsistent with one's own, the anthropologist should not relegate it to the realm of belief and should avoid the discussion of its validity as an account of the nature of the world. Communities who do not subscribe to a modernist view of the world are therefore also possessors of knowledges which do not need to be externally adjudicated (Ludwig et al.,

⁴ In their discussion of Viveiros de Castro's work, Holbraad and Pedersen (2017) formulate this in the corresponding terms of intension and extension (see also: Risjord (2020)).

2023). To democratize knowledge production and facilitate self-determination for these communities, political domination, grounded in this epistemic injustice and sustained by anthropological accounts which do not treat difference seriously, needs to be firmly challenged.

“Neither explain, *nor interpret*: Multiply and experiment!” is also what Viveiros de Castro (2013, 488, emphasis added) tells the reader when discussing controlled equivocation. How productive is it, therefore, to discuss his methodology in the context of cross-linguistic disagreement and interpretative asymmetry, outside of its practical use as a method of ethnographic inquiry? As the final reflection of the current section, I distill what it is that Viveiros de Castro’s theory entails with respect to these topics, to put it side by side with Davidson’s theory of interpretation in the comparative analysis which follows.

To begin with, let us recall the discussion of *information asymmetry*. Controlled equivocation can be seen as an account of interpretative rather than information asymmetry precisely because, differing from straightforward translational errors, it is applicable in situations when the difference is not one which can be overcome given enough time, additional information, or resources. The difference, such as between perspectivism and naturalism, which ultimately demands an equivocal and not translational interpretative strategy, persists because it is constitutional of the interpretative apparatus. Furthermore, the goal of interpretation is not to remove this difference by explaining the aspect of the discourse of the interpreted in the language (or interpretative structure) of the interpreter. Rather, the anthropologist must experiment with their own discourse and foundational categories to capture to the best of their ability the mode of presentation of precisely what they had been told and had experienced in the ethnographic encounter.

The (meta)relation between anthropologist and native is not one of identity: the anthropologist always says and, therefore, does something different than what the native says or does, even when he intends to do nothing more than repeat the native’s discourse in a “textual” form, or when he tries to establish a dialogue—a dubious notion—with the native.. ... What happens if, unsatisfied with a mere passive or de facto equality between discursive subjects, we claim an active or de jure equality between their respective discourses? What if, rather than being neutralized by this equivalence, the disparity between the meanings produced on either side, by anthropologists and natives, is introduced into both discourses, thus releasing its full potential? Viveiros de Castro (2013, 475–476)

Controlled equivocation is thus a way to analytically capture cross-linguistic disagreement. Therefore, the difference resides at the level of concepts or modes of presentation in Fregean terms, without proclaiming a cognitive difference between communities, which Viveiros de Castro (2013, 485) explicitly rejects. These divergent modes of presentation are at the core of ethnographic analysis. The aim is to prompt reflection about the construction of foundational categories, rather than reflecting on the veracity of the interlocutor’s statements: “... when told by his indigenous interlocutors (under conditions that must always be specified) that peccaries are human, the anthropologist should ask herself or himself, not whether “he believes” that

they are, but rather what such an idea could show him about indigenous notions of humanity and “peccarity.” Viveiros de Castro (2013, 495). The modes of presentation of *human* and *peccary* are in divergent relational networks in the interpretative frameworks of the anthropologist and the informant, and the controlled equivocation methodology of interpretation allows for the discovery of these differences without explaining them away. And this difference has pragmatic importance, as a source of productive tensions sparking creativity.

5 Two faces of cross-linguistic disagreement and the question of commensurability

To make our analysis more precise, let us consider the following exemplary dialogue between three speakers, A, B, and C. B is a scientific naturalist, and C an Amerindian perspectivist, and thus, they subscribe different meanings to “jaguar” and “person” which is suggested in the following dialogue:

A: Are jaguars people?

B: No.

C: Yes.

Can the divergence between B’s and C’s statements be classified as genuine cross-linguistic disagreement? Or rather, how would each of the accounts discussed above analyze this situation? In Davidson’s “only words apart” view, firstly, this is a case of faultless disagreement, which relates to the truth value of statements of each agent as assumed by the principle of charity. And while what we observe shows disagreement, this is not a deep disagreement that would make interpretation between B and C impossible, if the interpretative frameworks relating to the concept of *person* of B and C are mutually translatable, which it can be argued is exactly the case based on Viveiros de Castro’s ethnographic study. On the other hand, in Viveiros de Castro’s view, while once again this is a case of faultless disagreement (as each agent is entitled to epistemic self-determination), there is genuine cross-linguistic disagreement between those two statements, which renders the interpretative frameworks of the agents asymmetric.

That being so, is cross-linguistic disagreement possible? In short, according to Davidson, yes, but only if the differences are small, since we cannot make logical sense of strong interpretative asymmetry. According to Viveiros de Castro, yes, and those differences are radical, prevalent, and require a perspectivist approach, i.e., the methodology of controlled equivocation, rather than translation, to accurately grasp. Which one is it then? Are cross-linguistic differences deep or easily resolvable? And how consequential is that for interpretation across difference?

First, a methodological note. Davidson arrives at his conclusion on the impossibility of interpretative incommensurability through deductive reasoning and a reflection on the logical plausibility (or rather lack thereof) of conceptual relativism. Notably, however, Viveiros de Castro is an empirical social scientist (albeit with a keen interest in theory). His views on cross-linguistic interpretation are thus strongly informed by active engagement with the practical application of it, rather than dwelling at the level of philosophical abstraction. It is important to note that,

already in the 1974 article, Davidson dismisses ethnographic description of interpretative divergence between English and Hopi (Whorf, 1936) as convincing evidence for the strong, i.e., incommensurable view on difference. In his view, if Whorf managed to explain Hopi metaphysics in English in a way that an English speaker can understand, then the difference cannot be strong enough to motivate incommensurability between the two linguistic systems. One could, therefore, use a similar logic to remain unconvinced by Viveiros de Castro's work on Amerindian perspectivism and his resulting reflections on the methodology of interpretation.

Furthermore, one could argue that the distinction between deep and surface differences is too vague to adjudicate. Is it just a matter of degree? When does a difference become strong enough to require equivocation rather than translation? Or is the controlled equivocation methodology just a fancy new term for the established method of *free translation* (Lomaka, 2017), which similarly prioritizes the contextual and therefore relational accuracy of interpretation rather than literal proximity to the text at hand.

In the face of these dilemmas, I propose to anchor the remainder of the analysis in pragmatism. Interpretation as a pragmatic issue was in fact the very driver of Davidson's considerations on language and understanding. In his writing, he was determined to challenge the analytic philosophy of language to move beyond logical analysis and think of language as a social phenomenon. Unlike Quine who had argued that any divergence between interpretative systems between speakers would lead to indeterminacy of translation (Quine [1960] 2013), Davidson advised pragmatically that "[t]he aim of interpretation is not agreement but understanding" (2001, xix). Similarly, in this article, by anchoring the analysis in pragmatism, I mean to focus on the utility for analyzing real-world examples of engaging with such difference, setting aside the abstract distinctions, which do not amount to differences in practical effects.⁵ The question therefore is not so much "are cross-linguistic differences deep or surface" in the abstract, but what the practical implications of each view are and whether and how that squares with the empirical reality of cross-linguistic hermeneutics and with the need for more diverse dialogue and pluralism in knowledge production outlined above. Methodologically, therefore, theoretical soundness will be treated on a par with empirical validity; thus, both theoretical and empirical consequences shall be considered. As for the issue of the distinction between deep and surface difference being too vague to analyze, the pragmatic strategy will allow to discuss this from a standpoint of practical use. So, when deliberating on communication across difference, is it helpful to consider systematic difficulties in understanding, and if yes, how do they link to collective interpretative structures?

I suggest that the answer to this question can be captured by considering the issue of commensurability between interpretative structures of various communities. For it is precisely commensurability which sets apart deep from surface cross-linguistic differences. Two languages or frameworks are incommensurable if they cannot be compared or mutually evaluated. The differences between interpretative frameworks

⁵ In line with the 'activist' reading of pragmatism, defined by Jackman (2016) as a type of philosophical reasoning focused on social utility and practical use.

which make them incommensurable I shall call *deep*. The differences between interpretative frameworks which are commensurable I shall call *surface*. Davidson's and Viveiros de Castro's views on interpretative difference can be thought of as residing on the opposite edges of the spectrum between total interpretative incommensurability (latter), where differences are deep, and total commensurability (former), where differences are surface, between diverse interpretative frameworks of the communities of speakers. I will show that both accounts share a common issue—despite the efforts to nuance their positions by both authors, they inevitably lead to implausible consequences on the extreme ends of the commensurability spectrum.

Let us start with Davidson. In his view, understanding can be reliably achieved thanks to a commonality of the observable reality and the fact that, by and large, humans communicate in accordance with their true beliefs. But let us turn once again to Amerindian perspectivism. Is it justifiable to assume that the triangulation between an anthropologist interpreter and an Amerindian perspectivist speaker talking about blood-drinking jaguars would render an understanding on the part of the researcher in a way that the relational correspondence of humans drinking beer would be grasped? That would surely require the speaker to be very explicit about the foundational categories of their interpretative framework, which is pragmatically and empirically unlikely to happen in everyday hermeneutics.

So, while perhaps Davidson's account is plausible in the abstract where the speaker is expected to be a perfect informant, i.e., providing all the necessary information for the interpreter which would allow for exact understanding between the two, in everyday communication this is unlikely. Along these lines, Taylor (2017) argues that Davidson's theory of meaning does not leave space for even surface interpretative difference, since the envision strategy of interpretation based on the principle of charity and triangulation could only work on the basis of general agreement. As such, it renders the theory inept to deal with everyday experience with hermeneutics, where differences are prevalent:

.. in dealing with the real, partial barriers to understanding, we need to be able to identify what is blocking us. And for this we need some way of picking out the systematic differences in construal between two different cultures, without either reifying them or branding them as ineradicable. (43)

Interpretative universalism is thus at an unlikely candidate for a plausible theory of cross-linguistic disagreement, since it does not make room for interpretative asymmetry (see also: Lynch, 2016). When Davidson reflects on Whorf's work with the Hopi time concept, he proposes that the difference in time concepts is surface or commensurable because it is expressible, or in other words, Whorf succeeds in explaining the Hopi concept of time to English speakers. However, is it not safe to assume that to express this difference Whorf first had to put into question that a category so fundamental as time could be expressed very differently than it is in his interpretative apparatus? Furthermore, doesn't Whorf's analysis express something novel and important about the diverse ways in which time perception works in various human collectives?

I propose that the notion of equivocation be helpful in grasping the hermeneutic process which turns the deep, incommensurable divergence of time concepts into

the productive expression of pluralism. The analytic expression of strong difference, where the shift from translation to equivocation, is helpful precisely when the goal is to learn, imagine, create “new meanings,” so as not to simply process what’s already known, but in a different symbolic code. Furthermore, pace Davidson, the distinction between reference and mode of presentation is useful for analytically capturing the cross-cultural disagreements between various communities of speakers.

But before agreeing with Viveiros de Castro’s view on cross-linguistic disagreement, a few important qualifications need to be made. The controlled equivocation methodology can be interpreted as posing a challenge to the view that disagreements in a cross-linguistic scenario can be readily settled by adhering to the state of some objectively observable reality, as the Principle of Charity would have us do. Therefore, if equivocation is the way to go to analyze disagreements in cross-linguistic interpretation, but at the same time differences are expressible, as Davidson shows, then what is it that is being equivocated on? Viveiros de Castro often talks about different *worlds* or *ontologies*, and controlled equivocation being a methodology of interpretation across those worlds or ontologies. And those worlds are incommensurable. In relation to that, I will argue that this perspective on cross-linguistic disagreement is empirically and theoretically just as improbable as Davidson’s interpretative universalism.

Viveiros de Castro never clarifies what *worlds* are exactly, but he traces the intellectual history of his project to the anthropological school of structuralism (Viveiros de Castro 2014), where representation was a key concept (van Fraassen, 2006). At face value, this is at odds with the core assumption of the ontological turn movement, which aims to move anthropology away from thinking of the diversity of worldviews as diversity of representations (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Makovec, 2023).⁶ At the same time, while the usage of concepts such as *perspective* or *world* in reference conceptual structures which govern the engagement between the subjects and their environments suggest a distinction from representationalism, the focus on *conceptualization* is nonetheless reminiscent of the notion of *scheme* as which describes the relations between various entities (see the description of multinaturalism above), which links the ontological paradigm with conceptual relativism yet again (Risjord, 2020). Controlled equivocation would therefore entail linking complex networks of different conceptual structures, such as those in which the concept of jaguar is in important ways connected to the concept of human, and those in which it is not. The division between the object and the concept it is attached to,

⁶ Many an article engaged with the question of whether ontological anthropology lives up to its promise of providing an antirepresentational view of interpretative diversity, i.e., against the idea that the differences between communities can be explained in reference to the divergence of representations of the elements of reality. In a recently published piece, Makovec (2023) carries out a detailed analysis of Viveiros de Castro’s views and concludes that the anthropologist’s perspectivism accomplishes just that by appealing to “a representational unity (a red liquid independent of perspective) set off against a diversity of realities for different perspectives (blood or manioc beer from the human’s or jaguar’s point of view, respectively)” (8). What the current work is aiming to problematize is not whether such diversity should be situated at the level of representation or world, but whether representation should be at all posed as an element of the process interpretation, either in view of representational unity, or representational diversity.

however, seems to create more problems than it solves. A plausible theory of cross-linguistic disagreement should express the differences between the modes of presentation in non-representational terms.

Furthermore, objections from within the anthropological community show that this way of thinking of radical incommensurability does not align well with empirical data on cross-linguistic understanding. For example, there is the issue of over-generalization of how communities view certain elements of their reality. “.. it places people in boxes not of their own devising” says Graeber (2017, 34) of Viveiros de Castro’s view on incommensurability.

Therefore, Viveiros de Castro’s thought is reminiscent of the scheme and content dualism which, as Davidson showed, leads to conceptual relativism. Setting aside the theoretical issues listed above, one could wonder how that strong incommensurability squares with the emancipatory aspect of the controlled equivocation methodology. It has been argued that realist conceptions of reality, and specifically Davidson’s version of realism (Clough, 2011), are particularly apt for grounding marginalized points of view precisely because they encompass a reference to the intersubjectively observable reality. Uncontrollable relativism such as the one produced when equivocation is taken ad infinitum (when can we ever know that we are in fact talking about the same object?) rather than seen as emancipatory, can therefore render the silenced perspectives only relevant for the people who subscribed to them at the local level, and therefore irrelevant for more general social debates and transformations. This is in turn contrary to the pragmatically given goal I anchored this analysis in at the beginning of this section.

To sum up, while an equivocal treatment of cross-linguistic disagreement is both theoretically and empirically desirable for a plausible account of cross-linguistic interpretation, it remains unclear where to situate those differences, without relying on the representational understanding of interpretative pluralism. In the next section, I propose that the lived experience dimension of interpretation makes room for interpretive pluralism and difference without slipping into conceptual relativism.

6 Cross-linguistic disagreement as difference in lived experience

As stated above, interpretative asymmetry is defined as arising when there is a significant difference between the interpretative apparatuses of speakers in a conversation. Such asymmetry can in some cases lead to cross-linguistic disagreements. These disagreements can be analyzed using the method of controlled equivocation. Importantly, though, controlled equivocation should not be seen as a way of removing the asymmetries; i.e., there is no claim of isomorphism (even if highly complex) between interpretative structures, as Davidson’s rejection of conceptual relativism proposes. At the same time, the interpretative structures present in the equivocation should not be understood representationally, as that leads to strong incommensurability and thus relativism. Such understanding of equivocation is developed in this section.

In doing so, two ideas discussed above will serve as guiding principles. The first will be Davidson’s pragmatism. What we want to achieve is a view of interpretation

which is not perfect but *good enough* to explain the fact that in everyday interpretation, understanding is overall reachable. The second principle is the commitment to uphold interpretative pluralism, in line with Viveiros de Castro's consideration of controlled equivocation. Cross-linguistic differences are there, and they matter.

As mentioned, the initial step towards the new view on equivocation is the rejection of representationalism. From this rejection, another reflection follows: if the thoughts we entertain and sentences we communicate are not in a purely representational relationship with the objects with which we interact, then how do we navigate and communicate the propositional content of our beliefs about the world? In thinking through that, phenomenological approaches to language become particularly relevant.

Phenomenology can be defined as a discipline of philosophy where the focus is on "grasping how phenomena, i.e. what appears – whether this is entities, others, situations or ideas – are given to consciousness. It strives to clearly understand what appears, how it appears and what makes such appearing possible." (Knowles, 2021, 450). The phenomenological tradition, while often presented as being concerned solely with the metaphysics of perception, both historically and nowadays, has engaged with topics related to language and interpretation, albeit in different ways than strictly analytic philosophy (Engelland, 2020). The key intervention that phenomenological approaches bring to the study of language is the focus on language as a reciprocal practice of interaction with an environment that is composed of other living and non-living beings. Thus, the semantic content of speech and belief is not a representation of the various elements of reality but emerges in the ongoing interaction between the agent and their surroundings, centering the agent's first-person experience of the hermeneutic process.⁷ In this way, the phenomenological account of language links the referent with the mode of presentation without viewing the latter purely as a representation of the former but rather as emergent from lived experience and social linguistic practices in an interactive dynamic entanglement.

On this account, therefore, the interpretative structure is developed in relation to the lived experience of the speaker. However, individual lived experience is not the sole factor shaping conceptual structures. Viewing it as such would contradict the description of language provided earlier, where it is presented as operating at the collective level rather than being shaped by a single individual. How do we thus get from the lived experience level of meaning to the interpretative structure which is present and negotiated at the level of community? Andrew Inkpin (2015) proposes that the phenomenological approach to language (in the book he focuses in particular on the work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty), which centers the traditional

⁷ It is worth mentioning in the context of this interdisciplinary investigation the work of Tim Ingold (e.g., 2000 and others; 2017), a cultural and social anthropologist who developed an account of human life as dwelling, which is heavily influenced by the phenomenological tradition. While this literature sparked my interest and inspired me to pay attention to the phenomenological concept of lived experience in the study of cross-cultural linguistic interaction, in this article I decided to focus more specifically on issues related to interpretation across difference, which to my knowledge Ingold does not discuss directly and thus a more in-depth discussion of Ingold's ideas in relation to this topic is not developed here.

concerns of the paradigm such as introspection and 1st person consciousness, is compatible with the aforementioned late-Wittgensteinian conception of practice as constitutive in the making and grasping of meaning captured by the concept of language games. Enculturation in a particular linguistic community develops a familiarity with the collective-wide semantic and syntactic structures, which turns individuals into proficient users of the said language. At the same time, the lived experience of the perceiving agent continues to be a site of negotiation of the collective interpretative framework. These two levels are not discrete but constantly interact and influence each other. As such, the phenomenological view of language does not explicitly support either universalism or pluralism on the question of commensurability. Agreement on interpretative tools is not required for understanding, since understanding is achieved in relation to the interaction with the environment and between the speakers in conversation.

Returning to the key narrative of this analysis, let us now consider the following: if interpretative structures are developed by the phenomenologically conceptualized lived experience and communal practices, what happens if agents whose experience of the world diverges and who were enculturated in different communities try to interpret each other? In other words, what are the outlooks of the phenomenological approach to language for the phenomenon of cross-linguistic disagreement?

The phenomenological approach to language highlights the subjective, lived, and contextual nature of linguistic phenomena. Cross-linguistic disagreement can thus be conceptualized as an outcome of these subjective experiences. At the same time, phenomenology in the Inkipinian sense emphasizes intersubjectivity of meaning structures via the concept of language games, in the sense that understanding between people involves shared meanings and interpretations. The phenomenological account therefore straightforwardly delivers one of the lessons learned from the discussion of Viveiros de Castro's work, namely, that of a theory of cross-linguistic disagreement should make room for interpretative pluralism.

As for the Davidsonian component, namely, the support for the claim of overall possibility of understanding, to see how that is achieved in the perspective I propose, we need to tap into the dynamicity of meaning creation, which the phenomenological account of language supports. The systematic breaks in interpretation can be explained by the divergence in modes of presentation shaped by experience and collective language practices. But the dynamicity of meaning creation puts an additional layer of possibility of interpretation via the idea of a linguistic encounter as a relational practice during which agents get to engage with each other. In interpreting each other, speakers bring into the conversation their own interpretative structures, but through the co-experiential engagement, they can build new concepts, some of which are shared, and those will serve mutual interpretation. In this way, in accordance with the pragmatic orientation of this analysis, the interpretative structures do not converge, but the speakers develop creative pathways between each other. So, what is achieved is *not agreement but understanding*.

To better understand how this happens, it is once again helpful to consider methodological considerations on anthropological practice that were presented above. The anthropological focus on the empirical speaks to the intuition that only through extensive contact, participant observation, and co-experiencing can one do justice

to the goal of understanding the society which is the object of study. At the same time, as shown by the view of interpretation as equivocation rather than translation, anthropologists should act with heightened reflexivity with regard to their own interpretative structures, if new co-constructed meanings are to come into light. The view on cross-linguistic disagreement as a difference in lived experience can thus be seen as already implicitly present in the anthropological methodology of ethnography, in which the researcher is to learn with the community through sharing the experience of the field site. As such, the process of interpretation during fieldwork proceeds through co-experiencing and dynamic interaction. The lived experienced view reinforces the claim that these interactions are not just the material based on which the interpretation of data should proceed to develop generalized abstract insights on the daily practices of the community. A description of these experiences, on this view, is in itself an analysis of the practices since those practices are always dynamically emergent.

Importantly, however, this is not only achievable in anthropological practice, but in other contexts as well. Arregui (2020) uses the notion of *ecopolitical mimicry* to describe dialogues between representatives of diverse communities who share a common ecopolitical agenda and use linguistic practices from different interpretative repertoires to communicate with each other.⁸ In the analysis, Arregui proposes his approach in dialogue with Viveiros de Castro's thought, and similarly to this work, calls for the *re-embodiment of equivocations* (335), meaning that the representational treatment of equivocations should be replaced by the embodied, experience-based grasp of both difference and interpretation. Arregui's concern with the institution of allyship and how that allows for co-participation in political action is also key in answering to the concern about the difficulty of relativist positions such as Viveiros de Castro's strong incommensurability to maintain political valence.

Let us return to the exemplary dialogue from the previous section between where B is a scientific naturalist, and C, an Amerindian perspectivist:

A: Are jaguars people?

B: No.

C: Yes.

What does the phenomenological view of interpretative asymmetry entail in this situation? Analogically to Davidson- and Viveiros de Castro-inspired analyses above, we assume that the disagreement between B and C is faultless (in the sense of: Kölbel, 2004). Contrary to the Davidsonian view, I accept that this should be considered as a case of genuine disagreement arising interpretative asymmetry (and thus faultless). Therefore, in an interpretation scenario, one can make use of the method of controlled equivocation, reflecting the importance of grasping the interpretative asymmetry, and not explaining the difference away. However, the key intervention I argued for in this is to re-evaluate the set-up of this example. What does it mean that B is a scientific naturalist, and C, an Amerindian perspectivist? Pace Viveiros de Castro, I propose that these descriptions do not refer to worlds

⁸ His case study is the dialogue between a Brazilian climatologist Antonio Donato Nobre and a Yanomami shaman and philosopher Davi Kopenawa.

as conceptual schemes (understood representationally) but are rather artificial labels which approximate the phenomenologically understood modes of presentation of these semantic entities (lived experience, and the enculturation structures these agents were exposed to throughout their life). The difference in their answers to the question is indicative of a difference in these factors, and that difference is pragmatically important to theorize given the impact it might have on their daily livelihood, decision-making strategies, and their relationships with their environment. At the same time, this difference is not incommensurable given that the phenomenological interpretative structures are dynamic and intersubjective, as:

Although all agents are differently situated in the world in virtue of their specific concrete existence, this concrete existence depends upon and reflects more fundamental, universal structures of human existence. Knowles (2021, 450)

To summarize, on the phenomenological view presented here, cross-linguistic disagreements arise out of the divergence of interpretative frameworks of speakers. These frameworks differ across communities and individuals, creating interpretative asymmetries because they are a product of the lived interactive experience with the surrounding reality as well as the established language practices. While disagreements are pragmatically important and create regular breaks in understanding, interpretation across difference can be negotiated through dialogue and co-experiencing in dynamic meaning-making. This account, therefore, observes the empirical reality of interpretative divergencies across communities while rejecting strong incommensurability.

7 Conclusion

This work responds to the call for analytic philosophy to engage with other areas of scientific inquiry to consider philosophically relevant questions in dialogue with empirical realities and socially relevant concerns. To reflect on the possibility of cross-linguistic disagreement, I put together two views on interpretation across difference, which can be conceived of as representing opposing accounts of the possibility of radical incommensurability, namely, Davidson's theory of meaning and Viveiros de Castro's anthropological methodology of controlled equivocation. What emerges when bringing the two together is that cross-linguistic disagreement is inextricably linked to the phenomenon of interpretative asymmetry. Counter to Davidson's interpretative universalism view, this asymmetry is an empirical reality. At the same time, it is argued, it need not be conceived of as evidence of conceptual relativism, of which the controlled equivocation view on disagreement is reminiscent. Instead, pluralism between asymmetrical interpretative structures can be explained phenomenologically, i.e., by considering the diversity of lived experiences and social practices of meaning making. Such an interdisciplinary perspective provides a philosophically nuanced view on cross-linguistic disagreement using the standard methodologies and accounts rooted in the analytic philosophy of language,

while at the same time bringing into the fold the pragmatically oriented reflection on the role of social praxis and the dimension of power.

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Declarations

Competing interests The author declares no competing interests.

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