1. Introduction

Let me begin this paper by making two extensive quotations. The first is from Donald Davidson’s 1991 paper, “The Social Aspect of Language”:

[L]et’s look at the concept of a language I opposed. It was this: in learning a language, a person acquires the ability to operate in accord with a precise and specifiable set of syntactic and semantic rules; verbal communication depends on speaker and hearer sharing such an ability, and it requires no more than this. I argued that sharing such a previously mastered ability was neither necessary nor sufficient for successful linguistic communication. I held (and hold) that the linguistic skills people typically bring to conversational occasions can and do differ considerably, but mutual understanding is achieved through the exercise of imagination, appeal to general knowledge of the world, and awareness of human interests and attitudes. (Davidson 2005, 110)

The second passage is an often quoted paragraph from Stanley Cavell’s 1962 paper, “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy”:

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, sense of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls “forms of life.” Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rests upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. (Cavell 2002, 52)

At first sight, Davidson and Cavell may seem to be saying more or less the same thing. At any rate, they may seem to have the same foe – to be rejecting the same view of how language works. According to the view they both seem to be rejecting, using language is, in basic and typical cases, a matter of following pre-established
rules that fix what words express on particular occasions of utterance. A shared ability to operate in accordance with those rules is taken to be what fundamentally matters to successful communication. Proponents of this picture might admit that other, unregularizable skills – imagination, shared routes of interest and feeling, general knowledge of the world – allow the speaker to employ elliptical, ambiguous and grammatically garbled constructions without being misunderstood, and that such skills may therefore be relevant to the pragmatic aspects of communication. What these proponents claim is that such skills are not essential to the functioning of a language. Linguistic communication is in principle possible without them.¹

In their attempts to undermine this picture, Davidson and Cavell may seem to employ similar strategies. An important element of their criticisms is the highlighting of instances of language use that they take to be counterexamples to this picture – instances of language use that do not constitute rule-governed continuations of a shared practice, but which are nonetheless instances of successful communication. Davidson and Cavell both think that the nature of such innovative yet immediately intelligible employments of words will be impossible to accommodate within the sort of view they are rejecting – or, at least, that it will strongly tell against such a view. Davidson’s favorite counterexamples are *malapropisms*. Cavell focuses instead on what he calls *projections*.

In this paper, I will argue that the initial appearance of similarity between Davidson’s and Cavell’s criticisms is largely an illusion. It is even questionable to what extent they have a common foe. In any case the alternative conceptions they offer are very different.

I will justify this claim by clarifying some important differences between malapropisms and projections, conceived as paradigmatic forms of linguistic innovation. My conclusion will be that depending on what sort of example one takes as central, one's conception of how our previous commerce with the relevant expressions matters to present expressive possibilities will vary. Roughly, if malapropisms are treated as exemplary, it will be natural to conclude, with Davidson, that a shared practice, be it rule-governed or not, matters only instrumentally, as something that may enhance but is neither necessary nor sufficient for successful communication. By contrast, if Cavellian projections are seen as exemplary, a shared practice will be conceived not only as essential to the

¹ In the first passage quoted above, Davidson’s description of the picture he is opposing suggests that according to that picture, we in fact never need anything more than a shared ability to operate in accordance with a precise and specifiable set of syntactic and semantic rules in order to understand each other’s utterances. But that is obviously too strong, a no philosopher or linguist would accept the picture in such an extreme version. As we shall see, Davidson also wants to reject less extreme versions. Indeed, his main concern is to reject the very idea that linguistic communication requires a shared linguistic practice, be that practice rule-governed or not.
possibility of meaningful linguistic innovation, but as already permeated by the sort of creativity of which projections are only particularly striking examples.

My aim is not just exegetical. I am also going to argue that malapropisms, and similar examples of linguistic deviance, are not particularly convincing as counterexamples to the sort of view Davidson wants to reject. In fact, they are fairly easily accommodated within such a view. Nor do they give much support to the alternative view that Davidson is trying to defend. Cavellian projections, on the other hand, are powerful as counterexamples, and reflecting on the nature of their inventiveness is crucial to understanding and seeing the plausibility of Cavell’s own conception of language.

2. Malapropisms, Intentions and Established Usage
The funniest malapropisms are funny partly because they are unintentional. Consider Frank Bruno’s saying of Mike Tyson, ‘And then he will have only channel vision’, or John Prescott’s exclaiming that ‘It’s great to be back on terra cotta’.

Deliberate malapropisms are of course also possible. For Davidson’s purposes, inadvertent or deliberate does not matter. What he finds interesting about malapropisms is just that the speaker manages to convey an intended message despite the fact that his way of talking is not in line with established usage. On hearing Boston mayor Thomas Menino saying of John F. Collins that ‘He was a man of great statue’, we immediately understand that what he intends to tell us was that Collins was a man of great stature. On hearing Mrs Malaprop i Sheridan’s play The Rivals utter the sentence, ‘She’s as headstrong as an allegory on the banks of Nile’, we immediately grasp that what she intends to tell us is that the woman she is talking about is as headstrong as an alligator on the banks of Nile. And so on. “A malapropism,” Davidson claims, “is sheer invention”—and yet we are able to grasp the message that the speaker is trying to get across. (Davidson 2005, 143)

But exactly what kind of invention is a malapropism? The first thing we should note is this: To understand how a malapropism can serve to convey the speaker’s intended message, it is completely unnecessary to take into consideration our earlier commerce with the deviant expression. Certainly, this earlier usage explains why the malapropism is funny. ‘We need a laugh to break up the monogamy’ is amusing partly because of how we are used to employing the word ‘monogamy’. However, the property of malapropisms that interests Davidson is not their amusingness, but their communicative power. And this power is there no matter what our earlier commerce with the word ‘monogamy’ looked like. What matters are such things as the acoustic similarities between ‘monogamy’ and ‘monotony’, and a sense of what message the speaker can reasonably want to convey to his audience in the relevant sort of (linguistic and non-linguistic) context. Indeed, the situation is similar to one in which a foreigner who does not know English very well happens to be using an expression that is not part of the English vocabulary at all, and yet make himself understood. Suppose he says, ‘We need a
laugh to break up the monotony’, or ‘He was a man of great statuture’. Just as with malapropisms, we would have no difficulties understanding what this person is trying to tell us, and the clues on which we would rely in figuring out his message would be essentially the same as in the corresponding malapropism cases. So, again, our earlier use of the deviant expression cannot be what matters, since in the foreigner case there is no such earlier use at all.

Of course I am not saying that all earlier patterns of use are irrelevant to the communicative power of malapropisms. Among the relevant patterns, however, is not that of the expression that is being used in a deviant way. Rather, the patterns that are relevant are, to begin with, the patterns of the other expressions that figure in the sentence: ‘We’, ‘need’ ‘laugh’, ‘break up’ and so on. But what is also relevant is how we normally use the word that the speaker would have used had he not spoken in a deviant fashion; the word he should have used instead of the deviant one. For example, in order to understand the intention behind Menino’s utterance of ‘He was a man of great statue’, we have to be familiar with the way in which the word ‘stature’ is normally used. In order to grasp the intention behind Tonya Harding’s utterance, ‘I am not going to make a skeptical out of my boxing career’ we have to be familiar with the way in which the word ‘spectacle’ is normally used. And so on.

This point has to be put with some care. I may seem to be steering toward the absurd conclusion that Menino and Harding are not themselves aware of what messages they are trying to convey to their listeners – for don’t their mistakes indicate that they are not entirely familiar with the ways in which ‘stature’ and ‘spectacle’ are normally used? This impression is based on a misunderstanding, however. The familiarity I refer to is a familiarity with certain established patterns of use – a familiarity that, in a particular case, need not involve knowing how that pattern is instantiated at the level of signs. For example, our established use of the word ‘spectacle’ may be said to exhibit a certain pattern. Harding is probably familiar with that pattern of use, that ‘language-game’. What she might not know is that the word ‘spectacle’ is the piece by means of which we normally play that game. Perhaps she thinks this role is instead played by the word ‘skeptical’. Or, perhaps she does know that ‘spectacle’ is normally used in this sort of way, but mistakenly believes that the same is true of ‘skeptical’ – roughly, he might think that ‘spectacle’ and ‘skeptical’ are synonymous. Or, perhaps most plausibly, her mistake is just a momentary slip of the tongue. On reflection, she immediately realizes that she should have said ‘spectacle’ rather than ‘skeptical’. In any case, Harding is familiar with the relevant pattern, and this is why we can ascribe to her the intention to tell us that she is not going to make a spectacle out of her boxing career.²

² As Ian Hacking notes, “[s]omeone who commits a malaprop is first of all confusing sounds.” (Hacking 1986, 450). Cases are of course possible where the speaker is not even familiar with
An important qualification must be made here. Mistakes of this sort, where the speaker is familiar with a pattern of use but mistaken about how that pattern is instantiated at the level of signs, are necessarily exceptions. For one thing, if all speakers used ‘skeptical’ where we use ‘spectacle’, Harding’s utterance would not be a malapropism and would not be an invention in any sense. It would simply be standard usage. More fundamentally, it cannot in general be so that communication requires only familiarity with patterns, and not with how those patterns are instantiated at the level of signs. The very idea of a speaker who communicates only by means of utterances in which, as it were, every word is a malapropism, and whose attempts at explaining what he is trying to say consists only of further utterances of the same kind, is unintelligible. Indeed, it is unclear what a pattern of use would be in the absence of a widespread consensus on how the pattern is instantiated at the level of signs. Without a certain consistency in our use of signs, nothing, it seems, would embody patterns of use; and without any such embodiment, it is unclear what it would be for those patterns to exist.

If we identify concepts with patterns of use, and grasping a concept with being familiar with such a pattern, the points I have made can be summarized as follows. We can say of Harding that she is trying to convey the message that she is not going to make a spectacle out of her boxing career, only insofar as she has the concept of a spectacle. She can have that concept even if she mistakenly thinks that it is expressed by the word ‘skeptical’. This sort of case, however, must be exceptional. The communicative power of Harding’s utterance depends on the fact that her other verbal habits are largely in agreement with established usage.

Now, returning to the question of what sort of invention a malapropism is, I think we can draw the following conclusion: A malapropism is not an invention at the conceptual level. There is no genuinely new development of any established pattern of usage. If we want to speak of novelty or creativity at all here, it occurs only at the level of signs. Harding says, ‘I’m not going to make a skeptical out of my boxing career’, and what is unusual about this utterance is that she uses ‘skeptical’ rather than ‘spectacle’. We identify the message she is trying to convey by recognizing the acoustic similarity between ‘skeptical’ and ‘spectacle’ and by taking into consideration what someone like Harding could want to say in the situation in which she is talking. So, we can specify the intended message: Harding is trying to tell us that she is not going to make a spectacle out of her boxing career. And in doing so, we go on using the word ‘spectacle’ along previously established lines. Once the mistake at the acoustic level, the sign-level, has been adjusted for, we see that, in an important sense, Harding is just continuing an old routine pattern in an old, familiar manner.
This by itself strongly suggests that malapropisms are not very convincing as counterexamples to the sort of picture that Davidson is trying to undermine. They seem like marginal surface phenomena whose communicative power is entirely parasitic on shared, established usage. And their novelty seems of a kind that does not force us to reconsider the nature of that established usage. In particular, the existence of malapropisms seems like no threat against conceiving that usage as rule-governed.

Further support of this charge is given by the observation that it seems very natural to say that when someone utters a malapropism and nonetheless succeeds in conveying the message he intends to convey, there is a certain gap between that message and the words he uses: a gap, if you like, between speaker meaning and word meaning. The words do not, as it were, live up to the speaker’s intentions. Thus, when Hylda Baker utters, ‘I can say that without fear of contraception’, it is not by virtue of the content of the word ‘contraception’ that we grasp the message. It is by taking into consideration its acoustic similarities with the word ‘contradiction’ – similarities that from a conceptual viewpoint are purely accidental – that we manage to infer what it is that she is trying to tell us.

By contrast, in normal cases of linguistic communication, where no malapropisms occur, there is no such gap. Suppose Baker had said, ‘I can say that without fear of contradiction’. In such a case, if we want to bring in her intention at all, we will have to say that it is perfectly embodied in the words she uses. Unlike in the malapropism case, there is no distinction to be made here between grasping the meaning of the utterance, and grasping the message Baker wants us to grasp.

3. Davidson on Malapropisms

Davidson disagrees with almost everything I have said so far. He thinks the contrast I have suggested between the malapropism case and the normal case is philosophically unsatisfactory. He denies that the malapropism case involves the sort of gap between words and intended message that I have been talking about. Or, better, he claims that the idea of such a gap depends on a philosophically insignificant notion of linguistic meaning. He argues that if we want to understand what is fundamental to the possibility of linguistic communication, we should say that the mere fact that he who utters a malapropism succeeds in conveying his intended message is reason enough to conclude that his words do live up to his intentions. Allegedly, this sort of communicative success is enough to close the gap between what the speaker wants to say and what his words mean. So, according to Davidson, a malapropism is not just an acoustically or orthographically odd way of continuing along old, established patterns of usage. Rather, the speaker manages to give the deviant word a new meaning. Allegedly, there is a substantial change at the semantic level, and this is a sort of change the possibility of which tells us something really deep about how language works.
Let us look a bit closer at Davidson’s conception. According to him, the fundamental aim of language use is to convey to others what one has in mind: “the point of language or speech or whatever you want to call it, is communication, getting across to someone else what you have in mind by means of words that they interpret (understand) as you want them to.” (Davidson 2005, 120) As a consequence, he thinks the notion of successful communication is explanatory prior to concepts such as meaning and language. The latter concepts cannot serve to explain but have to presuppose what it is for someone to communicate a propositional content to his audience. Davidson says the notion of meaning applies most straightforwardly and basically to instances of successful communication – cases in which a speaker intends his words to be understood in a certain way and where the words are in fact understood in that way by his audience. “In such cases,” Davidson claims, “we can say without hesitation: how he intended to be understood, and was understood, is what he, and his words, meant on that occasion. [...] Thus,” he continues,

for me the concept of ‘the meaning’ of a word or sentence gives way to the concepts of how a speaker intends his words to be understood, and of how a hearer understands them. Where understanding matches the intent we can, if we please, speak of ‘the meaning’; but it is understanding that gives life to meaning, not the other way around. (Davidson 2005, 120-121)

Consider again John Prescott’s, ‘It’s great to be back on terra cotta!’. Since people immediately grasp that what Prescott intends to be telling them is that it’s great to be back on Terra Firma, Davidson thinks we can say, “without hesitation”, that the meaning of Prescott’s words is that it’s great to be back on Terra Firma. On this analysis, the gap I talked about above between Prescott’s intention and the words he uses disappears. Since Prescott’s audience grasps the underlying intention, the words express what Prescott takes them to express.

So, according to Davidson, the notion of linguistic meaning is to be accounted for in terms of the successful communication of propositional contents. Furthermore, he thinks the possibility of communication can be accounted for without reference to a shared linguistic practice. And what is crucial to observe here is that by ‘shared linguistic practice’ Davidson does not just mean usage according to a precise system of syntactic and semantic rules. His central claim is not that communication without such a shared system of rules is possible. He is proposing a considerably stronger thesis. He is denying that the notions of communication and propositional content presuppose the idea of a common language, and here ‘language’ includes languages in the ordinary, non-technical, humdrum sense of the word. Even if a natural language is no longer conceived as governed by a precise system of rules, Davidson denies that the notion of a common language – a shared linguistic practice – is of fundamental importance: “neither the ordinary, nor a
certain philosophic, concept of a language is basic to the understanding of verbal communication.” (Davidson 2005, 123)

Davidson does admit that sharing patterns of linguistic behavior facilitates communication. There is, he says, an “obvious utility of the large degrees in overlap in verbal performance we find in groups that live and talk together”; “ease of communication is vastly promoted by such sharing.” (Davidson 2005, 118-119)

This is to embrace what seems appropriately described as an instrumentalist conception of the relevance of a shared linguistic practice. Davidson sees our previous common usage as something the acquaintance with which serves merely as a means for an independently specifiable end, namely, that of grasping the propositional content which a speaker intends to convey. And in a case where one’s communicative purposes are served equally well by a malapropism, Davidson thinks no wedge is driven between one’s words and one’s intentions. The “mistake” is only a matter of linguistic etiquette:

Using a word in a nonstandard way out of ignorance may be a faux pas in the same way that using the wrong fork at a dinner party is, and it has as little to do with communication as using the wrong fork has to do with nourishing oneself, given that the word is understood and the fork works. (Davidson 2005, 117)

Davidson’s point is not that a speaker can give words whatever meaning he likes. His view is not Humpty-Dumpty’s. To begin with, he thinks the concept of meaning requires that successful communication does occur, and does so often and reliably. A world in which people intended their words to have certain meanings but where communication never succeeded is unthinkable. A speaker can intend his words to be understood in a certain way only if he takes such understanding to be possible, and “people can only understand words they are somehow prepared in advance to understand.” (Davidson 2005, 147) What Davidson does claim is that such preparedness need not involve familiarity with a shared linguistic practice. Rather, his view is that for meaning and propositional thought to emerge there must be a group (in principle only a couple) of interacting speakers, whose interaction “demands that each individual perceives others as reacting to the shared environment as much as he does.” More precisely, each individual must exhibit a pattern of reactions to stimuli from the shared environment, such that another individual can inductively make a correlation between that pattern and his own reactions to the same stimuli. “It follows,” Davidson says, “that meaning something requires that by and large one follows a practice of one’s own, a practice that can be understood by others. But there is no fundamental reason why practices must be shared.” (Davidson 2005, 125)

My aim here is not to provide arguments that decisively refute Davidson’s view of a shared linguistic practice as of merely instrumental significance.
However, I do want to claim that the communicative power of malapropisms is no evidence at all that his view is correct. For the reasons described earlier, this communicative power seems entirely explicable within the sort of framework Davidson wants to reject. From the viewpoint of this framework, my capacity to grasp the message that Prescott is trying to convey depends on (i) the fact that he and I are both familiar with the established use of the words he employs in a non-deviant fashion (‘great’, ‘back’, and so on), and (ii) the fact that we share a familiarity with the language-game normally played by means of the word ‘Terra Firma’. Prescott’s mistake is just to think that this language-game is normally played by means of the word ‘terra cotta’. This is a mistake at the level of signs; it constitutes no genuine conceptual development, no development of established patterns of usage. The communicative power of Prescott’s utterance is entirely parasitic on our established and shared ways of talking.

According to Davidson, uses of the sort illustrated by malapropisms “happen all the time; in fact, if the conditions are generalised in a natural way, the phenomenon is ubiquitous.” (Davidson 2005, 89) But how could malapropisms and similar uses of language happen all the time? Again, such cases seem necessarily exceptional (which is not to say that they are highly unusual). In one paper, Davidson suggests that Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* can help us understand what he has in mind. He says, Coopted into Joyce’s world of verbal exile, we are forced to share in the annihilation of old meanings and the creation – not really *ex nihilo*, but on the basis of our stock of common lore – of a new language. All communication involves such joint effort to some degree, but Joyce is unusual in first warning us of this, and the making the effort so extreme.

Joyce takes us back to the foundations and origins of communication; he puts us in the situation of the jungle linguist trying to get the hang of a new language and a novel culture, to assume the perspective of someone who is an alien or an exile. (Davidson 2005, 157)

This strikes me as an absurd conception of what Joyce is doing. Davidson does admit that Joyce’s technique is that of “fragmenting familiar languages and recycling the raw material”, and that the text’s “creation [...] of a new language” is “not really *ex nihilo*, but on the basis of our stock of common lore” (156-57). But then, how can he still with any plausibility claim that Joyce takes us back to the origins of communication? Shouldn’t we say the very opposite, that Joyce is engaged in an extremely sophisticated form of communication that we can understand only if we have learned to communicate in familiar colloquial English?

One could perhaps try to defend Davidson by arguing that there are more everyday and obvious examples of successful communication where the speakers do not share a linguistic practice. Consider the following case: Jack is on a train from
Stockholm to Gothenburg, knowing no Swedish at all. A man dressed in uniform approaches him. The man utters the words, ‘Kan jag få se på biljetten’, and, since Jack knows what a train conductor usually looks like, and what kind of function such a person has, he correctly supposes that the man is asking him to produce his ticket. Jack gives it to him. The man looks at it, returns it, and leaves. Isn’t this a clear case where communication succeeds, despite the fact that speaker and hearer do not share a linguistic practice?

Well – but no one is denying that such things occasionally happen. An intelligent defender of the sort of view that Davidson is rejecting would not deny that Jack’s guess can be correct. Rather, he would make two observations. First, he would point out that this case is not a genuine instance of linguistic communication. For no matter what words the conductor employs, Jack will suppose that he is being asked to produce his ticket. The clues on which Jack is relying are only the non-verbal features of the situation. Jack knows that trains have train conductors, and he knows what such persons are supposed to do. To clarify this point, let us imagine that the train conductor knows that Jack does not understand Swedish, and decides to play a little game with him. The conductor’s intention is still to convey the message that Jack should produce his ticket, but he realizes that he can achieve this aim no matter what words he uses. So, he approaches Jack and says, ‘Tycker du om köttbullar?’ (‘Do you like meatballs?’). Jack correctly identifies the conductor’s intention, and produces his ticket. Alternatively, we can imagine a case in which the conductor says nothing at all, but just stares at Jack. Again, Jack grasps the message and produces his ticket. In both these cases, the process of communication is essentially the same as in the original case. Hence, to call that original case an instance of linguistic communication seems spurious. We have a genuine case of linguistic communication only when it does matter what words are being used – where mere familiarity with the non-linguistic context is not sufficient to grasp what is being said.

The second point is this. Even if Jack does not know Swedish, he is familiar with another linguistic practice that he shares with many people, namely, the use of the English language. Hence the example with Jack and the conductor does nothing to show that Jack’s ability to specify propositional contents, to have such contents “on his mind” and to ponder what contents other people may have on their minds, is independent of his familiarity with such a shared practice. In fact it seems quite plausible to say that when Jack specifies propositional contents, even to himself, he makes use of the English language. For example, he thinks to himself, ‘This man wants me to show him my ticket’. Davidson’s view, however, involves precisely the idea that it is possible to have propositional contents on one’s mind without sharing a language with other people. What is required, according to Davidson, is only that one follows a practice on one’s own that can be shared by others – a situation very different from Jack’s. So it seems that the example with Jack and the conductor can lend no support at all to Davidson’s position.
Again, I do not claim to have given decisive arguments against Davidson’s view. But I do hope to have made it plausible that we will have a very hard time finding actual instances of real-life language use that can provide evidence for his position. Malapropisms will not do, *Finnegan’s Wake* will not do, examples like that of Jack and the conductor will not do. Rather, it seems as if Davidson will have to rest his case on remote thought-experiments, such as that of a radical translator who does not share a language with any other person, but who is trying grasp the communicative intentions of other speakers by inductively correlating their stimuli-response-patterns with his own. This seems like a meager and unreliable basis for philosophizing about language, not least because it is difficult to see how agreement could be reached on the significance and consequences of such remote thought-experiments if we do not already agree on what conclusions they should be taken to support.

4. Cavell’s Projections

In the previous section, I pointed out three features of malapropisms. First, a malapropism’s communicative power – as opposed to its amusingness – is independent of the earlier, normal, non-malapropistic use of the relevant word. Second, a malapropism involves no special innovation, no special creativity, at what I called the conceptual level. It manifests linguistic creativity only at the level of signs. Third, in the case of a malapropism, it is very natural to conceive of what happens in terms of a gap between speaker meaning and word meaning. When John Prescott says ‘It’s great to be back on terra cotta’, his words do not live up to his intentions. While the word ‘terra cotta’ in his utterance retains its normal meaning, what he means is something else – namely, that it’s great to be back on Terra firma.

Cavellian projections are different from malapropisms in all these respects. Consider his most famous example: projections of the word ‘feed’. Here is Cavell:

> We learn the use of “feed the kitty”, “feed the lion”, “feed the swans”, and one day one of us says “feed the meter”, or “feed in the film”, or “feed the machine”, or “feed his pride”, or “feed wire”, and we understand, we are not troubled. (Cavell 1979, 181)

First, unlike in the case of malapropisms, the communicative power of ‘feed the meter’ and ‘feed his pride’ clearly depends on the earlier use of ‘feed’ in constructions such as ‘feed the kitty’ and ‘feed the lion’. This power is not due to some merely acoustic or orthographic similarity with some other word – as in the case of ‘terra cotta’ and ‘Terra firma’, or ‘allegory’ and ‘alligator’. Second, in ‘feed the meter’ or ‘feed his pride’ there is genuine innovation or creativity going on at the semantic or conceptual level. The old pattern is not just routinely reproduced but developed and extended.
But wherein does this development and extension consist? Perhaps some would be inclined to invoke a distinction between speaker meaning and word meaning here too, arguing that the development takes place within the speaker’s mind rather than in the meaning of the word ‘feed’. After all, it might be suggested, you cannot literally feed a meter or feed someone’s pride, and what happens beyond literal or lexical meaning is a matter of what the speaker intends to do with his words. This, however, makes it somewhat difficult to understand how projections can be genuinely creative in any more substantial sense than malapropisms. So, another, perhaps more attractive line, is to argue that ‘feed the meter’ involves the creation of a new concept of feeding – a concept with wider application than the word’s literal or lexical sense. After all, it does seem quite plausible to say that you do not feed a meter in the same sense as you feed a kitty or a lion (when you give it milk or meat). In this sort of connection, some linguists have talked about a process of loosening. François Recanati explains:

There is loosening whenever a condition of application packed into the concept literally expressed by a predicate is contextually dropped so that the application of the predicate is widened. An example is ‘The ATM swallowed my credit card.’ There can be no real swallowing on the part of an ATM, since ATMs are not living organisms with the right bodily equipment for swallowing. By relaxing the conditions for application for ‘swallow’, we construct an ad hoc concept with wider application. (Recanati 2004, 26)

For present purposes, what is important about both ways of construing what is going on in projections is that they invoke a distinction between literal meaning and something else – speaker meaning, or a new ‘looser’ concept. In this sense, they both can be seen as emphasizing the break or discontinuity with earlier practice. The common thought is that in cases of successful communication involving sentences such as ‘feed the kitty’, ‘feed the lion’ and ‘feed the swans’, what gets conveyed is the literal or lexical or established meaning of ‘feed’, whereas in successful communication involving sentences such as ‘feed the meter’ and ‘feed his pride’ what is conveyed and grasped is something else. Of course, this is not to deny that the communicative power of ‘feed’ in the latter contexts depends on its earlier use. It is only to provide a certain sort of construal of this dependence – a construal that Cavell thinks is dangerously misleading. Indeed, the key to an adequate understanding of Cavell’s view is precisely to understand why he thinks this sort of construal is to be regarded with suspicion.

According to Cavell, there is a very important sense in which the use of ‘feed’ in ‘feed the meter’ is continuous with earlier uses such as ‘feed the kitty’ and ‘feed the swans’. He thinks that views of the sort we have just been rehearsing are dangerous because they tend to make us underestimate the depth of that continuity.
For Cavell, projections are not just secondary outgrowths on an independently identifiable stem of primary, literal, non-projective uses of words. The step from ‘feed the kitty’ to ‘feed the meter’ may be bigger than the step from ‘feed the kitty’ to ‘feed the swans’. And yet, Cavell argues, the possibility of taking that bigger step must already be foreshadowed by the other, smaller, and apparently non-projective step. So, it is not just that the possibility of taking such a bigger step depends on the possibility of taking smaller ones. The dependence goes in the other direction as well: the smaller steps can be taken only if the bigger ones are also possible. According to Cavell, a language intolerant of projections like the one from ‘feed the kitty’ to ‘feed the meter’ would also be intolerant of the step from, say, ‘feed the kitty’ to ‘feed the monkey’. Indeed, such a language would not allow any uses of words in different contexts – and, hence, would not be a language at all.

This is a difficult but absolutely crucial point. To get clearer about what it might mean, the first thing to do is to look at why Cavell thinks projection cannot be eliminated by paraphrase. “Of course,” he admits, “we could, in most of these cases, use a different word, not attempt to project or transfer ‘feed’ from contexts like ‘feed the monkey’ into contexts like ‘feed the machine’. But,” he asks, “what would be gained if we did? And what would be lost?” (Cavell 1979, 181)

Cavell distinguishes between two different ways of trying to eliminate projection by paraphrase. First, instead of projecting the word ‘feed’ into new contexts, we could use another, more general verb. For example, we could use ‘put’, and say that we ‘put money in the meter’, ‘put new material into the machine’, ‘put film into the camera’, and so on. Cavell notes several problems with this choice. To begin with, it obliterates distinctions we want to make, or makes the expression of those distinctions more cumbersome. For example, ‘put new material into the machine’ does not discriminate between putting a flow of material into a machine and putting a part made of some new material into the machine. Second, the suggested substitution has holistic effects that lead to collateral damage in other areas of our conceptual apparatus. For example, the fact that we can say ‘feed his pride’ matters to our conception of pride as something that can grow, and grow on certain circumstances. According to Cavell, “[k]nowing what sorts of circumstances these are and what the consequences and marks of overfeeding are, is part of knowing what pride is.” (1979, 181) If we forbid this use of ‘feed’, our conception of pride and of other emotions is impoverished. Third – and, for present purposes, this is the most important point – the use of a more general verb such as ‘put’ does not eliminate projection. Quite the contrary: the range of projection increases. For the verb ‘put’ can fulfill its assigned purpose in the relevant contexts only by being projected from its use in other contexts such as ‘Put the cup on the saucer’, ‘Put your hands over your head’, ‘Put out the cat’, ‘Put on your best armor’, ‘Put on your best manner’, and so on and so forth.

Faced with these problems, we might instead try to eliminate projection by offering paraphrases that employ a more specific verb than ‘feed’. At first, it may
It requires little reflection, however, to realize that such a word would be useless for our purposes. Just as in the case of ‘put’, the more specific verb would have to be projected in order to carry out its assigned task: so the paraphrases given would have to be instances of the very phenomenon they were meant to eliminate. Consequently, the only at least *prima facie* viable solution to our problem seems to be to introduce wholly new terms. So, we try to forbid the construction ‘feed in the film’ in favor of, say, ‘fod in the film’; we forbid ‘feed the machine’ in favor of ‘fawd the machine’; we forbid ‘feed the meter’ in favor of ‘fud the meter’; we forbid ‘feed his pride’ in favor of ‘fyd his pride’; and so on and so forth. Now what would such regulations achieve? What real difference would they make? Cavell’s answer is that, by themselves, they make no substantial difference at all. In particular, they do not show that a language that allows no projections can exist – for the possibility of projection is still there in the relevant sense. Suppose that some disobedient language user employs expressions such as ‘feed in the film’ and ‘feed his pride’, despite our proposed regulations. Clearly, his utterances are just as intelligible as before, and for just the same reason: they still constitute viable projections of the word ‘feed’. Our “elimination” was, at best, elimination only in the most superficial sense. What we have done is just to issue rules of linguistic decorum. In fact, it is unclear from what sort of position we are supposed to be able to issue such regulations; but even if we somehow managed to achieve that sort of authority, following our verdicts would be no more than a matter of linguistic etiquette. It would have nothing to do with what can and cannot be meaningfully said in the language.

In order to really block the possibility of projecting ‘feed’ from ‘feed the kitty’ and ‘feed the swans’ to ‘feed the machine’ and ‘feed his pride’, more deep-going changes must occur. The possibility of such projections depends on our seeing and attaching importance to similarities between different cases – for example, on our seeing and attaching importance to the similarity between making an organism grow and making an emotion grow. So, what is required is a change among us such that we no longer see and attach importance to the relevant similarities – or, that the world changes in such a way that the similarities disappear. Such changes may indeed occur, and may even amount to quite concrete, down to earth events. For example, it may be that, with concrete technological developments, the expression ‘feed in the film’ becomes obsolete and eventually unintelligible to new generations of speakers. The changes may also involve much more far-reaching alterations, such as a radical transformation of our understanding of and responses to people’s emotions.

The important point is that the possibility of projections such as the one from ‘feed the kitty’ to ‘feed the meter’ is not just a matter of verbal conventions that can be changed by mere stipulation of the sort envisaged earlier. Rather, such a projection is tied to, and might be said to constitute a manifestation of, the “whirl of
organism” or “forms of life” that Cavell talks about in the passage quoted at the beginning of this paper. The availability of a given projection reflects “our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment.”

Now it is crucial to Cavell’s conception that our forms of life may change in ways that make certain projections obsolete and unintelligible, whereas other projections may become intelligible for the first time (‘surf the web’). Which projections are possible may vary from one time to another, and no particular projection is essential to language. But of course, this is not to say that a life with language is possible in which no projections can be made. The fact that certain changes in our shared routes of interest and feeling and modes of response would eliminate the possibility of particular projections in no way indicates that changes can be imagined which would eliminate the possibility of projections überhaupt.

In fact it is central to Cavell’s view that we cannot make sense of the idea of language-users whose ways of living are meager enough to block projection in general, so that all that remains of their language are ‘literal’, ‘lexical’, ‘non-projective’ uses of words. To begin with, it should be clear from the very start that it is quite a challenge to distinguish in any principled way the ‘literal’ or ‘lexical’ or ‘non-projective’ uses of words from those that involve projection. Where, exactly, should the line be drawn between uses that involve projections and uses that do not? Is there a determinate, non-arbitrary answer to that question? And are there similarly determinate answers to this question with respect to all the other expressions in a language? We say, ‘turn down the light’, ‘turn down the phonograph’, ‘turn down the offer’ – which of these uses involve projections and which do not?

And even if we claimed to be able to draw such a line: would we then also be able to isolate a corresponding minimal core of features of human life which, on the one hand, is rich enough to allow for the understanding of the uses that do not involve projection, and, on the other hand, poor enough to block any projection from those uses? Could we make sense of such an impoverished version of our life with language – a life such that people could only understand what words mean ‘literally’? Would anything remain that could still be recognizable as a life with language?

According to Cavell, our interests, responses, senses of what is important and of what is similar, and so on, are not compartmentalized in the way required for any such isolation to take place, even in principle. He thinks it is just not clear what it would mean to lead a life such that one can intelligibly use the word ‘feed’ in contexts such as ‘feed the kitty’, ‘feed the eel’, and ‘feed the monkey’, but in which there is no room for any clearly ‘projective’ yet immediately intelligible uses of the same word. Similarly, he thinks it is utterly unclear what a life would be in which ‘turn down’ had only ‘literal’ uses, but in which there was no room at all for the sort of creativity exemplified in, say, the move from ‘turn down the light’ to ‘turn down the phonograph’ or ‘turn down the offer’.
One may try to object that this is not unclear at all, since all we need in order to make sense of such a life with language is a group of utterly dull, unimaginative speakers: speakers to whom it would just not occur that words might be used in contexts involving projection. As it stands, however, this is not a substantial objection. For it remains to be specified what the life of such unimaginative speakers would look like. And as long as such a compelling specification has not been made, Cavell can simply reformulate his original point: It is utterly unclear what it is to be a language user while suffering from such incredibly deep-going lack of imagination.

In fact, this way of putting Cavell’s point is illuminating, for it points toward a problem with my repeated emphasis on the “imaginative” or “creative” character of projections. Such talk of imagination and creativity is appropriate to the extent that it serves to highlight Cavell’s insistence that “language is not everywhere determined by rules” (Cavell 1979, 180). However, it is inappropriate to the extent that it suggests that projections require some sort of special linguistic talent that is not already inherent in the intelligible use of words in seemingly trite contexts such as ‘feed the kitty’ and ‘feed the eel’. After all, Cavell’s criticism of the idea that language is everywhere determined by rules is not that this idea just happens to be false of actual linguistic practices, and that real-life language users just happen to be imaginative in ways that are not allowed for by such a false theory. As I have tried to point out, and I as I will try to show in even further detail in what follows, Cavell’s mode of criticism is rather this: Strictly thought through, the idea that language is everywhere determined by rules makes no clear sense. And this means that to the extent that words such as ‘imaginative’ and ‘creative’ are meant to induce a genuine contrast with such an ultimately unintelligible view, they are ladders to be kicked away. In the end, the contrast apparently indicated by these words turns out to be illusory, since there is nothing genuine against which it can be made.3

3 Cavell of course thinks there are substantially creative and imaginative uses of language, uses that do require special talent. These uses include metaphors and what Wittgenstein calls “secondary” uses of words. Significantly, Cavell contrasts such uses precisely against projections. It is, he says, “essential to the projection of a word that it proceeds, or can be made to proceed, naturally;” whereas “what is essential to a functioning metaphor is that its ‘transfer’ is unnatural – it breaks up the established, normal directions of projection.” (1979, 189-90). A full treatment of Cavell’s notion of projection would have to clarify what, exactly, is involved in this contrast between natural and unnatural transfers. This topic is difficult, however, and requires a paper of its own. However, some of the things I say in what follows can be seen as spelling out at least part of what Cavell means when he says that a projection is “natural”. An interesting example of an account of language use that is in some respects close to Cavell’s can be found in Cohen (1986). It is striking, though, that Cohen completely ignores the distinction between projections and metaphors; indeed, Cohen thinks projections are metaphors. Thanks to Stanley Cavell and Cato Wittusen for having pointed out to me a similar conflation in an earlier version of this paper.
To understand better how Cavell’s criticism of the idea that using language is a matter of following rules is supposed to work, consider another attempt to save the idea that there is a delimited and fundamental domain of ‘non-projective’, ‘lexical’ uses that make sense independently of whether there are also further possibilities of projection. Even if it is accepted that any real life instantiation of these lexical uses will also leave room for further projections, couldn’t it be argued that this is beside the point as far as the nature of lexical meaning is concerned, since what characterizes such meanings is precisely that they are determined independently of how words are actually put to use in real life contexts. In other words, the claim is that lexical meaning, in contrast to projections, does not depend on any interests and responses among actual users of language. This would mean to argue, for example, that the ‘feed’ in ‘feed the kitty’, ‘feed the monkey’ and ‘feed the eel’ means one and the same thing – namely feeding – irrespectively of whether real-life language users in fact see and attach any importance to that sameness; whereas the possibility of making sense of sentences such as ‘feed the meter’ and ‘feed his pride’ depends on contextual factors external to the ‘lexicon’.

The problem here is to explain how this independent determination is supposed to occur. One may, for example, try to explain it in terms of there being rules for how to use the word ‘feed’ in its lexical, supposedly non-projective sense. The problem with this suggestion is not just to understand why real people would have erected and cared to follow those particular rules, rather than, say, rules according to which ‘feed’ refers to something done with kittens and monkeys but not with eels or swans. Moreover, there is the deeper, Wittgensteinian problem of understanding how, in such total abstraction from the actual responses of language users, there could be anything like such rules at all – as opposed to mere ink-marks or scribbles the interpretation of which is left open.

Cavell’s response to these problems is his conception of a basic continuity between projective and seemingly non-projective uses of words. Again, what characterizes this continuity is not just that the possibility of projections such as ‘feed the machine’ and ‘feed his pride’ depends on the existence of a practice where we say such things as ‘feed the kitty’ and ‘feed the swans’. The really crucial point is that there is inter-dependence here. So, it is not just that a language totally intolerant of projection would not allow us to say that a meter or someone’s pride is being fed; such a language would not even allow to say the same thing of kittens or swans.

In fact, from a Cavellian perspective there is something misleading about the very distinction between uses that involve projection and uses that do not. The step from ‘feed the kitty’ to ‘feed the meter’ involves our seeing and attaching importance to similarities between the two different cases – but so does the step from ‘feed the kitty’ to ‘feed the eel’. In the former step, linguistic creativity is writ large, and hence it is a useful introductory example of linguistic projection. But essentially the same sort of creativity is present also in the latter, seemingly less
innovative step. ‘Feed the eel’ and ‘Feed the meter’ are poles of a continuum within the indefinitely creative potential of natural language use. In the end, what Cavell wants examples such as ‘feed the meter’ or ‘feed his pride’ to do, is to make apparent a sort of unregularizable way of “going on”, of doing “the same thing”, that is present also in seemingly much more trivial transfers between contexts.

This point needs to be stated with care, in order not to seem just outrageous. For example, Cavell is not denying that it might sometimes be important to distinguish between lexical and non-lexical meanings within the continuum just described. Similarly, we may sometimes find it useful to draw a line between cases in which an expression is used in its ‘old, established sense’ and cases in which a ‘new concept’ is being created. In fact this line may well be drawn by means of something like a rule. But where to draw such a line will vary, depending on our particular purposes and interests. Distinctions between “old” and “new” senses are not just “there” because of “how language works”. And the rules used to make such distinctions in particular cases cannot serve draw the bounds of sense. On the contrary, such rules can always be intelligibly transgressed, even without prior stipulation or redefinition. This is Cavell’s fundamental criticism of the idea that language is governed by rules. He is not denying that for certain purposes and intentions, parts of linguistic practice can usefully be described in terms of rules. What he is rejecting is the idea that such rules can lay down in advance what can and cannot meaningfully be said.

According to Recanati, there can be no real swallowing on the part of an ATM, since ATMs are not living organisms with the right bodily equipment for swallowing. Well; it would certainly be absurd to object to a book in anatomy on the mechanisms of swallowing that it does not include a chapter on ATM machines. In fact, there need be nothing wrong at all with saying that animals and ATM machines ‘swallow’ things in different senses of the word, as long as we do not lose sight of the continuity between the cases that we thereby separate. The danger is that we forget that the sort of dynamics that relates these seemingly different cases is already present – albeit less conspicuously – in our most basic and familiar employments of the expressions of a natural language.

That forgetting about this means forgetting about what a language is becomes clear if we now return to the issue of what it would be to eliminate projection by paraphrase. Suppose, again, that we try to achieve such elimination by replacing relevant occurrences of ‘feed’ with entirely new terms. Instead of ‘feed the meter’, we say ‘fud the meter’; instead of ‘feed his pride’ we say ‘fyd his pride’; and so on. And now, suppose we take the continuity emphasized by Cavell seriously, and make similar replacements even in seemingly trivial changes of contexts. If we say ‘feed the kitty’, we can no longer say ‘feed the monkey’ and ‘feed the swans’; we must now say, for example, ‘flid the monkey’ and ‘flod the swans’; and so on and so forth. Indeed, come to think of it, it is not even clear why such variation should not be marked also when it comes to different utterances of
the same sentence. So, if I say ‘feed the kitty’ in the evening, shouldn’t I say ‘foid the kitty’ in the morning; if I give the kitty milk, perhaps I should say ‘filk the kitty’; if I give her fish, maybe ‘fulk the kitty’; and so on and so forth.

Obviously, we are on a slippery slope rapidly leading toward destruction of the very possibility of a language. Not everything can be just different or unfamiliar; if nothing is the same, then nothing is different either – and the very purpose of language is destroyed. The notion of a language in which projection is eliminated in this sort of way is no more intelligible the notion of a linguistic practice in which every uttered word is a malapropism.

4. Conclusion

I said at the beginning of this paper that Davidson’s and Cavell’s views of language use are considerably different, and that it is even questionable if their criticism of the notion of language as rule-governed is aimed at a common foe. My ensuing discussion has substantiated these claims. Davidson’s primary target is not the idea that linguistic communication requires the ability to operate in accordance with a precise and specifiable set of syntactic and semantic rules, but the idea that linguistic communication requires the sharing of a linguistic practice, be it rule-governed or not. Cavell, by contrast, is in no way hostile to the idea that language use involves a shared practice. On the contrary, he thinks such sharing is crucial. What he is rejecting is the idea that this practice is delimited by rules that determine what it makes sense to say. He thinks the pervasiveness of projective possibilities shows that this idea is not just false but ultimately unintelligible.

This description of the difference between Davidson and Cavell is correct, as far as it goes. It makes it seem as if Davidson’s criticism is the more radical one: While Cavell holds on to the idea that linguistic communication involves a shared linguistic practice, Davidson throws even that idea overboard. However, my discussion in this paper has provided us with the resources to give a different summary of the dialectical situation – a summary that cuts deeper and makes it clear that Cavell’s criticism is in fact more fundamental than Davidson’s. Here is what I mean:

The slippery slope described at the end of the previous section makes it possible to identify the core of Cavell’s criticism of the idea that language “is everywhere determined by rules”. Cavell’s point can be put as follows: If we confront the ideal of language as thoroughly rule-governed with the inevitable realities of actual language use, what happens is that the ideal turns against itself. The thorough implementation of this ideal in reality leads to chaos rather than stability. Instead of providing the constancy required for communication and description, it makes such constancy impossible. In fact – and this is Cavell’s fundamental claim – it is only by acknowledging that language is permeated by a sort creativity that cannot be regularized that we can make sense of the required constancy, and hence, of the possibility of communication and description.
sounds paradoxical, it is only because we are still held captive by the idea that linguistic constancy must be determined by rules. In fact, as Karl Kraus famously said of psychoanalysis, this idea is the illness for which it takes itself to be the cure.

Davidson’s criticism involves no such charge. I have argued at length that malapropisms do not constitute convincing counterexamples to the sort of picture Davidson wants to reject; and they would certainly be useless as evidence for the sort of point Cavell is making. Davidson is surely right that some “wit, luck and wisdom” are required in order to understand Mrs Malaprop’s intention (Davidson 2005, 107); but it is far from clear how this observation could tell us anything essential about what is required for linguistic communication. In fact, Davidson’s own account of how communication proceeds comes dangerously close to the sort of chaotic situation envisaged at the end of the slippery slope described at the end of the previous section. But it is interesting that his conception involves not so much de-regularization as social and temporal fragmentizing. He retains the idea that the abilities of speakers and hearers must be possible to represent in terms of regular, systematic meaning-theories – even if these meaning-theories are now pictured as varying over time and between individuals. It is the variation among the theories – the development of new “passing” theories or the adjustment of old “prior” ones – that is said to require “wit, luck and wisdom”. (Davidson 2005, 101ff.) The understanding of an individual utterance is still depicted as involving the application of a systematic (albeit short-lived and highly local) theory. Indeed, Davidson holds on to the idea that linguistic meaning has to be systematic in this sense. From a Cavellian viewpoint, this suggests that he is still very much held captive by the sort of picture we need to reject.

References