Attitudes toward quotation

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1. Introduction

As is well known, Frege (1892) argued that the sentential complements of propositional attitude predicates refer to propositions. W.V. Quine, who disdained intensional objects like propositions, briefly suggested instead an analysis of such complements crucially involving quotation (1956), and Donald Davidson took up and elaborated this suggestion in a number of papers (1969, 1975, 1979). The main purpose of this paper is to argue against quotational analyses of propositional attitudes, although I’ll suggest at the end that the result may have consequences for the analysis of quotation itself. In the second section below we will review Quine’s comments and Davidson’s development of them. In §3 we look at considerations involving proper names which seem at first to go in favor of this kind of analysis, but which ultimately probably do not. In §4 we turn to an argument against quotational analyses – the fact that it seems to deny languageless creatures' propositional attitudes. The final section contains some concluding remarks.

2. Quine’s & Davidson’s accounts of attitudes

Although Davidson’s analysis of propositional attitudes is based on the one Quine briefly suggested (but ultimately rejected) there are subtle differences between the two, so we need to look in turn at what each has had to say.

2.1. Quine’s view

As noted in the introduction, Quine was wary (to say the least) about intensional objects like propositions, commenting that “there is a way of dodging the intensions which merits serious consideration. Instead of speaking of intensions we can speak of sentences, naming these by quotation. Instead of:

\[ w \text{ believes that .....} \]

we may say:

\[ w \text{ believes-true ‘.....’}; \]

and he remarked that “[a] similar shift can be made in the case of the other propositional attitudes, of course, ...” (Quine 1956: 185).

One problem immediately strikes one (perhaps especially if one is an animal lover), and in the very next paragraph Quine addressed it.

\[ 1 \] By “languageless creature” I mean a creature who does not have a natural language like English or Vietnamese. Fodor (1975, 1987) has argued for an innate, unlearned, language of thought for both humans and nonhuman animals, but such a language (if it exists) will not be under consideration here. I’m grateful to Rich Hall for reminding me of its potential relevance.
This semantical reformulation is not, of course, intended to suggest that the subject of the propositional attitude speaks the language of the quotation, or any language. We may treat a mouse’s fear of a cat as his fearing true a certain English sentence. This is unnatural without being therefore wrong. It is a little like describing a prehistoric ocean current as clockwise. (Quine 1956: 186.)

We will return to this issue shortly. But to complete our review we must first take note of an additional complication, originally pointed out by Church (1950). Since any given phonological or orthographic string could, by chance, have two very different meanings in two different languages, the quotation analysis of propositional attitudes needs to leave a slot for a specification of the relevant language. Thus we need to replace (1) with (2).

(1) \( w \) believes-true ‘.....’
(2) \( w \) believes-true ‘.....’ in L

Quine expressed some distress at the need of the analysis to mention a particular language, not only because that does not seem to be a part of any ordinary statement of belief (or other propositional attitude), but also because of the ill-definedness of languages. His conclusion was thus anything but definitive:

The propositional attitudes are dim affairs to begin with, and it is a pity to have to add obscurity to obscurity by bringing in language variables too. Only let it not be supposed that any clarity is gained by restituting the intensions. (Quine 1956: 187.)

And in *Word & Object*, he opted instead for an “analysis” which deems a propositional attitude predicate and its complement to be one indissoluble unit (Quine 1960: 216).

### 2.2. Davidson’s view

Davidson was concerned that Quine’s ultimate solution to the problem of propositional attitude contexts would result in an unlimited number of distinct atomic expressions for a language, ruling out the possibility of a Tarskian truth definition. He thought Quine’s earlier suggestion, involving quotation, was superior, and he sought to modify it so as to circumvent the problems Quine had noted.

Davidson proposed what has come to be called the “demonstrative” theory of quotation. On Davidson’s theory, quoted elements are not semantically a part of the sentences in which they appear. They stand instead as separate utterances, and the quotation marks which surround them are seen as a kind of demonstrative which points to that now distinct utterance. Thus his analysis of (3) would be something like (4) (cf. Davidson 1979: 91).

(3) “Donald collapsed” is a sentence.
(4) Donald collapsed. The expression of which that is a token is a sentence.

Davidson (1969) applied this theory of quotation to contexts of indirect speech. His analysis of (5) is given, in abbreviated form, in (6).

(5) Galileo said that the earth moves.
(6) Galileo said that. The earth moves.

We are to take the second element of (6) as an utterance rather than a sentence; that way, we don’t have to worry about the language issue – the utterer of (6) makes the language determinate.
Of course Galileo didn’t make his famous statement in English, so we need to understand *Galileo said that*, as it occurs in (6), in a special way. On Davidson’s analysis it would abbreviate (7) (1969: 105).

(7) \[ \exists [\text{Galileo’s utterance } x \text{ and my next utterance make us samesayers}] \]

Introducing the relation of samesaying would seem to introduce an intensional element into the analysis – something Davidson, following Quine, did not want to do. A footnote (note 14, added in the 1984 reissue of this paper) assures us that this is not the case.

In the introductory paragraph of his 1969 paper, Davidson suggests that he is about to give, not only the correct analysis of indirect discourse, but also “an analysis that opens a lead to an analysis of psychological sentences generally (sentences about propositional attitudes, so-called)...” (93). However nothing more is said in this paper about exactly how the extension would go. Let us make an attempt to fill in some details.

Consider (8):

(8) Louise would like to go out for a while.

As a first crude step, we might paraphrase (8) in Davidsonian fashion as in (9):

(9) Louise would like that. Louise goes out for a while.

This appears to put Louise in the liking relation to an utterance. How can we make sense of this? Somehow we must consider Louise would like that, in (9), to abbreviate something which yields the right meaning for (8). Possibly this would be something like (10).

(10) \[ \exists [\text{Louise’s utterance of } x \text{ and my next utterance would make us samesayers, and } x \text{ expresses Louise’s desire}] \]

Of course we would have to consider Louise’s utterance of x as describing something hypothetical rather than actual. This is so not only because people can have all kinds of unexpressed desires, but also because Louise is a cat and can’t say anything as articulated as my utterance of Louise goes out for a while. This may not be exactly what Davidson had in mind, but since he did not spell that out we will have to make do.

We turn now first to the potential (but probably not actual) argument in favor of this kind of analysis, and then the argument against.

3. A potential argument in favor of quotation

As was alluded to in our introduction, Frege proposed a shift of reference in propositional attitude contexts, whereby expressions come to denote their customary senses rather than their customary referents. He did this, at least in part, in order to account for apparent failures of substitutivity – the fact that expressions which are ordinarily coreferential are not in general intersubstitutable in such contexts. (11) gives a standard example (from Linsky 1967: 74).

(11) a. Oedipus wanted to marry Jocasta.
    b. Jocasta = Oedipus’s mother.
    c. Oedipus wanted to marry his mother.

Although (11a) and (11b) are true, our first impression is that (11c), on at least one interpretation, is not. (If (11c) is true, why did Oedipus put his eyes out when he found out what he had done?) Frege’s analysis seems to save the day: if we assume that Jocasta and Oedipus’s mother mean different things (i.e. have different senses), then
given a shift in reference following \textit{wanted to}, they are no longer coreferential as they occur in (11a/c).

This solution seems to assume that a proper name like \textit{Jocasta} actually has a meaning, something Frege appeared to accept, albeit with reluctance, in his famous footnote 2 of \enquote{On sense and reference}. However Mill (1843), before Frege, and Kripke (1972), after him, argued convincingly that proper names do not have meanings, or Fregean senses. Well, maybe we can still manage with the example in (11), since even without a meaning \textit{Jocasta} would not be equivalent to \textit{Oedipus’s mother}, which undoubtedly does have a meaning. However there exist quite a few entities with more than one proper name, especially these days. (12) illustrates a problem parallel to that shown in (11).

(12) \begin{itemize}
    \item[a.] Gillian knows that John Wayne was a famous actor.
    \item[b.] John Wayne = Marion Morrison.
    \item[c.] Gillian knows that Marion Morrison was a famous actor.
\end{itemize}

Here again, it seems that the first two sentences could be true while the third is not. But if proper names do not express a sense, Frege has not given us a reason why we cannot substitute one for another in (12a).

A successful quotational analysis of the complements of propositional attitude verbs would seem to solve our problem. If propositional attitudes are (somehow) relations between individuals and sentences, or utterances, then any difference in sentence/utterance can be expected to have the potential to make a difference in the attitude attributed. Since the sentences following \enquote{that} in (12a) and (12c) are different, as would be any utterances of those sentences, we no longer expect (12a) to entail (12c) even given the equivalence in (12b).

I called this a \enquote{potential} argument for a quotation analysis because of some considerations pointed out by Kripke (1979). Peter is an American lad who knows that Paderewski was a Polish statesman. He also has heard about Paderewski the famous musician, but thinks that these are two different people, and also has a firm belief that politicians never have musical talent. The crucial example is given in (13).

(13) Peter believes that Paderewski had musical talent.

The problem is that we seem to have a situation that is very similar to that which Gillian is in with respect to John Wayne/Marion Morrison, but we do not have two different names with which to express Peter’s diverging beliefs. The Davidsonian analysis of (13) is given in (14).

(14) Peter believes that. Paderewski had musical talent. There is only a single utterance to express Peter’s divergent beliefs. If Peter’s situation is indeed the same as Gillian’s, then the quotational analysis has not been shown to provide a solution.

\section*{4. An argument against}

Let us turn now to the other argument, the one which goes against quotation analyses of propositional attitude contexts. It is the one to which Quine alluded when he reassured us that such analyses, or his version anyway, need not be taken so as to exclude languageless creatures from the realm of the believing and desiring. Should we accept this reassurance? Davidson himself suggests that under one natural construal of the
Quinean line, we shouldn’t. That would be a construal such that to have a thought is “to have a disposition to utter certain sentences with appropriate force under given circumstances” (Davidson 1975: 167). However Davidson, apparently like Quine, concludes that this construal is not necessary.

The paratactic analysis of the logical form of attributions of attitude can get along without the mimic-theory of utterance. When I say, ‘Jones believes that snow is white’ I describe Jones’s state of mind directly: it is indeed the state of mind someone is in who could honestly assert ‘Snow is white’ if he spoke English, but that may be a state a languageless creature could also be in. (Davidson 1975: 167.)

From Quine we have at least the analogy to describing prehistoric ocean currents; from Davidson only a disclaimer.

So there are two issues here. One is whether or not we should accept these reassurances from Quine and Davidson, that their analyses of propositional attitudes as relations to sentences or utterances do not preclude the truthful attribution of such attitudes to languageless creatures. And the second is whether we should in fact exclude languageless creatures from such attributions – whether in fact one must know a language before one can have a belief or a desire.

4.1. Do quotational analyses rule out languageless creatures?
Is describing a mouse’s fear of a cat as a relation to a sentence (or an utterance) really like describing a prehistoric ocean current as clockwise? I don’t think so. In the case of the clock and the ocean current it is clear that there is a certain direction of motion which is shared between the two (assuming the description is correct). The fact that the two things (clocks and the ocean current) do not exist at the same time is not relevant to that direction of motion. Once the direction of motion has been characterized in our present day terms we know what it is, and it would be the same for both clocks nowadays, and the ocean current prehistorically. Furthermore we could, of course, have conveyed the same information in different terms – e.g. by describing the current as one which goes northward on its western side and southward on the east. However if we accept Quine’s and Davidson’s disclaimers, then it is not at all clear what is shared between, on the one hand, the state of a mouse who fears the attack of a cat (or a human who fears the attack of a lion), and on the other, a sentence or utterance.

Consider again Davidson’s remark from the quote above:

When I say, ‘Jones believes that snow is white’ I describe Jones’s state of mind directly: it is indeed the state of mind someone is in who could honestly assert ‘Snow is white’ if he spoke English, but that may be a state a languageless creature could also be in.

What kind of state is this? If Jones a normal human being who is not an English speaker, we could almost certainly teach them enough English so that they could assert “Snow is white” if they felt that that were true. But if Jones is a cat or a mouse, we could not teach them English – it is not possible to satisfy the if clause of this analysis. In order to believe that a mouse or a cat could be in this very same state is to disassociate this state
completely from any state which we might have thought Davidson was talking about – and in particular any state involving sentences or utterances of English. Indeed, we know nothing at all about this state.

Consider a parallel: we speak about the weather using sentences of English. Extending the quotational analysis, we might analyze weather phenomena as properties of those very sentences of English, or utterances of them. What is it to be raining? It is to be such that an utterance of the sentence *It is raining* is true. In giving this kind of analysis we can individuate all the possible weather conditions we might need to. However the analysis does not really tell us anything about weather – it does not tell us what rain consists of, or what causes it to be raining or not raining. In the case of Quine’s ocean current we have a direction of motion which is shared by two things, so that when we are told (accurately and believably) that the current is clockwise we learn something about it. But in the case of the propositional attitudes we are not offered anything which is shared by sentences or utterances of English, on the one hand, and the minds of possibly languageless creatures on the other.

Ultimately, it seems to me, if we actually do want to allow that languageless creatures might have propositional attitudes then we cannot learn anything about their attitudes, or our own, from the Quine-Davidson type of analysis. We would have to conclude that such analyses are empty, and convey nothing of interest. Thus it seems crucial to the success of the quotational approach to establish that languageless creatures cannot, in fact, have propositional attitudes. Perhaps it is because of this that Davidson is at some pains to argue that very point.

4.2. *Can languageless creatures have beliefs and desires?*

In his paper “Thought and talk” Davidson gives us no very powerful direct reason to believe that our attributions of propositional attitudes to languageless creatures are incorrect, although he suggests that such attributions “smack of anthropomorphism” (1975: 155). Instead his argument is rather contorted and indirect. But before we consider it, let us consider on independent grounds whether or not there might be any languageless creatures to whom we would want to attribute thought.

One kind of example is considered by Davidson himself – a dog, say, who chases a squirrel up a tree and then stays by that tree barking. Wouldn’t a natural explanation of this behavior involve attributing to the dog a desire to catch the squirrel, and a belief that the squirrel is in the tree? Davidson apparently does not find this kind of example convincing, although he offers nothing against it except that the description may be wrongly anthropomorphic. Let us move on, then, and consider some members of the corvid family. A study reported in 2002 that New Caledonian crows are able to bend wires to make hooks in order to retrieve food from a tube. And more recently there is even more striking evidence of reason. In one study, four captive rooks quickly learned to drop stones into a narrow container of water, in order to raise the level and bring a tasty worm floating on the surface to within reach of their beaks. (Orangutans have apparently shown similar intelligent behaviors.) And in another, New Caledonian crows showed they were able to first use a small stick to drag a medium-sized stick out of a tube, then use that stick to drag an even longer stick out of another tube, in order finally to use the longest stick to obtain food from yet another tube. (See Bower (2009) for a summary of these results, plus references to the original articles.) The idea that these
crows are accomplishing all of this without a belief or desire in their heads is mind-boggling.

We should also consider humans. On Davidson’s view, apparently, prelinguistic toddlers are not in a position to have propositional attitudes. And there are also cases like that of Genie – an abused child who was essentially prevented from hearing or producing speech until she was discovered, in 1970 at the age of 12. Genie never acquired English, although she did learn a number of English words subsequent to her release, and was able to communicate with them, enough to inform caretakers, e.g., that her father had punished her for making noise. (See Curtiss 1977; Rymer 1992.) Nevertheless it would seem that on Davidson’s view we would have to conclude that Genie did not (and does not) have memories, given her lack of a language. This is not plausible.

Examples like these give us reason to believe that Davidson’s conclusion – that to hold a propositional attitude one must have a language – is not correct. So let us look at his argument, to see where the weakness might be. As noted above, this argument is rather contorted – John Searle describes it as “not as clear as it could be” (2002: 67). It seems to have roughly the structure given below (cf. Davidson 1975: 167-170).

(15)  
   a. To have a belief requires recognizing the difference between true and false beliefs.
   b. Recognizing the difference between true and false beliefs requires membership in a speech community.
   c. Ergo, to have a belief requires membership in a speech community.

It is the second premise of this argument which is weak. This premise is vaguely reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s argument against the possibility of a private language (cf. Wittgenstein 1953), as elucidated by Kripke (1982). The idea seems to be that the only way of knowing one has a false belief is through comparison with, or correction by, other members of one’s speech community: “the contrast between truth and error...can emerge only in the context of interpretation, which alone forces us to the idea of an objective, public truth” (Davidson 1975: 170). Searle’s very sensible response is that awareness of the falsity of a belief, or the unfulfilled nature of a desire, does not require membership in a speech community. So, consider again the dog who is barking up the tree after a squirrel. Soon, we may imagine, she notices (sees and smells) the squirrel running down the tree and into the neighbor’s yard. She stops barking up the tree and chases the squirrel into the neighbor’s yard. No speech community is required for the dog to change her beliefs – only feedback from the world in the form of perceptions which conflict with those beliefs. (Cf. Searle 2002: 67-69.)

4.3 Alternatives to quotation

An anonymous reviewer of this paper has pointed out that I haven’t said anything about alternatives to the quotational analysis of propositional attitudes. For my argument to hold water I need to show that there are alternatives that do, indeed, tell us something about what propositional attitudes are attitudes toward. Following Frege (and Mill), the major alternative to quotational analyses holds that the objects of propositional attitudes are propositions. However there are some differences of opinion about what propositions are. We have at least three live possibilities these days. One is that propositions are sets of possible worlds. Another is that they are sets of situations, where situations can be as big as possible worlds are usually conceived of as being, but can also be much smaller –
as small as an entity possessing a property. A third possibility is that at least some propositions are structured objects which contain entities, and properties or relations holding among them.

Any of these possibilities for propositions, I would like to argue, tells us more about what propositional attitudes are than the quotational analysis does. That is because on any of these views propositions are constituted by objects with which any sentient being can be in at least partial acquaintance. That is, the raw materials of propositions are states of affairs, or situations, or entities, properties, and relations, and these are things which one can make cognitive contact with without any necessity of a language. Of course it is possible, as the reviewer suggests, for a supporter of the quotational view to reply by pointing out that we may not actually have access to our propositional attitudes. And indeed that may be true, but the fact remains that our minds create those attitudes, and it is much more plausible to assume that they do it using elements which they are acquainted with, than that they do it using elements which they are not acquainted with.

5. Concluding remarks

The main point of this paper has been to argue (a) that quotational analyses of propositional attitudes of the kind proposed by Quine and Davidson will only tell us something about the attitudes if languageless creatures don’t have them, and (b) that there is good reason to think that languageless creatures do indeed have propositional attitudes. If these results stand up they give us a good reason to abandon quotational analyses of propositional attitudes. And that in turn, I think, can tell us something about quotation itself: if it is not at the bottom of attributions of propositional attitudes, it becomes a less important, and less opaque, phenomenon.

Let me try to spell out this point in a little more detail. The relative dates of two of the papers I’ve cited above – 1969 for “On saying that” and 1979 for “Quotation” – suggest that Davidson was led to his theory of quotation because of his quotational analysis of propositional attitudes. That is, it seems that Davidson first had the idea of reanalyzing the complementizer *that* in sentences about propositional attitudes as the demonstrative pronoun *that*. This allowed him to reformulate Quine’s quotational analysis of the attitudes in a way that obviates reference to a language, by having instead an utterance to refer to. And from there, it seems, Davidson was led to see quotation marks themselves as a different form of demonstrative pronoun, and to propose the demonstrative analysis of quotation in general.

However, if Davidson’s quotational analysis of the attitudes is problematic, as I’ve tried to suggest, then that fact would remove his original motivation for the demonstrative analysis of quotation. And without that motivation there is very little left to support the demonstrative theory. Paul Saka (2006) has argued in detail against the demonstrative analysis of quotation, and though there are aspects of his paper that I disagree with, it is nevertheless very convincing in its refutation of Davidson’s theory. So one positive outcome, if the considerations in this paper are sustained, is an increase in clarity about quotation – it is not demonstrative in nature. And there is another positive outcome, which is that we do not require a theory of quotation to account for
propositional attitude sentences. Without that additional burden, there is less that a theory of quotation has to do.

References


