

Triangulation, Untranslatability, and Reconciliation

Nathaniel Goldberg

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Abstract Donald Davidson used triangulation to do everything from explicate psychological and semantic externalism, to attack relativism and skepticism, to propose conditions necessary for thought and talk. At one point Davidson tried to bring order to these remarks by identifying three kinds of triangulation, each operative in a different situation. Here I take seriously Davidson's talk of triangular situations and extend it. I start by describing Davidson's situations. Next I establish the surprising result that considerations from one situation entail the possibility that at any one time one language is partially untranslatable into another. Because the possibility is time-indexed, it need not conflict with Davidson's own argument against the possibility of untranslatability. I derive the result, not to indict Davidson, but to propose a new kind of triangulation, the reconciliation of untranslatability, which I investigate. Insofar as triangulation is central to Davidson's views, getting a handle on his various triangular situations is key to getting a handle on his contributions to philosophy. Insofar as those contributions have enriched our understanding of how language, thought, and reality interrelate, extending Davidson's model promises to extend our understanding too.

Keywords Donald Davidson · Reconciliation · Triangulation · Untranslatability

Perhaps no one in recent memory has done more to explore how language, thought, and reality interrelate than Donald Davidson. In the final two decades of his life Davidson made his model of triangulation central to that exploration.¹ Davidson used triangulation to do everything from explicate his psychological and semantic externalism, to reinforce his arguments against conceptual relativism and for the veracity of our basic beliefs, to speculate on conditions necessary for thought and

¹Davidson (2002, p. 105) introduces triangulation. See Goldberg (2008) for triangulation's relation to Lepore and Ludwig's (2007a, pp. 337–42) account of Davidson's semantic externalism.

N. Goldberg (✉)

Department of Philosophy, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, VA, USA
e-mail: goldbergn@wlu.edu

talk to emerge. Nonetheless at one point Davidson tried to bring order to his multifarious remarks by identifying three kinds of (or, as I prefer, roles for) triangulation, each operative in a different situation (2001a, pp. 306–7). Presumably Davidson subsumed his other roles for triangulation under these.

My aim here is to take seriously Davidson's talk of triangular situations and in fact extend it. I do so by describing Davidson's situations and how they relate to what else he says about triangulation. I then suggest a new role that triangulation plays and new situation in which it plays it. Insofar as triangulation is central to Davidson's views, getting a handle on his various triangular situations is key to getting a handle on his contributions to philosophy.² Insofar as those contributions have enriched our understanding of how language, thought, and reality interrelate, extending Davidson's model promises to extend our understanding too.

I proceed as follows. In "[Triangulation](#)" I review the triangular situations that Davidson discusses and briefly identify lessons each is meant to impart. In "[Triangulation and Untranslatability](#)" I establish the surprising result that triangulation's role in one of these situations entails the possibility that at any one time one language is partially untranslatable into another. Because the possibility is time-indexed, it need not conflict with Davidson's (2001c, essay 13) own argument against the possibility of untranslatability. I derive the result, not to indict Davidson's argument, but to propose a further role for triangulation that Davidson never recognized: the diachronic *reconciliation* of untranslatability. Thus in "[The Reconciliation Situation](#)" I show that triangulation can explain (1) why untranslatability is possible at one time and (2) how this untranslatability might be overcome at another. In "[The Importance of Reconciliation for Davidson](#)" I explain why reconciliation is important for Davidson. In "[The Importance of Reconciliation for Us](#)" I explain why it is important for us.

Triangulation

Davidson's general idea of triangulation is of two (or more) creatures responding to one another against their shared environment. Two monkeys react to the lion in their midst by signaling to one another. My brother and I show interest in the watch in the showcase by talking to one another about how it might make a suitable gift for our mother. Davidson adds that co-triangulating creatures need to have similar innate quality spaces. They must be innately disposed to group worldly objects into roughly the same similarity classes based on the objects' ostensive qualities. Our monkeys tend to agree on which objects are lions and which are not; my brother and I tend to categorize the same objects as watches.³

Davidson (2001a) makes this general description of triangulation specific when he contends that there are various triangular situations. (1) In the *primitive situation* creatures signal to one another in response to something in their environment without employing language. Such creatures might be non-linguistic; Davidson

² Verheggen writes: "The importance of the triangulation argument in Davidson's philosophy cannot be overstated" (2007, p. 96). My only disagreement is over there being a single "argument."

³ Davidson borrows the notion of a quality space from Quine (1964, pp. 83–5; 1977, pp. 123–8).

mentions birds, elephants, fish, gazelles, monkeys, and whales.⁴ They might be pre-linguistic, such as human infants. Or they might be linguistic, like typical adult human beings, yet here respond in non-linguistic ways.⁵ (2) In the *learning situation* one triangulator teaches another how to respond to the object being triangulated. These responses might involve hiding from or signaling about the object, as with our monkeys, or acquiring terms and concepts for the object, as with speakers. (Though Davidson is not explicit, we may distinguish the *primitive learning situation*, where the learning is non-linguistic, from the *linguistic learning situation*, where the learning is linguistic.) Finally, (3) in the *interpretive situation* two speakers interpret one another's utterances in basic cases by triangulating objects in their shared environment, and in non-basic cases by interpreting utterances in light of these basic ones. This is the situation of the radical interpreter.

While Davidson identifies each situation, neither he nor any of his commentators systematically describes them all.⁶ My goal in this section is to describe Davidson's triangular situations systematically myself. In each case I also briefly mention lessons that Davidson draws, though these take a back seat to my discussion of the situation itself. Whether or not Davidson is correct in any of this is not my concern here. I come not to criticize Davidson but to explain him.⁷

Primitive and Primitive Learning Situations

Because Davidson usually groups the primitive and primitive learning situations together, I do the same. Davidson characterizes the primitive situation thus:

There is a prelinguistic, precognitive situation which seems to me to constitute a necessary condition for thought and language, a condition that can exist independent of thought, and therefore precede it.... The basic situation is one that involves two or more creatures simultaneously in interaction with each other and with the world they share; it is what I call *triangulation*. It is the result of a threefold interaction, an interaction which is twofold from the point of view of each of the two agents: each is interacting simultaneously with the world and with the other agent (2002, p. 128, his emphasis).⁸

⁴ See Davidson (2001b, pp. 6–7; 2002, p. 128; 2005b, p. 140).

⁵ See Davidson (2001b, p. 12).

⁶ The closest that Davidson comes is describing the primitive and learning situations, without distinguishing primitive from linguistic learning, and then merely naming the interpretive situation (2001a). None of Davidson's commentators describes the primitive, learning, and interpretive situations together, nor distinguishes primitive from linguistic learning. Bridges (2006) describes only the primitive, and the primitive and linguistic learning situations. Brink (2004), Child (2001), Fennell (2000), Glock (2003, p. 260), Hacker (1998), Lasonen and Marvan (2004), Montminy (2003), and Yalowitz (1999) describe only the linguistic learning situation. Pagin (2001) and Talmage (1997) describe only the linguistic learning and interpretive situations. Lepore and Ludwig (2007a, pp. 406–12) and Ramberg (2001) describe only the interpretive situation. Verheggen describes only the linguistic learning and interpretive situations (1997), and primitive and linguistic learning situations (2007), respectively.

⁷ I do, however, refer in these notes to controversies concerning Davidson's claims about triangulation. See Goldberg (2008) for further worries.

⁸ See also Davidson (2001a, p. 293; 2002, pp. 117–8, 212; 2005b, p. 140).

While Davidson's description of "[t]he basic situation" is basic enough to pertain to any triangular situation, Davidson uses it here in the context of prelinguistic creatures. His idea is that two creatures respond to objects in the world in ways that are partly informed by their responses to one another. One monkey hides from a lion because another monkey, spying the lion, lets out a call. Creatures in the primitive situation also respond to one another in ways that are partly informed by their responses to those worldly objects. The first monkey signals to the second *because* the first perceives the lion.

One lesson that Davidson draws from the triangular primitive situation is that creatures who have been in it respond to objects in public view rather than to their private sensory states. The object of the two monkeys' responses is the lion, rather than the lion's effects on their senses, because the lion is the common cause of those responses. We are therefore entitled to locate the object to which creatures respond distally, in the shared cause of their responses, rather than proximally, in the triggering of their nerve endings. Thus Davidson breaks with W. V. Quine, who locates the stimulus at the nerve endings. He also breaks with pre-Quinean empiricists like the logical empiricists, who describe at least we human creatures as responding to private "sense-data," and the classical empiricists, who describe us as responding to our own "ideas."⁹

Another lesson that Davidson draws is that the primitive situation provides conditions necessary for primitive, and ultimately linguistic, learning. In the primitive situation, Davidson maintains, it is possible that

each creature learns to correlate the reactions of other creatures with changes or objects in the world to which it also reacts. One sees this in its simplest form in a school of fish, where each fish reacts almost instantaneously to the motions of the others.... A learned reaction can be observed in certain monkeys which make three distinguishable sounds depending on whether they see a snake, an eagle, or a lion approaching; the other monkeys, perhaps without seeing the threat themselves, react to the warning sounds in ways appropriate to the different dangers, by climbing trees, running, or hiding (2002, p. 128).¹⁰

For Davidson, because creatures in the primitive situation respond to objects in public view, they are capable of learning responses *from* one another. The primitive situation gives way to the primitive learning situation. Now, according to Davidson, non-linguistic animals and pre-linguistic human beings can both be in the primitive learning situation:

Some creature is taught, or anyway learns, to respond in a specific way to a stimulus or a class of stimuli. The dog hears a bell and is fed; presently it salivates when it hears the bell. The child babbles, and when it produces a sound like 'table' in the evident presence of a table, it is rewarded; the process is repeated and presently the child says 'table' in the presence of tables (2002, p. 117).

⁹ See Davidson (2001b, p. 8; 2002, pp. 83, 130, 202–3, 212) for his distal theory. See Davidson (2001b, pp. 10–1) for his disagreement with Quine. See also Glock (2003, pp. 185–8).

¹⁰ See also Davidson (2005b, p. 140).

Nonetheless, Davidson explains, while ‘table’ can eventually acquire semantic content for the child, bell-ringing can never acquire any such content for the dog. Only the child can move from primitive to *linguistic* learning.

Linguistic Learning Situation

To see how Davidson thinks the triangular linguistic learning situation works, consider two points that he holds. First, “thought and talk” are learned together (2001c, essay 11; 2002, essay 7). According to Davidson, knowing the meaning of a term requires being able to think its meaning and so possess the associated concept. Further, since (Davidson maintains) knowledge is intersubjective, possessing a concept requires possessing something sharable. We cannot share concepts directly, however, at least not *qua* concepts. We share concepts indirectly via words. Davidson therefore maintains that everything expressible in thought is expressible in language and vice versa.

Second, as we heard in “Primitive and Primitive Learning Situations,” Davidson contends that the primitive situation is necessary for thought and language. Thought and language are normative and, he claims, the primitive situation introduces the possibility of error:

In [triangulation] two (or more) creatures each correlate their own reactions to external phenomena with the reactions of the other. Once these correlations are set up, each creature is in a position to expect the external phenomenon when it perceives the associated reaction of the other. What introduces the possibility of error is the occasional failure of the expectation; the reactions do not correlate (2002, p. 129).¹¹

Recall our child and dog. Davidson is silent on why the child can appreciate the possibility of error while the dog cannot. Nonetheless Davidson is right that eventually the child can learn that ‘table’ can be uttered incorrectly, say, to refer to a chair. The dog cannot learn that the bell can be rung incorrectly. The dog is habituated to expect it to be rung in the presence of food; the dog’s habit can change without its ever thinking that the bell was rung in error. Once the child appreciates the possibility of error, Davidson maintains, he has grasped the notion of objective truth. Erroneous signals presuppose the possibility of correct ones.¹²

Consider now Davidson’s description of the linguistic learning situation. Davidson claims that basic cases of linguistic learning go like this. When the teacher thinks that the learner is looking at a table, the teacher utters ‘table’ and ostends to the table. She might repeat utterances and ostensions if the child’s attention stays focused. The learner in turn watches the table and his teacher both, correlating utterances of ‘table’ with his teacher’s ostensions. Should the teacher and

¹¹ See also Davidson (2002, pp. 130, 212–3; 2005b, pp. 140–1).

¹² Davidson thinks that the “only legitimate source of objectivity is intersubjectivity” (2001b, p. 13), which learning introduces. See also Davidson (2002, pp. 118, 130, 138–9) and Lasonen and Marvan (2004, p. 182). While Bridges (2006, pp. 292–5) and Montminy (2003, pp. 38–9) argue that a second person is not needed for objectivity, I take Pagin’s (2001, pp. 203) and Davidson’s (2002, pp. 212) responses to why a second person is needed for meaning to explain why it is needed for objectivity also; see note 14.

learner share the same innate quality space, and the learner appreciate that his teacher can be in error, then the learner would learn the word ‘table’.

Davidson adds, however, that this

is not just a story about how we learn to use words: it must also be an essential part of an account of what words refer to, and what they mean.... [I]n the simplest and most basic cases, words and sentences derive their meaning from the objects and circumstances in whose presence they were learned (2002, pp. 43–4).¹³

Mention of “the simplest and most basic cases” is important. Davidson does not think that for any term to be meaningful for someone, that someone had to have learned it in the linguistic learning situation. Rather “for someone to think or say that the cat is on the mat, there must be a causal history of that person that traces back, directly *or* indirectly, to the triangular experiences” (2001b, p. 293, my emphasis). The causal history would be direct insofar as the learner learned any of these terms or concepts via triangulation in the linguistic learning situation. That is how our above-imagined learner learned ‘table’. The causal history would be indirect insofar as the learner learned any of them by *appealing* to terms or concepts that she learned via triangulation. Davidson’s idea seems to be that ‘mat’ could be meaningful for our learner if she learned it by appealing to ‘floor’, ‘covering’, ‘door’, or other words that she did learn in the linguistic learning situation. Regardless words get their meaning for someone in virtue of what she learned them, or related words, to mean.¹⁴

One lesson that Davidson draws from the linguistic learning situation is a form of psychological and semantic externalism. On his view, ‘table’ (to focus on words) means table for the learner because she learned ‘table’ via triangulating a table in her environment, and ‘mat’ would mean mat for her because she learned related words via triangulating objects in that environment also.¹⁵ In fact Davidson accepts lessons of Putnam’s (1998) *physical* externalism, according to which the meaning of one’s terms is connected to the physical environment in which some were learned. Nonetheless he rejects lessons of Putnam’s and Tyler Burge’s (1979) *social* externalism, according to which the meaning of one’s terms is automatically inherited from experts in one’s social environment based on some division of

¹³ See also Davidson (2002, pp. 37, 203, 213).

¹⁴ Bridges (2006, pp. 295–6), Talmage (1997, p. 144), Verheggen (1997, pp. 363–5), and Yalowitz (1999, pp. 119–26) claim that Davidson has not explained why the second person is needed for meaning. According to Lasonen and Marvan (2004, p. 180, n. 5), Pagin (2001) claims that too. Nonetheless Pagin (2001, p. 203) himself explains why for Davidson the second person is required: to ensure that the first person’s responses are similar to *themselves*. See Davidson (2001b, p. 6; 2002, pp. 83, 212) and Brink (2004, p. 118).

¹⁵ See also Davidson (2001a, p. 293; 2002, pp. 18, 29, 44, 117–22, 151, 202, 212–4). For ‘table’ to mean table is not for it to mean *only* table. Thus Davidson’s discussion of the linguistic learning situation is consistent with his indeterminacy of interpretation thesis; see note 23.

Further, the learner would not learn the meaning of any of ‘table’ *in vacuo*. Were she to learn ‘table’ from triangulating a table with her teacher, the teacher would be saying other things to the learner also. The learner might even be able to learn ‘table’ only if the teacher has already introduced her to other objects, even if she has not named them. I take this to go some way toward making Davidson’s discussion of the linguistic learning situation, which seems atomistic, consistent with his commitment to holism (which, Ludwig (1993) is right, amounts more to molecularism). Nonetheless for simplicity I bracket concerns about holism.

linguistic labor.¹⁶ On Davidson's view, the learner's *own* 'table' means table because she *herself* learned that it means table. Learners learn the meaning of their own terms, though their co-triangulators help. Indeed Davidson maintains that what we call an individual's 'language' is better understood as an evolving idiolect.¹⁷ Though there is tremendous overlap between how individuals use words, much remains distinct to the individual and can change over time.¹⁸

Interpretive Situation

The final triangular situation is the interpretive. Triangulation here clarifies radical interpretation. Davidson first mentioned radical interpretation when proposing a truth-theoretic account of meaning (2001c, essay 2). Then he urged that a Tarski-style truth theory for a natural language interprets that language. To construct such a theory an interpreter systematically correlates utterances of the speaker whom she is interpreting with conditions under which each utterance is true, where the interpreter formulates these truth conditions in her own language.¹⁹ The systematic correlation between languages, generated by Alfred Tarski's (1944) recursive method modified for use with natural language, is meant to ensure that individual terms in the speaker's utterances make similar semantic contributions regardless of the utterance in which they occur.²⁰

Davidson eventually (2001c, essay 9) realized that for such a theory to be interpretive its construction must be empirically constrained. He offered his account of radical interpretation proper to elucidate the minimal empirical constraints necessary for interpretation. The central constraint is the principle of charity. Davidson ultimately (2002) maintained that the principle requires that in basic cases the radical interpreter correlate the speaker's utterances with truth conditions that describe perceptually salient features of the environment. In non-basic cases the interpreter assigns truth conditions by systematically respecting assignments made in basic cases.²¹ These charitable, systematic truth conditions in turn translate the speaker's utterances. And on Davidson's view interpreting a speaker's language involves charitably and systematically translating the language into one's own via a Tarski-style truth theory.²²

Davidson's pre-triangulation discussions of radical interpretation would have the interpreter take the speaker's utterance 'La neige est blanche' to mean that snow is

¹⁶ See Lepore and Ludwig (2007a, pp. 335–42) for Davidson's attitude toward physical and social externalism.

¹⁷ See Davidson (1993, p. 117; 2001c, pp. 276–7; 2002, pp. 88–9, 114–5; 2005a, p. 52; 2005b, essay 7) for his understanding languages as idiolects. See Davidson (2001c, essay 11; 2002, p. 89; 2005b, essays 7, 8) for his understanding idiolects as evolving.

¹⁸ Verheggen (2007) takes what I have identified as triangulation's use in the primitive and linguistic learning situations as a single argument explaining the possibility of meaning determination. While I agree that being in the former situation is a prerequisite for being in the latter, Davidson nonetheless treats each as a situation worth analyzing in its own right. His concerns include not only how meaning is determined but also how language itself evolved from primitive interactions.

¹⁹ See Davidson (2001c, essay 8) for utterances that are not statements. See also Lepore and Ludwig (2007b, chap. 12).

²⁰ See Fodor and Lepore (1992, pp. 63–4).

²¹ See Goldberg (2004b) for Davidson's early formulations of the principle of charity. See Lepore and Ludwig (2007a, pp. 185–92) for this formulation.

²² See Davidson (2002, p. 148).

white (1) should the interpreter observe that the speaker utters ‘La neige est blanche’ in the presence of snow that is white, (2) should the interpreter impute that the speaker finds the presence of snow that is white perceptually salient, and (3) should the interpreter’s taking ‘La neige est blanche’ to mean that snow is white be part of an overall theory that interprets the speaker’s other utterances systematically so that components of ‘La neige est blanche’ make roughly the same semantic contribution to this utterance as they do to the others that the speaker makes.²³ Triangulation clarifies Davidson’s discussion of radical interpretation in two ways. First, it makes clear that radical interpretation is interactive. To interpret a speaker’s language, the interpreter triangulates objects *with* the speaker. The interpreter not only listens but also attempts to communicate with the speaker, triangulating objects with him. The joint causes of their responses provide the content of the speaker’s basic utterances—their presence provides charitable truth conditions for those utterances—and the interpreter interprets more complicated utterances systematically in light of them. Second, triangulation makes clear that radical interpretation is in principle reciprocal. Interpreter and speaker each respond to the world and one other. In fact for Davidson each can in principle interpret the other. The speaker–interpreter distinction ultimately dissolves, leaving two speakers who can triangulate each other’s utterances against their environment.²⁴

Lessons that Davidson draws from the interpretive situation include those that he had previously drawn from radical interpretation. Because the content of a speaker’s basic utterances just are their causes—the objects and events in the environment that prompt the speaker to utter them—in basic cases what a speaker utters is true of her environment directly. There is no relativization to anything like a “conceptual scheme.”²⁵ Likewise there is no skeptical worry that in basic cases the speaker describes her environment incorrectly. In basic cases what she describes just is what is the case. While these lessons are as interesting as they are controversial, I have discussed them elsewhere.²⁶ Instead we must next connect triangulation to untranslatability.

Triangulation and Untranslatability

My aim in this section is to establish that considerations from the triangular linguistic learning situation entail the possibility of partially untranslatable languages, if this possibility is indexed to a time. Since Davidson’s (2001c, essay

²³ See below for worries about Davidson’s apparent shift between focusing on words when discussing the linguistic learning situation, and sentences when discussing the interpretive situation. Davidson also maintains that there can in principle be more than one charitable, Tarski-style truth theory for a language, and so more than one meaning for any utterances. This is his indeterminacy of interpretation thesis. For simplicity I bracket discussion of the thesis here, though see note 15, first paragraph.

²⁴ Ramberg agrees: “We can think of triangulation as symmetrical radical interpretation, where each is both interpreter and interpreted” (2001, p. 230). See also Davidson (2002, p. 121).

²⁵ See “Triangulation and Untranslatability” for what Davidson takes a conceptual scheme to be.

²⁶ See Goldberg (2004a) for Davidson’s argument against the very idea of a conceptual scheme, and Goldberg (2003) for his argument against Cartesian skepticism. See Goldberg (2008) for emphasis on triangulation’s role in each argument.

13) argument against the possibility of untranslatable languages does no such indexing, what follows need not conflict with his argument. My point in showing that Davidson's views entail the possibility at one time of untranslatable languages is to allow me later to explore a use of triangulation that Davidson does not himself consider. That use concerns what is possible at some *later* time.

Let an individual's conceptual endowment (CE) at time t_1 consist of all and only those concepts that the individual has actually thought at or before t_1 . If one has actually thought WHITE and TABLE at or before t_1 , then each of these concepts is part of her CE at t_1 . Without actually having thought the complex concept WHITE TABLE at or before t_1 , however, this concept is not part of her CE at t_1 . It is instead part of her *potential* conceptual endowment (PCE) at t_1 . Let an individual's PCE at t_1 be the closure of her CE at t_1 under the rules of complex concept formation to which she has access at t_1 . If an individual possesses WHITE and TABLE as part of her PCE at t_1 , and can form intersective concepts at t_1 , then she possesses the concept WHITE TABLE as part of her PCE at t_1 . This is so regardless of whether she has actually ever thought WHITE TABLE at or before t_1 .

An individual's PCE at t_1 delineates the total space of thoughts that she could in principle think at t_1 . Anything outside her PCE at t_1 would be unthinkable by her at t_1 . Now, recall, Davidson maintains that everything expressible in thought is expressible in language and vice versa. Hence for Davidson an individual's PCE at t_1 captures the total expressive power of her *language* at t_1 . Any concept outside her PCE at t_1 would be *untranslatable* into her language at t_1 .²⁷

What does this have to do with Davidson's discussion of the triangular linguistic learning situation? Any time that an individual is in the linguistic learning situation, her PCE either does or does not increase. If it increases, then the individual learns something entirely new, a concept not constructible from any other concepts, actual or merely potential, that she already possesses. Suppose that via triangulation a learner learns 'flib' and its corresponding concept FLIB in the linguistic learning situation, and that FLIB, unlike WHITE TABLE, is not composed of concepts that the learner already knows. Learning flib then increases both her PCE and CE. If, conversely, being in the linguistic learning situation does *not* increase the learner's PCE, then the individual learns something constructed out of concepts that she did already possess. Being in that situation merely activates something previously merely potential. Learning white table from white and table works thus. So usually does learning BACHELOR. Typically one learns the concept by learning that it is the conjunction of UNMARRIED and MAN, which one already possesses. Learning neither WHITE TABLE nor BACHELOR increases one's PCE. Being in the linguistic learning situation merely causes a concept to migrate from one's PCE to CE.

Elsewhere (Goldberg and Rellihan 2008) I have catalogued philosophers who maintain that some learning can involve PCE augmentation, and others who maintain that no learning can involve such augmentation. The former think that some concepts can be learned on the model of flib. The latter think that no concepts can be learned on the model of FLIB; they all must be learned like WHITE TABLE. This latter group is committed to the view that human beings are born with an innate set

²⁷ See Goldberg and Rellihan (2008) for more on CE and PCE.

of concepts from which all learned ones are composed.²⁸ Learning involves reconfiguration rather than whole-cloth discovery. While both the former and latter group have reasons for their view, my concern here is not in defending either. It is instead in determining in which group Davidson belongs.

Davidson seems to belong in the former.²⁹ Sometimes on his view learning apparently does involve PCE augmentation as in the case of flib. “[I]n the simplest and most basic cases, words and sentences *derive* their meaning from the objects and circumstances in whose presence they were learned” (Davidson 2002, pp. 44, my emphasis). Concepts and thoughts corresponding to these words and sentences would then derive their meaning from these objects also. Their meaning would come, not from the speaker’s own PCE, but from objects and circumstances that lie *outside* the speaker, and so outside her potential conceptual store. Conceptual and so, on his view, linguistic learning would therefore increase one’s PCE from time to time.

Unfortunately the role of the learner’s innate quality space in Davidson’s account of the linguistic learning situation complicates matters. On Davidson’s view, the teacher can via triangulation teach the learner the word ‘table’ because the learner is *already* disposed to categorize objects based on what she finds similar about them, and what the learner finds similar about them her teacher finds similar also. How much work are the learner’s and teacher’s innate quality spaces playing in the linguistic learning situation? The answer is apparently a great deal:

It is we [teachers and learners] who class cow appearances together, more or less naturally, or with minimal learning. And even so, another classification is required to complete the point, for the class of relevant causes is in turn defined by similarity of responses: we group together the causes of someone’s responses, verbal and otherwise, because we find the responses similar. What makes these the relevant similarities? The answer again is obvious; it is we, because of the way we are constructed (evolution had something to do with this), who find these responses natural and easy to class together (2002, p. 202).³⁰

This suggests that for Davidson being in the linguistic learning situation may *always* involve the mere stimulation of our innate conceptual capacities. We class cow appearances together because we evolved to possess the innate potential to do so. Our *shared* innate quality space would then seem to determine the concepts that we could possess. But that is tantamount to identifying that space with our PCE. On this view, seeing a cow would merely cause the corresponding concept to move from

²⁸ Elsewhere I have shown how this commits them to what I have called ‘Kantian skepticism’ (Goldberg and Rellihan 2008) and ‘noumenalism’ (Goldberg 2008). As I have discussed elsewhere (Goldberg and Rellihan 2008), one’s environment can through natural selection shape the PCE with which one is born. Here we are concerned with whether being in the linguistic learning situation at some time shapes one’s PCE at *that* time.

²⁹ Elsewhere (Goldberg and Rellihan 2008) I have presented evidence that Davidson belongs in both groups, though I now think that the evidence more strongly supports his belonging in the former.

³⁰ See also Davidson (2002, p. 212).

our PCE to our CE. Our PCE would itself never grow.³¹ Jerry Fodor (2005) has argued from the ease with which we categorize objects to the conclusion that all our concepts are in one form or another innate. One may regard this quotation from Davidson as making him Fodor's brother in nativist arms. On both their views, PCE augmentation seems never to occur.

Nonetheless there are two reasons to think that for Davidson the linguistic learning situation sometimes does augment a learner's PCE. First, Davidson never claims that our innate dispositions *fully* determine our classificatory systems. Nowhere does he embrace anything as strong as Fodorian nativism. Nor does his talk of "quality spaces" and "dispositions" require him to do so. His insistence that our classifications of the world are "natural" (2002, p. 202) to us is consistent with his claim that meaning "derive[s]" (p. 44) from the world. Our classifications can be natural insofar as our dispositions *partly* determine them; meaning could still derive from the world insofar as the world *partly* determines it. Regardless partial determination is enough. Linguistic learning, proceeding via triangulation, would sometimes lead to PCE augmentation.³²

Second, for Davidson to believe that the linguistic learning situation *never* augments a learner's PCE would be to maintain that our innate dispositions *alone* allow us to organize our experiential uptake into distinct classes of objects. Reality itself offers us no categorization of objects into kinds. As William Child explains, this is to say that for Davidson our "concepts carve up a neutral, structureless world" (2001, p. 33). Nonetheless, as Child observes, Davidson (2001c, essay 13) attacks the very idea of our concepts carving up such a world when he attacks the very idea of the dualism of conceptual scheme and empirical content. A conceptual scheme just is whatever carves up the neutral, structureless world that figures as the empirical content of our beliefs. Hence if Davidson allows one's innate quality space to do *all* the carving, then he has made intelligible the very dualism whose intelligibility he denies. Davidson can do so only by maintaining that the world is not purely neutral and structureless. But then the world must already have divisions in it prior to any that our concepts put there. Child concludes (and I concur) that for Davidson triangulation must allow language learners to pick out natural kinds that inhere in the world itself and so are not constituted merely by the language learner's conceptual capacities. But then for this reason also linguistic learning would sometimes lead to PCE augmentation.³³

What does this have to do with time-indexed untranslatability? Suppose that due to triangulating in the linguistic learning situation one's PCE increases from t_1 to t_2 . At t_2 one's PCE then contains more expressive power than it did at t_1 . Since one's

³¹ In fact Brink (2004), Fennell (2000, p. 150), Lasonen and Marvan (2004, pp. 187–90), Talmage (1997, p. 142), and Yalowitz (1999, p. 125) argue that for Davidson because the learner is already disposed to group objects into similarity classes, she must already possess the conceptual capacities to do so. If they are right, then for Davidson being in the linguistic learning situation always fails to increase one's PCE. Below I argue that they are wrong.

³² See note 28, second and third sentences.

³³ See Yalowitz (1999, pp. 115–7) for a related point. Child (2001, p. 33) also argues that to disallow the world any role in our classificatory systems is to reduce truth to mere verification in light of our own conceptual categories. As Child correctly notes, Davidson (2005a, chap. 2) would reject any such purely epistemic notion of truth. See note 28, second and third sentences, for considerations that via natural selection the world shapes our conceptual capacities.

PCE also determines the expressive power of one's language, one's language at t_2 will be partially untranslatable into one's language at t_1 .³⁴ Thus suppose that at t_2 I am in a chemistry laboratory for the first time, and that before t_2 I knew nothing about chemistry. Suppose also that at t_2 I triangulate a sample of benzene with my laboratory partner. Suppose that in so doing I learn the word 'benzene' and concept BENZENE.³⁵ Finally, suppose that my learning BENZENE causes my PCE at t_2 to be larger than it was at t_1 . In other words BENZENE was not in my PCE at t_1 , so my learning the concept is analogous to my learning FLIB. My language at t_2 is then partially untranslatable into my language at t_1 . I can express BENZENE in my language at t_2 but not at t_1 .

The laboratory scenario is at least possible. Because Davidson is committed to the possibility of some language at t_1 being partially untranslatable into that language at t_2 , let us assume for the sake of argument that the laboratory scenario (or one like it) exemplifies it. Now if one person's language at two different times can be partially untranslatable into itself, then two different persons' languages at the same time can be partially untranslatable into one another.³⁶ Thus suppose that my neighbor's innate quality space and experiences in the linguistic learning situation render her PCE at t_1 identical to mine at t_1 . Suppose too that she is as ignorant about chemical substances and processes, their properties, and their uses as I am. Our languages at t_1 are fully intertranslatable. Further, suppose that at t_2 my neighbor's PCE stays fixed while mine expands to include BENZENE. (Only I was in the lab.) Our languages are then partially untranslatable at t_2 for the same reason that my own language at t_2 is partially untranslatable into itself at t_1 . Finally, my neighbor and I may eventually be in many divergent instances of the linguistic learning situation. For Davidson, our languages may then eventually contain many words that are untranslatable into one another; 'benzene', however, at t_2 suffices for my purposes. At t_2 my neighbor's language lacks the resources to translate all the utterances of mine.

Now one might think that my notion of translation differs from Davidson's. When discussing the interpretive situation, Davidson imagines translation operating via a charitable, Tarski-style truth theory. Charitable, systematic truth conditions expressed in one language are meant to translate sentences expressed in another. But then my notion of translation would seem to differ from Davidson's in two ways. First, unlike his, mine is divorced from any mention of Tarski. Second, unlike his, mine focuses on individual words rather than sentences, when only sentences can have truth conditions.

Consider the second alleged difference first. Davidson himself is clear that individual words sometimes function as sentences. His examples include 'mother', 'snow', and 'table' (2002, p. 212).³⁷ Presumably 'snow' is elliptical for 'Lo, snow' or 'This is snow'. We can then take 'benzene' to be elliptical for 'Lo, benzene' or

³⁴ Because Davidson understands languages as evolving, for him, at t_1 and t_2 I speak the *same* language with different expressive powers rather than *different* languages. Either way, however, my argument still works.

³⁵ This triangulation would not happen *in vacuo*. My partner and I would talk about related things as well, so that I would learn other words and concepts also. See note 15, second paragraph, for similar considerations.

³⁶ Because Davidson understands languages are idiolects, and my neighbor and I speak different idiolects, for him, we speak *different* languages rather than different versions of the *same* language. Either way, however, my argument still works.

³⁷ See also Davidson (2002, pp. 43, 86, 117, 200).

‘This is benzene’. Linguistic learning and interpretive situations both involve sentences.

Now consider the first alleged difference. I can in fact agree with Davidson that translation operates via a charitable, Tarski-style truth theory. Based on my argument my neighbor would be unable at t_2 to construct such a theory for my language that includes ‘benzene’ or ‘This is benzene’ in it. On the one hand, *ex hypothesi*, there is no benzene around when I utter ‘benzene’. So she has nothing environmental in light of which to construct her theory. She must rely exclusively on interpreting my utterance of ‘benzene’ systematically with my other utterances. On the other hand, *ex hypothesi*, my neighbor lacks the conceptual capacity to know what my ‘benzene’ means. She then lacks the conceptual capacity to know *how* it relates systematically to what my other words mean. She *cannot* rely exclusively on interpreting this utterance systematically with my others. Hence to the extent that my neighbor’s charitable, systematic correlation of truth conditions with my utterances interprets them, and so renders them conceptually transparent to her, ‘benzene’ remains for her a semantic black box. My neighbor can correlate my utterance ‘This is benzene’ neither charitably nor systematically with truth conditions expressed in her language. But then ‘benzene’ is untranslatable in Davidson’s sense into my neighbor’s language at t_2 . My notion of translation need not differ from Davidson’s at all.

Davidson really must accept that the possibility of time-indexed untranslatability arises from his views. Further, because my neighbor cannot incorporate ‘This is benzene’ into a charitable, systematic truth theory for my language at t_2 , she cannot *interpret* ‘This is benzene’ (and ‘benzene’) at t_2 either. She then cannot figure out what at t_2 by ‘benzene’ I mean. The essential role that Davidson affords triangulation in the linguistic learning situation therefore has consequences for the interpretive situation also.

Why does this time-indexed untranslatability (and ultimately uninterpretability) matter? As I explained at the outset, it points the way toward a new use of triangulation, and a new a triangular situation, that Davidson does not consider but which *we* should. We do so next.

The Reconciliation Situation

Reconsider my neighbor and me. Suppose that we are talking to one another. We are communicating—we are in the interpretive situation, exchanging and interpreting utterances in turn—when at t_2 we realize that something that I am trying to communicate is being lost. My neighbor might ask me what this thing is that I keep calling ‘benzene’, or I might come to realize that she does not know what I mean by ‘benzene’. Either way we discover that I am using a word whose meaning she cannot interpret. I might of course try to communicate its meaning to her by appealing to words that she does know. This would be to try to get my neighbor to form the concept BENZENE from concepts that she already possesses. Nonetheless, *ex hypothesi*, BENZENE is not in my neighbor’s PCE at t_2 . There *are* no concepts, innate or otherwise, to which I can appeal at t_2 to teach her what my ‘benzene’ means. The only way for me to communicate to her what I mean would be for her PCE to increase after t_2 to *include* BENZENE.

Now for Davidson that increase could happen in one of two ways. I could triangulate some benzene with my neighbor and call it ‘benzene’; she would then learn the concept BENZENE directly. Or I could triangulate some other object or objects that would teach my neighbor what other words mean, in virtue of which I could then tell her what ‘benzene’ means; she would then learn the concept BENZENE indirectly. Either way, Davidson would have to agree, when words alone fail I need to ostend to objects. *So suppose that I do.* Suppose in fact that the direct route is available. At t_3 I go into my house to fetch some benzene. (I happened to take some home from the lab.) With a sample in tow, I catch my neighbor’s attention, ostend to the sample, utter ‘benzene’, and repeat ostensions and utterances as needed. According to Davidson, ‘benzene’ then gains semantic contact for my neighbor, the same content that it has for me. She learns the concept BENZENE also. Hence BENZENE figures in her CE at t_3 .³⁸ It would therefore also figure in her PCE at t_3 , so her PCE increased from t_2 . Finally, let us stipulate that my own PCE did not increase between t_2 and t_3 . My neighbor’s language at t_3 , after she learns what ‘benzene’ means, would then be intertranslatable into my own language at t_3 .

Call what my neighbor and I have just done ‘reconciliation’ and the triangular situation in which as reconcilers we found ourselves the ‘reconciliation situation’. By appealing to an object in our environment my neighbor and I *reconciled* with one another what we each mean by ‘benzene’. She came to see eye-to-eye with me concerning what I mean by the word, by coming to mean the same thing by it herself. We thereby eliminated this particular instance of untranslatability between our languages. I could then resume interpreting her, and she me. This semantic difference has *been* reconciled. Of course my being able to triangulate benzene with my neighbor was not guaranteed. There might have been no available sample of benzene, nor of other objects that would allow my neighbor to learn what ‘benzene’ means. Nonetheless if we do triangulate benzene, then on Davidson’s view ‘benzene’ is now a word whose meaning we share. Earlier I showed that Davidson permits languages to be partially untranslatable at one time. Now I have shown that, under certain circumstances, he can permit this untranslatability to be reconciled later. My neighbor and I could then step back into the interpretive situation and continue communicating. Interpretation may proceed as before.

The idea of reconciliation generally then is this. On Davidson’s view, two speakers who were in different instances of the linguistic learning situation might possess languages some of whose words are untranslatable into the other’s language at some time. When one speaker attempts to interpret the other’s language, part of her attempt could therefore fail. She would then be forced to construct a charitable, Tarski-style truth theory for the other’s language that did not incorporate those untranslatable words. To the interpreter, utterances containing those words would then be meaningless. Faced with such untranslatability, the speakers have four options. (1) They might ignore the untranslatable words and communicate around them. There would then be gaps in one’s interpretation of the other. (2) They might break off communication because of it. Interpretation would then cease. (3) They might try to define the untranslatable words via other words that they both know. Yet, as we have seen, this strategy is not always

³⁸ Considerations from note 35 apply here too.

guaranteed. (4) Or the speakers might grope around for objects in their environment, one trying to explain to the other, in light of those objects, what those untranslatable words mean. If the groping fails, then the languages are not reconciled on those words. Untranslatability remains. If, however, the groping succeeds, then the previously untranslatable words are no longer untranslatable. Words that were once untranslatable have now become translatable, and indeed translated, in light of new triangular experiences. Reconciliation has occurred, and interpretation can recommence. Hence for Davidson the reconciliation situation can eliminate difficulties in the interpretive situation, difficulties that are themselves due to divergent experiences in the linguistic learning situation. And his single model of triangulation is essential to each.

To get clearer on what the triangular reconciliation situation is—and so allow us in the rest of this paper to explain why it is important—we should get clear on what it is not. For starters, the reconciliation situation is not Davidson's primitive or primitive learning situation, because it is not pre-linguistic. Nor is the reconciliation situation Davidson's interpretive situation. While speakers transition between interpretation and reconciliation often without noticing, the activities differ. Interpretation for Davidson is always into an antecedently available vocabulary. It involves charitably and systematically correlating words from one language with truth conditions as expressed in words that *already* exist in another language. To interpret my 'benzene' into her language at t_2 , my neighbor would have to have words that translate my 'benzene' into her language at or prior to t_2 . *Ex hypothesi*, this is precisely what my neighbor's language lacks. That is why, rather than interpreting my 'benzene' at t_2 , my neighbor reconciles what she means by this word with what I mean by it by *acquiring* the word at t_3 .

The reconciliation situation might therefore appear to be identical to Davidson's linguistic learning situation. Indeed reconciliation is a kind of linguistic learning. Nonetheless, as Davidson describes the linguistic learning situation, it differs from the reconciliation situation in occurrence, aim, and potential scope. The reconciliation situation *occurs* only after the interpretive situation is thwarted. When one interpreter cannot interpret another's utterance, either interpreter might try appealing to external objects to reconcile their languages. If either succeeds, then reconciliation happens, and the interpretive situation can restart. If they both fail, then interpretation can continue but not as smoothly. Conversely, as Davidson describes it, the linguistic learning situation occurs when a teacher wants to teach a learner part of a language, not to overcome a specific problem in interpretation, but for its own sake (perhaps the learner wants to know what my 'benzene' means merely to increase her knowledge of my language) or so that an installment of dialogue can commence. The linguistic learning situation is not prompted by a particular interpretive impasse; the reconciliation situation is.

The *aim* of the reconciliation situation is to remove an identified obstacle to interpretation so that communication can continue. I go into the house and emerge with some benzene to let my neighbor know what I mean. Communication then proceeds as before. The aim of the linguistic learning situation for Davidson is to teach someone part of a language. As we just heard, this teaching can be for its own sake or so that communication can start. Though reconciliation and linguistic learning are similar, only the reconciliation situation aims to recover from an interpretive fall.

Regarding *potential scope*, the linguistic learning situation can involve learning a language *ab initio*, as in first language acquisition. In fact Davidson introduces the linguistic learning situation with the hope of exploring necessary conditions on language acquisition itself. Interpretation, however, for Davidson is always into one's own language—i.e., a language that one already possesses. Because the aim of the reconciliation situation is to remove particular instances of untranslatability during interpretation, all reconciliators, unlike all learners, must already have a language. Hence while the potential scope of linguistic learning is vast—it can teach someone a language for the first time—reconciliation's scope is necessarily limited. It merely patches over an interpretive hole caused by differences in linguistic learning. It cannot be as expansive as the linguistic learning situation itself. No matter how similar linguistic learning and reconciliation are, therefore, detailing Davidson's views requires distinguishing the linguistic learning and reconciliation situations themselves.

In retrospect it should come as no surprise that Davidson allows one language to be partially untranslatable into another at a given time, nor that he can allow speakers to reconcile such untranslatability later. Treating languages as evolving idiolects and meaning as partly determined by the environment invites the picture of individual speakers now and again communicating. Sometimes when they communicate they refer to present surroundings; here interpretation would generally be unproblematic. But often they refer to past surroundings. Those surroundings need not have been shared. It is only natural to think that occasionally interpretation could therefore falter and that, if it did, speakers might look to particular objects in their current environment to convey what they mean. Having been in different instances of the linguistic learning situation in the past could have robbed speakers of common content. Being in the same reconciliation situation in the present or future might allow them to borrow that content from one another.

What lessons should we draw from the reconciliation situation? Reconciliation is important for Davidson's project as well as our own understanding of how language, thought, and reality interrelate. In the next two sections I consider its importance, first for Davidson, then for us.

The Importance of Reconciliation for Davidson

There are three reasons why reconciliation is important for Davidson. First, the possibility of time-indexed untranslatability, and hence uninterpretability, really does follow from his views. And reconciliation really can mollify them. Davidson himself worries about non-time-indexed untranslatability; reconciliation can be part of his story about how when time considerations are not a concern untranslatability can be overcome. Davidson's discussions of untranslatability become more complete.

Second, reflecting on reconciliation allows Davidson to expand his project of describing different uses of triangulation itself. In fact the reconciliation situation should itself be added to his list of triangular situations. Here is the list in full. According to Davidson, triangulation is essential to the *primitive situation*, in which two beings, linguistic or otherwise, respond in concert to distal objects, creating space for the notion of objective truth. Triangulation is essential to the *primitive*

learning situation, in which beings learn from their co-triangulators how non-linguistically (and non-conceptually) to respond to objects, and the *linguistic learning situation*, in which the learned responses are linguistic (and conceptual). Triangulation is essential to the *interpretive situation*, clarifying Davidson's account of radical interpretation. And, let me now offer to Davidson, triangulation is essential to the *reconciliation situation*, detailing how, should interpretation stumble, speakers could reconcile parts of languages that had previously been untranslatable into one another. Triangulation explains how, after an interpretive fall, the reconciliation situation can allow speakers to pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and start interpreting again. Reconciliation is just what Davidson should want, and I have shown that reconciliation is just what Davidson's model of triangulation allows him to have.

And third, reflecting on reconciliation reveals the harmonizing roles that triangulation itself should play for Davidson. While the linguistic learning situation entails the possibility at some time of untranslatable languages, the reconciliation situation creates the possibility at some later time that such languages can be reconciled on particular words. And the same model of triangulation would be operative in each case. Hence triangulation explains why for Davidson partial untranslatability is at some moments possible. It also explains how for Davidson such untranslatability might at other moments be reconciled away.

To be sure, it is not difficult to understand why Davidson himself never happened upon the notion of reconciliation. We need an account of interpretation before we can have one of what to do when interpretation founders. Early in his career Davidson focused was on the former. Later he examined linguistic learning and its primitive prerequisites, natural enough topics given his work on interpretation proper. Nonetheless interpretation tends not to be as seamless as Davidson might make one think. Speakers really do face obstacles. Communication breakdowns really do occur, and Davidson's own views on linguistic learning suggest the same even if he did not realize it. Reconciliation should have a home in any full reckoning of how people communicate. Thanks to the plasticity of triangulation, it can have a home in Davidson's.

The Importance of Reconciliation for Us

What conclusions should we draw for ourselves about all this? What is the importance of reconciliation for *us*? While I am sympathetic with much of what Davidson says, and think that triangulation's connection to both untranslatability and reconciliation does follow naturally from his views, I have not defended those views on their own terms. My goal was systematization and expansion; defense must await another day. This much, however, is clear now. Any full account of linguistic exchange needs to recognize the existence of something like what I am calling 'reconciliation'. Sometimes interpretation does falter, on Davidson's view and in real life. Momentary untranslatability is commonplace, whether Davidson considered it or not. We have all been in discussions where we cannot explain to our interlocutor what we mean. Under those circumstances we sometimes do appeal to objects in our environment to convey our message. We exhibit new wares; we show our friend the

latest gadget. Names of new foods, furniture, buildings—when one person talks about them to another without the other understanding what she means, the first would ostend to a sample if she could. The same is true in the indirect case also. We point to a color to explain what we mean when we talk about a related hue. We ostend to one kind of animal to define what we mean by the name for another. In such cases we appeal to these objects to try to get our interlocutor to form complex concepts in light of them, concepts for objects not in our environment at the moment. Untranslatability is common, and attempts at reconciliation tend not to be far behind. To the extent that philosophers of language are interested in the various uses of language—like learning, interpreting, and reconciling—we should be interested in the extent to which Davidson's model of triangulation figures in each. To the extent that Davidson has enriched our understanding of all these topics, we philosophers of language should be interested in how Davidson's view might themselves be enlarged.

In fact we can employ Davidson's triangular situations, supplemented by the reconciliation situation, to tell a coherent story of our semantic lives generally. Though the details are debatable, Davidson is correct that when we are young we come to appreciate the notion of objective truth. His primitive and primitive learning situations may have something to do with this. Growing up and continuing to our final days, we do learn what words mean. Linguistic learning occurs some of the time via triangular ostension, as Davidson himself imagined. So too do we try to interpret the words of others. Though we are not *radical* interpreters, triangulation plays a role in our interpretive situation nonetheless. We figure out what our interlocutors mean by looking at the environment around them and interacting with interlocutors and environment in concert; Davidson is right about that too. As we have seen, however, Davidson does not appreciate the philosophical significance that occasionally our interpretive tries fail. Radical and normal interpreters alike would sometimes stumble, and it is not unimportant that this is so. Philosophers of language especially, if we are after an account of how language works, should take note. Nor does Davidson appreciate that *when* we interpreters stumble, we can sometimes appeal to triangulation to reconcile our semantic differences so that interpretation might continue. We can point to objects with our interlocutors and our interlocutors can point back, naming those objects in turn. Via the reconciliation situation momentary impasses in interpretation might be overcome. Had Davidson recognized the connection among triangulation, untranslatability, and reconciliation, then his semantic theorizing would have been richer and more nuanced. *Our* semantic theorizing can be richer and more nuanced instead.

Finally, though reconciliation is important for all these reasons, it is important for another reason too. While I cannot make a case for it here, I would like in closing to suggest that, *ceteris paribus*, we *should* when faced with an interpretive obstacle try to engage in reconciliation. We should *try* to eliminate misunderstandings and failures of comprehension when possible. We should make a point of addressing breakdowns in communication whenever they become apparent because that is part of what it means to be semantically responsible. We wielders of language owe it to one another. Untranslatability, I have observed, is a fact of life. Reconciliation, I would now like to suggest, can make that fact bearable. We should therefore engage in it whenever it would aid us in navigating around our interpersonal world.

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