**ABSTRACT**: *FOR THE FULL ARTICLE, PLEASE SEE:* [*https://iep.utm.edu/indeterm/*](https://iep.utm.edu/indeterm/)

**The Indeterminacy of Translation / Radical Interpretation**

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The indeterminacy of translation is the thesis that translation, meaning, and reference are all indeterminate: there are always alternative translations of a sentence and a term, and nothing objective in the world can decide which translation is the right one. This is a skeptical conclusion because what it really implies is that there is no fact of the matter about the correct translation of a sentence and a term. It would be an illusion to think that there is a unique meaning which each sentence possesses and a determinate object to which each term refers.

Arguments in favor of the indeterminacy thesis first appear in the influential works of W. V. O. Quine, especially in his discussion of radical translation. Radical translation focuses on a translator who has been assigned to translate the utterances of a speaker speaking a radically unknown language. She is required to accomplish this task solely by observing the behavior of the speaker and the happenings in the environment. Quine claims that a careful study of such a process reveals that there can be no determinate and uniquely correct translation, meaning, and reference for any linguistic expression. As a result, our traditional understanding of meaning and reference is to be thrown away. Quine’s most famous student, Donald Davidson, develops this scenario under the title of “radical interpretation.” Among other differences, radical interpretation is distinguished from Quine’s radical translation with regard to its concentration on an interpreter constructing a theory of meaning for the speaker’s language. Such a theory is supposed to systematically entail the meaning of the speaker’s sentences. Nonetheless, radical interpretation too cannot resist the emergence of indeterminacy. According to the thesis of the indeterminacy of interpretation, there always will be rival interpretations of the speaker’s language, and no objective criterion can decide which interpretation is to be chosen as the right one.

These views of Quine and Davidson have been well received by analytic philosophers particularly because of their anti-Cartesian approach to knowledge. This approach says knowledge of what we mean by our sentences and what we believe about the external world, other minds, and even ourselves cannot be grounded in any infallible *a priori* knowledge; instead, we are rather bound to study this knowledge from a third-person point of view, that is, from the standpoint of others who are attempting to understand what we mean and believe. What the indeterminacy of translation/interpretation adds to this picture is that there can never be one unique, correct way of determining what these meanings and beliefs are.

The article begins with Quine’s arguments for the indeterminacy of translation, then introduces Davidson’s treatment of indeterminacy by focusing on his semantic project and the scenario of radical interpretation. Then the discussion turns to David Lewis’s version of radical interpretation, Daniel Dennett’s intentional stance, and the way Lewis and Dennett treat the indeterminacy of interpretation.

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