

A comparison of Derrida and Davidson on incommensurable scientific languages

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. Donald Davidson denies that there are incommensurable scientific languages: languages which cannot be translated into our contemporary language. What about Derrida? What is his perspective on this matter? This paper presents a broadly Derridean objection to Susan Carey's argument for incommensurability.

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Researchers addressing somewhat different aspects of the work of Jacques Derrida have found it useful to make comparisons with Donald Davidson, for example when writing on his response to speech act theory and his essay concerning philosophy and metaphor (Richmond 1996; Morris 2000: 236). The highly respected Davidson with the forever spat upon Derrida!

Well, I personally don't like all the Nazis in the vicinity of Derrida. But I shall try to build a dwelling on Comparison Street myself, focusing on incommensurable scientific languages. The basic idea of incommensurability which I shall work with here is that propositions expressed in an earlier scientific language cannot be expressed in our contemporary language. They cannot be translated. Davidson famously denies that there are, or could be, instances of incommensurability; or more strongly asserts that we cannot attach any clear meaning to the claim that this is possible. I shall begin with a purported instance and present what I believe is a broadly Derridean response.

The purported example. I take my example from Susan Carey. She refers to

the old phlogiston theory, which tries to explain combustion. It uses familiar words but with unfamiliar senses, such as the word “principle” in a sentence featuring the expression “the principle given off during combustion.” (1988: 169) How are we to translate sentences from an old scientific text with “principle” in them, into contemporary idiom? In some contexts, some words of ours seem suitable and in other contexts other words. Carey identifies two options, neither of which is genuine translation, according to her:

1. At the beginning of the translated text, or when the word first appears, we explain what “principle” meant for phlogiston theorists and then we use “principle” throughout. This is language teaching, declares Carey.
2. We replace “principle” with some word or words of ours in some contexts and other words in other contexts. But the text uses one word, “principle,” in all these contexts, so the result is disjointed. “Such a text is not a translation, because it does not make sense as a whole,” says Carey (1988: 170).

Davidsonians would reject 1. They would argue that this counts as a translation using the relevant notion, one which makes this topic of interest for philosophers. If speakers of our language can explain what was asserted by the earlier text, then translation is possible (see 1973-4: 6). It is unclear to me what Davidsonians would say about 2, or what his system entails; but Derrideans would reject it I believe.

Derrida versus incommensurability. Saying that Derrideans would reject 2 makes it sound as if Derrida has a system, composed of general premises which apply to situation after situation, including the “translation” situation described. Probably some Derrideans would disagree with that approach. Anyway, let us begin with four commitments, which I shall attribute to Carey:

- (i) A reliable interpreter reads a certain old scientific text and has an experience of unity, achieved by means of a word used with the same sense throughout and involving a consistent message being communicated.
- (ii) This experience is not illusory.
- (iii) The aim of translation is to produce a text in contemporary idiom which gives the same experience of unity.
- (iv) This can only be achieved by a translation that uses a single word whenever the original uses a single word.

I am taking “disjointed” in Carey’s paper to refer to the experience the hypothetical text gives. I think a Derridean would reject this set of commitments in an exhilarating way, by writing of how they involve a Platonic dualism of the ideal original and an imperfect copy, a dualism which must be deconstructed. And they may talk of simulacra (see Lawlor 2003).

My somewhat dull Derridean does not say any of that. But they reject (ii) and consequently (iii). “The experience referred to in (ii) involves overlooking relevant evidence,” says the dull Derridean. “If one does not overlook this evidence, then a rival interpretation to the standard interpretation can be developed, with both interpretations fitting equally well with the totality of relevant evidence. The original was never so unified! Furthermore, a disjointed translation can be of value for prompting readers to realize this rival interpretation. In that case, it should not be discounted as a translation.”

I cannot say whether Derrideans deny that there is incommensurability, but they are going to reject Carey’s argument. They are going to reject a notion of translation that she uses in her argument to justify the claim that there is

incommensurability, the notion which leads her to say that disjointed translations do not count. It is loaded with disputable theoretical commitments, either the ones above or other ones which overstate the unity of the original. Some strange texts, which Carey would not count as translations into contemporary language, would not be excluded by Derrideans. A translation can be more faithful to the original than the original! So that is the new dwelling on Comparison Street., next to Transitivity-Of-Translation-Or-Not Tent.

References

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