

## **L'océan de la vérité? Conceptual schemes and the length of translation**

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*Abstract.* I respond to Wes Sharrock and Rupert Read's argument that we should not count very long supposed translations of very short sentences as translations. I cannot see that a length mismatch alone should disqualify a sentence from counting as a translation.

When does a sentence count as having been translated into another language? Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that there is one language that we all speak and no other, we are all monolingual speakers of English say, and speakers of another language count as having an alternative conceptual scheme if they speak a language which cannot be translated into ours. Focusing on different scientific vocabularies across history, and responding to Donald Davidson, Wes Sharrock and Rupert Read say:

In principle, a translation would give, for each sentence in one language, a sentence in the other language that would match it in meaning, and one could do this for all the sentences in the two languages. But what if the sentences were incredibly long? What if the 'sentence' needed to translate a sentence from a scientific text was actually the length of a monograph, having to go into all the historical conditions and sensibilities, etc. involved in the old conceptual scheme, so as to avoid missing its real 'meaning'? (2002: 150)

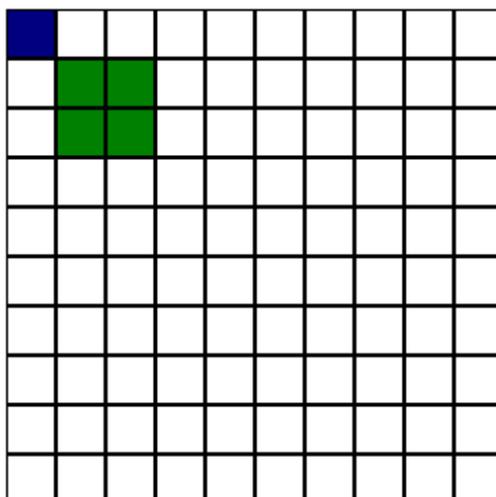
And:

And it would be odd indeed to say that the translation of (say) 'The Earth is at the centre of the Universe' is to be found simply in the totality of the argument

of *The Copernican Revolution*. Better to say, not just that there is no point for point translation between some Ptolemaic and ‘Copernican’ statements, but that there is an important sense in which they cannot be intertranslated at all. Would one call something a translation into Russian of ‘A bird half wakened in the lunar noon / Sang halfway through its little... tune’ if it was the length of a book, in order to capture all the possible allusions of lines in English, etc., etc.? (2002: 151 – apologies, I cut the word, “inborn,” which felt heavy to me here)

A natural way of reading Sharrock and Read is that they think a massive difference in the length of the original and the length of the supposed translation is good evidence that the supposed translation is not a translation. But I think Davidsonians will say that such differences do not matter. Focusing on his paper “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” I shall draw attention to why Davidsonians might resist the demand for parallel length.

1. *Information content*. To illustrate the first reason, imagine a grid of coloured squares, composed of ten rows and ten columns.



In language A, you can make a statement specifying coordinates within the grid and the colour of the square there. You can also conjoin such statements to make larger ones, for example: “Row 1, column 1, blue, and row 2, column 2, green.” All statements in language A are of the form “Row R, column C, colour word W,” or conjunctions of such statements.

Language B is slightly different. It allows one to talk about larger squares, composed of smaller ones of a uniform colour. All statements in language B are of the form “Square at row R, column C, of sides length L, colour word W” or conjunctions of such statements. For example, “square at row 2, column 2, of sides length 2, green.” A longer statement in language A is needed to convey the content of this particular statement, which tells you the colour and coordinates of every smaller square composing this larger square,<sup>1</sup> but assume the same information is conveyed by the longer statement. Then someone will say, “The information is there, so it counts.” (Also it is probably natural to speak of translation here.) We can briefly describe an even larger square in language B and the corresponding statement in language A would be much longer. The Davidsonian will say, what does the difference in length matter for assessing whether one has translated or not? Languages A and B are of course artificial languages, but I also think any argument that these are not translations should not focus on differences in length and the lesson would seem to apply elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

2. *Metaphor interpretation.* Read and Sharrock involve themselves in the difficult topic of metaphor translation. Now Davidson also talks about metaphors in his paper, but for

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<sup>1</sup> Row two, column two, green; and row two, column three, green; and row three, column two, green; and row three, column three, green.

<sup>2</sup> One person might say that significant difference in length in itself disqualifies something from being a translation (or a good translation) – see the appendix – while another might say that it is a symptom of some disqualifying problem. I think it is best to directly focus on that problem if it exists.

quite a different reason: because he regards some of the views he is evaluating as formulated metaphorically. Nevertheless, what he says does not look consistent with Read and Sharrock.

Conceptual schemes can be understood as systems of concepts, but also as systems of propositions (the Ptolemaic system of propositions about reality versus the Copernican, say). Given the latter understanding, our conceptual scheme is said to fit reality and an alternative scheme is also said to fit. Davidson says that fitting is a metaphor and what it amounts to is the claim that the propositions composing both schemes are true (1973-4: 16). He then says that the best understanding of how our concept of truth is used has the consequence that truths uttered in another language must be translatable into our language, appealing to Alfred Tarski on truth (1973-4: 17). Now let us suppose that Davidson tries to explain our concept of truth to speakers of another language by means of the following pattern:

“Roses are red” is true if and only if roses are red.

“Snow is white” is true if and only if snow is white

“It is hot at noon” is true if and only if it is hot at noon.

And so on...

That other language does not provide tools for capturing this pattern with an abstract generalization. Furthermore (and forgive me if this sounds prejudiced<sup>3</sup>), the speakers do not grasp how it is to be extended after a few examples. What does Davidson do? He gives lots of examples! Eventually his audience are able to give their own. Davidson is going to say that he has succeeded in conveying to them the content of the fitting metaphor by means of his many examples. Davidsonians are not going to accept that the mere length of his explanation, compared to the original brief metaphor, is good evidence that he has failed to capture its

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<sup>3</sup> My impressions are actually the opposite of certain familiar prejudices.

content. Indeed, it seems arbitrary to say an explanation with few examples counts but one with many more of these repetitive cases, because they are so unfamiliar to our speakers, is a failure. Again I think any argument that Davidson has failed should not focus on differences in length.

**Appendix.** One of the doctrines of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan is the primacy of the signifier over the signified. What does that mean? I am not sure, but I have made intuitive attempts to interpret the doctrine before with reference to Davidson and I suppose another interpretation is as follows: a sign is composed of something that signifies (a signifier) and something signified, and a supposed translation of an original sentence which is composed of many more signifiers does not count, regardless of what is signified by the many more signifiers. Perhaps, for Lacanians, the difference in signifiers involved matters in itself for whether this is a translation or not, and also for whether this is even translatable or not: “If you cannot communicate the original content in a comparably brief sentence in my language, then it is not translatable into my language!”

## References

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