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INCOMMENSURABILITY AND THE INDETERMINACY OF TRANSLATION

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I. Introduction

In a number of publications which date from the 1970's, Kuhn has linked the thesis of the incommensurability of scientific theories with Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of radical translation.¹ Kuhn's thesis is that 'there is no language, neutral or otherwise, into which both [of two incommensurable] theories, conceived as sets of sentences, can be translated without residue or loss'.² Quine's thesis, on the other hand, is that behavioural evidence available to a radical translator leaves the translation of alien utterances indeterminate.

In more recent work, Kuhn has tended to distance his position from Quine's. In his [6], for example, he distinguishes translation between languages already known to the translator from interpretation of an initially unknown language.³ In light of this distinction, he claims that 'Quine's "radical translator" is in fact an interpreter, and "Gavagai" exemplifies the unintelligible material he starts from' [6, p. 672]. The task of such an interpreter is 'in the first instance . . . [to] learn a new language', and 'whether that language can be translated into the one with which the interpreter began is an open question' [6, p. 673]. Kuhn also notes that Quine employs a 'theory of translation based on an extensional semantics', and argues that such a theory overlooks conceptual or intensional aspects of meaning which 'are what a perfect translation would preserve' [6, p. 680]. In making points such as these, Kuhn seems to suggest that the interpreter can discover meaning which goes beyond the evidence to which Quine restricts the radical translator, and that it is such meaning which escapes full translation between incommensurable theories.⁴

¹ Kuhn draws the connection in several places, e.g. [2, p. 202], [3, p. 268] and [4, p. 191]. Feyerabend, the co-sponsor of the thesis, makes no such link; cf. his [1, p. 287].

² Kuhn [6, p. 670]. For similar characterisations of incommensurability, see Kuhn [4, p. 191] and [5, p. 416]. It should be stressed that Kuhn's notion of incommensurability involves only limited translation failure between subsets of the vocabulary used by theories; cf. his remarks on local incommensurability [6, p. 670-1].

³ For further discussion of the issues connected with the distinction between translating and interpreting a language, see section 3 of my [10].

⁴ Elsewhere Kuhn suggests that 'Quine's arguments for the indeterminacy of translation can, with equal force, be directed to an opposite conclusion: instead of there being an infinite

In this paper I seek to establish the following result. The notion of translation failure of relevance to incommensurability is distinct from that of translational indeterminacy in Quine's sense (section II); at most, Kuhnian incommensurability constitutes a weak form of indeterminacy, quite distinct from Quine's (section III). This result lends support to Kuhn's present tendency to distance his position from Quine's. However, I will also suggest that it enables us to see a point of convergence between their views on translation which is perhaps the intended link between incommensurability and indeterminacy (section IV).

II. Incommensurability versus Indeterminacy

It follows from Kuhn's denial of full translation into a common language that there may be expressions of one theory which cannot be translated into the language of another. Thus, Kuhn claims that translation between languages fails while Quine says it is indeterminate. The connection is not immediately apparent. One link that might be suggested is that Kuhn's version of incommensurability is a form of Quinean indeterminacy which arises in translating between theories. However, I will now show that this suggestion is mistaken.

Quine considers the case of the linguist faced with determining the meaning of utterances of an unknown language from verbal response to visual stimulation. This leads him to the indeterminacy thesis: 'manuals for translating one language into another can be set up in divergent ways, all compatible with the totality of speech dispositions, yet incompatible with one another' [8, p. 27]. The thesis represents a behaviourist critique of meaning, for Quine holds not only that verbal behaviour fails to determine meaning, but that 'there is nothing to linguistic meaning . . . beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behavior in observable circumstances' [9, p. 5].

For Quine, therefore, there is more than one way to translate between languages: 'indeterminacy means not that there is no acceptable translation, but that there are many' [9, p. 9]. But this directly conflicts with incommensurability. For, strictly speaking, there is not even one translation between the languages of incommensurable theories. The incommensurability thesis would not appear therefore to be a form of Quine's indeterminacy thesis, since it contradicts the claim of translational indeterminacy.

But such emphasis on failure versus indeterminacy of translation may

⁴ *cont.*

number of translations compatible with all normal dispositions to speech behavior, there are often none at all' [7, p. 11]. While this remark rightly contrasts untranslatability with indeterminacy, it is unclear how *Quine's arguments* can be directed to such a conclusion without placing a construal on 'dispositions to speech behavior' not in keeping with Quine's behaviourism. In any case, Kuhn resists Quine's 'abandon[ment of] traditional notions of meaning', and abandons instead the idea that 'anything expressible in one language . . . can be expressed also in any other' [7, p. 11]. Perhaps the resulting untranslatability would conform to the non-Quinean indeterminacy sketched below (section III).

be misplaced, since the key issue raised by Quine is what is to count as admissible evidence for translation. Quine claims that there are multiple translations consistent with the evidence, which he construes as observed verbal behaviour. Kuhn's denial of full translation between incommensurable theories seems to imply that there can be no complete translation which is consistent with the evidence. The question arises of whether such translation failure is to be analysed in terms of a Quinean assumption that behaviour is the only admissible evidence.

If the claim of incommensurability is construed as the claim that there is no translation consistent with the behavioural evidence, then the theses of indeterminacy and incommensurability do contradict one another, as before. For Quinean indeterminacy entails that multiple translations are consistent with the behavioural evidence. So, on a behaviourist construal, the incommensurability thesis denies indeterminacy, and cannot therefore be a form of Quinean indeterminacy.

If incommensurability is not analysed in terms of behavioural evidence, a rather different picture emerges. The denial of translation between theories would then imply that there is more to meaning than is evident in behaviour, for it would appeal to a richer form of linguistic evidence. Moreover, the claim of translation failure would be consistent with the claim that verbal behaviour alone is insufficient to determine translation, since a different form of evidence would pertain to the denial of translation. Yet incommensurability would still differ from Quinean indeterminacy in at least three ways: it implies failure rather than indeterminacy of translation; it neither implies nor precludes that behaviour leaves meaning indeterminate; and it imposes no behaviourist constraint on meaning.

III. Incommensurability as Indeterminacy

There remains a sense in which incommensurability entails translational indeterminacy, though it is not Quine's sense. Consider this passage in which Kuhn explains that translation can neither be faithful nor uniform.

Translation always and necessarily involves imperfection and compromise; the best compromise for one purpose may not be the best for another; the able translator, moving through a single text, does not proceed fully systematically, but must repeatedly shift his choice of word and phrase, depending on which aspect of the original it seems most important to preserve. The translation of one theory into the language of another depends, I believe, upon compromises of the same sort, whence incommensurability. [4, p. 191]

The idea of unavoidable compromise and imperfection suggests that, in the absence of exact translation, translation may be indeterminate in the sense that there may be a choice between imperfect translations. For example, it may be impossible to translate a word exactly, but possible to translate it in either of two equally inexact ways.

This form of indeterminacy must be sharply distinguished from Quine's. In the first place, such indeterminacy constitutes an indeterminacy between translations which diverge from correct translation to an equivalent (or near equivalent) degree. Quinean indeterminacy, on the other hand, constitutes an indeterminacy between translations which are fully consistent with the permissible linguistic evidence; it is therefore an indeterminacy between equally correct translations.

In the second place, Quinean indeterminacy implies that there is no fact of the matter (apart from facts about verbal behaviour) for translation to be right or wrong about. Such indeterminacy removes the presupposition of uniqueness which is crucial to the notion of a correct translation. Kuhn's claim that translation involves compromise and imperfection runs counter to Quinean indeterminacy since it presupposes the possibility, in principle, of correct translation. For a translation can only be compromised or imperfect if there is a fact of the matter for translation to be right or wrong about. Hence, the claim of incommensurability constitutes a denial of correct translation of a kind which would be impossible if translation were indeterminate in Quine's sense.

IV. A Residual Point of Convergence

Finally I will consider a further suggestion about the link between incommensurability and Quinean indeterminacy which does not make the former a form of the latter. Notwithstanding the differences outlined above between indeterminacy and incommensurability, there remains a central point of convergence between the views of Kuhn and Quine with respect to translation. In particular, they both hold that there is no single adequate translation between languages, since for Kuhn there is not even one fully adequate translation, while for Quine there is more than one adequate translation. This parallel between their views might explain why Kuhn linked his view with Quine's.

Yet it must be stressed that such convergence does not draw the notions of incommensurability and indeterminacy of translation closer together. For Quine, an adequate translation is one which is consistent with overt verbal behaviour, while for Kuhn a correct translation is one which fully preserves meaning. As I pointed out above, Kuhn's untranslatability involves facts about meaning which do not feature in Quinean indeterminacy.

While this suggestion brings out a point of convergence, it also draws attention to a fundamental point of divergence. Quine's denial that there is more to meaning than manifested in overt verbal behaviour prevents him from saying that translation fails in Kuhn's sense. Kuhn cannot claim that there is nothing to meaning beyond what is evident in overt verbal behaviour, for he wishes to appeal to facts about meaning which lead to translation failure. Where Quine and Kuhn most fundamentally disagree, therefore, is

with respect to the issue of whether overt verbal behaviour exhaustively manifests meaning.⁵

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⁵ I am indebted to the comments of two anonymous referees for the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, particularly for remarks which led to section IV.