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## **Quine and First-Person Authority**

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### **Abstract**

Blackburn and Searle have argued that Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation results in a denial of the sort of first-person authority that we commonly concede we have over our mental and semantical content. For, the indeterminacy thesis implies that there is no determinate meaning to know at all. And, according to Quine, the indeterminacy holds at home too. For Blackburn, Quine must constrain the domain of indeterminacy to the case of translation only. Searle believes that Quine has no other choice but to give up on his behaviorism. Hylton, however, has attempted to defend Quine against these objections, by arguing that Quine's naturalistic claim that speaking a language is nothing but possessing certain dispositions to act in specific ways would enable him to accommodate first-person authority. I will argue that the objections from Blackburn and Searle, as well as Hylton's solution, are all problematic when seen from within Quine's philosophy. I will introduce a sort of Strawsonian-Wittgensteinian conception of first-person authority and offer that it would be more than compatible with Quine's naturalistic philosophy.

**Keywords:** Indeterminacy of Translation; First-Person Authority; Quine; Blackburn; Hylton; Strawson.

## 1. Introduction

What would Quine say of the first-personal authority that we strongly concede we have over the meaning of our own utterances? To put the question in terms of the attributions of meaning (and mental content) to others and ourselves, could Quine offer an explanation of the asymmetry between self-ascriptions of meaning and ascriptions of meaning to others' utterances? Very few philosophers have attempted to answer these questions. I think everyone agrees that any plausible answer must take into account Quine's central remarks on naturalized epistemology, criteria of individuation, stimulus meaning, and the indeterminacy-underdetermination distinction. My aim in this paper is not to go through all such topics in detail; they have been well discussed in the extensive literature on Quine.<sup>1</sup> I will rather assume familiarity with most of them and attempt to unpack the problem which seems to appear within Quine's naturalistic philosophy with regard to the existence of such an asymmetry in meaning-attributions. Quine does not explicitly address such an issue. My chief goal is to envisage what can be extracted about this matter from his remarks on meaning and translation.

One answer to the above related questions is that Quine really has no other choice but to deny that we can say anything philosophically interesting about any asymmetry in attributions of a *determinate* meaning: the indeterminacy of translation has it as its *sceptical conclusion* that there is no fact as to what the correct translation of a speaker's utterances is and if all that can be said about such a content is confined to what we can extract from the Quinean reflections on radical translation and its accompanied indeterminacy, we have no other way but to concede that there is nothing uniquely determinate about meaning to know at all. If there is no such thing as a determinate meaning, there is no such thing as knowing it, directly

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Gibson (1986; 2004), Hossein Khani (2018; 2021a; 2023), Hylton (2007), Kemp (2006), Soames (1999), Orenstein (2002), and Verhaegh (2018).

or indirectly, inferentially or otherwise. Nor is there any determinate meaning to attribute to the utterances of others and ourselves. Quine once declared that “a sentence has a meaning, people thought, and another sentence is its translation if it has the same meaning. This, we see, will not do” (1987, 8).<sup>2</sup>

Some critics of Quine have criticized him on the basis of this negative conclusion of his arguments for the indeterminacy of translation. Since Quine’s indeterminacy thesis results in a denial of the existence of any fact about determinate meanings – which if we were supposed to have authoritative knowledge of, it would be of them – he thereby fails to accommodate an essential asymmetry between the subject (the speaker) and others (the translators) with regard to knowledge of what the subject means by her expressions, or at least with regard to the essential difference there is between the basis for self-ascriptions of meaning and that of the ascriptions of meaning to the speaker by the translator. Up to some point, our concern may merely (but legitimately) be to answer the question how an alien language can be translated into our own; but, as the objection goes, it is unacceptable to conclude from an answer to that question that this is *all* we can do about meaning and knowledge of it. We cannot genuinely hold that there really is no difference whatsoever between the speaker’s self-attributions of meaning and the speaker’s attributions of meaning to others’ utterances. Failing to appreciate the existence of such an asymmetry misses a philosophically vital distinction, the distinction between the first-person and the second-person, or one may even add, the distinction between the subjective and the objective, the self and the world. Quine does not seem to be on board

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<sup>2</sup> See also Quine (1960, 73; 1968, 275; 1987, 10; 1995a, 75-76). This is sometimes taken to be the view of the “early” Quine. By “early” I mean his pre-1975 works on the topic, such as Quine (1960; 1968; 1969b; 1970). By the “later” Quine, I mean the period of his works on the topic that starts with Quine (1975), and then Quine (1987; 1981) and continues to his later works such as Quine (1990a; 1990c; 1995a). The main difference between them is the way Quine treats the indeterminacy of translation thesis, i.e., as a “conjecture” (1986, 728), in which underdetermination plays no significant role. This difference is not the concern of this paper because Quine never gives up on the claim that meaning *is* indeterminate. He remains a non-factualist about such traditional, or fine-grained, meanings and this is what matters in this paper.

with such an outcome either. If so, appreciating the existence of such an asymmetry would inevitably force him to offer an explanation of, or at least a plausible story about, this phenomenon which seems to have been absent in Quine's works.

Blackburn (1984) and Searle (1987) – and more recently Glock (2003, 201-207) – are among those critics who think that Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation leads to such a highly counterintuitive consequence, i.e., a denial of the existence of such asymmetries. Hylton (2007; 1990/91) disagrees and attempts to show that Quine does not need to give up on the existence of such a phenomenon. In what follows, I examine the objections from Blackburn and Searle, as well as Hylton's defense of Quine. The extent to which I agree with these philosophers is only that Quine is required to say something constructive about such asymmetries. I will, however, argue that in one way or another the objections from Blackburn and Searle, as well as Hylton's defense, all miss certain central points in Quine's naturalistic philosophy. Among other things, they treat Quine as if he is on board with the idea that meaning can be divorced from translation, that indeterminacy does not arise at home, that the pragmatic criteria, such as smoothness of dialogue, can be treated as somehow *determining* facts about meanings. None of these can be done in Quine's philosophical framework. I will then offer a sort of Strawsonian-Wittgensteinian account, the most important feature of which is its neutrality to the questions about the metaphysical status of meaning and which I think Quine could employ without jeopardizing the consequences of his arguments for the indeterminacy thesis. I begin with an important distinction with regard to the notion of meaning.

## **2. Stimulus Meaning vs. Fine-Grained Meaning**

Quine's arguments for the indeterminacy of translation aim to establish the sceptical conclusion that there is no fact as to what the correct translation of an utterance is and thus what a speaker,

*as a matter of fact*, means by her words.<sup>3</sup> Radical translation focuses on the process of translating an entirely unknown language spoken by a native speaker. The native assents to “Gavagai” in the presence of (the stimulations of) a rabbit in enough cases and this evidence allegedly convinces the translator to translate this one-word sentence into “Lo, a rabbit”, on the basis of the fact that, in a similar situation, she would assent to “Lo, a rabbit”. Quine argues that there are always rival translations of the native’s sentences that are mutually incompatible with each other but are all compatible with all possible (allowed-by-Quine) facts of the matter – that is, the physical facts in general and facts about the native’s verbal dispositions to assent to or dissent from certain sentences on specific occasions. The famous examples of such alternative translations are “Lo, an undetached rabbit-part”, “Lo, another manifestation of rabbithood”, and so forth.<sup>4</sup>

The second important claim from Quine is that he does not see the indeterminacy as solely emerging in the process of translating a radically unknown language; rather, as he emphasizes, “radical translation begins at home” (1969, 46) and thus, the indeterminacy manifests itself at home too: “The problem at home differs none from radical translation ordinarily so called” (Quine 1969, 47) so that “[r]eference would seem ... to become nonsense not just in radical translation but at home” (1969, 48). One reason for this is that, for Quine, “there is no entity without identity; [thus] no meaning without sameness of meaning” (1995a, 75-76).<sup>5</sup> Quine makes it even easier to see why translation and indeterminacy both hold at home:

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<sup>3</sup> More particularly, his “Argument from Below” and the “Argument from Above”. See, e.g., Quine (1970, 183).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Quine (1960, 52-53, 71-72; 1969b, 30-34; 1987, 7; 1990a, 45; 1995a, 71-72).

<sup>5</sup> See especially Quine (1948).

I have directed my indeterminacy thesis on a radically exotic language for the sake of plausibility, but in principle it applies even to the home language. For given the rival manuals of translation between Jungle and English, we can translate English perversely into English by translating it into Jungle by one manual and then back by the other. (1990a, 48)

Meaning and translation are indeterminate everywhere. Consequently, Quine does not, and cannot, grant the translator a language in which meanings are uniquely determinate.

We can also detect a second reason for such a claim: if meanings are determinate for the translator in his own language, they are determinate for the native speaker in her own language as well. The consequence of this is that there *are* thereby facts about determinate meanings and all the translator is doing turns into the task of using the available evidence to capture such facts. This means that the indeterminacy problem becomes a mere *epistemological* problem, rather than a *sceptical* problem with the *ontological* consequence that there are no such things as determinate meanings. The indeterminacy problem now turns into a very similar doctrine like that of the underdetermination of translation by evidence, which is essentially an epistemological problem for Quine. I will come back to this problem later. Thus, it is vital to note that the consequence of Quine's arguments for the indeterminacy of translation is that reference is in general inscrutable and meaning is generally indeterminate so that there is no fact as to what someone means by her words, whether the language is radically unknown to us or it is our own familiar language.

The indeterminacy of translation undermines our traditional conception of meaning, and this is the reason why Quine states that “[w]hat I have challenged is ... an ill-conceived notion within traditional semantics” (1987, 10). Quine's attack is on the existence of *fine-grained meanings*. According to Quine, “Gavagai” and “Lo, a rabbit” have the same “stimulus meaning”. He defines the stimulus meaning of a sentence, for a given speaker, as (the ordered pair of) all the stimulations that would prompt the speaker to assent to, and dissent from, that

sentence.<sup>6</sup> We can then explain an expression's fine-grained, or traditional, meaning as follows: two expressions possess different fine-grained meanings if they have the same stimulus meaning but differ in the sort of unique meaning that we (traditionally) expect them to possess.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the competing translation manuals are alike with regard to the sentences' stimulus meaning but differ regarding the alleged fine-grained meanings that we expect them to possess – after all, “Lo, a rabbit” and “Lo, an undetached rabbit-part” seem to have different fine-grained meanings. Quine's claim is that there would always be a slack between stimulus meanings and fine-grained meanings, a gap which can never be filled because facts about stimulus meaning are too weak to constitute one unique fact about fine-grained meanings. We can never ascend from stimulus meanings to fine-grained ones.

The difference between Quine, who is a non-factualist about fine-grained meanings, and a factualist about meanings, e.g., a non-reductionist, is that for the non-reductionist there *are* facts about fine-grained meanings, though this claim would not necessarily stand against the idea that (possible) alternative meaning facts could exist: “Green” means *green* but it could have meant something else. For our non-reductionist too, there can be endless possible meaning facts with regard to each expression of language. Nonetheless, the crucial difference between Quine and the non-reductionist is that, for the latter, facts about fine-grained meanings are primitive so that the rest of all possible meaning facts are automatically *out of* the set of all actual facts about meaning.<sup>8</sup> For Quine, however, there is no set of *actual* facts about fine-grained meanings separate from the set of *possible* facts about them. The *actual* facts about stimulus meaning cannot constitute one unique set of actual facts about fine-grained meanings

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<sup>6</sup> See Quine (1960, 32-33).

<sup>7</sup> For a recent discussion of this, see Hossein Khani (2018; 2023).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, Wright's non-reductionist judgement-dependent account of meaning and intention has such a characteristic. See Wright (1992; 2001).

and thereby rule out the rest. Consequently, no plausible account of self-knowledge seems to be in peace with the idea that the speaker directly and non-inferentially knows an *indefinite* number of meanings of one expression.<sup>9</sup> This makes it difficult to provide a Quinean account of the asymmetry in question *without* abandoning his naturalistic notion of stimulus meaning. I think the way out of this problem is to look for an account that remains *neutral* to the metaphysical status of meaning.

One way to do that, one may suggest, is to appeal to the notion of *agreement in use*. But we have just postponed the problem: How should we treat such facts about agreement in use? Is there an agreement in using a word *because* certain facts about its fine-grained meaning obtain or is there such an agreement simply *because* it is simply an empirical fact that members of a speech-community are all trained or conditioned to be disposed (or blindly inclined) to respond to the world and to each other's responses in one way rather than another? Quine's naturalism seems to deny the existence of the first sort of facts and only allow for the second, by confining the study of meaning to the study of the link between our best theory of reference (and meaning) and the flow of relevant evidence, which itself is constrained by Quine's physicalism, according to which "[n]othing happens in the world ... without some redistribution of microphysical states" (Quine 1981, 98).<sup>10</sup> No change in meaning is possible, unless there is some physical change of one sort somewhere, which is, in the case of translation, a change in the speaker's behavioral dispositions to assent and dissent. We can say that Quine's physicalism *manifests* itself as a sort of behaviorism in the case of translation: "there is nothing in linguistic meaning ... beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behaviour in observable

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<sup>9</sup> This is a claim different from the (plausible) claim (sustained by a factualist) that the unique meaning of an expression, which one grasps, can have *an indefinite number of normative consequences*, that is, that meanings determine the correct use of expressions for a potentially infinite number of occasions.

<sup>10</sup> For more on Quine's physicalism, see Føllesdal (2014), Glock (2003), Harman (2014), Hookway (1988, 212), Hossein Khani (2018; 2021a), Hylton (2007, 1982), Kemp (2006), and Kirk (1986, 1969).



circumstances” (1987, 5). The totality of such behavioral facts, however, fails to constitute one unique fact about an expression’s fine-grained meaning.

Therefore, if we wish to bring in the notion of agreement in use, a desired Quinean explanation of first-person authority must be able to work with facts about agreement in use viewed only as a sort of primitive facts about the speech-community, which the speaker is a member of, i.e., as not being constituted by any deeper fact about fine-grained meanings and as not capable of constituting any fact about fine-grained meanings. This will be the main target of this paper to find such an account. I believe a workable account is Strawson’s (sort of Wittgensteinian) account. But let me first review the objections from Blackburn and Searle and the problems with their solutions.

### **3. The Objections from Blackburn and Searle**

According to Searle, “[i]f the argument [from indeterminacy] is valid, then it must have the result that there isn’t any difference *for me* between *meaning* rabbit or rabbit stage, and that has the further result that there isn’t any difference for me between *referring* to a rabbit and referring to a rabbit stage” (1987, 130). He thinks that this implausible conclusion is a consequence of Quine’s broad application of behaviorism and forms a *reductio* for Quine’s behaviorism.<sup>11</sup> The idea behind this objection is that indeterminacy cannot arise at home because if it does, it amounts to a denial of first-person authority. A similar point is made by Glock: “I deny that radical translation and hence indeterminacy starts at home” (2003, 201). Glock is sympathetic with Searle’s claim that “[w]e know from our own case, from the first-person case, that behaviorism is wrong, because we know that our own mental phenomena are

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<sup>11</sup> See Searle (1987, 136-137). For a discussion of this, see also Føllesdal (1990).

not equivalent to dispositions to behavior” (Searle 1987, 136).<sup>12</sup> For Searle and Glock, “Quine’s indeterminacy argument ... denies the existence of distinctions that we know from our own case are valid” (Searle 1987, 137). Glock, like Searle, thinks that first-person vs. second-person asymmetries form a constitutive part of our semantic concepts and that denying it is to be taken to form a *reductio* for any view implying such a denial. The consequence of Quine’s indeterminacy thesis, when so broadly applied, would be to conclude that “he would then no longer be talking about meaning as commonly understood” (Glock 2003, 206). But did Quine ever claim that he is talking about meaning as *commonly understood*? It does not seem so as he declared that his aim is to undermine meaning as commonly (traditionally) understood.<sup>13</sup>

Searle’s objection pictures Quine’s view as if Quine can abandon his behaviorism without any harm. But we saw that Quine’s behaviorism stems from his general naturalistic view: more particularly, from his physicalism. For him, the naturalistically salient facts in the case of meaning are facts about the speaker’s dispositions to assent and dissent, or basically behavioral facts. If they fail to fix facts about fine-grained meanings – and Quine thinks they fail – the conclusion would be that there is simply no fact about such meanings at all. Quine’s behaviorism is the view that the naturalistically worth noting facts, in the case of translation, are behavioral. Otherwise, it would become vague what sort of facts must be taken into account when our concern is the case of translation. As Quine himself puts it, “where I have insisted on behaviorism is in linguistics” (1990b, 291). By demanding Quine to give up on his behaviorism here, we are asking Quine to allow for facts *over and above* the physical (i.e., behavioral) facts in the case of translation. What would be such alleged facts, however? Obviously, they cannot

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<sup>12</sup> See Glock (2003, 206).

<sup>13</sup> Though, I will use “commonly” in the Wittgensteinian way later, which departs from “traditionally” as Quine used it.

be facts about fine-grained meanings: Quine's arguments for the indeterminacy denied their existence. The first problem with Searle's objection is thus that he seems to overlook the fact that his demand, that Quine retreats from such a special sort of behaviorism, has serious destructive consequences for Quine's philosophy. There are, however, more serious problems with Searle's objection, as well as his solution. Let me consider these problems after introducing Blackburn's objection and proposed solution.

Blackburn thinks that if Quine's indeterminacy thesis applies to the case of the speaker *herself*, it would lead to a highly unacceptable conclusion. As he puts it, "[b]ut after all, I know what I mean when I say that rabbits are good to eat – I know what I refer to and what I say. Indeterminacy may afflict the bleak physicalistic outsider looking at me, but to me and to my fellow-speakers there is no shadow of indeterminacy to be seen" (1984, 281). Blackburn's claim is that, in my own case, no indeterminacy *can* emerge: there can be no shadow of indeterminacy *in the case of the translator using her own language*. This means that there is then a sense in which speakers *know* what they mean by their *own* words, as if we can hold onto meaning *without* translation, as if translation can be divorced from meaning in such a way that the translator can be credited with knowledge of the determinate meanings of the terms of her own language. Like Searle, Blackburn too sketches an outline of a possible solution. What he seems to be suggesting is that some *further* constraint should be imposed on Quine's physicalism if Quine is to have any chance to rescue his account from turning into a highly counterintuitive one. We do not need to go through the details of what such constraints can be because it is already clear that a problem similar to the one with Searle's objection arises in the case of Blackburn's suggestion too. For, imposing extra conditions on Quine's naturalism and its resulted physicalism is already considered as illegitimate by and from within Quine's naturalism, according to which philosophy is not "an *a priori* propaedeutic or groundwork for science, but as continuous with science" (1969, 126) so that when you "see language

naturalistically... you have to see the notion of likeness of meaning ... as simply nonsense” (1969, 30). We can put the problem with Blackburn’s suggestion in the form of a dilemma for him: either the constraints on Quine’s physicalism which he has in mind are supposed to allow for the existence of determinate (fine-grained) meanings in the language of the speaker herself, in which case Quine has already rejected any such possibility, or the alleged constraints are not supposed to work in that way, in which case it would not be clear in what sense they are supposed to help deal with the present problem at all. For, if the latter is the case, the constraints would inevitably leave the sceptical consequences of the indeterminacy thesis untouched. We are then back to where we started. Let me now introduce what I take to be more serious problems with both Searle’s and Blackburn’s objections. I concentrate on three related problems.

Searle and Blackburn both claim that indeterminacy does not arise at home. This is a highly problematic claim within Quine’s philosophy, for two reasons. The first is textual, which I mentioned earlier in this paper. Quine insists that indeterminacy holds in the speaker’s own language as well: “radical translation begins at home” (1969, 46) and thus the indeterminacy manifests itself at home too. Again, “[t]he problem at home differs none from radical translation ordinarily so called” (1969, 47) so that “[r]eference would seem ... to become nonsense not just in radical translation but at home” (1969, 48). Indeterminacy *does* arise at home for the reason which I briefly mentioned before and which puts forward the second problem with Searle’s and Blackburn’s suggestions: if we think that translation and indeterminacy do not hold at home, we are misreading the indeterminacy thesis as an *epistemological* problem. If meanings *are* fixed for the translator and within the translator’s own language, there are then *facts* about fine-grained meanings. But then just like the case of the translator, in the case of the native’s language too meanings would be determined – the native is also a speaker and a translator at the same time. There are thereby meaning facts. In

this case, the only remaining problem would be that the behavioral evidence would not suffice to pick out one unique translation among the rivals. Nonetheless, that would not imply that there are *no meaning facts*.<sup>14</sup> This is to make the same kind of mistake that, according to Quine, Chomsky (1968) makes with regard to the indeterminacy thesis. What was the mistake?

For Quine, translation is underdetermined by all possible evidence so that “the totality of possible observations of verbal behavior ... is compatible with systems of analytical hypotheses of translation that are incompatible with one another” (1968, 274-275). But Quine’s claim is that there is an essential difference between underdetermination and indeterminacy: the latter “is parallel but additional” (1968, 275). Chomsky thinks that translation’s being underdetermined by behavioral evidence is all that is philosophically salient about translation: “It is, to be sure, undeniable that if a system of ‘analytical hypotheses’ goes beyond evidence then it is possible to conceive alternatives compatible with the evidence ... Thus the situation in the case of language ... is, in this respect, no different from the case of physics” (Chomsky 1968, 61). For Quine, however, Chomsky fails to appreciate the indeterminacy-underdetermination distinction and this is the point that “Chomsky did not dismiss ... He missed it” (Quine 1968, 67). Not only are the translation manuals underdetermined by all possible evidence, but they are also indeterminate because “there is no fact of the matter [about correct translation] even to *within* the acknowledged under-determination of a theory of nature” (Quine 1968, 275). Translation withstands the whole truth about the world because it remains underdetermined even when all of the physical facts are fixed *within* our favored theory of the world. This means that the totality of all physical facts fails to determine facts about correct translation. There is thereby no fact of the matter about correct translation. Blackburn’s and Searle’s claim that indeterminacy does not arise at home leads the same *kind* of mistake, i.e.,

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<sup>14</sup> Compare this to Quine’s metaphor of the “Myth of a Museum” in Quine (1969, 27-30; 1981, 41).

blurring the crucial distinction between indeterminacy and underdetermination. It is to force Quine, who is a non-factualist about fine-grained meanings, to submit to a factualist view of such meanings.

The third problem with Searle's and Blackburn's reading is that they treat the speaker's *own* language in such a way that it looks as if meanings are fixed within it and as if there is no question of translation in the speaker's own language. They talk about the speaker's knowing what she means by the terms of her own language and that translation does not happen at home, as if we are allowed to talk about determinate meanings without talking about correct translation. This cannot be held in Quine's naturalistic philosophy. For Quine, "there is no entity without identity; [thus] no meaning without sameness of meaning" (1995a, 75-76). We cannot claim that something exists if we fail to provide a criterion for its individuation. We cannot talk about physical objects, for instance, if we cannot give a criterion for their identity. According to Quine, we do talk about physical objects because we have such a criterion for them. As Kemp puts it, "Quine's notion of a *physical object* ... has a sharp criterion of identity: *x* and *y* are the same physical object if and only if their spatio-temporal boundaries coincide" (2006, 136). What is such a criterion when the subject matter is that of meaning? We can say that a sentence has a uniquely determinate meaning only if we can tell when two sentences can share the same meaning: *A* and *B* have the same meaning if and only if they are the correct translations of one another. But Quine's arguments for the indeterminacy of translation rejects the possibility of sustaining any such criterion of identity for the case of meaning: there is no fact as to whether two sentences are the correct translations of each other. Consequently, we cannot talk about meanings either. Therefore, we cannot use the notion of meaning independently of that of correct translation or sameness of meaning. The claims from Blackburn and Searle are thereby implausible in Quine's view, i.e., that *in the case of the speaker herself speaking her own language*, there is no shadow of translation and

indeterminacy: whenever we talk about meaning of terms, no matter if they belong to an alien language or a familiar one, we are talking about translation. And there is no fact about correct translation. Nor is any about fine-grained meanings. Therefore, the solutions that Searle and Blackburn offer are to be viewed as implausible. Hylton, however, attempts to offer a different solution.

### 3.1. Hylton's Defense of Quine

Hylton suggests a middle view, but as we can immediately see, he seems to commit to the same *kind* of mistake that Blackburn and Searle made, because his first claim is that “[w]hile we are simply using our language, there is no issue of indeterminacy, for that arises only with translation” (2007, 214). Hylton’s claim, as it stands, is already susceptible to the three problems that were discussed above. But Hylton adds that “Quine certainly need not deny that I often know what I am about to do” (2007, 214). For him, if indeterminacy arises in the case of the translator’s own language too, the translator’s utterances would remain indeterminate, in which case we face the following vicious regress: we are trapped in endless attempts to find another language the meaning of whose expressions is supposedly determinate so that we can translate our own words into that language. Obviously, each time the indeterminacy survives. For Hylton, the regress must be stopped somewhere because it does lead to a denial of first-person authority and the best place to stop it is in our own language. But the fundamental question is: How?

The main problem here is that, as previously discussed, there seems to be no naturalistically promising answer to such a question in Quine’s philosophy. Hylton attempts to offer an answer to this question by appealing to the following remark from Quine: “*in practice* we end the regress of background languages, in discussions of reference, by acquiescing in our

mother tongue and taking its words at face value” (1969, 49, my emphases). There is an essential role that the proviso “in practice” plays in this passage, which I think is overlooked by Hylton here. What Quine seems to emphasize here is not that the regress ends by assuming that there *are* determinate meanings in our *own* language, the meaning that we, as first-persons, know. This cannot be Quine’s view. His point is rather that when there is no fact as to what the correct translation of an expression is, we are left with nothing but *pragmatic* or *practical* criteria to decide between them. Theoretically speaking, this whole idea is independent of whether we are translating an unknown language or the language of our fellow-speakers. Hylton is right in his claim that “acquiescing in our mother tongue and taking its words at face value” would, for Quine, mean that we simply *use* our own language. But this by no means helps argue that, for Quine, in the case of our own language, “translations, determinate or indeterminate, are not to the point” (Hylton 1990/91, 280). They are always to the point but not in practice. *In practice*, of course, this is true. As Quine has always insisted on, we do mean things in real life and understand what others mean by their words. But these are two separate claims. Quine has been very careful in distinguishing between the issues with indeterminacy of translation and the issues with successful linguistic communication: “the indeterminacy of translation holds also at home. But adherence to the home language can nevertheless afford escape from problems of translation” (1973, 83-84). This may be viewed as an endorsement of what Hylton, and even Blackburn and Searle, have been suggesting, i.e., that the indeterminacy problem is somehow solved at home, so that meanings are determined and ready to be known by the speakers. But Quine then adds: “It all depends on what we are trying to do” (1973, 84). And this is crucial.

Indeterminacy is ubiquitous: linguistic expressions have no determinate (fine-grained) meaning. We come up with this conclusion when “we are going to make capital of relations of sameness and difference of meaning” (Quine 1973, 84). In practice, normal speakers are not



concerned with such theoretical and sceptical issues. Quine then continues: I may be equally interested in “the steps by which you all may plausibly have arrived at much the same usage as mine; but the *sameness* that I have in mind here is merely the sameness that is tested by *smoothness of dialogue*, and *not a sameness of hidden meanings*” (1973, 84, emphases added). Practically speaking, we choose among rival translations the one that helps our communication proceed more smoothly. We are so acquainted with our home language that we speak and understand unhesitatingly and almost automatically. This, however, has nothing to do with the fact that translation and its accompanied indeterminacy hold at home. To think that meaning is somehow *determined* in our own language is to make a mistake very similar to that which Chomsky has made, at least according to Quine. If meaning and reference is, as a matter of fact and not for some pragmatic reasons, viewed as determined at home, then meaning and reference would be at most *underdetermined* rather than *indeterminate*. The whole point of Quine’s remarks on the indeterminacy thesis was that, in the case of meaning and translation, we have indeterminacy *in addition to* underdetermination. There is then *no* stop to the regress which Hylton mentioned: the indeterminacy is there to assure us that it would not stop. There is no essential difference between a translator translating an unknown language and a translator communicating with, translating, or understanding the speech of her fellow speakers. If we think that things are different at home, it is because of our familiarity with the use of our own language.

All this, however, does not imply that our initial concern with Quine’s view has vanished: Quine must either deny first-person authority, in which case his view remains problematic – at least for being counterintuitive – or provide some constructive remarks on how to accommodate the meaning-asymmetry. I think he can offer such a story.

#### 4. A Wittgenstein-Strawsonian Explanation

Strawson famously distinguishes between two types of predicates, M-predicates and P-predicates. “The first kind of predicate consists of those which are also properly applied to material bodies to which we would not dream of applying predicates ascribing states of consciousness” (Strawson 1959, 104), such as “weighs 10 kg”, “is 30 °C”, and the like; “[t]he second kind consists of all the other predicates we apply to persons” (Strawson 1959, 104), such as “believes that” and “means that”.<sup>15</sup> For Strawson, however, there should be some way for determining whether a speaker has possessed such P-predicates. What is such a criterion? According to Strawson, “[t]here is no sense in the idea of ascribing states of consciousness to oneself, or at all, unless the ascriber already knows how to ascribe at least some states of consciousness to others” (1959, 106). The important point here is to see how an asymmetry of the sort Quine needs can emerge. On the one hand, “one ascribes P-predicates to others on the strength of observation of their behaviour” (Strawson 1959, 106). On the other, “when one ascribes them [P-predicates] *to oneself*, one does not do so on the strength of observation of those behaviour criteria on the strength of which one ascribes them to others” (1959, 107). This difference provides distinct criteria for the application of P-predicates, which in turn enable us to ascribe conscious states to ourselves *differently* from the way we ascribe them to others. This is a claim that Quine can in principle embrace: “it is essential to the character of these predicates that they have both first- and third-person ascriptive uses, that they are both self-ascrivable otherwise than on the basis of observation of the behaviour of the subject of them, and other-

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<sup>15</sup> The concept of a person is taken by Strawson to be a primitive concept, i.e., “the concept of a type of entity such that *both* predicates ascribing states of consciousness *and* predicates ascribing corporeal characteristics, a physical situation &c. are equally applicable to a single individual of that single type” (1959, 101-102). See also Strawson (1959, 110-111). We need not be worried about the primitiveness of this concept as what we are concerned with here is Strawson’s criteria for the application of P-predicates. The primitiveness of the concept of a person can lead to interesting questions, even with regard to Quine’s philosophy. This would be the subject of an independent investigation. For a discussion of this, see e.g., Hacker (2002) and Snowdon (2009).

ascribable on the basis of behaviour criteria” (Strawson 1959, 108). This explanation, if one prefers to call it so, does not need to presuppose the notion of fine-grained meanings; rather, it is enough that there is an (intersubjective) agreement in use about these terms so their use can be treated as already fixed. As Strawson famously puts it,

[t]o learn their use is to learn both aspects of their use. In order to *have* this type of concept, one must be both a self-ascriber and an other-ascriber of such predicates, and must see every other as a self-ascriber. In order to *understand* this type of concept, one must acknowledge that there is a kind of predicate which is unambiguously and adequately ascribable *both* on the basis of observation of the subject of the predicate *and* not on this basis, i.e. independently of observation of the subject: the second case is the case where the ascriber is also the subject. (1959, 108)

Through learning our first language, we gradually gain mastery of the use of our language. Our languages contain different expressions, with different rules governing their application. Such a mastery, among other things, consists in our ability to use the same type of predicates on the basis of two different criteria. Quine’s Wittgensteinian idea that language is essentially public, “a social art” (Quine 1960, x), together with his naturalized epistemology, which brings in the role of *evidence* in our descriptions of the world and persons, can prepare us to treat certain of the speaker’s utterances as self-ascriptions of meaning and as authoritative and reliable by default. Competent speakers of a language are disposed to apply “means that”, “intends that” and other P-predicates to others on the basis of evidence and observation and to themselves differently, i.e., free from any need to observe their own verbal behaviour. Those who do not

possess such a mastery cannot be said to have learnt their language: enough evidence to the contrary leads to an expiration of their membership in the speech-community.<sup>16</sup>

The account can work within Quine's naturalistic philosophy because it is *neutral* to the issues about the metaphysics of meaning, what they are and what constitutes facts about them. The desired asymmetry emerges in the following way: we ascribe meanings, *whatever they might be*, to others on the basis of evidence and observation; we do *not* do the same in our own cases. And doing so is part of what constitutes one's mastery of one's own language. This is basically what Wittgenstein pictures when he says "[w]hat is the criterion for the redness of an image? For me, when it is someone else's image: what he says or does. For myself, when it is my image: nothing" (1953, §377). What sustains such a fact is *not* some hidden fact about the fine-grained meaning of my word.<sup>17</sup> It is rather a *primitive* aspect of being a member of a speech-community that self-ascriptions are viewed as authoritative by default. It is a form of life with its own various language-games in which we attribute meanings to ourselves and to others in different ways.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For certain well-known discussions of this issue see, e.g., Kripke (1982, Chapter 3), Dummett (1994, 423-425) and Wright (2001, 202-203).

<sup>17</sup> Kripke's Wittgenstein has argued powerfully against the plausibility of any such attempt. See Kripke (1982, Chapter 2).

<sup>18</sup> Whether this Wittgensteinian idea leads to what Strawson calls the "no-ownership" view (1959, 95) is a matter of controversy. See, e.g., footnote 1 in Strawson (1959, 95). Strawson later emphasizes that "[w]hat I am suggesting is that it is easier to understand how we can see each other, and ourselves, as persons, if we think first of the fact that we act, and act on each other, and act in accordance with a common human nature" (1959, 112). Comparing to Wittgenstein's "Beetle in a Box" (1953, §293), for instance, it does not seem that there appears a serious conflict between these two views. For Strawson, the word "I" does not refer to some Cartesian sort of pure conscious self, but "refers to the *person* who uses it" (Hacker 2002, 25). This, I believe, leads to no conflict with Wittgenstein's view, especially considering his remarks on the primitiveness of forms of life. Nonetheless, deciding on this controversy would be subject to an independent investigation. For Strawson's reading of Wittgenstein's relevant remarks, see Strawson (1974/2008, Especially Chapter 7). For more on Strawson's view, see Bilgrami (2006, Chapter 2; 2010), Baldwin (2010), Davidson (1984; 1993b), Hacker (2002), and Snowdon (2009).

Whether or not this sketched Strawsonian-Wittgensteinian account is viewed as plausible, to some important extent, depends on the sort of metaphysical view from which you are attempting to deal with this phenomenon. It is not a plausible account if you wish to stand outside of our best theory, or as Wittgenstein puts it, our own form of life, and take a factualist view of fine-grained meanings. If you believe there *are* such semantic facts, the account would lose its force. Davidson, for instance, has rejected this view on a similar ground.<sup>19</sup> His reasons may seem convincing but only if we, following him, dramatically depart from Quine's naturalistic philosophy. He looks at the problem from a factualist point of view.<sup>20</sup> For Davidson, "we may postulate different criteria of application for the key concepts or words ('believes that', 'intends to', 'wishes that', etc.). But these moves do no more than restate the problem" (1984, 109). He thinks that the asymmetry in ascriptions of meaning cannot be explained by an appeal to the existence of different criteria of use. For, first of all,

it is a strange idea that claims made without evidential or observational support should be favored over claims with such support. Of course, if evidence is not cited in support of a claim, the claim cannot be impugned by questioning the truth or relevance of the evidence. But these points hardly suffice to suggest that in general claims without evidential support are more trustworthy than those with. (1987, 442)

But is it a strange idea? For one thing, Strawson does *not* think that "claims made without evidential or observational support should be favored over claims with such support"; he rather, not strangely at all, claims that *mastery* of how to use our language would, among other things, consist in knowing how to use its predicates, that some of its predicates are used without an appeal to evidence and some inevitably by an appeal to such evidence. Furthermore, what

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<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Davidson (1984; 1987; 1993b).

<sup>20</sup> On his departure from Quine on this matter, see Hossein Khani (2018; 2023), Kemp (2012, 127), and Engel (2013, 594).

Strawson, and I think Quine, needs would be the platitude that “if evidence is not cited in support of a claim, the claim cannot be impugned by questioning the truth or relevance of the evidence”. The speaker’s claim is that “I mean *rabbit* by ‘rabbit’” and she knows, among other things, that when she uses “mean that” in self-ascriptions, she uses it on the basis of a criterion different from the one governing the use of it in the case of ascribing meaning to others. It is a strange idea for Davidson because he thinks we have a better way to explain the asymmetry in question: we can appeal to the fact that understanding, or more particularly, interpreting speakers in the way they intended their utterances to be understood, was not be possible if they did not have non-inferential knowledge of what they mean and believe.<sup>21</sup> Davidson views facts about meaning, beliefs and intentions as real as any other commonly conceded facts: he *includes such facts in the class of all facts about the world*. As he puts it, propositional attitudes are “as real as atoms and baseball bats, and the facts about them are as real as the facts about anything else” (1998, 98). This is the reason why he thinks that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis “does not entail that there are no facts of the matter” (1999, 596).

Davidson’s more sophisticated objection is that Strawson’s account results in an ambiguity in the meaning of P-predicates and this would invite scepticism about other minds. According to Davidson, “if what is apparently the same expression is sometimes correctly employed on the basis of a certain range of evidential support and sometimes on the basis of another range of evidential support (or none), the obvious conclusion would seem to be that the expression is ambiguous” (1987, 442). In that case, he asks: “Why then should we suppose that a predicate like ‘*x* believes that ...’, which is applied sometimes on the basis of behavioral evidence and sometimes not, is unambiguous?” (1987, 442). And if it is ambiguous, it does not seem that the predicate preserves its meaning when employed by the speaker in self-ascriptions

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<sup>21</sup> On Davidson’s account, see, e.g., Aune (2012), Child (2007), Hacker (1997), Hossein Khani (2021b), and Ludwig and Lepore (2005, 353-354).

of attitudes and by the speaker in the case of ascribing them to others. This leads to scepticism about other minds because the sceptic is then allowed to ask whether the self-ascribed attitudes really are the same as those we attributed to others. On this basis, Davidson objects that “Strawson and Wittgenstein had *described* the asymmetry, but had done nothing to explain it” (1993a, 211).<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, the existence of differences in use is part of what a mastery of the use of language is, in which case it would then be a “strange idea” to claim that such a use is *ambiguous*, in such a Davidsonian sense, rather than simply *rule-governed*. And rules are not supposed to be simple: they can be as complex as Strawson thinks and “unambiguously” applicable if we are to be able to judge if one has learnt one’s language.

Quine would not be against any of these claims. Such an intersubjective ground, agreement across a speech-community, has already been present in Quine’s definition of observation sentences – as those sentences that almost all members of the speech-community have more or less similar dispositions to assent or dissent on specific occasions.<sup>23</sup> The sketched account here appeals only to what Quine strongly admits, i.e., that “knowing what expressions mean *consists*, for me, in being disposed to use them on appropriate occasions” (Quine 2000, 420). And the differences in such dispositions would enable Quine to preserve the asymmetry in question. I disagree with Hylton’s claim that, for Quine, “meaningfulness *consists in* just the sorts of things that make translation possible” (1990/91, 274). If Quine wanted to follow this path of reasoning, he should have said *what makes translation possible* at all. But for Quine, nothing philosophically salient can be said about such a possibility.

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<sup>22</sup> See also Davidson (1993b, 248-249).

<sup>23</sup> His later discussion of pre-established harmony is relevant but in a complicated way. See Quine (1995b; 1996). See also Kemp (2017).

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