On How to Avoid the Indeterminacy of Translation

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Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation has puzzled the philosophical community for several decades. It is unquestionably among the best known and most disputed theses in contemporary philosophy. Quine's classical argument for the indeterminacy thesis, in his seminal work *Word and Object*, has even been described by Putnam as "what may well be the most fascinating and the most discussed philosophical argument since Kant's Transcendental Deduction of the Categories" (Putnam 1975a, 159).

The thesis states that, first, it is possible to construe several conflicting translations compatible with all observable data, and second, more strikingly, that there is no fact of the matter of which one is correct. It is especially the latter, ontological part of the thesis that has so much annoyed various philosophers. Note, however, that Quine does not postulate some formidable obstacles for translation or deny the possibility of correct translation—rather the opposite: "The fact remains that lexicography lives, and is important. Translation is important, often right, often wrong. The indeterminacy thesis denies none of this, but tells us that right translations can sharply diverge" (Quine 1990d, 198).

Although I believe that the great majority of philosophers find the thesis difficult to accept, opinions have not really converged. There is little agreement on what exactly is the content of the thesis, what are the arguments for it and their premises, and what—if anything—is wrong with them. Accordingly, critical assessments have varied considerably, and

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consequently, there is no widely accepted reply to Quine's indeterminacy thesis. For this reason, I think that even if the commentary literature is already enormous, Quine's thesis and arguments are still worthy of one more careful analysis. As I don't want to give just another interpretation of Quine, I'll back up my interpretation with relatively extensive textual evidence.

I cannot even conceive analyzing one by one the hundreds of reactions to Quine's thesis that exist in the literature; some very general remarks must suffice here. One can nevertheless argue that many distinguished philosophers have simply misunderstood the thesis.[1] And if the thesis has been difficult to frame, how much more difficult it is to understand what really is the argument for the thesis. So, I shall consider in some detail the questions: What really is the argument for the indeterminacy thesis? What are Quine's deepest reasons for holding the thesis?[2] Only after getting the right answers to these questions can one hope to make any progress in one's attempts to avoid Quine's radical conclusions. But before I present my own interpretation, I shall point out certain widely shared misunderstandings concerning Quine's reasons for his thesis.

1. Quine's Target

To begin with, it is important to get the fundamental point of Quine's thesis and thought-experiment of "radical translation" right. One regrettable trend in the secondary literature on the indeterminacy thesis has been the tendency to view it as primarily concerning the methodology of field linguistics. This is, however, highly misleading. Quine's real target is elsewhere, as he has repeatedly emphasized:

> what I've been really concerned with or motivated by in this stuff about translation and indeterminacy hasn't been primarily translation but cognitive meaning and analyticity and the like.... I am interested in isolating something like the notion of cognitive meaning that we associate with science. (Quine 1974a, 493)

> What the indeterminacy of translation shows is that the notion of propositions as sentence meanings is untenable. (Quine 1992, 102)

> The point of my thought experiment in radical translation was philosophical: a critique of the uncritical notion of meanings and, therewith, of introspective semantics. I was concerned to expose its empirical limits. A sentence has meaning, people thought, and another sentence is its translation if it has the same meaning. This, we see, will not do. (Quine 1987a, 9)

> [I]ts motivation was to undermine Frege's notion of proposition or Gedanke. (Quine 1990c, 176)

Hence, it is above all philosophers' uncritical appeal to unexplained meanings, or Fregean[3] propositions (thoughts, "Gedanke"), that Quine aims to question with his indeterminacy of translation thesis. Moreover, the connection between propositions, or sentence meanings, and translation was made explicit by Quine already in *Word and Object*, where he noted that "meaning, supposedly, is what a sentence shares with its translation" (Quine 1960, 32). Consequently, the thesis of the indeterminacy of translation could also be appropriately called, and has been called, the thesis of the indeterminacy of meaning.

Quine has in fact two related but different theses of indeterminacy, the thesis of the indeterminacy of meaning and the thesis of the indeterminacy of reference, althought their difference was not sufficiently clear in Quine's early work; Quine later begun to call the latter "the inscrutability of reference," in order to separate them more clearly. It is largely independent of the former, although it adds a new dimension to it (cf. Quine 1994). One should note that Quine's key argument for the latter is quite different, based on what he calls "proxy functions" (see, e.g., Quine 1981, 1994). The former applies primarily to sentences, whereas the latter concerns terms. In this paper, the focus is on the former, that is, on the indeterminacy of meaning.

2. Is Quine's thesis based on behaviorism?

Apparently the most usual critical strategy is to simply dismiss Quine's thesis by remarking that it assumes behaviorism, which is as conclusively refuted as a doctrine can be. As a representative example, Devitt and Sterelny pass it by remarking that "Quine's scepticism about meaning ... seems based on a behaviorism like Skinner's" (Devitt and Sterelny 1987, 158–9). And indeed, Quine seems to justify this move himself, for he writes: "Critics have said that the thesis is a consequence of my behaviorism. Some have said that it is a *reductio ad absurdum* of my behaviorism. I disagree with this second point, but I agree with the first. I hold further that the behaviorist approach is mandatory" (Quine 1987a; cf. Quine 1992, 37–8).

Given the practically universal agreement that Skinnerian behaviorism has been refuted for good, this would appear to justify just ignoring Quine's thesis. However, it is a mistake to unqualifiedly equate Quine's view with the more traditional kinds of behaviorism. Quine explicitly distances himself from such extreme views:

> Usually the concurrent publicly observable situation does not enable us to predict what a speaker even of our language will say, for utterances commonly bear little relevance to the circumstances outwardly observable at the time; there are ongoing projects and unshared past experiences. It is only thus, indeed, that language serves any useful communicative purpose; predicted utterances convey no news. (Quine 1992, 38)

In fact, the behaviorist, as Quine understands the term, "is knowingly and cheerfully up to his neck in innate mechanisms of learning readiness"; behaviorism, according to Quine, "does still condone the recourse of introspection" (Quine 1969c). Now Quine may have on some occasions sympathized with stronger forms of behaviorism, but be that as it may, I would argue that nothing of the kind is assumed in his argument for the indeterminacy of translation. (See sections 6–7 below.)

In particular, one has repeatedly assumed that it is essential for Quine's thesis that one focuses solely on what Quine calls "stimulus meaning," that is, on assent and dissent. But this is incorrect (see also Quine 1968, 285–6):

> I must insist that the thesis does not depend on limiting the evidence for radical translation to assent and dissent. The relevant evidence even goes beyond speech. It includes blushing, stammering, running away. It includes native customs and rites, and indeed any observable behavior that one can exploit in trying to get a clue to how to translate the language. The method of query and assent is necessary but not sufficient. We have to spot likely observation sentences to begin with, and we have to get beyond them. (Quine 1990c, 176)

In sum, even if Quine's thesis is a consequence of a view of him that he still likes to call "behaviorism," it should be recognized that his view differs significantly from the standard and agreeably refuted forms of behaviorism and should at least be considered separately.[4] However, I shall leave the question of the exact content of Quine's "behaviorism" for a moment and turn to certain other alleged reasons for the indeterminacy thesis.

3. Is the thesis a consequence of austere physicalism?

Field, Putnam, and Soames, among others, interpret the indeterminacy thesis as a consequence of Quine's austere physicalism (see Field 1974; Putnam 1986; Soames 1999). Furthermore, some of the arguably most adequate analyses of the indeterminacy thesis, namely by Friedman and Gibson, emphasize the significance of Quine's physicalism for his thesis (see Friedman 1975; Gibson 1986). Now it is certainly true that

a kind of physicalism is an important ingredient of Quine's overall philosophical view and that Quine's own conception of "fact of the matter"—used in the formulation of the thesis—is explicated physicalistically by him (see, e.g., Quine 1981, 23). Nevertheless, I think that one should not wed the indeterminacy thesis too closely with physicalism.

To begin with, Quine's physicalism is in fact much less extreme than is often thought, for he reports that he has usually cited physicalism just by way of dissociating himself from dualism and mentalistic semantics (Quine 1990g, 334). More exactly, Quine's physicalism is in no way reductionistic, but he only subscribes a version of supervenience thesis:

> The answer is not that everything worth saying can be translated into the technical vocabulary of physics; not even that all good science can be translated into that vocabulary. The answer is rather this: nothing happens in the world, not the flutter of an eyelid, not the flickering of a thought, without some redistribution of microphysical states. (Quine 1978a)

Moreover, one can even claim that actually physicalism is not at all relevant for the argument for the indeterminacy thesis itself. For Quine declares: "[P]hysicalism is irrelevant; monism is irrelevant. One can wallow in the rankest mentalistic ontology without affecting the indeterminacy of translation" (Quine 1990b, 110). Quine has stressed that his primary objection to the uncritical appeal on the notion of meaning is not an objection to meanings on account of their being mental or abstract entities; he says that the objection persists even if one takes meanings as the denoted concrete objects, as long as one regards a man's semantics as somehow determinate beyond what might be implicit in his dispositions to overt behavior (Quine 1969a, 27).

4. Does Quine's thesis assume verificationism?

Others assume that Quine's thesis is a consequence of his commitment to verificationism. And again, Quine's own comments appear to justify this interpretation. Indeed, Quine sometimes even says that the indeterminacy of translation is *best* argued from a somewhat Duhemian holism and a somewhat Peircean verificationism rather than from, for example, the underdetermination of physical theories (Quine 1986c; cf. Quine 1986a).

The most well known expression of this view argument is found in "Epistemology naturalized":

> For an uncritical mentalist, no such indeterminacy threatens. Every term and every sentence is a label attached to an idea, simple or complex, which is stored in the mind. When on the

other hand we take a verification theory of meaning seriously, the indeterminacy would appear to be inescapable....

... Should the unwelcomeness of the conclusion persuade us to abandon the verification theory of meaning? Certainly not. (Quine 1969b, 81)

Nevertheless, one should not, again, read too much into such statements that appear to commit Quine to verificationism. For, as I have argued in detail elsewhere (Raatikainen 2004), it is a mistake to commit Quine to verificationism, in the standard sense of the word. In a closer look "verificationism," as a view that Quine is prepared to accept, boils down to the emphasis of empirical evidence for one's learning a language, that is, to the basically same moderate view that Quine calls "behaviorism" in other contexts (see sections 6–7, below).[5]

Summarizing, then, one can conclude that Quine's thesis cannot be dismissed simply for the reason that it is essentially based on an outdated positivistically spirited commitment to radical behaviorism, physicalism or verificationism.

5. "Gavagai" and Underdetermination Arguments from Below and Above

Many critics have focused on the details of Quine's best-known attempts to illustrate the indeterminacy, namely the classical case of "Gavagai," and the later argument from the underdetermination of scientific theories, also known as the argument from below and the argument from above, respectively.[6]

Lots of criticism has indeed concentrated on Quine's famous example "Gavagai," by which Quine made the thesis so famous (Quine 1958, 1959, 1960). Quine's reaction to this line of reply is, however, informative. He complains that the Gavagai-example has figured too centrally in discussions of the indeterminacy of translation: "Readers see the example as the ground of the doctrine, and hope by resolving the example to cast doubt on the doctrine." "The real ground of the doctrine," Quine continues, "is very different, broader and deeper" (Quine 1970a, 187). In fact, Quine questions the very relevance of the Gavagai-example for the thesis (see also Quine 1970a; Quine 2000, 419):

Ironically, indeterminacy of translation in a strong sense was not what I coined the word "Gavagai" to illustrate. Seen as a term, the word illustrated inscrutability of reference. Seen as a sentence, the word did not illustrate indeterminacy of holophrastic translation of sentences, which is the more sweeping thesis; for "Gavagai" is an observation sentence, translatable as "(Lo, a) rabbit" firmly enough.

> Translation of "Gavagai" as "(Lo, a) rabbit" is insufficient to fix the reference of "gavagai" as a term; that was the point of example. (Quine 1990a, 6)

Another much-cited and critically discussed line of reasoning leading to indeterminacy is Quine's later argument based on the underdetermination of scientific theories by all possible observation (Quine 1970a). Indeed, many commentators seem to have taken this as the essential source of Quine's thesis. But Quine has had second thoughts:

> Let me say by the way that I have lost my liking for this particular argument for the indeterminacy of translation in the case where one of the two competing theories is our own; for in devising a manual of translation I would favour agreement, where I could, between the natives and myself regarding the truth of the sentence and its translation. This policy would favour ascribing our physics rather than its rival. (Quine 1979b)

But then Quine's deeper reasons for his indeterminacy thesis must lie elsewhere, and accordingly, the critical discussion of the thesis that focus on these two issues—the Gavagai-example and the underdetermination—may be less conclusive than they may appear to be.

6. Meaning, Language Acquisition and Observation

But why then is Quine so convinced of the indeterminacy thesis? What are his principal reasons for holding the thesis? Dagfinn Føllesdal (1990, 103) has suggested that all that actually matters is a view that one could call "the thesis of man-made meaning" (in short, MMM):

(MMM) The meaning of a linguistic expression is the joint product of all the evidence that helps learners and users of the language determine that meaning.

Quine himself has commented this proposal approvingly:

> Dagfinn has illuminated the indeterminacy thesis by clearing away what does not pertain. What matters is just that linguistic meaning is a function of observable behavior in observable circumstances. Dagfinn divides this condition into two: that meaning is the product of the evidence by which it is learned, and that that evidence is public.
>
> Broader behaviorism is irrelevant; physicalism is irrelevant; monism is irrelevant. One can wallow in the rankest mentalistic

ontology without affecting the indeterminacy of translation. (Quine 1990b, 110)

This is then the essential content of "behaviorism" as it is understood by Quine in his argument for the indeterminacy thesis. Actually all this harmonizes also with the much-cited passage on behaviorism (quoted partly above in section 2), in which Quine admitted that the thesis is a consequence of his behaviorism and, further, claimed that that the behaviorist approach is mandatory; Quine continues by giving his reasons: "Each of us learns his language by observing other people's verbal behavior and having his own faltering verbal behavior observed and reinforced or corrected by others" (Quine 1987, 5; cf. Quine 1992, 37-8).

Quine's "behaviorism," inasmuch as it is relevant for the argument for the indeterminacy thesis, is thus restricted to language, more specifically to linguistic meaning, and is based on the reflection of language acquisition: "Where I have insisted on behaviourism is in linguistics, because of how language is learned" (Quine 1990e, 291). Apparently nothing is here assumed about the validity of behaviorism in general, for example, in relation to beliefs and desires, or sensations. Accordingly, this view of Quine has sometimes been aptly called "linguistic behaviorism."[7]

7. Quine's "Behaviorism"

Let us now look more closely at the content of Quine's brand of behaviorism.[8] Recall that according to him, the behaviorist is up to his neck in innate mechanisms of learning readiness (see section 2). In particular, Quine has no objection to the view that language aptitude is innate. Language learning, on the other hand, in which this aptitude is put to work, turns according to Quine on intersubjectively observable features of human behavior and its environing circumstances, "there being no innate language and no telepathy" (Quine 1968, 278).[9] It is for this reason that Quine concludes that "the linguist has little choice but to be a behaviorist at least qua linguist" (Quine 1968, 278). Evidently such a moderate linguistic behaviorism simply cannot be rebutted together with the traditional Skinnerian behaviorism.[10] On the contrary, it is a view, whatever one prefers to call it, that is rather widely accepted in the contemporary philosophy of language (cf. Wright 1997, 399).

In another context, Quine comments on his behaviorism as follows:

When I dismiss a definition of behaviorism that limits it to conditioned response, am I simply extending the term to cover everyone? Well, I do think of it as covering all reasonable men. What matters, as I see it, is just the insistence upon couching all

criteria in observation terms. By observation terms I mean terms that are or can be taught by ostension, and whose application in each particular case can therefore be checked intersubjectively. Not to cavil over the word 'behaviorism', perhaps current usage would be best suited by referring to this orientation to observation simply as empiricism; but it is empiricism in a distinctly modern sense, for it rejects the naive mentalism that typified the old empiricism. (Quine 1969c)

By the "naive mentalism" Quine means here the uncritical use of the "idea" idea in the classical empiricism, which he naturally wants to avoid. And what does he mean by empiricism? According to Quine, there are "two cardinal tenets of empiricism" that remain unassailable: "One is that whatever evidence there is for science is sensory evidence. The other … is that all inculcation of meanings of words must rest ultimately on sensory evidence" (Quine 1969b, 75).

Even more informative is Quine's comment in a personal correspondence reported by Gibson: "When I have stressed that language is learned through observation of overt behavior without telepathic aids, I have encapsulated the point by saying that linguistics has to be behavioristic; but if the term does not fit my account, the term is what should be dropped" (see Gibson 1988, 129). Hence it is important not to overestimate the austerity of Quine's behaviorism (cf. Quine 2000).

8. Meaning, Understanding, and Use

Quine's constraints on meaning are thus essentially based on his considerations on language learning. What I further suggest is that for Quine, the plausibility of the MMM-thesis, or his (linguistic, or semantic) "behaviorism," is in turn based on the apparent truism according to which to understand a language is to know the meaning of its expressions—that meanings, if anything, are what one learns to know when one learns a language. In leaning on this heuristic picture Quine is, of course, in good company; more or less the same idea has led, for example, Frege, Wittgenstein, Schlick, Carnap, Davidson, and Dummett.[11]

Because Quine prefers to avoid the whole meaning talk, that is, he does not want to appeal to an unexplained notion of "meaning" in his theorizing, it is not too easy to find this idea explicitly in Quine's writings. Nevertheless, it shows itself in various places. Quine for example explains that he has used "synonymous" for "alike in meaning," "significant" instead of "having meaning," and "understand" instead of "knowing the meaning" and that he has avoided the latter phrases, whatever they might mean, because he proposes to analyze the former notions before meaning (Quine 1990f, 309). Thus Quine writes: "People persist in talking thus of knowing the meaning …

where they could omit the mention of meaning and merely talk of understanding an expression … where the real threat lies, in talking of meaning, is in the illusion of explanation" (Quine 1975, 86–7). Yet, Quine is prepared to say that "to learn a language is to learn the meaning of its sentences" (Quine 1974b, 38). Once he even remarked that one might try looking to the understanding of expressions, rather than to synonymy, as the operationally basic notion of semantics (Quine 1979a). Recall also that part of the MMM-thesis, as Quine explicated it, was that "meaning is the product of the evidence by which it is learned."

As languages are, in Quine's view, learned, that is, they are not innate, and there is no telepathy, the learning of meanings must be based on observation. Therefore, it is natural to turn to observable *use* of expressions. Thus Quine equates meaning with use, or at least insists that the meaning is determined by the observable use:

> … this relation of synonymy, or sameness of *meaning*, is sameness of *use*. (Quine 1978b)

> As long as we speak loosely enough, I can agree that likeness of *meaning* is likeness of *use*. (Quine 1980)

> How words and sentences are *used*, in what circumstances and in what relations to each another, is very much a matter of fact, and I cheerfully call its study a study of *meaning*. (Quine 1990h)

The whole point of view I am ascribing here to Quine is beautifully expressed in his entry "Meaning" in *Quiddities*:

> [T]here is no more to the *meaning* of an expression than the *overt use* that we make of this expression. Language is a skill that each of us *acquires* from his fellows through mutual observation, emulation, and correction in jointly observable circumstances. When we *learn the meaning* of an expression we learn only what is observable in overt verbal behavior and its circumstances.

> ... In describing ways in which an expression is *used* we may be said still to be explaining its *meaning*, but there is no lingering trace of a museum of labelled ideas nor of any clear and simple relation of paraphrase or translation. (Quine 1987b, my emphasis)

And by combining these two ideas, that is, that understanding is knowledge of meanings, and that meaning is use, one is led to the view that to understand an expression is to know its use— to know how to use it.[12] Thus Quine says that the understanding

of a word consist in part in knowing how to use it in sentences and in part in knowing how to react properly to all such uses (Quine 1975, 87; cf. Quine 1992, 58).

9. From Understanding to Indeterminacy

Quine's "behaviorism," as he calls it, relevant for his thesis of the indeterminacy of translation, is basically just the view that natural languages are learned, and that this learning is based on observation. Further, meanings, for Quine, are what one learns to know when one learns a language. On this ground, it is quite natural that he concludes that "[t]here is nothing in linguistic meaning beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behavior in observable circumstances" (Quine 1992, 38).

Finally, Quine is persuaded that this readily observable use is insufficient to determine a unique translation. So underdetermination has, after all, a certain role in Quine's reasoning. But one should note that there is no appeal here to underdetermination by all possible observation—whatever that may mean—but only to underdetermination by the actual observable data which is available for the average child while he or she is learning a language. This data is certainly quite limited, but still the child learns to understand the language, that is, learns to "know the meaning of its sentences." Therefore there is, from this perspective, nothing more in meaning itself, and no further facts of meaning for a linguist to discover. It is rather credible to conjecture that *such* data is not sufficient to fix a unique translation.[13]

> What I have said of *infant learning* applies equally to the *linguist's learning* of a new language in the field. If the linguist does not lean on related languages for which there are previously accepted translation practices, then obviously he has *no data but* the concomitances of native utterance and observable stimulus situation. No wonder there is indeterminacy of translation… (Quine 1969b, 81, my emphasis)

Quine has restrospectively described his reasoning as follows: "Language is learned and taught by observing and correcting verbal behavior in observable circumstances. There is nothing in linguistic meaning that is not thus determined…. What I did … in *Word and Object,* was to press that point for its negative implications regarding the notion of meaning" (Quine 1991, 272). However, this path from language acqusition to the indeterminacy thesis has in fact been explicit from early on (see Quine 1990d, 198). Namely, Quine had already opened *Word and Object* with the following words:

> Language is a social art. In acquiring it we have to depend entirely on intersubjectively available cues as to what to say and

when. Hence there is no justification for collating linguistic meanings, unless in terms of men's dispositions to respond overtly to socially observable stimulations. An effect of recognizing this limitation is that the enterprise of translation is found to be involved in a certain systematic indeterminacy… (Quine 1960, ix)

Consequently, I submit that one can represent Quine's reasoning leading to the indeterminacy thesis schematically as follows:

(1) To understand a language is to know its meanings. Meanings are thus whatever a competent speaker-hearer of a language knows.

(2) Learning to understand a language, that is, to know its meanings, must turn solely on observable use of the expression, there being no innate language and no telepathy.

(3) There is thus nothing in the meaning of an expression beyond what is to be gleaned from the overt use of the expression.

(4) One can construct incompatible manuals of translation that are consistent with all observable use.

(5) There is no fact of the matter which translation is the correct one, because there is nothing more in meaning itself beyond what is in observable use.

I have now presented what I see as Quine's principal reasoning leading to the thesis of the indeterminacy of translation. However, it is worth emphasizing, before I move on, that I do not intend to suggest that this chain of reasoning forms a deductive argument. Neither has Quine claimed that it does; he admits explicitly that "the indeterminacy of translation was always a conjecture, albeit a plausible one" (Quine 2000, 409, and passim).

One can certainly dispute many details of Quine's argument, but I do not think that they actually matter for the overall issue of indeterminacy. The general challenge remains. It is quite plausible to assume that there may be conflicting translations compatible with the readily observable use of expressions—however exactly the latter is explicated.

The next question obviously is how, then, could one resist Quine's radical conclusions—or, indeed, can one?

10. An Alternative Perspective on
Meaning and Understanding

Fortunately, there is now available a wholly alternative account of meaning and understanding which undermines Quine's basis for the indeterminacy thesis. It is not related to the fine details of Quine's views but questions the very ground of Quine's reasoning, as I have interpreted it. This view has emerged, in the past few decades, not as a reply to Quine's thesis but independently of it. Once clearly stated, its general idea is quite plausible. And as such, it provides rather convincing ground for questioning Quine's premises.[14]

I have in mind the semantic externalism of Kripke, Donnellan, Putnam, and others[15] and, in particular, its "arguments from ignorance and error." The latter aim to show that people may succesfully refer with an expression although they are too ignorant to have sufficient knowledge to identify the referent(s) uniquely, or may even have false beliefs that are better satisfied by other entities than the referent(s).

Although the main focus of semantic externalism has been elsewhere, it nevertheless entails a view of understanding that radically differs from the traditional picture: that is to say, from its perspective, there is a definite sense in which understanding a language does *not* consist in knowing or grasping the meanings of its expressions.

One way to summarize the moral of the externalist arguments (see Putnam 1974, 447) is to conclude that there are two traditional assumptions concerning meaning that cannot both be simultaneously true:

(I) The meaning of speaker's words does not extend beyond what he knows and believes and is disposed to do. In other words, it is not possible, in this view, for two speakers to know and believe and be disposed to do and say the same things and yet mean something different by a word.

(II) Meaning of an expression determines its reference, or extension.

But these two assumptions jointly imply that what the individual speaker knows, believes, or is disposed to do and say determines the extension of every term of his language. And that, so the externalist argument goes, just is not true. Semantic externalism prefers to keep (II); hence (I), that is, semantic internalism, must go.

11. Externalism and Indeterminacy

At first sight, one might think that Quine should be seen as an externalist, for he is certainly strongly opposed to the

traditional views on meaning, according to which meanings are mental or abstracts entities grasped or intuited by the mind. But looking closer, Quine's view of meaning is nevertheless internalistic (it falls under assumption (I) above); meaning, in Quine's view, is still determined by what is in a speaker (by his/her dispositions to verbal behavior) considered in isolation from speaker's social and physical environment.[16] Meaning for him is "inside the skin."[17] Quine, on the other hand, is happy to give up assumption (II), that is, to admit that meaning does not determine extension.[18] Assumption (II) simply does not appear to be at all essential for his conception of meaning.

Thus, independently of the exact details of Quine's view, externalists have to agree with Quine that dispositions to verbal behavior do not determine a unique translation. But Quine and externalists make a different choice as to which of the assumptions (I) and (II) one should give up.

Quine does not seem to realize, however, the highly paradoxical consequences of his view according to which meaning need not determine reference. Namely, it seems then impossible to avoid the conclusion that two standing sentences may have exactly the same meaning but nevertheless different truth values. But this is quite intolerable.[19] The externalist idea that also ignorant and mistaken speakers can successfully refer is, on the other hand, as such quite plausible.

In sum, it appears to be much less problematic to give up the traditional assumption of internalism and the idea of availability or transparency of meanings to speakers. But then, Quine's reasoning leading to the thesis of the indeterminacy of translation loses its whole basis. Consequently, one may justly hold that there may be much more in meaning than the dispositions to verbal behavior, or what one can glean from the overt use in the observable circumstances.

It must yet be granted that the above considerations do not as such demonstrate that there is no indeterminacy of translation. But accepting a wide notion of meaning decreases the plausibility of the indeterminacy conjecture, and it certainly restricts considerably the room there can, even in principle, be for indeterminacy. And this is perhaps reassuring enough.

Notes

[1] Roger F. Gibson (1986) argues, convincingly, that Chomsky, Rorty, Aune, and Føllesdal (in 1973) have misunderstood the thesis. Føllesdal (1990) in turn argues that Searle has misinterpreted the thesis. I add several other philosophers below.

[2] One may wonder that Quine's arguments and premises may have varied during the years. In a sense, this is true. Quine has seen

several possible ways leading to the thesis. However, I would argue that, nevertheless, early and late, from, say, *Word and Object* (Quine 1960) to his latest writings (Quine 2000), Quine has had a principal line of reasoning leading to the thesis—one whose premises he has seen to be especially forcing. See sections 6–8. One might also protest that many citations from Quine I give are quite late. This is true, but they were chosen only because of their nice formulations. All the views I ascribe to Quine have been in place and explicit at least since 1969.

[3] Interestingly, Frege also discusses his "thoughts" in relation to translation (Frege 1892, footnote 7).

[4] I shall return to the issue in section 6. See also notes 9 and 10.

[5] See the continuation of the above-quoted passage in Quine 1969b, 81.

[6] Wright (1997) for example, calls them "Quine's two principal arguments for the thesis."

[7] In light of what I say below, "semantic behaviorism" would be even more apt, for Quine's focus here is on meaning, not, e.g., on grammar; cf. notes 9 and 10.

[8] Gibson (1996) is a helpful overview of Quine's "behaviorism."

[9] Here, then, are the limits of innateness for Quine: on his view, languages are learned, not innate; and to learn a language is to learn meaning of its sentences (see below, section 8); consequently, meanings are learned, not innate. This is incompatible with extreme nativism (amounting to the claim that no meanings are learned but it is all innate) but compatible with more moderate forms of nativism. The more innate constraints one postulates the less there is room for indeterminacy, but as long as one does not accept extreme nativism, there is still space for Quine's arguments. And certainly the great majority of philosophers share Quine's disbelief in extreme nativism. For a comprehensive critical discussion of nativism, see Cowie 1998.

[10] In particular, Quine's brand of behaviorism is not refuted by "the standard objections to behaviorism" (as Bloch [1981] calls them), that is, the argument of Geach (1957) and Chisholm (1957) from the holistic character of beliefs and desires, and Putnam's argument from the possibility of unexpressed pains (Putnam 1965). Quine's linguistic behaviorism is clearly untouched by either of these arguments. Further, the most widely accepted and uncontroversial of Chomsky's objections to behaviorism (not based on his disputed nativism) is his argument from the "creativity" of language, i.e., the fact that competent speakers can produce and understand sentences instantly that they have never produced or heard before (Chomsky 1959). But again, all this seems to be totally irrelevant with respect to Quine's linguistic behaviorism. Indeed, Quine had pressed the same point well before Chomsky (see Quine 1953; cf. Quine 1968; see also Quine 1960, 27). Fraser (2000) argues comprehensively that Chomsky's critical considerations do not manage to rebut Quine and his thesis. See also Gibson 1982, ch. 4. Consequently, even if one accepted Chomskian nativism and the idea of innate universal grammar, there is room for Quine's argument, as I interpret it.

[11] In particular, a reader familiar with Dummett's writings may note that in what follows, I am attributing to Quine certain views which are famously held by Dummett, and are much more explicit in Dummett's writings than in Quine's.

[12] The close connection between these notions for Quine can also be

seen in the following passage: "What divides lexicography from semantics as pursued by philosophers is … shift of focus from likeness of meaning to *knowledge of meaning* , so to speak; from synonymy of expressions, anyway, to the *understanding* of expressions. The lexicographer's job is to inculcate *understanding* of expressions, that is, to teach *how to use* them" (Quine 1979a, 140, my emphasis).

[13] See also below, sections 10–11, where I argue further that this is indeed the case.

[14] I am not the first to suggest this kind of line of reply to Quine. Already Friedman (1975) criticized Quine's thesis by appealing to the causal theory of reference, or semantic externalism; but I think his account exaggerated Quine's behaviorism and physicalism. Moreover, Gibson, perhaps the most reliable expositor of Quine's philosophy, admits (referring to Friedman 1975) that were it possible to give a plausible causal theory of reference, it would indeed undermine Quine's thesis; but he suggests further that such theories meet unbearable problems (Gibson 1988, 126–7). The reasons he gives are not, however, in my mind particularly convincing.

What I hope I have been able to show here with my rather detailed exegesis of Quine's texts is that this is indeed a relevant and efficient strategy, whereas various other popular lines of reply fail.

[15] See Putnam 1970, 1973, 1974, 1975b, 1975c; Kripke 1972; Donnellan 1972; see also Devitt 1981. Devitt and Sterelny 1987 is a good overview. My countersuggestion, however, does not assume any particular theory of reference and meaning; what matters is the more general insight that there is often more to meaning than is known by the average speaker, or even any speaker.

[16] It is possible to understand "observable use" itself widely, as overt behavior in *observable circumstances* . Nevertheless, the result of "gleaning," that is, understanding, "the knowledge of meaning," which for Quine amounts to acquired verbal dispositions, is in any case internal to the speaker (cf. note 19).

[17] A liberal Quinean might perhaps accept the idea of "the division of linguistic labor" (see Putnam 1975b) and thus give up individualism (although this is in conflict with Quine's understanding of "observability"). This would make the view more defensible, but also reduce the plausibility of indeterminacy thesis. And from the properly externalistic (not just anti-individualist) perspective, which allows also the physical reality to contribute to meaning, the general conclusions stand (cf. note 19).

[18] See Quine 1986b. Quine seems to think that also Putnam's arguments (which were actually arguments in favour of externalism) show this.

[19] For example, in Putnam's (1975b) Twin Earth thought-experiment, "Water" in Earth and "Water" in Twin Earth would in Quine's view have (before the development of modern chemistry) the same meaning. But it seems clear that it would be mistake (which for Quine is the same) to consider them as correct translations of each other (they denote in fact different, only superficially similar substances), even if there is no difference, at the time, in speakers behavioral and verbal dispositions. There is a further "fact of the matter" here.

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