

### Indeterminacy of Translation and Indeterminacy of Meaning Lecture 3

1. We saw in the last lecture that Quine's argument for the indeterminacy of translation rests on a prior underdetermination: that of theory by data. But the underdetermination and the indeterminacy are not the same thing. A better way to describe the situation would be to say that because the data underdetermine what theory is true; so equally what data the native is *exposed* to underdetermines what theory he *believes* in and hence what his sentences say. It would be true to say that the indeterminacy was a consequence of the underdetermination but not that it was an *instance* of the underdetermination.
2. This way of describing the connection makes Quine seem open to two "parity" objections. The first one is very natural but certainly a misunderstanding: it is due to Chomsky ("Quine's Empirical Assumptions" in Davidson and Hintikka, eds., *Words and Objections*: 61). Quine had said that the radical interpreter faces uncertainty not just at the "theoretical" level—the level of analytical hypotheses—but also at the level of observation statements (*WO* 68). After all, the assignment of stimulus meanings to the observation statements is itself subject to normal inductive uncertainty: for every hypothesis aligning the native's "Ug" with our "Green rabbit!" there will be another—just as well-confirmed—aligning it with our "Grue rabbog!" If Quine thinks there is no problem with assigning a definite stimulus meaning to "ug", why does he think that there is any more problem with assigning a correct translation to "Das neutrino hat keine masse"?
3. The answer is that translational indeterminacy is not *just* the ordinary inductive uncertainty, because neither is the underdetermination from which it arises. Ordinary inductive certainty is just the fact that we cannot rationally extrapolate from cases that we have experienced to cases that we *might* experience or *might have* experienced but in fact did not. But translational indeterminacy, unlike inductive uncertainty, survives even idealization to the case where we observe all that *can* be observed. If we tested the responses of all natives under all situations, if we could *see inside their brains*, the inductive uncertainty of stimulus meanings would be eliminated, but translational indeterminacy would persist.
4. It might also be said that the way in which the translation manual is underdetermined by the native's verbal dispositions (observed and unobserved) is no more troubling than the way the physical theory is underdetermined by the observational data (observed and unobserved). Now Quine does not in the latter case infer from this epistemological limitation that there is no fact of the matter as to which one is the right physical theory. Why then *does* he infer that there is no fact of the matter as to which manual gives the right translation?
5. Quine's view is that an asymmetry arises because the translational, but not (trivially) the physical, indeterminacy, survives settling all the physical facts; but it is plausible that these are all the facts there are.

That is to say: even *once* we have settled all the physical facts (right down to the level of what neural mechanisms operate in the speaker's brain), we *still* have a choice. Since all the facts are physical facts then it seems that there are no translational facts. (The asymmetry arises because the preceding argument does not work if we everywhere interchange "physical" with "translational". Why?) In reply to *this* I think the following is fair: whilst it is true all events are physical events, it might still be true that your best explanatory theory *has* to appeal to propositional attitudes etc. e.g. beliefs and desires. That is, it has to appeal to physical events under mental descriptions. And it may be that once we admit facts of *this* sort into the picture, the indeterminacy vanishes (cf. Quine's Reply to Davidson in *Words and Objections*). That will be the subject of our discussion of Evans next week.

6. Finally, it might be objected (Chomsky again; QEA 54ff) that there is something suspiciously unempiricist about the dispositional mechanisms thought by Quine to underly patterns of linguistic response. To be sure, the native's disposition to say "Evet" when queried "Gavagai?" under suitable conditions was acquired through experience (sensory stimulations). But the disposition to acquire it must *itself* have rested on prior dispositions e.g. to respond to rewards in certain ways, to regard certain phonemes as similar etc. Doesn't that amount to unempiricist innatism? It does not. What the early empiricists objected to was not innate *dispositions* (which everything has an infinitude of) but innate *ideas*: anything like a capacity to think or speak a language. The fact that the former can be acquired without experience does not imply that the latter can too.