

Part II, Paper 8, Question 8

If translation is indeterminate, then how is communication possible?

Communication is still possible because different translations are equally efficient. I show this by presenting translational indeterminacy in § 1, and I show that it is plausible in §2, and I explain how it is compatible with successful communication in §3.

§1

I first introduce three ideas, and I then specify what translational indeterminacy is.

First, what is concerned is radical translation: no continuity may be assumed between the source of language (i.e. the alien language) and the target language (i.e. English) beyond the speakers' common humanity.

Second, the translation in question takes the form of a translation manual: a correlation of the vocabulary and grammar of the source and target language (which Quine calls 'analytical hypotheses').

Third, the success of a translation manual consists in the enabling of fluent dialogue and successful practical interaction with the alien people.

Fourth, the incompatibility of translation manuals is judged by the 'alternation test': if the translation of a source language text by the application of two different translation manuals to alternate sentences yields an inconsistent output, then the two translation manuals are incompatible.

Finally, the indeterminacy of translation is a conjecture by Quine that two translation manuals of a radical translation can be individually successful and jointly incompatible.

§2

Is translational indeterminacy plausible? Quine gave three arguments in its favour. First, the argument from below, which is the famous Gavagai example. However, Quine later found the argument weak as disagreement over 'Gavagai' can be 'compensated' by disagreements over other sentences, so that the alternation test might all the same come out negative. Therefore I look to the next argument, which is the argument from above. It employs the underdeterminacy of physics which Quine convincingly argues for in "The Dogmas of Empiricism" by basically asking how to translate the theory of a foreign physicist. However, it is not at all obvious that indeterminacy of such highly complex notions carries over to more basic vocabulary, and therefore all the argument establishes is that the translation of highly complex theories is indeterminate, as Wright has noted.

Third is the argument from holism, which consists of three ideas:

Holism: A sentence had empirical implication only together with others. E.g. "When humans come close, birds are frightened" on its own has no empirical implications, but together with "Frightened birds fly away" it has. Holism makes possible

Underdeterminacy: several translations can equally well preserve empirical implications, e.g. employing the above example, substitute 'angry' for 'frightened' and the empirical implications remain the same.

Verificationism: The meaning of a sentence consists in its empirical implications.

Given Quine's endorsement of semantic behaviourism, i.e. that there is nothing more to meaning than peoples' public dispositions to behavior (originally due to Dewey) verification comes 'naturally', for our dispositions are a sentence's empirical implication; if we hold a sentence true, we assent to it and act according to it, if we dissent to it, we do not.

The argument from holism then goes:

1. A sentence has empirical implications only together with other sentences (from holism)
2. Several translations equally well preserve a sentence's empirical implications (from underdeterminism)
3. The meaning of a sentence consists in its empirical implications (from verificationism)
4. Several translations equally well preserve a sentence's meaning (from (2) and (3)).

This is not a clear-cut argument, but a plausible progression; given (1) and (3), (4) is as plausible as (2). And this is all I need from the argument, for I am now in a position to show that in either case, i.e. whether it succeeds or not, communication is possible.

§3

How does indeterminacy of translation threaten communication? Not in terms of dialogue and interaction, for that is as specified part of the condition of translational indeterminacy. The threat is instead that it defeats the idea of the meaning of sentences, if there is no one right correlation of sentences of radically different languages, there is no common meaning, or, they do not express the same proposition. And with the defeat of shared meaning and proposition, the threat of impossibility of communication comes.

The seeming threat to communication is illusory. For, I showed in specifying the argument from holism that translational indeterminacy is conditional on semantic behaviourism (and specifically verificationism). So, if semantic behaviourism is true, indeterminacy of translation is true, or at least very plausible. But then the consequences of no common meaning or propositions is no threat for communication, for semantic behaviourism shows that these notions are not real, but all there is to meaning is dispositions to behavior, which translational indeterminacy by 'fluent dialogue' and 'successful practical interaction' ensures. In brief, if translational indeterminacy is true, then the threat is unreal. And the other way around too: if the threat is real, there is more to meaning than public dispositions, semantic behaviourism is false, the argument from holism fails, and indeterminacy of translation is false. In briefest conclusion, in either case, communication is possible.

Comments

The work shows very detailed knowledge of Quine's views and states them clearly and in a way that makes clear how they are relevant to the exposition. The arguments for indeterminacy are presented in a clear-cut way (for instance, it is clear what the premises are) and the essay defends a thesis that directly answers the question. The paper makes an interesting and plausible argument in the final paragraph which is, however, too compressed to merit a mark at the higher end of the firsts. Low first.

