

RADICAL INTERPRETATION LECTURE 2

1. The point of a translation manual is to enable predictions and explanations of the natives' behaviour that would enable us to get by in the native society. To this end, a translation manual pairs up, or offers a systematic method for pairing up, sentences of the language being studied (what Quine calls the 'native language') with sentences of the translator's language (the 'domestic language', in our case English). Cf. e.g. phrasebooks that tell you how to order an ice cream or a taxi in French by pairing up the relevant English sentences with appropriate French ones.
2. Quine's conjecture of the **indeterminacy of translation** is that two translation manuals might be incompatible and yet each is equally good, and unimprovably good, at doing that job. 'Unimprovable': we'd do as well as possible (as radical translators) using either; 'Incompatible': we'd do terribly if we used both. For instance it might be that manual 1 translates a sentence of the native language into a true one of English, whereas manual 2 translates it into a false sentence of English.
3. The argument is from underdetermination of theory by data. This is the point, familiar from Quine's earlier writings, that two theories might be incompatible and yet yield the same observational consequences and thus be empirically indistinguishable (see 'On the reasons for the indeterminacy', *J. Phil.* 67 (1970): 178-9).
4. Note that we are not making this assumption about translation manuals. We are only assuming it about physical theory. The indeterminacy might only be at a very theoretical level, or it might be at the level of talk of tables and chairs. It doesn't matter, so long as you agree that it is there.
5. Now suppose that we are trying to translate some in fact theoretical sentence of the native's language. So it is not an observation statement, though of course it is assented to or dissented from in response to experience. The point is that if observations underdetermine the theory, then stimulus meanings of observation sentences underdetermine the translation of theoretical sentences.
6. What could happen is this. All we can observe of the behaviour of the native scientist is what observations confirm, and what observations disconfirm, their theory. But this means that we cannot distinguish, in point of its predictive value, between a translation that translates the sentences of his theory into the sentences of a 'domestic' theory T and one that translates the sentences of his theory into the sentences of a domestic theory T* that is empirically equivalent to T but logically incompatible with it (cf. WO s15: 76).
7. Here is an example. The first two sentences are observation sentences and so get the same translations in the two manuals M and M*: the essential difference between M and M* is that M takes 'F' to 'frightened' whereas M* takes 'F' to 'happy'.

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Source	Manual M	Manual M*
LS!	Lion struck by spear!	Lion struck by spear!
LA!	Attacking lion!	Attacking lion!
S → F	Anything struck by a spear is frightened	Anything struck by a spear is happy
LF → LA	Frightened lions attack	Happy lions attack
LS → LA	Lions struck by spears attack	Lions struck by spears attack

The theories consisting of the last three sentences in M and the last three in M* are empirically equivalent because they can only be tested via tests of the last sentence. M and M* are equally accurate translations of the corresponding source theory.

8. There response to this. You might say (like Brentano: cf. WO s45) that meanings are forever hidden beneath the surface of all forms of linguistic behaviour. Or you might say like Quine that there is nothing there at all. The empiricist approach described in the last lecture strongly favours the second line.

9. The moral is that there is no such thing as the meaning of a native sentence, at least if that means a proposition which translation must preserve. Quine's examples show not that translation is impossible but that it is all *too* possible: we can unimprovably translate a native's sentence into either of two English ones that are not themselves synonymous on any intuitive conception of synonymy (because they do not even have the same truth value).

10. Preservation of meaning is therefore beside the point when it comes to translation. 'Containment in the Low German idiom facilitated translation of Frisian into English, and containment in a continuum of cultural evolution facilitated translation of Hungarian into English. In facilitating translation these continuities encourage an illusion of subject matter: an illusion that our so readily inter-translatable sentences are diverse embodiments of some intercultural proposition or meaning, when they are better seen as the merest variants of one and the same intracultural verbalism.'

11. So much for radical *translation*. But we must distinguish this activity from radical *interpretation* (and in fact they can be distinguished more clearly than Quine himself seemed to do in *Word and Object*). Radical translation is simply a method for paring up sentences of the native language with sentences of the domestic language in order to convey the relevant facts about the use of the former. Radical *interpretation* is more ambitious: it attempts to assign *reference* to sub-sentential components of the language. Radical translation makes a connection between languages; Radical interpretation makes a connection between bits of language and bits of reality. We shall see that radical interpretation faces a similar indeterminacy; but the arguments for it and against it, and also its philosophical significance, appear to be very different.