RADICAL INTERPRETATION LECTURE 3

1. A *translation manual* pairs sentences of the target language with sentences of the language being translated into. So you might possess and understand a translation manual without understanding either language. E.g. possession of a French-German dictionary, together with construction rules, might let me to create a translation manual from French to German even if I don't understand *either* language.

2. For Davidson, a *theory of meaning* for a language is supposed to contrast with a translation manual on just this point. A theory of meaning for a target language is supposed to tell you, for each sentence of that language, what it *means*. Somebody who knows a theory of meaning for a language must therefore understand it. Davidson thinks that we can achieve philosophical insight into the structure of meaning by attempting to construct such a theory of meaning. (See his 'Radical interpretation', in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford 1984).

3. What would a theory of meaning look like? That is: what do you need to know to understand a language? Davidson suggests that we can represent such knowledge as knowledge of a theory whose theorems include biconditionals stating, for each sentence, a condition that is necessary and sufficient for its truth, for instance:

(3.1) 'Schnee ist weiss' is true in German if and only if snow is white.

We are meant to understand (3.1) as a theorem of a theory of meaning for the German language. Someone who knows such a theory understands German. Note that the left-hand side of (3.1) is about language, in particular a bit of German, but the right hand side is not about language at all – it is about *snow*. (3.1) could not be a clause in a translation manual.

4. If its having true theorems of the form (3.1) is the *only* constraint on a theory of meaning then there seems to be a radical indeterminacy in the meaning of sentences. After all, (3.1) is no *more* true than:

(4.1) 'Schnee ist weiss' is true in German if and only if grass is green.

This biconditional is just as true as (3.1) because it has the same left-hand side as (3.1) and its right-hand side has the same truth value as (3.1). So if there could be a theory of meaning for German that has (3.1) as a theorem then couldn't there also be a theory of meaning for German that has (4.1) as a theorem? And if so, is it then indeterminate whether 'Schnee ist Weiss' in German means that snow is white or that grass is green?

5. Note: this is not the Quinean indeterminacy of translation. The Quinean indeterminacy was (a) dependent on the availability of incompatible but empirically equivalent theories and (b) only supposed to arise at the level of theoretical statements. The kind of indeterminacy here arises everywhere and seems to follow directly from Davidson's idea that a theory of meaning need only generate true biconditionals of the form (3.1).

6. What rules out this indeterminacy is that the correct theory must be knowable to a *radical interpreter*: someone trying to understand the language but who has

nothing to go on other than the observable behaviour of its speakers, where for Davidson this includes data about which sentences of the interpreted language are held true, or would be 'held true', in what contexts.

7. How does this help? You might think not at all, because of course the circumstances in which (say) a German speaker holds true 'Schnee ist weiss' does nothing to distinguish (3.1) from (4.1); after all, most German speakers hold that sentence true in all circumstances. But there is a potential infinity of German sentences, and a knowable theory that generates theorems for all of them couldn't just list them. It would have to have finitely many axioms or axiom schemata.

8. What would these axioms look like? Davidson proposes axioms applying not to individual sentences but rather to repeatable sub-sentential components i.e. to *words*; such axioms would assign a reference or satisfaction condition to each such word. For instance, there would be clauses like this:

(8.1) 'Schnee' refers in German to snow

(8.2) For any x, x satisfies 'ist weiss' if and only if x is white

There would also be structural axioms telling you how to generate biconditionals from clauses of this sort:

(8.3) X + 'ist' + Y is true in German iff what X refers to satisfies: 'ist' + Y

It is easy to see that (3.1) follows from these clauses.

9. It is also easy to see how a radical interpreter would avoid constructing a theory that makes (4.1) a theorem, because (4.1) does not follow from (8.1)-(8.3) nor from any other plausible axioms. (See 'Truth and meaning', in *Inquiries into truth and Interpretation* pp. 25-6.) For note that radical interpretation is *holistic*: what justifies the putative axioms of a putative theory of meaning is their ability to cope with the totality of data: the totality of holdings true, and dispositions to hold true, of the sentences of the target language without attributing massive, inexplicable error (this is Davidson's version of the 'Principle of charity': see e.g. 'Belief and the basis of meaning' in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*: 152-3.)

10. This procedure does however create radical indeterminacy at the level of *reference*. Consider the argument from *proxy functions* (see Quine, 'Things and their place in theories', in his *Theories and Things*, Harvard 1981, p. 19). This is a one-to-one function taking each thing to its cosmic complement. Now consider the axioms:

(10.1) 'Schnee' refers in German to the proxy of snow

(10.2) For any x, x satisfies 'ist weiss' if and only if the proxy of x is white

(10.1), (10.2) and (8.3) entail (3.1) just as well as (8.1), (8.2) and (8.3); by obvious adjustments elsewhere we could construct a theory that entails all the same sentences of the form (3.1) whilst postulating completely different objects of reference and of satisfaction. (See 'Reality without reference' in *Inquiries into truth and Interpretation*.)