Objections to Quine and Davidson: Searle

REFORMULATING QUINE'S ARGUMENT. If we accept behaviourist premises, then meaning consists in a pattern of stimuli and responses. There may be some neural mechanism mediating between stimuli and responses, but it is inessential for the theory of meaning: any medium would do the job just as well. So the behaviourist does not deny there are, or could be, mental states. He only thinks they are unimportant in the account of meaning.

But this view, Searle argues, is incredible from the start. *We* know that there is a difference between meaning 'rabbit' and 'undetached rabbit part', even when there are identical stimuli-response patterns. Hence there will be indefinitely many translations consistent with the evidence, on one hand, but on the other hand, there must be a fact of the matter, a 'part of objective reality', that 'There is a rabbit' and 'There is an undetached rabbit-part' mean different things.

Searle, therefore, sees the indeterminacy of translation argument as a *reductio ad absurdum* of behaviourism. If we start with behaviourist premises and pursue them consistently, we end up with an absurdity. If only we are allowed to use the first-person perspective, to cite as evidence the fact that I know what I mean when I say 'A rabbit!', then the argument simply shows the inadequacy of linguistic behaviourism.

SAMENESS OF MEANING. Quine's argument cannot simply consist in rejecting the existence of meaning in addition to stimuli-response patterns. That rejection was taken for granted from the start. The real argument is rather that, given behaviourist evidence—i.e. observations of stimuli-response patterns—there can be a unique correct translation. That is, the issue is whether there is a fact of sameness of meaning, once behaviourism is accepted. [128]

At this point we have to consider Chomsky's argument again. There we see the complaint that Quine's argument is a mere argument for under-determination—a relatively trivial claim (in Chomsky's eyes). But this works only if there is a level of psychological facts accounting for meaning, that is, only if behaviourism is rejected from the start.

Since Quine, however, affirms it from the start, Chomsky's argument is a misconstrual. Two radical translation manuals are supposed to be compatible with the exactly same distribution of matter. They are physically equivalent, as Quine says. This is possible only if behaviourism is assumed. Therefore, it is wrong to think that Quine's argument establishes non-reality of psychological meanings. Far from it: for it to succeed, this non-reality has to be taken for granted.

INSCRUTABILITY OF REFERENCE. At this point it is worth recalling the Fregean claim: sense determines reference. If the indeterminacy of translation is true, then, Searle argues, there will be no fact of the matter *for me* whether in using 'rabbit' I refer to rabbit or a rabbit-part. [128]

But now, Searle insists, the absurdity of this conclusion is evident. For if this were the case, then I would not be able to make sense of the argument to begin with. I would not be able to understand the (surprisingly) equal correctness of the translation of 'rabbit' and 'rabbit-part' if I have not already had a conception of the difference of meaning of those two expressions. [131]

Now this objection seems wrong. Of course we could have a difference in the meaning of 'rabbit' and 'rabbit-part'—but only in English. When Quine says there is no fact of the matter, he means: there is no fact of the matter whether 'rabbit' or 'rabbit-part' *adequately* capture the meaning of 'gavagai' in Jungle.

HENRI AND PIERRE. Searle finally comes to what he believes is the ultimate ground of indeterminacy: the analogy with relativity. Just as motion is relative to the background coordinate system, so is meaning relative to the choice of the background language and of the translation manual. There is no absolute motion. In the same way there is no absolute meaning to be grasped in translation. This view, Searle insists, is absurd. Is it? [132]

We imagine two French speakers translating an John's English utterance: [133]

(13-1)   John: There's a rabbit there

as:

(13-2)   Henri: Il y a un stade de lapin là-bas

and:

(13-3)   Pierre: Il y a une partie de lapin là-bas.

But this is just a case of inadequate translation. Henri and Pierre are just wrong; their English competence is imperfect. There is a fact of the matter, and it can be captured by grasping what the utterance (13-1) *really* meant.

This is contrasted with motion relativity. Once coordinate systems (of the passing truck or of the car) are specified, then there is no further question what velocity the car is moving with.

I think this is a particularly facile example. Is Quine supposed to claim that the choice between (13-2) and (13-3) is arbitrary? If indeterminacy of translation were that easy to demonstrate, why all the fuss with the imaginary 'gavagai'? Of course we do see the difference, but only because we are already aware of the translation of 'stage', 'part', '*stade*', and '*partie*'.

And what of motion? Searle is right to complain about the 'breathtaking conclusions from sketchy remarks'. But his example is sketchy too. He underestimates the mysteries of motion relativity. It took Galileo's genius to point it out. But even now, is it not mad to argue, 'Well, my speed is 5 mph according to this inertial frame, 0 mph according to that inertial frame, but *I* know that my speed is 25 mph!'? (Of course, the analogy with relativity shouldn't be taken too far—compare the twin paradox.)

PUBLICITY OF LANGUAGE. Searle eventually turns to Davidson. Although Davidson rejects linguistic behaviourism, he joins hands with Quine on the thesis of inscrutability of reference. The reason for this is his commitment to the public character of language. And now, Searle claims, just as Quine's argument is a *reductio* of behaviourism, so is Davidson's argument a *reductio* of the public language argument.

Unlike Quine (as Searle reads him), Davidson does not rule out mental states at the outset. Indeed, as we have seen, his theory relies on the notion of belief, or 'holding true'. But the semantic theory must only use the facts—facts about meaning—available to observers (from the third-person point of view). The speaker himself has no special authority on the question of meaning.

How does Davidson's argument work? As we saw earlier, semantic explanations are 'top-down': because the initial evidence used by the theory is the evidence of the speaker's belief, they begin with truth value assignments to sentences and proceed to the assignment of semantic values to sentential parts. And since the speaker's belief provides evidence for sentential meaning, the procedure is in line with the familiar Context Principle. It is also in line with the general philosophical worry that Tarski's theory of truth doesn't explain the notion of semantic satisfaction. It turns out that we don't have to explain satisfaction in the first place, since meanings trickle down, so to speak, from the sentential level.

Once our interpretations of the speaker's beliefs have been brought into an equilibrium, once we have maximised our agreement with the speakers' beliefs (principle of charity), the job is done. The cost is inscrutability of reference. It follows, because one and the same sentence-level assignment may be compatible with different sub-sentential assignments.

CRITIQUE OF DAVIDSON. [To be completed. . .]

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