ARE THERE EMPIRICAL CASES OF INDETERMINACY OF TRANSLATION?

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Summary
Quine’s writings on indeterminacy of translation are mostly abstract and theoretical; his reasons for the thesis are not based on historical cases of translation but on general considerations about how language works. So it is no surprise that a common objection to the thesis asserts that it is not backed up by any positive empirical evidence. Ian Hacking (1981 and 2002) claims that whatever credibility the thesis does enjoy comes rather from alleged (fictitious) cases of radical mistranslation. This paper responds to objections of that kind by exhibiting actual cases of indeterminacy of translation.

Introduction
“Gavagai” is a made up word, as are the various translations Quine says it admits—all equally compatible with the behaviors of the made up native speakers, but incompatible with each other. Apparently some of the most impressive cases of indeterminacy of translation are fictitious. My favorite is Jorge Luis Borges’s (1964) description of a few pages of the “Eleventh Volume of A First Encyclopedia of Tlön.” We are told that the languages spoken on planet Tlön differ radically from the ones we speak on Earth. Commenting on one of those languages, Borges produces a vivid image of what indeterminacy of translation might look like. He mentions a native sentence and two possible translations. One of them is a literal translation; the other has a more natural expression in most human languages:

The nations of this planet are congenially idealist. […] The world for them is not a concourse of objects in space, but a heterogeneous series of independent acts. It is successive and temporal, not spatial. There are no nouns in Tlön’s conjectural Ursprache, from which the “present” languages and dialects are derived […]. For example: there is no word corresponding to the
word “moon,” but there is a verb which in English would be “to moon” or “to moonate.” “The moon rose above the river” is blor u fang axaxaxas mlo, or literally: “upward behind the onstreaming it mooed.” (Borges 1964, 8)

This gives us an illustration of indeterminacy of translation because the native sentence blor u fang axaxaxas mlo apparently can be equally well translated as “The moon rose above the river” and as “Upward behind the onstreaming it mooed.” The latter is a more literal translation, but harder for us to understand. The former is easier for us to understand, but might render other portions of the native discourse less readily intelligible: portions of their philosophical and scientific discourse might sound nonsensical to us when translated out of their native idiom. Thus, alternative manuals of translation—one more literal, the other less so—might be thought up which afford roughly equal fluency in dialogues and negotiations with the natives of Tlön, but which diverge in the translation of individual sentences. I take this to be a good illustration of Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation.¹

The question addressed in this paper is whether there is any actual empirical evidence for the thesis. A recurrent objection says that there is none, and that the thesis asserts a mere logical possibility.² Quine himself did not do much to prevent this kind of objection from coming up. His reasoning contains very little in terms of direct positive evidence.³ It relies instead on considerations about how language and translation works in general, not on actual case studies. Quine does not think that the lack of direct evidence counts against the thesis. Rather, he argues that this is to be expected, given how hard it usually is to find a single manual of translation.⁴ Once a manual of translation is found that affords fluency in

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¹. This is how Quine formulates the thesis in Word and Object: “manuals for translating one language into another can be set up in divergent ways, all compatible with speech dispositions, yet incompatible with one another” (1960, 27). The notion of ‘incompatibility’ that figures in this passage is explained in Pursuit of Truth in terms of non-interchangeability: the “two translation relations might not be usable in alternation, from sentence to sentence, without issuing in incoherent sequences. Or, to put it in another way, the English sentences prescribed as a translation of a given […] sentence by two rival manuals might not be interchangeable in English contexts” (Quine 1992a, 48).

². Collin and Guldman (2005, 255), for example, say that “… it remains a striking feature of his account that Quine only argues for the abstract logical possibility of the indeterminacy of translation. He never offers serious examples taken from actual anthropological or linguistic research.” See also Bar-On (1993), who argues that indeterminacy of translation is inconsistent with our actual translation practices, and Hacking (1981 and 2002), discussed below.

³. See Quine (1960, chapter 2), (1970), and (1987).

⁴. “Radical translation is a rare achievement, and it is not going to be undertaken success-