SOME CRITICAL REMARKS ON QUINE’S THOUGHT EXPERIMENT OF RADICAL TRANSLATION

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Summary
Quine characterizes his argument for the indeterminacy of translation as a thought experiment, and claims that although it cannot be realized in practice, its result “is not to be doubted”. Quine’s thought experiment is a long argument, intended to have the character of a proof. The argument involves theoretical assumptions, such as the behaviorist approach—asserted by Quine to be “mandatory”—as well as empirical assumptions—e.g., that natives will have words for assent and dissent, which the linguist can recognize as such.

In this paper I critically examine some aspects of Quine’s thought experiment and argue that even granting the behaviorist approach, the argument has substantial theoretical and empirical weaknesses for the claim of indeterminacy to be considered plausible.

1. Introduction

With the argument for indeterminacy of translation Quine intends to establish that there is no empirical basis for meaning and synonymy. In (Quine 1951) he argued strongly against the analytic-synthetic distinction, as based on meaning and synonymy, as well as against other notions which he classified as being part of what he called “the theory of meaning.” At that time he drew a sharp distinction between the theory of meaning and the theory of reference, which included such notions as reference, extension, and truth, suggesting that whereas the latter had a sound empirical grounding, the former did not. The ensuing discussion was very lively, and many different issues were raised, but two responses—(Mates 1951) and (Carnap 1955)—seem to me particularly relevant to Quine’s development of the indeterminacy argument.
Mates and Carnap argue that if what we consider as the empirical grounding of extension and reference is the observed use of words by speakers of a language, we can question the speakers with respect to the use of words in hypothetical and counterfactual situations to obtain inductively a sound empirical grounding for meaning (or intension).

Quine counters by elaborating the techniques suggested by Mates and Carnap into the notion of *stimulus meaning*, and argues that what this shows is not that meaning and intension have an empirical grounding, but that he, Quine, was wrong in assuming that reference and extension do. Herein lies the main conclusion of the indeterminacy of translation argument, which leads to a very substantial shift of perspective in Quine’s later philosophy. A central aspect of the indeterminacy of translation depends on the argument that stimulus meaning is not sufficient to determine reference; hence the inscrutability of reference, which eventually leads to ontological relativity. The inscrutability of reference depends in turn on the indeterminacy of identity; i.e., in that stimulus meaning does not give us the relations of identity and diversity, which is nothing more than another way of saying that reference is socially inscrutable.

2. *Stimulus meaning*

Quine introduces the notion of stimulus meaning as follows (Quine 1960, 32f.):

Let us make this concept of meaning more explicit and give it a neutrally technical name. We may begin by defining the affirmative stimulus meaning of a sentence … for a given speaker, as the class of all the stimulations (hence evolving ocular irradiation patterns between properly timed blindfoldings) that would prompt his assent. More explicitly, … a stimulation \( \sigma \) belongs to the affirmative stimulus meaning of a sentence \( S \) for a given speaker if and only if there is a stimulation \( \sigma' \) such that if the speaker were given \( \sigma' \), then were asked \( S \), then were given \( \sigma \), and then were asked \( S \) again, he would dissent the first time and assent the second. We may define the negative stimulus meaning similarly with ‘assent’ and ‘dissent’ interchanged, and then define the stimulus meaning as the ordered pair of the two … A stimulus meaning is the stimulus meaning of a sentence for a speaker at a date; for we must allow our speaker to change his ways. Also it varies with the modulus, or maximum duration recognized for stimulations. For, by increasing the modulus we supplement the stimulus meaning with some stimulations that were too long to count.