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Materials for indeterminacy of translation

Philosophers in ancient India disputed over whether sentences or words were the primary vehicles of meaning. The argument in favor of words is that they are limited in number and can be learned once for all. Sentences are unlimited in number; we can fully master them only by learning how to construct them, as needed, from words learned in advance. Despite this situation, however, words can still be said to owe their meaning to their roles in sentences. We learn short sentences as wholes, we learn their component words from their use in those sentences, and we build further sentences from words thus learned.

The quest for a clear and substantial notion of meanings then should begin with an examination of sentences. The meaning of a sentence of one language is what it shares with its translations in another language, so I propounded my thought experiment of radical translation. It led to a negative conclusion, a thesis of indeterminacy of translation.

The view that I have come to, regarding intersubjective likeness of stimulation, is rather that we can simply do without it. The observation sentence 'Rabbit' has its stimulus meaning for the linguist and 'Gavagai' has its for the native, but the affinity of the two sentences is to be sought in the externals of communication. The linguist notes the native's utterance of 'Gavagai' where he, in the native's position, might have said 'Rabbit'. So he tries bandying 'Gavagai' on occasions that would have prompted 'Rabbit', and looks to natives for approval. Encouraged, he tentatively adopts 'Rabbit' as translation.

A pioneer manual of translation has its utility as an aid to negotiation with the native community. Success in communication is judged by smoothness of conversation, by frequent predictability of verbal and nonverbal reactions, and by coherence and plausibility of native testimony. It is a matter of better and worse manuals rather than flatly right and wrong ones. Observation sentences continue to be the entering wedge for child and field linguist, and they continue to command the firmest agreement between rival manuals of translation; but their distinctive factuality is blurred now by the disavowal of shared stimulus meaning. What is utterly factual is just the fluency of conversation and the effectiveness of negotiation that one or another manual of translation serves to induce.

He can keep a record of these unconstrued sentences and dissect them. Some of the segments will have occurred also in the already construed observation sentences. He will treat them as words, and try pairing them off with English expressions in ways suggested by those observation sentences. Such are what I have called analytical hypotheses. There is guesswork here, and more extravagant guesswork to follow. The linguist will turn to the unconstrued, nonobservational sentences in which these same words occurred, and he will project conjectural interpretations of some of those sentences on the strength of these sporadic fragments. He will accumulate a tentative Jungle vocabulary, with English translations. and a tentative apparatus of grammatical constructions.

The translator will depend early and late on psychological conjectures as to what the native is likely to believe. This policy already governed his translations of observation sentences. It will continue to operate beyond the observational level, deterring him from translating a native assertion into too glaring a falsehood. He will favor translations that ascribe beliefs to the native that stand to reason or are consonant with the native's observed way of life. But he will not cultivate these values at the cost of unduly complicating the structure to be ascribed to the native's grammar and semantics, for this again would be bad psychology; the language must have been simple enough for acquisition by the natives, whose minds, failing evidence to the contrary, are presumed to be pretty much like our own. Practical psychology is what sustains our radical translator all along the way, and the method of his psychology is empathy: he imagines himself

in the native's situation as best he can.

Considerations of the sort we have been surveying are all that the radical translator has to go on. This is not because the meanings of sentences are elusive or inscrutable; it is because there is nothing to them, beyond what these fumbling procedures can come up with. Nor is there hope even of codifying these procedures and then defining what counts as translation by citing the procedures; for the procedures involve weighing incommensurable values. How much grotesqueness may we allow to the native's beliefs, for instance, in order to avoid how much grotesqueness in his grammar or semantics? These reflections leave us little reason to expect that two radical translators, working independently on Jungle, would come out with interchangeable manuals. Their manuals might be indistinguishable in terms of any native behavior that they give reason to expect, and yet each manual might prescribe some translations that the other translator would reject. Such is the thesis of indeterminacy of translation.

A manual of Jungle-to-English translation constitutes a recursive, or inductive, definition of a translation relation together with a claim that it correlates sentences compatibly with the behavior of all concerned. The thesis of indeterminacy of translation is that these claims on the part of two manuals might both be true and yet the two translation relations might not be usable in alternation, from sentence to sentence, without issuing in incoherent sequences. Or, to put it another way, the English sentences prescribed as translation of a given Jungle sentence by two rival manuals might not be interchangeable in English contexts.

I have directed my indeterminacy thesis on a radically exotic language for the sake of plausibility, but in principle it applies even to the home language. For given the rival manuals of translation between Jungle and English, we can translate English perversely into English by translating it into Jungle by one manual and then back by the other.

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