Chapter 10. Quine and Davidson on translation and interpretation

10.1 Introduction

- ☐ Don't we need to understand the role of language in people's lives?
- ☐ This chapter: concept of language & meaning – Quine (proposed) & Davison (developed)
- ☐ **Meaning of words** ☐ define the meaning
- ☐ **Whether a language makes sense** ☐ clarify the meaning.

(☐ Davison ☐ supply to missing from his semantic proposal)

10.2 Quine and radical translation

- ☐ Familiarity of languages ☐ hard to see the nature of language

- ☐ **Quine's term 'radical translation'** refers to the translation of a completely unknown language with <u>no historical or cultural links to familiar languages</u>.
- ☐ **Radical translation** can <u>neither</u> assume any *prior understanding* of the language in question <u>nor</u> resort to a *bilingual interpreter*.

Imagine the Situation: a 'field linguist' engaged in what Quine calls 'radical translation' where the 'field linguist' knows nothing about the language people speak & assume nothing about the language.

- ☐ language as *radically* foreign to the linguist.
- ☐ superficial similarities (e.g. sentence construction, word-form, writing, vocab) between the *radically* foreign language & linguist's own language ☐ does not indicate any similarity of GRAMMAR OR MEANING.
- ☐ this *radically* foreign language = an object of scientific study ☐ OBJECT LANGUAGE ☐ linguist as a **scientist** who approaches this OBJECT LANGUAGE
- ☐ **The task**: translate the foreign language into linguist's(scientist's) own language (HOME/SUBJECT LANGUAGE)

However, provided there'll be unlimited # of sentences in the foreign language ☐ the linguist needs to translate them systematically. By how?
☐ To construct a translational manual as a guideline to translate any sentence/s

Quine's opinion:

1. Radical translation is sufficient
2. Everything else ☐ a projection of habits created by dealing with familiar languages.
3. To understand a language ☐ we only need a translation manual (radical translation)
4. When dealing with speech with friends/family, the understanding of the speech is

no essentially different from that of the radical translation

5. Based on the idea of '*words are arbitrary signs which are not intrinsically meaningful*'

Differences between Locke & Quine:

☐ **Locke**: words get meaning through association with invisible ideas in speaker's mind

☐ **Quine**: the meaning of words

1) Associated with things that are objectively available to people who observe them

2) **t**hings are objectively available = facts about speakers' dispositions to assent to (agree) & dissent from (disagree) sentences (based on their past experience?)

3) However, whether or not a speaker assent to/dissent from a sentence varies from one culture to another

4) Therefore, a field linguist needs to do some research beforehand

   Example 1 **That's a dog**
   When pointing at a dog ☐ inclined to assent to
   When pointing at a fish/cat/other animals/a person ☐ inclined to dissent from
   These cases assent/dissent vary with circumstances, but not from speaker to speaker
   What if when pointing at a dog-like things (e.g. cloud, some may think it looks like a dog, others may not) ☐ may raise discrepancy (not an obvious sentence)
   ☐ Supervenience & multiple-realizability

   Example 2 God exists
   Different speakers have different attitudes to this sentence (assent/dissent)
   Varies from speaker to speaker ☐ not with circumstances

   Example 3 2 + 2 = 4 or 5 is greater than 9
   Provoke consistent response from all speakers & under all circumstances

Knowledge in own languages (subject-language/home-language) can be used to deal with the radically foreign language (object-language) by a field linguist

☐ The way to observe the profile of assent/dissent of every individual sentence is to pairing them with sentences in his/her/their own language/s
(like in example 1, pointing at a certain animal and say something which everyone assents)
Example 4 that's a dog **and** *that's a fish (conjunction)*
when a dog comes out of a river with a fish in its mouth.

☐ Some sentences ☐ contain **parts** which recur in other sentences

- ☐ If paired **O-L sentences** which have <u>common parts</u> WITH **S-L sentences** which <u>have common parts</u> ☐ we can then predict the ways in which **different combinations** of the same parts will be reacted to.

  - ☐ How to test ☐ present the native speaker of the O-L with sentences we constructed & see whether the provoke assent/dissent. (e.g. O-L: English, we (as non-native speaker of English) construct a sentence e.g. That's a dog when pointing at a picture of a dog & see whether this native speaker of English would assent)
    - ☐ **If assent** ☐ hypothesis is confirmed
    - ☐ **If dissent** ☐ need to revise the pairing

- ☐ **Following the same process with all possible sentences** ☐ field linguist can build up *a complete translation manual*
- ☐ **The S-L** should have the same **assent/dissent profile/s** compared with their **O-L counterparts**
  - ☐ If the **A/D** from **O-L** is consistent across speakers **BUT** <u>varies with different circumstances</u> ☐ same for S-L (under the same circumstances)
  - ☐ If A/D varies between speakers BUT same under different circumstances (O-L) ☐ applied to S-L
  - ☐ If neither invariant ☐ O-L matches S-L
  - ☐ **Other situations:** 2 groups of natives – one group assents, the other dissent ☐ need to find counterparts in S-L with similar tendencies to provoke common group responses.

- ☐ **Quine's view is austere as:**
  1) Basic evidence available to the field linguist ☐ merely dispositions to A/D
  2) The field linguist has to do is produce *translations*

  (to pair sentences in the O-L with sentences in the S-L with similar A/D/ profiles)

  3) Davidson's approach differs to the 2 points listed above

10.3 Davidson and radical interpretation

- ☐ **Radical interpretation** is interpretation of a speaker, including attributing beliefs and desires to them and meanings to their words, from scratch—that is, without relying on translators, dictionaries, or specific prior knowledge of their mental states.

- ☐ The task of the field linguist ☐ NOT *radical translation* BUT *radical interpretation*
- ☐ He promoted the link between **semantics** & **the task** undertaken by the field linguist

- The task of semantics (as per Davidson) ▢ to show in an explicit way how the meaning of sentences **depends on** the meaning of their parts
  - *A theory of meaning* for language (a semantic theory): we can derive *an explicit statement* of the meaning of **all sentences** from *an explicit statement* of the meaning of their parts.

> [W]e can know which sentences of the subject language translate which sentences of the object language without knowing what any of the sentences in either language mean.[2]

<div align="right">(page 199)</div>

- **If follow Quine's notion:**
  1) We can match A/D profiles without knowing any sentence of either language
  2) But we can't provide a theory of meaning for an alien language (O-L?) without knowing the meaning of any of the sentence of that Alien language
  3) WHY? Theory of meaning requires explicit statements of the meaning of the sentence ▢ i.e. we assent/dissent ▢ we must know the meaning of the sentence (explicitly stated)

- **Davison's version is superior, why?**
  1) For the situation that a field linguist dealing with a radically foreign language: our understanding of the speech of the people we interact with everyday > better than just matching A/D profiles by knowing nothing.

  2) The basic evidence for the field linguist ▢ NOT native's dispositions to A/D profiles ▢ BUT beliefs and desires about sentences

  3) **Simplest version:** The field linguist can tell which sentences the natives believe are true/false, **WITHOUT knowing** the meaning/beliefs/desires (refer to Kripke's puzzle about belief)

     (SB1)
     If someone understands a sentence and thinks it is true, then she believes what the sentence says;

     (SB2)
     If someone understands a sentence and does *not* think it is true, then, provided she is rational, she *does not* believe what the sentence says.

- **The crucial thought:** in interpreting someone, we should take her to believe what is sensible for someone in her situation to believe, UNLESS we can explain how she might have ended up with beliefs which are not sensible (whether or not the belief makes sense)
- **Same may apply to Quine's A/D profiles:**
  1) If someone thinks a sentence is true in some circumstances ▢ something

which it is reasonable to believe in the right circumstances not others

   2) If someone thinks a sentence is true in all circumstances ☐ true regardless in what circumstances, etc.

☐ **As per semantic theory stated by Davidson (parts defines the whole)** ☐ we need to suggest provisional statements of the meaning of the parts from which we can derive those provisional statements of the meaning of whole sentences.

☐ **How to test?** On natives

   1) If they think those sentence are true which mean things which we think are **TRUE** ☐ provisional theory is confirmed
   2) If they think those sentence are true which mean things which we think are **FALSE** ☐ provisional theory needs a revise (unless we can explain the difference of view)

10.4 Statements of meaning and propositional attitudes

☐ **The principle of charity or charitable interpretation** requires interpreting a speaker's statements in the most rational way possible and, in the case of any argument, considering its best, strongest possible interpretation.

☐ A basic worry: statements of the truth-conditions of sentences seem to permit more substitutions than statements of the meaning of sentences do

☐ Something could count as an acceptable statement of the truth-condition of a sentence, even if it could not plausibly be regarded as an acceptable statement of its meaning

Example 1 (Ts**)
The sentence 'Snow is white' is true **if and only if** snow is white and the area of a circle is $Pi*r^2$.

   ☐ TRUE

   But

Example 2 (Ms**)
The sentence 'Snow is white' means that snow is white and the area of a circle is $Pi*r^2$.

   ☐ Unacceptable as a statement of the meaning of the crucial sentence

The principle follows (what natives believe & what their sentence means):
(SB1) If someone understands a sentence and thinks it is true, then she believes what the sentence says.

☐ For Ts** ☐ all natives of English believe it's true that 'snow is white' regardless their

geometry knowledge (in relation to Pi*r^2)

☐ However, if we took Ts** to give the **meaning** of this sentence ☐ all English natives (regardless their knowledge of geometry) believe that 1. Snow is white & 2. The area of circle is Pi*r^2
  ☐ However, for natives, they would believe that this would take into account their knowledge of geometry…(that seems to be ruled out by the principle of Charity – does it mean whether taking into account their knowledge of geometry is ruled out??)
  ☐ As a consequence, Ts** assigns to the sentence 'Snow is white' a true-condition (cannot be regarded as giving its meaning)

☐ **An *extensional version* of the principle of charity (by Davidson):**
  1) We only need to maximize agreement between the natives & us as radial interpreters
  2) Our task ☐ to make natives right amap
  3) Regardless the knowledge of geometry ☐ all English natives believe that snow is white and area of circle is Pi*r(sqt)
  4) it's true that snow is white & area of circle is Pi*r(sqt) AS it's that snow is white

☐ **A *weighted extensional version* of the principle of charity**
  1) to optimize agreement between natives & radical interpreter
  2) focus things important for people to get right
  3) requirement on acceptable interpretations (that natives often be right with)

10.5 Theories of meaning and speaker's knowledge

☐ a natural suggestion on what precisely the theory of meaning (parts ☐ the whole) show about the speakers of a language:
☐ **Speaker's knowledge (spk)**
  1) A theory of meaning for a language is a statement of **what competent speakers of that language know.**
  2) Can tell us the actual state of the minds of people who can speak the language
  3) Davidson did not see this as something to look into speakers' psychology (even though some psycho tests are needed to explore the theory)

☐ **Davidson accepted *sufficient knowledge* conception (suk)**
  1) A theory of meaning for a language is something knowledge of which would suffice to **enable someone to understand that language.**
  2) Not expecting/suggesting the speakers of a language would know the theory

3) However, getting one to know the theory ☐ would make him/her as good as the natives (by a different route) (e.g. advanced level of L2 speakers acquire a language through learning the grammar/vocab of that languages?)
4) As per author ☐ it will make a difference to the way to represent the structure of sentences within a language
5) **Davidson's conception**: the <u>fundamental business</u> of **a theory of meaning** for a language ☐ be able to **yield a correct statement of the meaning** of *every sentence* in the language
6) **If 2 theories of meaning** (same language) could do equally well:
   a) They're different **in what they take to be the meaning** of parts of sentences
   b) They're different **in which they take the meaning of sentences to be derived** from the meaning of the parts
   c) Davidson believes they're both good enough for us to understand the language

☐ However, supporters for **speaker's knowledge conception** may not agree & wonder:

1) How the conclusion is reached (meaning)?

2) Why following one route not the other (derivation) ?
3) **Speakers speak sentences in clusters** ☐ therefore there may be a theory of meaning to show links between individual sentence & cluster
   ☐ With the same # of words ☐ some sentences **take longer** for speakers to process ☐ reflect **a different complexity** in deriving their meanings
4) **With SKC**, we may be able to produce theories of meaning for languages having their grammar that is *psychologically real*
   a) Structure of the sentences
   b) The way in which conclusions on their meaning is derived
   c) a&b match the process that speakers go through (reading/hearing☐ understand the meaning)
   d) a theory of meaning ☐ could tell what speakers know
   e) even though we may not know all theoretical concepts of parts of speech OR semantic concepts for the statement of meaning ☐ **SKC can define what a competent speaker should know** (tacit knowledge > explicit knowledge) ☐ no need for full comprehension
   f) SKC ☐ portray Davidson

☐ **Sufficient knowledge conception (SuKC)**
1) Portrayed a Behaviourist view (learning through imitation etc.)
2) Emphasis the input

- **What a language means ☐ whether can tell us anything about the mind of the speaker?**
  1) **SKC** (speaker's)– there's no more to a language than what its speakers know
  2) When talking about a language = talking about the structures in people's mind (*subjective view* of language) –
  3) Each person has his/her own language ☐ if it's true, Language = Psychology

  4) **SuKC** (sufficient) – more *objective*
  5) Independent to individual speakers ☐ it's only a matter of correctness of using/understanding them ☐ if it's true, language is independent to psychology

- **In relation to the attitude of familiar languages (English, German, and Japanese) ☐ distinction is clear**
  1) <u>**Subjective view**</u>: facts about language = facts about the psychology of individuals
  2) This does not apply to familiar languages mentioned above
  3) But rather to idiolects (individual particular language)

  4) <u>**Objective view:**</u> applies to familiar languages
  5) Focus on the tacit knowledge of the selected language
  6) The business theory only describes the objective facts about a language

<u>The difference is not about the psychological mechanisms but the fundamental difference between two general conceptions of language.</u>

10.6 How fundamental is radical interpretation?

RT - Every fact about the meaning of any words in any language, which can be known at all, is available in principle to someone to whom those words are **initially radically alien**, who proceeds by means of the methods of radical interpretation

- We need 2 things to get at the meaning of the words in any language:
  1. evidence (available to anyone)
  2. rationality (in working from that evidence in the construction of a theory)

- *perspective-neutrality* principle (PN)
  - Every fact of any kind, which can be known at all, can be known on the basis of evidence which is available in principle to everyone, together with the application of reason.
  - As an expression of a commitment to the power of a certain kind of science
  - Sciences of this kind X depend on any particular perspective – instead, it can

be tested from every perspective & they're rational

e.g. secondary qualities, like colours ☐ only available primarily/authoritatively through a particular sense (colours v.s. sight)
Redness ☐ is not available to everyone (e.g. colour-blinds or ppl cannot see)
If accept PN, we need to reject the apparently natural view of redness

- ☐ We may need a more neutral term (e.g. scientific term like physics) to define redness to make it available to everyone
- ☐ RT > plausible than PN ☐Facts about meaning x link to sense (e.g. colours)
- ☐ BUT, what if leaning a language involves acquiring very general habits & a distinctive cast of mind???? ☐ may depend on some non-rational training