

On Meaning Skepticism: Indeterminacy Hitch, Radical Interpretation and an Argument From Choice Paralysis

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Introduction

Both Davidson and Quine imbue holism into their philosophical views. Quine's holism drove him to be skeptical about meaning. Davidson, with his theory of Radical interpretation (RI), saw the possibility of meaning, so long as language remains constantly interpreted by a community who uses it. In this paper, I will contend that as we find an 'indeterminacy of translation', in Quine, an 'indeterminacy' problem similarly persists in Davidson's RI, and it is equally possible to be skeptical of RIs and lapse into meaning skepticism. Ultimately, I argue that RI only enjoys partial success in providing a sufficient alternative to a belief in meaning, but fails to fully drop Quinean meaning skepticism (QMS). I will first discuss Quine's Holism; and in the second part, I will be tackling Davidson's RI and conclude by introducing an aspect of choice paralysis.

Quine's Holism

W.V.O. Quine argues in his work, *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*, that 'modern' empiricism is, in bulk, conditioned by the two dogmas of [1] *analytic-synthetic divide (a-sd)* and [2] *reductionism* (39). Proceeding his criticisms of *as-d* and *reductionism*, Quine proposes a thorough account of pragmatism rooted in a Holism of ideas. That is to say, every fabric of knowledge, including empiricism, which Quine holds as scientific systems of knowledge, are and can be intermarried in a single holistic web encompassing a coherent totality altogether (50). Any adjustments in this system can help affirm a statement as true; consequently, it is impossible for any statements to be immune from revisions, owing to each statements' logical interconnectedness in this web,

necessitating in part a need to adapt revisions given new discoveries (51). However, it must be noted that from Quine's naturalistic holism, statements could [1] suffer being underdetermined by their evidence due to flux in experiences warranting readjustments to occur, but more radically, [2] translations [of statements] to be indeterminate due to a lack of any epistemic justification (EJ) for selecting a translation manual; therefore, lapsing into meaning skepticism.

Underdetermination occurs due to a lack of complete evidence to determine a conclusion, "leaving a latitude of choice to what statements we reevaluate" (50). In Figure 1, suppose from a birds-eye view, a ball appears to lay at rest within a transparent box. *Person A* argues that the ball and box are both at rest. Meanwhile, *person B* claims that neither ball nor box is at rest, instead both are in constant motion. From a birds-eye view, it becomes 'underdetermined' to the spectator which theory to believe in, as seemingly both statements give an equally sufficient explanation about this certain experience. Hence, following Quine, indecision occurs and "betrays an incomplete understanding, an incomplete grasp of the meaning" (45).

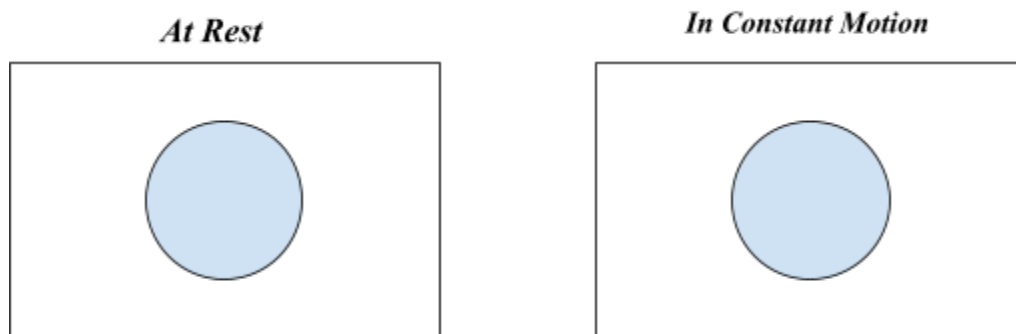


Figure 1. Birds-eye view of a ball and box within theories of being at rest or constant motion.

In the example above, a reader may note that underdeterminacy of such phenomena can be dissolved when we are able to adjust auxiliary and underlying assumptions about the given case in light of new evidence. Suppose that this ball and box were in fact the earth spinning at its axis and you sitting on a chair. From a heavenly perspective, there still might be difficulty

understanding what is happening; however, assume now that the earth suddenly stopped. If the earth did stop and nothing happened, it might be safe to say that the earth is at rest. However, if the earth did stop and things moved according to their original speeds and changes in location and motion were to occur, then the earth was in constant motion. Therefore, underdeterminacy may not be an issue at all. However, what of the cases offered by Descartes, in such that it is possible to believe that our experiences are illusory— that is we are impressed either by our own body as if we were dreaming¹ or that we are being deceived by an evil demon into experiencing the world? These thought experiments produce a broader underdeterminacy case to what theory to accept when both explain adequately that one's experience of the world can be questioned given larger sets of data and/or evidence .

Indeterminacy of translation occurs at the context preceding Radical Translation (RT) — Quine famously reviews this problem of indeterminacy of translation in his work, *Word and Object*, primarily through the 'Gavagai' example — where a traveler attempts to make 'translations' of what a native means whenever they utter 'Gavagai' (23). The assumption proceeds considering that the native's language is alien to the translator. Quine believes that given translations based on behavioral outputs or observations of the native and his utterances, it would still be logically impossible to choose a correct translation manual whenever a native says 'Gavagai' because of a difficulty with *how can one know certainly that they are selecting the correct translation manual?* According to Quine, no fact leads a translator to affirm that whenever Gavagai is uttered, selecting the translation of the word to stand as i.e. 'rabbit', 'rabbit tail', 'white rabbit' or any other given translations, nothing justifies any translation as correct

¹ See *Meditations on First Philosophy* by René Descartes

(Replies 275). Eventually, Quine ends up skeptical of ‘correct’ translations and the possibility of meaning.

I argue that Quine’s indeterminacy problem is *too strong* in this sense that it attacks the idea that no language can have any [fixed] meaning, and consequently sets an unreachable threshold for meaning to be determined because of the impossibility of grounding the justification regress. However, in following Quine’s thesis, it becomes possible that we underestimate the role of language in various pragmatic contexts. Consider practical situations where we can at times elucidate feedback mechanisms(FM) between speaker and audience about any given translations, assuming there are at least what I call a shared and acquired understanding (SAU) between similarities in our language and alien language — that is, it becomes clear and apparent to any given speakers to understand each other, organically, given a set of various interactions. For example, whenever the word *Kuneho* or *Gavagai* is uttered, regardless of the possibility for initial mistakes or cultural differences to abstruse the translation, bodily expressions such as the affirmation of a thumbs-up or the denial of a thumbs-down are effective signposts to inform the accurateness of translation. Yet, we must intercede when using FMs that have mixed meaning in various contexts to take their meaning as they would play in that context. For example, in the Philippines, when people nod their heads vertically, more often, the meaning behind that expression is akin to saying yes. However, in India, nodding one’s head the same way, means no. The point of SAU, first and foremost, is that it ought to have been organically acquired. Since people are communicating in context, the meaning of a word is gained in relation to that context. In relation with the *Gavagai* case, while using FMs via a thumbs-up or down, may initially invoke conflicting understanding on whether a thumbs-up is to be confirmatory of something or not and *vice-versa*, but when a set of experiences are acquired

and shared, then, I argue that SAU should make us cogent, rather than indeterminate of our translations. However, while FMs and SAU, either being expressed verbally or non-verbally, are in place, these communication tools may itself tie with the view of reducing meaning with speaker intention² and warrants the same justification for why we should accept a certain translation/intention above all. I ask, *from what authority can a statement gain its [unchallenged] semantic? And what justifies this authority sufficiently that it now warrants us to accept their claim as true?*

The bulk of Quine's indeterminacy proves strongly that meaning, in the absence of any grounds for EJ or entity capable of ordering our knowledge, must then be non-existent even if pragmatic considerations were to be taken. Afterall, any RT can be made and make sense of when it enters the domain of our holistic web. Hence, to reiterate, no matter of fact leads a translator to affirm a statement of translation as correct (Replies 275)... "manuals for translating are compatible with the totality of speech dispositions, but at the same time incompatible" (Word and Objects 24).

Davidson's Radical Interpretation

Given Quine's RT of alien language to speaker language, Donald Davidson extends this Quinean concept to emphasise interpretation, and consequently replace RT with his theory of RI. Whereas, RT can be explained by looking at Quine's holistic web, Davidson's holism is arguably shaped and emphasized by RI. In *Truth and Meaning*, Davidson highlights that the general consensus on the task of semantics is to provide the semantic interpretation of language (94). In the lack of a clear literature guiding a reader how one arrives so, Davidson proposes to take on a holistic view of meaning, that integrates a Tarski-like theory of truth (TLTT), where the theory of

² See 'Meaning' by H.P. Grice.

truth will lead to a theory of meaning characterising predicates to meet certain conditions (95); but, unlike Tarski, Davidson treats truth here as a basic condition that will allow us to interpret utterances made by a speaker (Radical Interpretation 326). That is to say, this TLTT presupposes RI, which is concerned with the basis of “how we know conditions that will enable us to interpret [utterances of others based on their behavioural and/or empirical components]” (313). Truth, for Davidson, is irreducible and necessary. He notes, “to give truth conditions is a way of giving the meaning of a sentence” but at the same time, the truth of such theory rests on its power to recover the ability to speak and understand a language (Truth and meaning 96). Consider the problem of biconditionals below:

(A) ‘Snow is White’ is True iff Snow is White

(B) ‘Snow is White’ is True iff Grass is Green.

Statement A, *prima facie* appears to be the only meaningful statement, contrary to statement B. The problem is to address *why is it that we are to prefer certain T-sentences³ like A and not B in our theory of truth?* For Davidson, the integration of a TLTT is done to attribute truth-conditions to utterances in light of evidence and interpret them accordingly (Radical Interpretation 326). Applying these to Statements A and B above, Only A fulfills coherence of logical propositions between object language (OL) and metalanguage (ML), and correspondence of the proposition with the observable properties of the material world. Meanwhile, B can only be true in coherence, but fails to be interpreted the same with correspondence. To elaborate, in not all cases ‘Snow is white’ is True, because *correspondingly* not all grass is green. The T-sentence in B is only true in isolation of the material world; thereby also failing the holistic constraint that Davidson proposes a theory of meaning ought to tackle. Hence, we avoid B.

³ See ‘The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundation of Semantics’ by A. Tarski

Similarly, in the Gavagai case, given the TLTT, it becomes intuitive for Davidson to interpret rather than simply translate the utterances of a native, whose language is alien to him. For by simple translation, it is possible that meaning may be left undetermined despite a success in translation, i.e. '*Lapine*' \leftrightarrow '*Kuneho*', both are to mean 'Rabbit' but we are also to concede that plain translation won't render the understanding of the meaning, 'Rabbit', lest the speaker is already familiar of both foreign languages, which in the context of RT or RI, we assume that translators or interpreters are not; otherwise, there is no need for RT or RI. Now, whereas we are to commit to interpretation rather than translation, given the OL, 'Gavagai' with some predicate about it and insert it into a truth equation, then various interpretations can be made following further evidence shown. Suppose the following statements below⁴:

(C) 'Gavagai is a rabbit' is true-in-native tongue when uttered by x at time t iff there is a rabbit near x at t

(D) 'Gavagai is white' is true-in-native tongue when uttered by x at time t iff x points at white objects at time t

(E) Native X is a zookeeper at NativeZoo and holds that 'Gavagai is a rabbit' is true on Monday afternoon and there was a rabbit at NativeZoo.

(F) Native X walks along Avenue N and holds 'Gavagai is white' is true at Monday morning and native x points to more than one white objects

Statements C and D both share the formal proposition of "'S is P' is true iff S is P". Both statements provide the truth-conditions by which OL becomes clear. However, this is insufficient in itself as it does not add anything new to the OL than bridge it to its ML in formal composition.

⁴ Examples are taken as Rephrasements from 'Radical Interpretation' by D. Davidson

Davidson restresses holism, by adding Statements E and F into the picture, which by serving as grounding evidence, allows us to know further about how accurate our interpretations are. Consider that we analyze statement E with statement C, then statement E provides evidence to the interpretation of ‘S as P’ in C; and when taken together, statement CE makes an interpretation of Gavagai to mean a rabbit is true given the particular instance that native x uttered Gavagai when there was indeed a rabbit present. The same can be done with Statements D and F, as with other interpretive statements about the OL that combine truth-conditions to actual empirical components of a native’s behavior, and evidence backing this up. However, for the holistic attitude to work, Davidson notes the Principle of Charity⁵ (PC) must apply. That is, we are making the best interpretations possible when natives *xyz* utter statements *abc*. It assumes that natives are themselves rational and are acting not with the desire to deceive us when they behave particularly when they utter phrases like ‘Gavagai’.

Choice Paralysis

If we are to accept Davidson’s theory of RI, then contrary to Quine, meaning must exist as various interpretations are made for utterances to mean certain things. Furthermore, a Davidsonian may elaborate that given various interpretations, meaning must therefore be multi-varied and layered which should provide us a sufficient breakaway against meaning skepticism. I argue however, that the multiplicity of interpretations can equally strengthen the indeterminacy claim and that a lapse into a skeptical position about interpretations is possible. Considering Statements C and D above, we face the same problem of indeterminacy as the absence of a grounding claim or EJ that could reign beyond doubt the correct meaning of the given interpretations continue to be absent. By Davidsonian standards, meaning arises as some

⁵ See “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation” by D. Davidson

sort of pragmatic choice that an interpreter decides on following the PC and their own belief; on the contrary, it is not illogical, partly with the absence of any EJ to concede with meaning skepticism, as choosing of believing in non-meaning is as rational as having freedom to choose from a wide array of choices and risk oneself to getting trapped into choice paralysis (CP) and possibly skepticism after.

Although, it is possible as well that in conceding with Davidson's theory of RI, beyond establishing a set of possible meanings, RI establishes a set of reasonable interpretations that could address the indeterminacy hitch and CP in such that in some cases, no matter how much we insist to use a word to mean its opposite — we cannot because of formal constraints embedded in our language and in RIs relation to truth. For example, it is absurd to say that hot water means that the water is hot when in fact it is cold. Therefore, an answer is clear and must dissolve any possibility for CP when evidence against reason presents itself. However, I will try to show why CP and indeterminacy remain valid claims, primarily in semantics, regardless of reasonableness of interpretation given by RI.

First, CP may also end with skepticism when a redefinition of meaning happens. Whereas, as earlier, QMS is externally indecisive, CP is internally wanting. To elaborate, within CP are the options between RIs of a word, the literal meaning of a word, which we shall suppose is conventionally accepted upon, and a use of the word. Lest a speaker is willing to follow the rules of community with the use of a specific word, CP shall be non-existent since a speaker is decided. Otherwise, should the speaker insist with a meaning one purposively intends so far as the suggested meaning is to an extent reasonable and transmittable in such that it can be understood and accepted by others, then one may find it that no set of reasonable interpretations will deliberately fix the meaning of a word, but can only as far suggest the most sound

interpretation. Suppose Argle wants to pull a prank on their friend Cradle and will need Bargle's help. When Cradle asks for hot water, Argle gives Cradle 'hot' water which really is cold. Argle deliberately insists that the water is what he had asked for, and suggests that they concede with Bargle's better judgement. Bargle, who had been friends with Argle for so long, had developed a SAU between the both of them, which allows Bargle to know that Argle is intentionally juxtaposing the meaning of 'hot water' to mean cold when pulling a prank on their friend Cradle. There is no doubt that hot water cannot mean of water that is cold, but we can point that there is some use to saying 'hot water' to mean it is cold – to prank Cradle – and so adjust the meaning to its use. In this scenario, the use of the joke and intercepting the understanding of that joke to oneself leaves Bargle with RIs to impose upon their friend on the meaning of "hot water". Now, however, Bargle is in a case whereupon they could also be paralyzed into deciding the meaning of the word, whether to take its literal conventional form, attribute it to its use, or say he knows nothing about it.

The same way that it is possible that Bargle does reach a choice from his options, it is equally possible that Bargle cannot decide and becomes skeptical of the options provided because each option may appear to Bargle as resulting from different justifications which themselves must be justified, and so restrains him. Now I would like to point out that while the act of naming is different from meaning, in the context of the thought experiment above, if we concede with the idea that to name cold water as hot is a rather flimsy or arbitrarily move, must this not posit prior that cold water must only fit a name that captures its meaning (ergo a thing cold but not hot) , but if so, *why are we able to take a name entirely different from what it should have been (cold water) and still be able to transmit and share this new name to mean something with others and be made sense of?* Even if the name does not necessarily become what we would

presume *commonsensically* it would mean, does not name itself also able to evolve with a community's use as with meaning? If so, permit the theory of meaning [as use]. It would be worthwhile to note that *meaning as use*, as a concept can also be associated with the views of the later Wittgenstein⁶. In my use of the concept, I do no more than describe how it fits into a CP scenario, whereby the result of doing something makes understanding about certain RIs meaningful, but still not result in meaning. I do not go into further detail of more scrutinies or objections of *meaning as use* as these shall be the subject of another paper. Rather, I simply highlight the viability that such theory could operate when paired with psychological constraints of CP and the transmissibility of altered meaning into going about meaning skepticism.

Going back to Argle, Bargle and Cradle, this thought experiment achieves that we can make words to be meaningful despite having no direct access to what words ultimately mean. For Argle, to give 'hot water' that is cold is to an extent meaningful in such that Bargle can reasonably interpret that it is possible to mean its opposite in the right context. Non-belief strictly in meaning can be justified in this sense while giving way to fulfilling pragmatic concessions. Thus, it appears that RIs align better with pragmatics rather than the literal semantics of a word. Second, in losing intentionality of whatever a word should mean following off the persisting indecision that may occur in CP, reasonable interpretations appear to not always resolve the indeterminacy claim, especially when no meaningful attempts are being made to ground the meaning of a word or when no such claim to justification can be located. Ultimately, RI seems better to perform in providing meaningfulness to a word rather than semantics. That is, our pragmatic choices can better inform our belief in the right use of a word and make it meaningful,

⁶ See Philosophical Investigations by Ludwig Wittgenstein.

regardless of whether or not meaning itself can decisively be established. In the offset, the EJ requirement itself seems *too strong* into redirecting our beliefs toward skepticism.

Conclusion

If my argument defending QMS and meaning skepticism as a whole is correct, then it is possible that talk of theories of meaning is nonsensical. This is not to abandon discussions about meaning or seeking to marry meaning with pragmatics, but argue such enterprises must also provide a sufficient answer to the indeterminacy claim. Otherwise, such theory also risks its interpreters paralyzed from numerous choice claims that could perpetuate a view towards meaning skepticism.

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