Philosophical Issues in Meaning and Translation

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This paper discusses certain views in contemporary philosophy especially relevant for the theme of translation and meaning. First, Kuhn and Feyerabend claim that comprehensive belief systems which differ sufficiently are "incommensurable" or mutually untranslatable, because they have no common meanings; according to them, change of a belief system inevitably leads to change of meanings. Second, the famous thesis of "the indeterminacy of translation" by W.V. Quine is discussed. According to this thesis, it is possible to construe several conflicting translations compatible with all observable data, all of these translations being equally correct. If this is true, meanings themselves are deeply indeterminate.

It is argued that both theses lead to intolerable problems and that a notion of meaning is needed which is more stable and more thick. The new, "externalist" theory of meaning (developed by Kripke, Putnam and others) submits that meanings do not depend only on what is in the speaker's mind, but that also history and the speaker's social and physical environment play some role in determining what the meanings are. It is suggested that this theory helps to avoid the problems of the above views.

1. Introduction

In contemporary philosophy, not to mention in the humanities and social sciences as well, there is a great deal of talk about meaning. However, philosophers' views on what is meaning vary greatly. The American philosopher William Lycan (Lycan 1984, 272) has argued that part of this disagreement derives from the wide acceptance of what he calls "the Double Indexical Theory of Meaning". He suggests that it explains why most disputes over the nature of meaning have seemed so intractable. Here it is:

MEANING $=_{def}$ Whatever aspect of linguistic activity happens to interest me now.

My own intuitive starting point is the following commonsense truism: the meaning of an expression, whatever it is, is what the expression and its (exact, correct) translation (assuming there is one) share, i.e. they have 'the same meaning'. This notion may be called linguistic meaning, or lexical meaning. There are certainly many other notions of meaning, but this is the one I shall focus on below.

In what follows I shall introduce and critically evaluate a couple of highly influential views on meaning in contemporary philosophy which are directly related to translation. I shall also briefly sketch a new alternative approach which avoids the problems of those views.

2. The Radicals of the New Philosophy of Science

2.1. The incommensurability thesis and the impossibility of translation

In the 1960s, a radical new trend emerged in the philosophy of science. This is largely due to two philosophers, Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend (see Kuhn 1962, 1970; Feyerabend 1962, 1963, 1965a, 1965b, 1970, 1975). Their arguments were directed primarily against the received positivist view on science which was dominant in the 1920s-1950s. However, their views have much wider implications.

The key claims of Kuhn and Feyerabend are the following. First, they submitted (against the received view) that under closer scrutiny the history of science demonstrates:

(a) The thesis of scientific revolutions:
Scientific knowledge does not accumulate; there are radical breaks and revolutions in the development of science. Often a new theory conflicts with or contradicts the old one.[1]

The radicals also endorsed a certain view of meaning:

(b) The contextual, or holistic, theory of meaning
The meaning of an expression that occurs in a scientific theory (or a system of beliefs) depends solely on the principles of the theory (the system of beliefs). To

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1   This had been emphasized already earlier e.g. by Karl Popper. He did not, however, accept the further claims of Kuhn and Feyerabend. This first thesis is now almost universally accepted among the philosophers of science.

know what the expression means requires a knowledge of the theory (the system of beliefs).

The above two views lead us to the next thesis:

(c) The thesis of meaning-variance

The meaning of an expression that occurs in a scientific theory (a system of beliefs) changes when the theory is modified or replaced by another theory in which that expression also occurs.

This, in turn, leads to the final radical thesis:

(d) The incommensurability thesis

Competing theories (belief systems) are incommensurable. There is no way of comparing them.

In Kuhn's words, the tradition "that emerges from a scientific revolution is not only incompatible but often actually incommensurable with that which has gone before" (Kuhn 1962, 103). This view is not restricted to natural science. It applies equally to all sorts of myths, belief systems, world views, etc. Consequently, it has also been very influential in the humanities.

Especially Kuhn (1970) has explicated the idea of incommensurability in terms of translation: The sufficiently different frameworks are mutually untranslatable. One cannot be translated into another "without loss or change of meaning". No fully adequate translation exists. The example Kuhn uses is the term 'planet'. Before Copernicus it included the Sun and Moon but excluded the Earth, while now it excludes the former but includes the latter (Kuhn 1970).

There is, however, a qualification. The incommensurability thesis is assumed to be true only of 'comprehensive' theories (systems of belief) which differ in 'major' or 'fundamental' ways. Still, this is a truly radical conclusion: according to this view, it does not make sense to say that a later comprehensive scientific theory is more adequate, or is closer to the truth, than an earlier one. It is a consequence of the incommensurability thesis that there is no genuine progress in science.

For many, this consequence may be implausible enough to show that there must be something deeply wrong with the view. But for those who are happy with this conclusion, it should be pointed out that the Kuhn-Feyerabend view, or the incommensurability thesis, has a number of intolerable internal problems.

2.2. Problems with the incommensurability thesis

It was soon recognized that the incommensurability thesis is not only hard to swallow, but leads to conclusions which are highly implausible and even inconsistent with its own starting points (see e.g. Shapere 1964, 1966; Achinstein 1968):[2]

(1) If the thesis were true, no two theories could contradict each other, for this requires that they can be compared. Yet, it was the very starting point that often a new theory conflicts with or contradicts the old one.

(2) If the thesis were true, any agreement between proponents of different theories is impossible.

But if there can be no agreement and no disagreement, what sense is there to say that two theories are alternatives? That is, there would only be talking past each other, never disagreement.

(3) If the meaning of an expression in a theory depends entirely on the principles of that theory, the principles in effect define what the expression means. But then such principles would always be vacuously true – true solely by virtue of the meanings of their words.

(4) If the thesis were true, a person could not learn a theory by having it explained to the person using any words whose meanings the person understands before learning the theory. In order to know what the expressions which occur in a theory mean, one must already know the theory.

An Interim Conclusion: These consequences are so implausible that it is better to reject the theses leading to them. Certainly the meanings of expressions sometimes change, but it is not reasonable to postulate this massive and extreme meaning variance. There must be more to the meaning of an expression than the beliefs, or the theory, associated with it. The contextual theory of meaning must be false.

Take, for example, the notions of Thales, a natural philosopher in ancient Greece who believed that everything consists of water. Clearly his views and those of modern chemistry are radically different. However, this does not necessarily mean that 'Hudor', as Thales called it, needs to have a different meaning from our 'water' and that 'Hudor' cannot be correctly translated as 'water'; there does not seem to be any principled reason for believing so.

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2   For later critical discussion, se e.g. Devitt 1984/1991; Hacking 1983; Kitcher 1993; Niiniluoto 1999; Psillos 1999.

Similarly, the beliefs associated with fire by Aristotle (who believed that fire is one of the four elements), Joseph Priestley (who believed that there is a special burning 'principle' phlogiston which is released during combustion) and a modern chemist, who believes in the oxygen theory of combustion, differ greatly. And yet we can translate 'Pur', as Aristotle called it, perfectly well as 'Fire'. Moreover, there is no reason to think that Priestley's 'combustion' and our use of the word now differ in meaning. Or, to recall Kuhn's example of 'planet', why not say that its meaning hasn't changed, but that we have only revised our beliefs about which heavenly bodies belong to the extension of 'planet'.

In sum, the problems associated with the incommensurability thesis are intolerable. Hence one must assume that meaning is usually stable despite changes in belief. This idea is captured in the following maxim: "Differences of meaning are not to be postulated without necessity" (Ziff calls this 'Occam's eraser'; see Putnam, 1965, 130). Hence the meaning of an expression must not be equated with, or be assumed to be determined solely by the beliefs associated with the expression. It must be – at least in part – independent of the latter. It is thus important to clearly distinguish the linguistic meaning of an expression and the conceptions associated with it.

3. W. V. Quine: The Indeterminacy of Translation Thesis

3.1. Quine's thesis

In contemporary philosophy one of the most widely-debated themes is the thought experiment of radical translation and the indeterminacy of translation thesis by the American philosopher W V. Quine (see e.g. Quine 1960, 1969, 1992).

The thesis says that:

(1) It is possible to construe several conflicting translations compatible with all observable data; and

(2) there is no fact of the matter which one is correct.

It is especially the latter part of the thesis that has annoyed many philosophers. Note, however, that Quine does not postulate some formidable obstacles for translation, or deny the possibility of correct translation – rather the opposite: "The fact remains that lexicography lives, and is important. Translation is important, often right, often wrong. The indeterminacy thesis denies none of this, but tells us that right translations can sharply diverge" (Quine 1990). In other words, there

may be, according to Quine, several perfectly adequate but mutually incompatible translations; and there are no further facts concerning meanings that would make one of them the correct one.

Quine has illuminated his thesis by his famous thought experiment of "radical translation": Quine invites us to imagine that a linguist undertakes to translate into English some hitherto unknown language – one which is neither historically nor culturally linked to any known language. It is further supposed that the linguist has no access to bilinguals versed in the two languages, English and what Quine calls 'Jungle'. (By 'radical translation', he means such an extreme situation). Thus, the only empirical data the linguist has to go on in constructing a 'Jungle-to-English' translation manual are instances of the native speakers' behaviour in publicly recognizable circumstances: "There is nothing in linguistic meaning beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behavior in observable circumstances" (Quine 1992, 38).

Quine next submits that it is very likely that the theoretical sentences (i.e. sentences that go beyond what is observable) of 'Jungle' can be translated into English in incompatible yet equally acceptable ways. Hence translation, and consequently meaning itself, are indeterminate, Quine concludes.

However, Quine's main interest is not in the methodology of field linguistics, but is much more philosophical. He aims to attack philosophers' uncritical use of the notion of meaning by showing that there may not be such things as meanings if these are assumed to be something determinate:

> The point of my thought experiment in radical translation was philosophical: a critique of the uncritical notion of meanings and, therewith, of introspective semantics. I was concerned to expose its empirical limits. A sentence has meaning, people thought, and another sentence is its translation if it has the same meaning. This, we see, will not do. (Quine 1987, 9.)

But how does Quine end up with his thesis? I submit that he has reasoned, roughly, along the following lines:[3]

(1) To understand a language is to know its meanings. Meanings are thus whatever a competent speaker-hearer of a language knows.

(2) Learning to understand a language, that is, to know its meanings, must turn solely on observable use of the expression, there being no innate language and no telepathy.

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3   There is much disagreement about how one should interpret Quine and what his reasons are for maintaining his thesis. I have given my interpretation in Raatikainen 2005.

(3) There is thus nothing in the meaning of an expression beyond what is to be gleaned from the overt use of the expression.

(4) One can construct incompatible manuals of translation that are consistent with all observable use.

(5) There is no fact of the matter which translation is the correct one, because there is nothing more in meaning itself beyond what is in observable use.

3.2. Problems with the indeterminacy thesis

Quine's thesis does not lead directly to such obvious absurdities as the radical meaning variance and incommensurability theses of Kuhn and Feyerabend. Nevertheless, it is not easy to accept, and arguably it is in conflict with some other central views to which Quine commits himself. Namely, Quine contrasts semantics (or the theory of meaning) with natural science. In all sciences, theories are underdetermined by observation; there are always several alternative hypotheses which are consistent with all observable data. Nevertheless, Quine holds that in the case of natural science only one hypothesis is true and others false, whether we can find this out or not. There is a fact of the matter here, and so Quine is a realist with respect to natural science. Recently this has become the standard view in the philosophy of science – it is generally seen as the most plausible alternative to the positivist view and radical relativism of Kuhn and Feyerabend. In semantics, on the other hand, the situation is, according to Quine, different. Because of their special connection to language acquisition, meanings cannot contain anything beyond observable behaviour. There is no further fact of the matter in semantics.

But it is difficult to see how a theoretical (i.e. non-observational) sentence in natural science could then be definitely true or false in the way Quine too believes. What makes a statement true is presumably its meaning and facts together. Quine also accepts the general idea that the meaning of a sentence determines its truth conditions. But if the meaning of a theoretical sentence is radically indeterminate, as Quine suggests, it is very hard to understand what then guarantees that it has a determinate truth value. Quine's indeterminacy of translation thesis thus seems to undermine his realism concerning natural science.

It is thus better to to reject Quine's reasoning. If Kuhn's and Feyerabend's notion of meaning was intolerably unstable, Quine's notion of meaning is too thin – too anaemic. There must be more to meaning than what speakers can glean from observable behaviour, or what they learn to know when they acquire their language.

4. Semantic Externalism

In the past few decades, a new kind of theory of meaning and reference has emerged. It is known under various names, e.g. "the new theory of reference" or "semantic externalism". Its founding fathers are philosophers Saul Kripke, Keith Donnellan, and Hilary Putnam.[4] It rebels against the traditional view that the meaning of an expression is determined by the beliefs, descriptions or theories speakers associate with the expression.

Particularly important are the various "arguments from ignorance and error" presented by these philosophers. These aim to show that people may succesfully refer with an expression, and mean by it what it means in the language, although they are too ignorant to have sufficient knowledge to identify the referent(s) uniquely, or may even have false beliefs that are better satisfied by other entities than the referent(s) – or perhaps nothing satisfies them.

Kripke (1972) considers, among other things, two Biblical examples. First, consider 'Moses'. It is unlikely that anybody has accomplished all, or even most of the deeds, that the Bible relates to Moses, and that most of us associate with the name 'Moses'. It is nevertheless possible that by 'Moses' we refer to a real historical figure. Or suppose that no prophet was ever swallowed by a big fish or a whale. But still, Kripke suggests, the name 'Jonah' again probably refers to a real historical person.

Or think of whales. Earlier it was generally believed that whales are fish, in other words, that they belong to the extension of the word 'fish'. But we have since learned that, appearances notwithstanding, they are mammals. This means that they never belonged to the extension of 'fish'; people only mistakenly believed they do. There is no change of meaning of 'fish' here, only a revision of belief on what entities belong to the extension of 'fish'.

Putnam (1975a) was concerned with two traditional assumptions:

(I) That knowing the meaning of an expression is just a matter of being in a certain psychological state.

(II) That the meaning of an expression determines its extension (in the sense that sameness of meaning entails sameness of extension).

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4   See Putnam 1970, 1973, 1975a, 1975b; Kripke 1972; Donnellan 1972. See also Devitt 1981. Devitt and Sterelny 1987 is a good overview.

Putnam aimed to show "that these two assumptions are not jointly satisfied by any notion, let alone any notion of meaning" (Putnam 1975a, 217). He established first that if the meaning of a term determines its extension then so also must knowing its meaning. So it follows from assumptions (I) and (II) that a psychological state determines the extension.

However, Putnam and others have presented arguments concluding that successful referring is possible even in a situation where nobody knows the necessary and sufficient conditions for belonging to the extension of the expression, or is able to recognize reliably whether the expression applies or not. Consequently, psychological states (and in particular, the beliefs, descriptions and theories associated with the expression) do not always and necessarily determine the reference or extension of the expression. Putnam has summed up this conclusion with his vivid slogan: "Meaning just ain't in the head" (Putnam 1975a, 227).

The most famous argument for such an externalism is Putnam's Twin Earth thought experiment. Putnam invites us to imagine that somewhere, far far away there is a planet very much like Earth we may call Twin Earth. We may even assume that every one of us has a Doppelgänger there. Languages similar to ours are spoken there. There is, however, a peculiar difference that the liquid called 'water' is not H_2O but a liquid whose chemical formula is very long and complicated; we may abbreviate it as XYZ. It is assumed that it is indistinguishable from water in normal circumstances; it tastes like water and quenches thirst like water. Lakes and seas of Twin Earth contain XYZ, it rains XYZ there, etc.

Putnam next assumes that we roll the time back to, say, 1750, when chemistry was not developed on either Earth or Twin Earth. At the time nobody would have been able to tell XYZ from H_2O. But still, Putnam submits, the extension of 'water' was just as much H_2O on Earth, and the extension of 'water' was just as much XYZ on Twin Earth. This is what he means by his claim that meaning is partly constituted by the environment.

Or, to change the example, let us consider gold (this example is taken from Putnam 1994). What *chrysos* (gold) was in ancient Greece was not simply determined by the properties ancient Greeks believed gold to have. For otherwise it would have made no sense for an ancient Greek to ask himself, "Is there perhaps a way of telling that something isn't really gold, even when it appears by all the standard tests to be gold?" But this is precisely the question Archimedes did put to himself, with a celebrated result. Archimedes's inquiry would have made no sense if Archimedes did not have the idea that something might appear to be gold (might pass the current tests for *chrysos*) while not really having the same nature as the paradigm examples of gold (see Putnam 1994, 443–444).

5. Conclusions

The two earlier views on meaning had untenable consequences. The Kuhn-Feyerabend view (and there are many somewhat similar views popular in the literature) make meanings much too unstable. Quine's view did not have this problem, but it made meaning much too thin. They both assume that meanings are transparent to the speakers' minds; speakers know the meaning of their language. Semantic externalism, on the other hand, has the virtue that it makes meaning much more thick and stable. From its perspective, there is a definite sense in which the traditional assumption that to be competent with an expression amounts to the knowledge of its meaning is false. Meanings may often go beyond the knowledge, beliefs and observable behaviour of the speakers.

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