

Indeterminacy and the Data of Introspection

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I

In his article "Indeterminacy, Empiricism, and the First Person",¹ John Searle attempts to show that W.V. Quine's indeterminacy thesis provides a *reductio ad absurdum* of linguistic behaviorism. Linguistic behaviorism understands linguistic acts in terms of stimulus situations which create dispositions to verbal behavior. The indeterminacy thesis, a result of this linguistic behaviorism, states that there is no fact of the matter which determines the correct translation of any term of a language into another language. That is, there will be a number of coherent yet mutually incompatible translations of any language into another. Searle, believing that there is determinate meaning, maintains that Quine's argument, and therefore linguistic behaviorism, must be flawed. In order to make this point, Searle invokes the first person point of view. Such introspective evidence, he claims, demonstrates the obvious absurdity of the thesis and the resulting concept of inscrutable reference.

I will attempt to show that linguistic behaviorism can easily account for this introspective data without abandoning indeterminacy. I also hope to make evident the reasons why Searle's objection, as well as ones similar to it, are at first glance so intuitively compelling. Before considering Searle's position, however, let us briefly outline the indeterminacy thesis and its logical results.

II

In order to isolate and examine meaning, Quine begins by describing a situation of radical translation. In such a situation, though the linguistic utterances of one language differ greatly from those of the other, meaning is somehow preserved in translation. Examining the evidence by which a linguist arrives at a viable translation, then, will lead to an objective,

¹Searle, "Indeterminacy, Empiricism, and the First Person" (*The Journal of Philosophy*, March, 1987).

empirical rendering of meaning. Since "All the objective data he [the linguist] has to go on are the forces that he sees impinging on the native's surfaces and the observable behavior, vocal and otherwise, of the native,"² Quine does not posit some intentional definition of linguistic meaning. Instead, he takes a behavioristic point of view by concerning himself with "language as the complex of present dispositions to verbal behavior".³ The actual internal processes by which such dispositions come about after a given stimuli are irrelevant for two reasons. First, they are unobservable and therefore cannot be part of an empirical project. Second, they will vary from person to person within a linguistic community, yet a uniformity of communication will result, indicating their future irrelevance to the project.⁴ Thus, meaning in the intuitive sense is redefined as stimulus meaning: the class of all non-verbal stimulus situations in which a speaker would assent to a query about a term contrasted with those situations in which the speaker would dissent.

The example of radical translation that Quine uses is that of the imagined native term 'gavagai.' A linguist in a foreign land has just witnessed a rabbit scampering across the trail, and the native she was with has shouted "Gavagai!" while pointing towards the rabbit. Thus, the linguist may hypothesize that the one word sentence 'Gavagai!' translates into the English sentence "A rabbit!" (or, simply, "Rabbit!"). Then the linguist may question the native while presenting him with various stimulus situations, in order to zero in on the stimulus meaning. If the stimulus meaning of 'gavagai' is the same as the stimulus meaning of 'rabbit', then she may translate 'gavagai' as 'rabbit' in English.

Indeterminacy comes in when it is realized that there may be more than one translation of the native's sentence into English which fits with the totality of stimulus situations. Two examples which Quine uses are 'undetached rabbit part' and 'stage in the life of a rabbit'. If 'rabbit' has the

²Quine, *Word and Object*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1960), p.28.

³Ibid., p.27.

⁴On page 8 of *W & O* Quine illustrates this point masterfully: "Different persons growing up in the same language are like different bushes trimmed and trained to take the shape of identical elephants. The anatomical details of twigs and branches will fulfill the elephantine form differently from bush to bush, but the overall outward results are alike."

same stimulus meaning as 'gavagai', then so would these other two translations, because they have the same stimulus meaning as 'rabbit'. Stimulus meaning being the only evidence admissible, there is no way to determine which translation is the correct one. Thus, the linguist (or a number of linguist working separately) could arrive at a number of translations, all of which facilitate communication, but which are not compatible with one another.

To illustrate this point imagine two linguists, each independently working opposite sides of a village, yet unaware of each other. After each has painstakingly formulated a manual of translation they chance to meet. One night about the campfire the two enter into a conversation with the same native. After each of the native's utterances the two rifle through their respective manuals, arrive at English translations (separately), formulate (separate) responses in English, translate the responses back into the native's language, and finally each responds to the native. The three have an intelligent and entertaining (albeit arduous) conversation. Thus we see that both translations are coherent. If the two should decide to compare notes afterwards, however, they will be surprised to find that while the one linguist believed they were having a conversation about the native's religious beliefs, the other believed they were having a conversation about particle physics. Even greater confusion would have ensued if the linguists had compared notes during the conversation or had jointly attempted to translate the native's utterances.

While this example may seem slightly exaggerated in order to demonstrate the mutual incompatibility of the two translation schemes, such an incompatibility will nonetheless exist. It must be stressed that I am working with what might be called a "strong" conception of indeterminacy. That is, I do not view indeterminacy as simply the possibility of a certain amount of "play" in translation. I expect that Searle would not object to that view. Instead, I understand indeterminacy as expressing the possibility of a number of different configurations of utterance/stimulus-situation correspondences, while still accounting for all dispositions to verbal behavior (i.e., preserving effective communication). Further, there is no fact (knowable or otherwise) that will determine a "correct" configuration.⁵

⁵There is, of course, a debate over the "extent" or "range" of indeterminacy. For further work in this area see Jonathan Bennett, *Linguistic Behavior*; or Mark Lance, "From a Normative Point of View."

A second result of the behavioristic stance which Quine takes is the inscrutability of reference. Because there is no fact of the matter about whether the native's term 'gavagai' is correctly translatable as 'rabbit', 'rabbit stage', or 'undetached rabbit part', there can be no fact of the matter about what, exactly, he is referring to. The only objective fact is the totality of stimulus situations in which he would assent to our linguist's query, "Gavagai?" But as the totality of stimulus situations for the three proffered translations are virtually identical (says Quine) there is no way of distinguishing which of the three the linguist should choose for translation and in turn the object of reference. Thus reference becomes inscrutable. This point will receive more attention as we begin to consider Searle's objections.

III

The logical consequences of indeterminacy pertain not only to cases of radical translation, but also to cases in which two people communicate in a common native language. Further, and most important to the bulk of Searle's argument, indeterminacy and inscrutability pertain to the specific case of my own speech as understood by myself. This is the point at which, Searle claims, the absurdity is most evident. Searle maintains that if the thesis shows that there is no difference (as to meaning or reference) *to me* between the terms 'rabbit', 'rabbit stage', and 'undetached rabbit part' when *I use them myself*, then it is obviously a false thesis. This is because, through introspection, the difference *is evident to me*, or so claims Searle.

Though he never gives a definite description of what, exactly, the difference is or how it may be discerned (I assume he would appeal to some as of yet undetermined internalistic notion), he does give two interesting examples of how the supposed absurdity manifests itself. These examples, however, fail to refute Quine's thesis or linguistic behaviorism in general. In fact, I would endeavor to show that in seeing these examples as creating absurdities, Searle misses the point of the indeterminacy thesis—the objections he raises from the first person point of view being possible only given the results of the thesis itself. While introspective evidence leads Searle to believe in determinate meaning, all he is really introspecting is his disposition to deal with indeterminacy in the most practical way; that is, taking the mother tongue at face value. Further, developing a contextual definition of

'meaning' will enable us to work our way about the issue without being caught in the same snare as Searle.

Searle's first example of absurdity will eventually lead us to his second example, and examination of the two will hopefully bring an understanding of the issue. He writes:

If the indeterminacy thesis were really true, we would not even be able to understand its formulation; for when we were told there was no "fact of the matter" about the correctness of the translation between rabbit and rabbit stage, we would not have been able to hear any (objectively real) difference between the two English expressions to start with. (his italics)⁶

This objection of Searle's is, intuitively, a very compelling one; an objection which I initially held, as a matter of fact. There is, however, a problem here. The objection simply says that in order to understand the indeterminacy thesis, we must be able to do what it says we cannot do. Thus, since we understand the argument it must be false. When first presented with this objection it seems so simple and obvious that one cannot help but want to accept it. The response to this objection, however, is that in making some sort of distinction between 'rabbit' and 'rabbit stage' we are not (as Searle believes) violating the terms of the thesis.

Searle seems to believe that the distinction we must make in order for the argument to work is one which supersedes the behaviorist view of meaning, thereby necessitating another (internalist) view of meaning and vitiating Quine's argument. However, this is not what we need to do in order to grasp the thesis. Working from the behaviorist's view and thereby through the terms of the thesis, we admit the stimulus synonymy of the three terms 'rabbit', 'rabbit stage', and 'undetached rabbit part'. Then we note the following: the choice of which these terms to use in our translation scheme will affect and be affected by other judgements we must make in constructing that scheme (e.g., analytical hypotheses relating to such things as identity, difference, pluralizations, etc.) with the result that we ultimately arrive at three coherent, yet mutually incompatible translation schemes.

⁶Searle, p.131.

Although we acknowledge that the use of one term over another will create a difference in our translation scheme, we do not thereby acknowledge any fixed meaning or reference for these terms. We merely acknowledge that the terms differ relative to a background language and translation scheme. That is, relative to one scheme 'gavagai' will translate into the (background) English language as 'rabbit' and, e.g., 'gavagug' will translate as 'rabbit stage'. However, relative to another translation scheme 'gavagai' will translate into a (different background) English as 'undetached rabbit part' and 'gavagug' will translate as 'rabbit'. Further, the supposed "fixed" difference we perceive when arbitrarily and uncritically utilizing the background language is itself subject to indeterminacy when translating from, e.g., English into English. The reference of the term 'rabbit' will be rabbit stage relative to one translation scheme/background language, undetached rabbit part relative to another, and rabbit relative to a third. Even if we try to clarify or fix our meaning, these attempts at clarification will also be subject to relativity to the background language in which we are working.

Meaning and reference, then, are relative to the scheme of translation which we choose. This scheme of translation is, in turn, relative to some background language into which we are translating. Thus, it would seem that in the case of translating from my native language into itself we are faced with an infinite regress of sorts. That is, the reference of any term in a given English is relative to the background of a second English, and the reference of any term in that second English is relative to a third and so on. We must, then, accept an arbitrary point of which we can anchor meaning and reference. Searle, however, sees this solution as ineffective, claiming that it only reiterates the absurdity of relativity and indeterminacy:

We cannot, on the one hand, insist on a rigorous behaviorism that implies that there is no fact of the matter and then, when we get into trouble, appeal to a naive notion of a mother tongue or home language with words having a face value in excess of their empirical behavioral content. If we are serious about our behaviorism, the mother tongue is the mother of indeterminacy, and the face value is counterfeit if it suggests that there are empirical differences when in fact there are none.⁷

⁷Ibid., p. 133.

This quotation must be examined carefully, because it demonstrates a problem which runs throughout Searle's argument. If he wishes to take the indeterminacy thesis on its own terms (i.e.: linguistic behaviorism) which he must do in order to show that it creates a *reductio* of itself, then he must let go of his belief (if only long enough to derive the *reductio*) that there is determinate meaning. One cannot help but recognize in reading his article, however, that he does not do this. In fact, it is this adherence to some (never-stated) theory of determinate meaning which creates the apparent absurdities Searle sights in order to refute Quine's thesis. Searle criticizes the appeal to a background language with "words having a face value in excess of their empirical behavioral content." Yet no claim is made by the behaviorist that the arbitrary background language has any such "excessive" values. This is Searle's assumption. Next, he states that if we are to accept linguistic behaviorism, "the face value is counterfeit if it suggests that there are empirical differences when in fact there are none." His use of the word "counterfeit" presupposes that there is some genuine article somewhere. Might not Searle, or anyone who objects to the indeterminacy thesis in a similar manner, be confusing internalistic notions of fixed language with the uncritical, unconscious acceptance of the language he learned as a child? Let us develop the concept of accepting an arbitrary background language before attempting an answer to this question.

IV

The purpose of language is, vaguely, to communicate. That is, to interact with our environment and each other effectively. Language is the necessary tool which allows two or more people to do such things as build a hut in which to live, protect their territory from invading forces, get the harvest in as efficiently as possible, accurately predict natural phenomena, and influence or subjugate others. With language we are able to consult one another ("What amount of water with this much mud makes the best brick?"); leave behind or pass on information ("I was told this amount of water works best."); organize a collective effort ("You two go to the right, he and I will go to the left."); and so on. We need (and have) a language system which works to accomplish these goals, as well as many others. Thus, when I am in a situation in which my fellow hunter tells me to go spear

a couple of rabbits for the upcoming midsummer feast, I do not respond, "Do you mean spear a rabbit, spear an undetached rabbit part, or spear a stage in the life of the rabbit?" I simply throw my weapon in the right direction, and return from the hunt with food for the feast.

Philosophers, on the other hand, having the luxury of others who take care of such things as raising animals for slaughter, and keeping territory ever safe from military (as well as economic and ideological) invasion, have time to ponder the meaning of 'meaning'. The (sometimes dubious) reward for our efforts are debates such as the ones discussed here. Ultimately, such philosophical inquiry is an attempt to increase our understanding of language use (and perhaps our thought processes as well). As we find the urge or need to perform more and more subtle tasks with language we find it is, at times, inadequate. Thus the enterprise of questioning meaning. It is not when things run smoothly that we need ask questions about meaning, but only when a breakdown occurs (e.g., when one of us does not understand the use of a term, when a certain term needs clarification, or when we encounter others whose terms are not the same as ours). In fact, it may be that we would not even have a concept of meaning at all if all communicatory exchanges occurred trouble-free. For why should the question "What do you mean?" ever arise if everyone were always understood?

The point to keep in mind through all this is that when such breakdowns do occur and we do end up questioning meaning, the resolution does not come when we find that some determinate chunk of meaning adheres to a certain utterance. Rather, the problem is resolved when adequate functioning resumes. That is, when we are able either to point to a stimulus situation or to map already understood terms on to the problematical one in such a way that our utterances produce, if not desired effects, at least understandable ones.⁸ In the case of radical translation we must start by establishing a set of stimulus meaningful translations. As the process

⁸ To some these considerations and some of those that follow seem to suggest a functionalist, or even a mechanistic view of communication. This characterization would, however, be incorrect. My aim here is simply to examine the use of sentences such as 'What does this mean?' in order to show that an answer is possible even given indeterminacy. Whether or not a functionalist view of communication necessarily underlies this exercise is irrelevant to the question at hand.

progresses we explain some terms through the use of others, every term ultimately relating back through various routes to stimulus meanings. That there is more than one possible translation that will work does not reduce the effectiveness of any one of them. Only if we attempt to mix translations will we experience problems, as did the two linguists mentioned above. A term which functions effectively relative to a certain background language and translation scheme will lose that effectiveness when indiscriminately transplanted to another background language and scheme. (We should even go so far as to say that it will take on a different effectiveness when so transplanted.)

When such a breakdown occurs in the use of English we again look to stimulus situations and remappings to resolve the crisis. We almost invariably translate every term homophonically, except the problematic one. On to this we map other terms in order to make its use understood, effective. In other words, when we are asked, "What does 'X' mean?" or "What is the meaning of 'X'?" what we are being asked is, "What other terms can be mapped onto 'X', substituted in this sentence for 'X'?" or "What other terms can be used to demonstrate proper usage of 'X'?" We are not being asked, "What determinate *thing*, what *chunk of meaning* corresponds to this term?"

Here, then, we employ a contextual definition of 'meaning'. That is, to understand what we mean by 'meaning' we substitute other words for it, finding that we look for what I have often described as remappings or substitutions of other words. Again, we are disposed to employ the easiest and swiftest remapping available (i.e.: the homophonic translation). We end up, in effect, taking our mother tongue at "face value." That we do this does not indicate that there is some genuine (as opposed to "counterfeit") chunk of meaning which we assign to a word. It merely indicates that to effect a complete heterophonic translation of English into English in order to clarify the use of a term or two, while possible, is a tedious and impractical task. To do so when there has not even been a breakdown in communication is even more impractical. (Perhaps the only practical reason for such a task would be to demonstrate the possibility to those who have not yet understood it.)

V

That I have substituted 'effectiveness' and similar terms for 'meaning' at different points throughout the preceding paragraphs has surely not gone unnoticed. While such vague usage must eventually be explicated, it emphasizes the use of a contextual definition of meaning, and serves to demonstrate a relatively simple point. Remember Searle's objection that face-value acceptance of the mother tongue was "counterfeit," and exceeded "empirical behavioral content." As meaning lies in the use of language there can be no genuine or counterfeit meaning; there can only be effective or ineffective use. Further, whether we choose to anchor meaning and reference by simply accepting the face value of our terms or by making a heterophonic translation every second Thursday, so long as use is effective and we can recognize it as such, no empirical behavioral content is exceeded. Our effective usage is empirical evidence enough to justify either approach. (The latter approach would most likely be considered a waste of time, however.)

That it would be an incredibly tedious task to effect a complete heterophonic translation of English into English is a compelling reason not to do so. Searle's introspective evidence merely stresses this point. He introspects his disposition to translate homophonically and resolve crises of understanding in the most efficient manner, as described above. That he is not disposed to choose heterophonic translation, or does not realize that he could so choose, in no way denies the possibility. Nonetheless, it is easy to see how such introspection would lead one to believe in determinate meaning. When one then considers the implications of the indeterminacy thesis, it appears as if it threatens to unhinge meaning and communication altogether. We perceive an absurdity—an absurdity to which we often have a violent reaction. How can we communicate if there is no meaning? But if we find that we have misinterpreted our introspective data we realize that there is no absurdity.

Thus, the absurdities Searle cites as creating a *reductio* argument against linguistic behaviorism and the indeterminacy thesis are not absurdities at all. Using a contextual definition of 'meaning' has allowed us to speak of linguistic behavior without the fear of becoming lost in a morass of

meaninglessness due to indeterminacy. Such an undesirable fate seems immanent only if we take the view (as Searle does) that language is only effective given determinate meaning. Further, as our approach salvages meaningfulness it simultaneously allows us to appreciate that there is no fact of the matter as to correct translation and that reference is ultimately relative. The first-person, introspective evidence Searle invokes (*I know what I mean and what I am referring to*) does not support the notion of determinate internalistic meaning. This is not to say that Searle's assertion that he knows what he means is false. Of course he knows what he is saying. But Searle is wrong to confuse the effective use of language and the disposition to translate homophonically in order to facilitate such use with determinate meaning. It is only in this confusion that the indeterminacy thesis appears absurd, for it is this very confusion, the myth of a *thing* called 'meaning', which indeterminacy seeks to unravel. The mother tongue *is* the mother of indeterminacy, but it is also the mother of another child: effective, meaningful language use.

Works Cited

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