

On Quine's Theory of “Indeterminacy of Translation”

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Abstract. In 1960 Quine put forward the famous proposition of “indeterminacy of translation” on the basis of naturalistic language concept, behaviorism theory of meaning and semantic holism. This proposition has had a broad and far-reaching influence in philosophical and translation studies, and has made vital contributions to the philosophical study of translation. However, there are many theoretical defects in the theory of naturalism, behaviorism, and semantic holism on which the proposition is based. In addition, the proposition itself has a lot of doubts, so the proposition is unreliable.

Keywords: Quine, The proposition of “indeterminacy of translation”, Naturalist language view; Behaviorism theory of meaning, Semantic holism.

1. Introduction

In “Word and Object” published in 1960, the famous notion of “indeterminacy of translation” was proposed after his famous ideological experiment, an extreme case of language translation, radical translation, translation of an indigenous language that has been unknown in the world so far, on the basis of naturalist language concept and behaviorist theory of meaning and semantic holism. As an epistemological proposition about language philosophy, this proposition goes like this: “we can compile manuals for translating one language into another in different ways. These manuals accord with all verbal behavior disposition, but they are not consistent with each other. “(Quine, Chen Qiwei et al., 2012:26). In a nutshell, multiple translations for the same source text are feasible. This is the so called “indeterminacy of translation”. “Furthermore, Quine claimed that it is impossible to determine which method of translation is correct.” (Zhao Yong, 2013:125)

Quine’s proposition of “indeterminacy of translation” has had a broad and far-reaching influence and has made important contributions to the philosophical study of translation. Quine's translation philosophy has two contributions: “1) from the ontological point of view, it proves the translatability between languages. 2) From an epistemological point of view, the Plurality of translation standards is validated, and it is also proved that the claim that there is only one correct translation does not hold water.” (Wu Guangjun, 2012:81-82) The proposition of “indeterminacy of translation” has emancipated people’s minds to a certain extent, further prompting us to believe that the standards of translation are diversified and fuzzy, and the translation process is changeable and uncertain. While acknowledging the positive impact of this proposition on the theory and practice of translation, we should also see through some theoretical flaws and loopholes in the theory.

To comment on the proposition of “indeterminacy of translation”, we must first trace the theoretical sources of the proposition. The essence of “indeterminacy of translation” lies in the uncertainty of conceptual meaning and the uncertainty of reference, which is based on Quine’s naturalist language concept and behaviorist theory and semantic holism on which the proposition of “indeterminacy of translation” is based. The following are the flaws in these theories.

2. The Limitations of Naturalistic Language Concept

Quine claimed that language is a social skill. He regards language as a natural phenomenon and stresses that language and language learning are natural phenomena in society. However, in fact, whether a child learning a mother tongue or an adult learning a second or third language can only naturally acquire simple language fragments in society. Only through continuous and systematic

instructed language learning, can they acquire a language thoroughly. So how do you learn a language effectively? Stephen Krashen, a second language acquisition expert, believes that the only way for humans to acquire a language is to understand information or receive comprehensible input. (Krashen, 1985: 80) Kees de Bot, Wander Lowie, etc. share the similar view and believe that “input is definitely the main source of information for learning, but not all inputs can be understood. Comprehension is essential to learning.” (Keith de Bot, Wander Lowie, etc., 2005:8) Krashen also proposed that “the ideal language input should bear four characteristics: comprehension, interest and relevance, not grammatical sequence, and sufficient input.” (Krashen, 1982:63 -72) The four demands for language input cannot be met in a purely natural language learning environment. Instead language input must be consciously regulated and controlled in instructed language learning environment. It can be seen that Quine’s naturalistic language concept only pays attention to the natural and social attributes of language and language learning, but ignores the limitations of natural language acquisition. Therefore, Quine’s naturalist language concept itself has certain defects. Any research results under the guidance of this linguistic concept are bound to have certain flaws.

In addition, while considering language as a natural phenomenon, Quine also advocates the study of language by using the method of studying natural sciences. In fact, as the carrier of culture, language has deeply imprinted itself on social culture, hence bearing the characteristics of humanism, diversity and dynamics. Therefore, it is bound to have its limitations to study language by using the methods of studying natural sciences. In fact, any attempt to study humanities in scientific ways has its limitations and therefore is doomed to failure. For example, the famous American translator and translation theorist Nida proposed a scientific description of the translation process in the 1960s and 1970s, conducting semantic analysis of the source text, including analysis of grammatical meaning, and the referential meaning, “However, grammatical meaning does not represent all meanings of language. Other types of meaning, such as the ‘referential meaning’ and ‘emotive meaning’ of language, are more important than other meanings.” (Tan zaixi, 1982:7) But Nida cannot analyze the “emotive meaning” “by using scientific methods, which determines that his description of the translation process is not comprehensive, so his scientific translation theory has gradually been neglected. For another example, the descriptive translation study that attempts to establish scientific translation studies has also exposed some significant flaws. Exactly speaking, “excessive emphasis is put on the neutrality of researchers, blindly avoiding value judgments on translations, and thus having the obvious tendency to deviate from translation itself. And less attention is paid to the translator’s creativity.” (Han Ziman, Liu Fang, 2005:97) The above two cases show that the study of the humanities by using the methods of studying the natural sciences only has obvious limitations and defects. Therefore, it is unreliable for Quine to use naturalistic language concept as the whole or main theoretical support for language research.

3. The Limitations of the Linguistic Concept of Behaviorism

At the beginning of “Words and Objects”, Quine pointed out that “Language is a social art. In acquiring it we have to depend entirely on intersubjectively available cues as to what to say and when. Hence there is no justification for collating linguistic meanings, unless in terms of men’s dispositions to respond overtly to socially observable stimulations.” (Quine,1960:ix). We can see from this sentence the gist of Quine’s view of behaviorism: meaning can only be obtained in the various verbal behavior tendencies in people’s response to public and observable stimuli; meaning refers to stimulating meaning. In the theory of behaviorist concept of meaning, Quine opposes the referential theory of meaning and the conceptual theory of meaning, thinking that meaning is neither an object nor a concept and People can only access meaning by observing the behavior of others in response to stimulations. On the basis of stimulating meaning, Quine divides sentences into two basic types: field sentence and constant sentence according to the standards of behaviorism. The difference between a constant sentence and a field sentence lies in that “constant sentence signifies that a speaker can repeat the original affirmation or negation without being stimulated when the same question is asked again later. The field sentence means that the speaker can give Positive and negative response only by the

current stimulus "(Quin, Chen Qiwei, etc., 2012:35) Chen Bo divided the field sentence into observation sentence and non-observation sentence according to the progressive decrease in dependence of the statement on the current sensory stimuli, and divided the constant sentence into constant sentences and non-constant long sentences. "The typical observation sentences are 'There is a dog here' and 'there is a rabbit there'; typical non-observation sentences are: 'He is a spy' and 'He is a bachelor.'; Typical constant sentences are such sentences as: ' $2 + 2 = 4$ '; Typical non-constant sentences are such sentences as 'Xiang Shan Maple Leaves have become red.' "(Chen Bo, 1996:4)

Quine's view of behaviorism has some significant theoretical defects. First of all, he rejected "the myth of language museum", that is, he was against the referential theory of meaning and the conceptual theory of meaning, thinking that meaning is neither the object nor the concept and people can only access meaning by observing the behavior of others in response to stimulus. He pointed out: "There has been a consensus among modern linguists that the notion of concept as a psychological counterpart of language forms is of no value to linguistics."(Quine, W. V., 1963, quoted from Zhang Jian, 2013:45) But because of this, he went to another extreme. He completely ignored the significance of human psychological factors for language learning and language research. Modern research shows that speech activities are extremely complex and there must be a close relationship between language and human psychological activities. First, the verbal and nonverbal response of the speaker to the stimulus involves the mental activity of the speaker. For example, the imperative sentence "Come here!" may cause a variety of reactions:(1) No response; (2) To refuse expressly; (3) Request explanations from the speaker; (4) Dissatisfaction with the speaker; (5) To justify the failure to obey; (6) walk away; (7) Promise to come, but move slowly and reluctantly; (8) Follow the call of the speaker, etc.. It can be seen that the different responses of the speaker to the stimulus imply different levels of psychological activity. Second, people's judgment of the speaker's verbal and non-verbal responses to stimuli also includes a specific psychological activity that is characterized by a given culture. For example, when the speaker shakes his head at a stimulus, people need to decide whether the speaker agrees, opposes, hesitates or means something else. The process of this judgment also includes the psychological activities of people who are immersed in a given culture. In short, speech activities not only involve the transmission of language materials and language, but also involve the speaker's psychological process of using language. It can be seen that Quine's rejection of "Conceptual theory of language" is a metaphysical absolutism.

Secondly, Quine also encountered great theoretical difficulties because of his behaviorism and empiricism about meaning. Quine tries to use the research results of behaviorist psychology to explain the meaning of language and the internal mechanism of language learning on the basis of empiricism by using the research methods of stimulation-response theory and conditioned reflex. However, behaviorist psychology itself has significant theoretical defects, and it has declined after ruling the Western psychology community for nearly half a century. The founder of behaviorist psychology is American psychologist John Watson. In 1913, Watson's paper entitled "Psychology as a Behaviorist" marked the birth of behaviorist psychology. "From the perspective of positivism and pragmatism, Watson believes that only what is directly observed is what actually exists. It only acknowledges perceptual knowledge but does not acknowledge rational knowledge ... Consciousness and thinking are the most important signs that distinguish people from animals. Behaviorism eliminates consciousness and thinking, and simplifies human consciousness and thinking to stimuli and reactions, so people are reduced to the same status as animals."(Wu Tieping, 1999:1, 2) Behavioral psychology therefore belongs to the category of mechanical materialism. It actually mechanizes and animalizes people and erases the fundamental differences between people and animals. That is why it is unlikely to explain psychological phenomena and language phenomena. Second, when using stimulus-response theory to explain meaning, the connection between stimulus and response is rarely simple and fixed, and the same stimulus may cause different or even completely opposite reactions on different occasions and even on the same occasion. Therefore, if the meaning of language is explained according to the stimulus response, it will become an elusive thing, and therefore behaviorist theory of meaning cannot effectively explain various semantic phenomena.

In addition, according to the standards of behaviorism, Quine's classification of statements into two basic types of field sentence and constant sentence is also unsatisfactory, because this mechanical division ignores the huge generative potential of human language. In fact, humans can generate higher levels of discourses that transcend field and constant sentences, such as literary discourse, political discourse, professional discourse, and so on. Such statements as "Life is a poem." development is the first priority "and" The meaning of words lies in the use of language "are neither observation sentences nor constant sentences. The meaning of such sentences stems from our observation plus thinking and analytical reasoning. The meaning of these sentences cannot be determined by observation alone.

4. Holistic Concept of Meaning

Traditional theories of meaning, such as referential theory and conceptual theory, hold that meaning is nothing more than a material or spiritual entity corresponding to words. Whether physical or spiritual entities are objects that cannot be further analyzed. The smallest unit of meaning is words and sentences, and the meaning of the entire language system is the superposition of the meanings of each word or sentence. But the holistic concept of meaning holds that the unit of meaning is not a single word or sentence, but the entire language system. The relationship between a word or sentence and a language system is that the meaning of a single word or statement depends on the entire language system, not the meaning of the language system is the superposition of the meanings of single words or sentences. This holistic concept of meaning seems plausible. In fact, it has two defects. One is that it regards the entire language system as a static and invariant system. It turns out that in real society, a language system is often open, dynamic, relative, and pluralistic. For example, Chinese as a language system has been changing with the changes of the times, including the spelling of Chinese characters, the collocation of words, the meaning of words, and grammatical rules. The changes in a language system are always closely related to the politics, culture, and economy of a society. Therefore, the meaning of a single word or sentence does not depend sheerly on the entire language system, but is related to the political, cultural, and economic factors of a society. For example, the meanings of such loanwords as “卡拉OK”、“可口可乐”、“麦当劳” are not related to the Chinese language system; The meanings of a large number of dialects in various parts of China have little to do with the Chinese language system. For another example, people in different parts of China use different words to express the idea of eating, such as“qi饭”、“ci饭”、“cha饭”、“dai饭”, “ki饭”、“jia饭”, and so on. The meanings of these dialects are not determined by the entire Chinese language system, but by local or folk culture. The second flaw of the holistic concept of meaning lies in that it ignores the contextual meanings of words and sentences. For example: The meaning of the sentence “It's cold outside.” does not entirely depend on the entire language system, but on the specific context in which it is spoken. When the door and window of the room are open, it is very likely that this sentence means “Please close the door and the window”; for a person who is going out for a walk, the meaning of this sentence is probably “You'd better not go out for a walk.” In summary, the meaning of a single word or sentence does not necessarily depend entirely on the entire language system. The entire language system only plays a reference role in determining the meaning of words and sentences, but it does not play a completely decisive role.

“Quine's Semantic Holism also holds that the knowledge system is a whole, the outermost layer of which is those parts that are in direct contact with experiences, and the core part of which is the part that is farthest from direct experiences. Our knowledge system or web of beliefs ... is a whole, with disciplines adjacent to each other, forming a continuum. “(Chen jiaying, 2003:224) Each belief is part of the network of other beliefs, which forms “the web of beliefs”. The belief in the center of the network is more strictly protected from falsification than the belief in the edge, but none of the beliefs is immune to revision. The belief at the center is mathematics and logic; the belief at the periphery of the center is physics and chemistry; beyond this is the belief in medicine, engineering, politics, etc.... The belief at the edge is experience. (Liu limin, 2014, handout) Because this mechanical and rigid division of the belief layers is incomplete as it completely ignores the

complexity, diversity, and ambiguity of beliefs. For example, what layer does the belief “God will bless us.” belong to? Is this belief protected in the belief network? For another example, what about the belief “translation is manipulated by power discourse”?

Quine’s semantic holism also believes that empirical units are not words or statements, but human knowledge as a whole. (Liu limin, 2014, handout) This kind of theory which overturns the traditional belief in the unit of meaning appears to be plausible, but it is actually misleading. If the unit of meaning becomes human knowledge as a whole, then how can we accurately grasp the meaning of language?

5. The Limitations of the Proposition of “Indeterminacy of Translation”

The proposition of “indeterminacy of translation” itself is full of doubts. First, Quine tried to prove the essence of translation with the experiment of original translation that in the translation from one language to another, or in the translation from one sentence to another within one language, there must be original indeterminacy and there is no accurate translation. However, the original translation was only Quine’s assumption. The truth is that it is almost impossible to compile such an original translation manual successfully. So far such an original translation manual has been unseen. It is very difficult to compile a translation manual by observing the responses of indigenous people to stimuli coupled with the translator’s analytical assumptions, because this requires not only a lot of time, money, energy and patience, and more importantly, by observing the responses of indigenous people to stimuli, only the meanings of a small number of field and constant sentences can be roughly determined, while the meanings of a large number of other sentences with abstract and emotional meanings cannot be accessed by stimulation-response model. Second, assuming that two or more linguists have compiled a translation manual respectively without communication with each other, how can we assert that these manuals are not consistent with each other? What is the degree of inconsistency? Are there any consistent translations? There is no sufficient evidence to testify that Quine’s assumption is right. The only example given by Quine is the corresponding relationship between “Gavagai” and the English observation sentence “rabbit”. His assertion based on this example is somewhat far-fetched. In fact, modern research has proved human similar perception of things. Different translation manuals are likely to have some consistency. Third, it is well-known that the results of the translation manual are affected by numerous elements such as the content, the principles and methods of translation and compilation. What are the criteria and principles of Quine’s assumed translation manual? Does it involve both the translation of words and sentences? All of these questions are not clearly interpreted in Quine’s theory of “indeterminacy of translation”, so Quine’s assumed translation manual is seemingly unreliable and confusing. Fourth, how do we understand Quine’s assertion that “These manuals are consistent with all the speech behavior tendencies” or “these manuals are generally compatible with all the speech behavior tendencies?” How can we determine whether all the translations in those manuals are consistent with all the speech behavior? Last but not least, what is the definite reference of “translation” said by Quin? Does it refer to translation activities, translation process, translation product or translator? What is exactly uncertain? Is translation activity itself uncertain? Or is the translation process uncertain? Or is the translation product uncertain? Or is the standard of translation uncertain? All of these questions are not interpreted clearly in Quine’s theory of “indeterminacy of translation”.

6. Summary

In view of the above-mentioned theoretical flaws and many doubts, I think that Quine’s proposition of “indeterminacy of translation” is unreliable. In fact, translation has both its uncertainty and certainty. In spite of this, from the perspective of history and dialectics, we cannot deny the fact that Quine’s theory has a wide and far-reaching influence on the Western language philosophy, modern linguistics, and translation theory and practice in the 20th century. His contributions to these disciplines are indelible.

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