Quine's Indeterminacy of Translation Thesis

Xiang Xu

College of Foreign Language, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao 266061, China
E-mail: stephenxu10@163.com

Abstract—**This paper aims to analyze Quine's major theories of Indeterminacy of Meaning and Inscrutability of Reference by their definition and appearance, then comments them in daily communication and practical translation activities.**

Index Terms—**Quine, indeterminacy of translation, indeterminacy of meaning, inscrutability of reference**

I. INTRODUCTION

In the preface to *World and Object* (WO), Quine claims that Language is social art. In acquiring it we have to depend on intersubjectively available cues as to what to say and when. He considers language as a social activity rather than a private one. In his view, man's understanding about language depends on the observations on the listener's responses towards the language. However, it is obvious that the responses of different people towards the same linguistic expression may differ greatly so there are all kinds of understandings, which is the source of indeterminacy of translation. According to his expression, the main content of the IT thesis should be as follows--manuals for translating one language into another can be set up in divergent ways, all compatible with the totality speech dispositions, yet incompatible with one another. In countless places they will diverge in giving, as their respective translations of a sentence with none-verbal stimulation, of course, the less drastically its translations can diverge from one another from manual to manual.

Actually, the IT thesis originates in Quine's epistemology. He thinks the primary goal of epistemology is to provide a factual account of how our theory of the world can arise from observation. Afterwards, it develops into the naturalistic and behavioral conception of language, which deserves the general background of the outcome of indeterminacy. In Quine's eyes, the key of translation cannot be determined in man's mind but be open to different explanation. So translation should not be judged by the criterion of right or wrong, and the criteria should be multiple.

To speak correctly, the IT thesis is mainly of two aspects--one is the indeterminacy of meaning (IM) which affects any native expression to maintain a specific meaning, the other is the inscrutability of reference (IR) which affects the terms of the untouched language. Hence, a closer look and a detailed study of IM and IR would certainly help a lot in understanding Quine's IT thesis.

II. INDETERMINACY OF MEANING (IM)

A. Definition

According to Quine's analysis, the indeterminacy of meaning is to claim that consistent with all possible dispositions to behavior on the parts of all concerned, different systems of analytical hypotheses can be formulated which render different English translations of the same use of an aboriginal expression which differ in meaning, and there is no sense to the question of any one translation being the uniquely correct one. Based on his naturalistic linguistic view, and in order to destroy the focus of determinacy thesis of meaning and translation, Quine holds that people should make it clear to what degree translators can solve the problem of translation from one language into another only by means of pure experiences rather than language itself.

To understand this, we cannot use languages as close as German and English in our translation, for they share much in common in language and culture. In this way, translators will rely on supposed commonly shared features of human interests and behaviors to help translation and to eliminate indeterminacies. On the contrary, we must get away from those nonessentials and only examine an extreme case of such translation, which Quine calls radical translation. It is unaffected by the considerations about how much or how little the linguist and his subjects have in common. Therefore, the linguist must compile a translation manual through his observation of the behaviors of others. However, because of the infinity of words and sentences, he may have to work harder on the vocabulary of the unknown language. Perhaps we can show how Quine thinks the IM arises through the following general account of an imaginary linguist's activities, which is quite famous.

B. Arising of IM

Above all, it should be made clear that translation is just handled as a special case of linguistics in Quine's philosophical system. Suppose that the linguist begins by observing the aboriginals speaking--all one has to go on in learning a language is observation. Since the philosophical point Quine intends to make is unaffected by the linguists

concern with the aboriginals phonemes, the linguist can omit the phonemic analysis in the translating process and transfer to the most elementary steps in this translation. As Quine imagines in *World and Object*, a rabbit scurries by, an aboriginal says Gavagai, and the linguist puts down the sentence Rabbit as a tentative translation subject to testing in further cases.

Hence the next task for the linguist is to settle down the aboriginal expressions for assent or dissent to decide whether the meaning is right or wrong. It is a necessary step for the following two reasons. Firstly, what the linguist is interested in is not the language-in-use of any particular native subject but his language–in-disposition. There many situations in which an aboriginal could say something conforming to the present stimulation, but the question is where he does not say. The linguist's solution is to put himself in a specific situation to query the native with their sentences, to see if the native would assent to, or dissent from these sentences in various stimulatory situations. Secondly and more importantly, only when the linguist has mastered the native expressions for assent and dissent could he is able to distinguish among the aboriginal terms in their reference.

Generally, the linguist relies on what appears to be the assent behavior and dissent behavior to arrive at his identifications for assent and dissent, this method may seem not so certain though.

In this way, the linguist can make close identifications of stimulus meanings between the two languages. Yet, because stimulus meanings are quite subjective, the linguist cannot easily compare his own stimulus meaning for some sentence of English with his subject's stimulus meaning of the unknown language. However, he can learn that the aboriginal will assent to or dissent from the query Gavagai under just those same public conditions where the linguist would do to Rabbit. Therefore, the linguist concludes that the two stimulus meanings are approximately the same with each other. The linguist could continue to make English translations for various aboriginal observation sentences.

In the whole process, what is extremely important to notice is that the linguist could possibly make mistakes, suppose, he made the wrong generalizations. He may find that on some future occasion his stimulus meaning for Gavagai differ greatly. Hence, stimulus situations offer an objective criterion for judging between the proposed equating of a single expression from the untouched language with one or the other of two non-equivalent English expressions. This is an important feature of translation, for it is this point that attends some later stages of radical translation and directly leads to the IM. As far as the stimulus meaning is concerned, more than just the aboriginal observation sentences can be translated. Whatever parts of the unknown language the linguist could learn on the ostensive basis, and then translate into English at the stimulating level.

III.   INSCRUTABILITY OF REFERENCE (IR)

A.   Definition

Apart from the indeterminacy of meaning, the inscrutability of reference is another factor leading to the IT thesis. Through the examination of Quine's argumentation, it is very clear that the inscrutability of reference originates in translation by the behavioral evidences. It has a special emphasis, except what can be established on behavioral evidence. Here the IR is to say that consistent with all possible dispositions to behavior on the parts of all concerned, different systems of analytical hypotheses can be formulated. And further, if the native expression is translated as a term of divided reference, then there will be further alternative systems of analytical systems of analytical hypotheses which will settle the reference of the term differently, thereby imparting different ontology to the native speakers, neither in the matter of term hood, nor in the matter of reference, is there any sense to the question of there being a uniquely correct translation.

B.   Appearance of IR

To answer the question as how the IR comes into being, we can take Quine's famous Gvagai example to illustrate the IR and make it clear why Quine draws this conclusion.

Suppose that, from his correlation of the observation sentences including Gavagai and Rabbit, the linguist concludes that Gavagai is a concrete term, and is uniquely translated as rabbit, in other words, the linguist is convinced that Gavagai and Rabbit refer to just the same animal. Yet the linguist may make a big mistake for his self-confidence because the correlation of the observation sentences Gaivagai and Rabbit fixes the reference of the term Gaivagai uniquely with Rabbit. However, it is quite possible that if Gavagai is an abstract singular term referring to rabbit species, or a concrete general term which is not of rabbits but of some part of rabbit, or of the rabbit current stage. Hence, we say at the level of ostensive translation, reference is inscrutable on the basis of behavioral evidence, quite different from stimulus meanings. The problem of inscrutability arises because the only difference between rabbits, undetached rabbit parts, and rabbit stages lies in their own characteristics. The scattered portion of the world that is made up of rabbits, and made up of the undetached rabbit parts, and made up of rabbit stages are all three just belonging to the same scattered portions of the world. Only when an undetached rabbit part appears can the whole rabbit appear. Similarly, only when a rabbit has appeared for a period of time can we ensure the appearance of the whole rabbit.

The only way for the linguist to settle such instances of the Iris to fix upon the aboriginal equivalents of English plural endings, pronouns, numerals, the *is* of identity, and its adaptations *same* and *other*. These will constitute the interrelated grammatical particles and constructions, with which the individual terms of divided references in English are connected. Besides this, the linguist will have to formulate a system of analytical hypotheses in connecting with

other aboriginal expressions as well. Once the linguist has finished the tasks, he could begin to ask the aboriginal questions like "Is this gavagai the same as that one? Is this one gavagai or two?" And so on. This may help a lot, but the premise is that the linguist has enough knowledge of the aboriginal language to ask these questions, which is just what he needs to acquire. And once the linguist can ask the aboriginal such questions, he would feel it a little easy to determine whether to equate gavagai with undetached rabbit part or with rabbit, or rabbit stage.

But after all, this method is not sufficient enough to deal with the indeterminacy between translating gavagai as rabbit, or as undetached rabbit part, or as rabbit stage and the like absolutely. For if one workable system of analytical hypothesis help to translate a given aboriginal expression into *is the same as*, perhaps another workable system would translate the same expression into something like *has something to do with* or other instead. Thus, when the linguist attempts to ask "Is this gavagai the same as that?", he could as well unconsciously be asking "Dose this gavagai has something to do with that?". From this perspective we could see, the native assent cannot be used to settle the reference of gavagai absolutely.

It is at this point in translation that the IR shows clearly its appearance. Even through analytical hypotheses we could only settle the reference of gavagai in a relative way, thus to determine the reference thoroughly is impossible. Now that the reference is inscrutable, how can you expect translation to be completely accurate? Therefore, IR becomes another important factor leading to the indeterminacy of translation.

IV. COMMENTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

A. Indeterminacy in Daily Communications

People may doubt that the problem of indeterminacy is only special to the context of the radical translation thus is totally insignificant. But this is a mistake, because it overlooks the similar behavioral proofs of radical translation and ordinary language learning and using. Generally speaking, the communication with our fellow people is also a kind of native language learning, the success of which depends on how the listener understands the mother tongue from the other speaker. However, due to the variety of dialectal phonemes, regional cultures and individual backgrounds, different listeners can hold quite different understandings towards the same word or sentences, which is crucial to translation process. Therefore, it is tolerable to say that different listeners or readers can maintain different translation criteria even in a domestic environment.

Therefore, in the rabbit example, we could reconstruct our neighbor's apparent reference to rabbits as references to inseparable parts of rabbits or the stage the rabbit being in. According to Quine's understanding, we could reconcile all this with our neighbor's verbal behavior, by cunningly readjusting our translations of his various connecting predicates so as to compensate for the switch of ontology. In short, we can reproduce the inscrutability of reference at home. Here lies the implication that even people's everyday verbal communication is also characterized by the nature of the indeterminacy, especially the inscrutability of reference. Hence, in the process of translation or interpretation, the inscrutability of reference ranks another factor leading to the indeterminacy of translation.

B. Absolute Right or Wrong Translation

People have long been accustomed to the discussion of whether the translation is right or not. And they tend to divide all translations into two parts labeled with either right or wrong. Quine's view on meaning is based on behavioral grounds. He holds that meaning of language is actually that of the behavior or behavioral episode concerned, and semantic facts concerned are only external inclinations of verbal activities. Due to the IM and IR, different manuals of translation, though incompatible with each other, show no difference with totality of those external facts and inclinations— all of them could be correct from different observing angles. So it is hard for people to decide which is right and which is wrong among different manuals, since they can hardly find any distinctive facts of the matter for judging the translation to be right or wrong. Moreover, for the lack of behavioral facts, people cannot decide which manual of translation is more exact as well. If they just want to talk about the exactness, they are all exact in a general sense and no one is mire exacter than any other one. All of them are suitable for the totality of the inclinations of verbal activities.

It is important to note that Quine's translation thesis does not mean to provide a protecting power for those translation works with low quality. Quine's idea is that evidences of verbal activities themselves cannot be the only proofs to decide the manual of translation, the compilation of which is intervened by the subjective factors of the translators. So translations in line with different manuals produce some indeterminacy towards the same event or text. As to the linguistic translation in our daily lives such as English-Chinese translation or Chinese-English translation, they are dealt with under the guidance of well accepted translation manuals, which is the integration the common understanding about two languages and their exchanges among the linguists and translators, in this way they can be determined. According to the above analysis, unless we establish different criteria and norms, we can still judge different translation works with the same criterion. Here, the problem lies not in whether there is an objective criterion, but what criterion should be established and consulted.

REFERENCES

[1]   Bassnett, S. Lefevere A (2001). Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation .Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
[2]   Benjamin, Walter (1992). The Task of the Translator. Arendt, Hannah. Illuminations. New York: Fontana Press.
[3]   Catford, J.C (1978). A Linguistic Theory of Translation. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[4]   Davis, Kathleen.(2004). Deconstruction and Translation. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
[5]   Derrida, Jacques (1981). Positions. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
[6]   Derrida, Jacques (1976). Of Grammatology. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
[7]   Derrida, Jacques (1982). Margins of Philosophy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
[8]   Derrida, Jacques (1985). Des tours de babel. Difference in Translation. Cornell University Press.
[9]   Dorit Bar-on (1993). Indeterminacy of Translation—Theory and Practice. Philosophy and Phenomenological Research.
[10]   Gentzler, E (1993). Contemporary Translation Theories. London: Routledge.
[11]   Katan, David (2004). Translating Cultures—An Introduction for Translator, Interpreters and Mediators. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
[12]   Kirk, Robert (1973). Underdetermination of Theory and Indeterminacy of Translation Analysis.
[13]   Munday, Jeremy (2001). Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications. London and New York: Routledge.
[14]   Newmark, Peter (2001). A Text Book of Translation. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
[15]   Newmark, Peter (2001). Approaches to Translation. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
[16]   Nida,E (2000). A Language, Culture and Translating Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
[17]   Nida,E.A (1984). On Translation. Chinese Translation and Publishing Corporation.
[18]   Niranjana, Tejasinini (1992) .History, Post-structuralism and the Colonial Context. Berkeley, University of California Press.
[19]   Nord, Christiane (2001). Translating as a Purposeful Activity—Functionalist Approaches Explaine. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
[20]   Quine (1960). world and object. Cambridge University Press.
[21]   Reiss, Katharina (2004). Translations Criticism-The Potentials& Limitations. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
[22]   Schick, Karl(1972). Indeterminacy of Translation. *The Journal of Philosophy*.
[23]   Steiner, George (1975). After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[24]   Sweetman, Brendan (1999). Postmodernism, Derrida, and Différance: A critique. *International Philosophical Quarterly*.
[25]   Venuti, Lawrence (1992). Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology. London: Routledg

Xiang Xu was born in Qingdao, China in 1971. He received his M.A. degree in literature from Shan Dong Normal University, China in 2004.

He is currently a lecturer in the School of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University, Qingdao, China. His research interests include British literature.