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Translation, Uncertainty, and the Spirit of Trust

Analytic philosophers discussing translation often emphasise uncertainty. Willard van Orman Quine insists on "the inscrutability of reference" and "the indeterminacy of translation," and Donald Davidson describes all understanding as "radical interpretation." Yet Quine and Davidson also provide the basis for entirely contrary conclusions based on trust. They invoke the "principle of charity": we must "maximize agreement" and assume our interlocutors to be largely correct in their beliefs. Davidson further rejects the very possibility of radically different conceptual schemes. Hence the chief impediment to correct understanding and translation is not the difficulty of determining reference, or the existence of radically incommensurable viewpoints à la Thomas Kuhn, but rather the dynamic nature of concepts, which, as Hegel argued in the *Phenomenology*, are forever being extended and applied in novel circumstances. Concepts have a history, so understanding texts from the past requires retrieving past meanings, and fusing them with one's present horizon. Understanding contemporary texts requires a permanent awareness of ongoing conceptual change. Interpretation and translation should be informed by such an awareness and by what Robert Brandom, freely interpreting Hegel, calls "a spirit of trust."

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> One might well want to ask how seriously this doctrine is intended, just how strictly and literally the philosophers who propound it mean their words to be taken. […] (There's the bit where you say it and the bit where you take it back.)
>
> (Austin 2)

In the 1960s and 70s, two influential American philosophers (and incidentally translation theorists), Willard Van Orman Quine and Donald Davidson, offered incisive arguments for the indeterminacy of translation and interpretation and, more radically, the inscrutability of reference. Yet they accompanied these with an equally forthright insistence on the necessity of charity in interpretation, and the impossibility of massive error in people's perceptions and beliefs about their environment. Given the essentially veridical nature of belief, and because all our concepts and languages have been shaped by interaction with our environment, Davidson dismisses the very possibility of radically different conceptual schemes. In this article I examine this dialectic of uncertainty and trust, and propose that conceptual change requires of us what might be called, following Robert Brandom, a spirit of trust.

1. The Indeterminacy of Translation and the Inscrutability of Reference

Arguments for the difficulty of translation, or even its outright impossibility, go back at least as far as antiquity – as, of course, does the practice of translation itself. Memorable twentieth century proclamations include George Steiner's claim in *After Babel* that "The mystery of meaningful transfer is, in essence, the same when we translate the next bill of lading or the *Paradiso*" (265), and José Ortega y Gasset's bold statement that "almost all translations done until now are bad ones" (98). "The indeterminacy of translation" is a term that was popularised by Quine's book *Word and Object* (1960). Quine states that

> manuals for translating one language into another can be set up in divergent ways, all compatible with the totality of speech dispositions, yet incompatible with one another. In countless places they will diverge in giving, as their respective translations of a sentence of the one language, sentences of the other language which stand to each other in no plausible sort of equivalence however loose. (24)

As he put it many years later, his "reservations […] concern the ascription of a distinctive meaning or cognitive content to each separate sentence, as something shared by the sentence and its correct translations," because "two conflicting manuals of translation" – translators tend to prefer the terms 'translation choices,' or 'translation solutions' – "can do equal justice to the semantic facts, while distributing the meaning load differently sentence by sentence" ("Accentuate" 117). And indeed, this holistic approach to meaning is implicitly shared by all skilled translators, who do not translate word for word, or even sentence for sentence, but generally attempt to carry across the meaning by moving things around according to the semantic and syntactic resources of the target language. There are usually various acceptable translations of any given text, which does indeed render translation to some extent indeterminate.

But Quine, notoriously, also has another argument, which he calls "the inscrutability of reference," by which he means that we can never know for sure what other people's words refer to. He illustrates this with an (artificial) example of "radical translation" – a fable about a field linguist learning a language in "the jungle," without the benefit of any bilingual interpreters. All he has to go on is his informants' utterances, and their assent or otherwise when he later tries out the expressions he has heard in similar situations. Quine imagines a rabbit scurrying past and the native saying "Gavagai." The linguist will probably assume that this means "rabbit" or "There's a rabbit" (or in Quine's idiom, "Lo! a rabbit") (*Word* 25).[1] But Quine insists that however long he stays in the source language community, and however fluent he becomes, the linguist can never be certain that "gavagai" does not in fact mean "all and sundry undetached parts of rabbit," or "mere stages, or brief temporal segments, of rabbits," or perhaps the "fusion […] of all rabbits: that single though discontinuous portion of the spatiotemporal world that consists of rabbits," or even the abstract universal noun, "rabbithood" (46–47).

Of course, Quine knows perfectly well that infants have an innate tracking mechanism, and develop image-schemas for motion and animacy, and make inductive generalisations, and begin to categorise objects,

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[1] Thomas Kuhn points out that Quine's radical translator is misnamed, and is actually an interpreter (in the sense of one who tries to understand) who, unlike a translator, may initially only command one language (*Road* 38–39). And he need not come from a speech community that knows of rabbits and has a word for them. He could merely acquire the native's term – as Europeans did for *kangaroo, koala, wallaby* and *wombat*, examples Kuhn doesn't use – in much the same way as he originally acquired the words of his first language. (Translators, scientists, etc. in Quine and Kuhn's writings are invariably "he.")

and so forth, long before they learn to speak (see, for example, Mandler), and so can easily learn our concept "rabbit," and he never suggests that a jungle-dwelling tribe might actually *have* these bizarre concepts involving rabbit parts or stages or rabbithood.[2] But he claims that this example *demonstrates* the inscrutability of reference.

In many later works, Quine claims to have *proved* the inscrutability of reference with his notion of a 'proxy function,' an arbitrary one-to-one transformation of one object or referent for another. For example, you could substitute the proxy function "lifelong filament of space-time taken up by a dog" for "dog" and "verbal behavior proceeds undisturbed [...] Nothing really has changed" (*Theories* 19). Or you could reinterpret "Tabitha" as designating no longer the cat of that name, but the "whole cosmos minus the cat" (*Pursuit* 33), etc. Quine at least concedes that we would need to "reinterpret our predicates in a compensatory way" (*Confessions* 316). If Tabitha referred to the whole cosmos minus the cat, the sentence "Tabitha is on the mat" would have to be "Tabitha surrounds that tiny part of the cosmos that is on the mat," except that Tabitha is also the mat, etc. Proxy functions appear to be more of a logical device than an aid to the interpretation of language. (And Quine's cat remains a less convincing example of uncertainty than Schrödinger's!)

2. Empathy and Charity

Yet as well as insisting on the indeterminacy of translation and the inscrutability of reference, Quine stated in a number of books and articles that all human beings share a common rationality, and understand each other by way of charity, empathy, and projection. Thus, "the translator

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2   Various philosophers have tried to help out Quine by filling in the gaps in his fable. For example, Hilary Putnam (the son of a distinguished translator) suggests that we fail to appreciate the indeterminacy of translation and reference because of "the interest-relativity of explanation" (*Meaning* 45). So he imagines very small Martians with little conception of whole rabbits and trees and so on, who consequently find rabbit-parts and tree-parts much more perspicuous than we do. If their language (according to our translation manual, of course) has short expressions for 'undetached rabbit-part' and 'detached rabbit-part,' but no short expression for whole rabbits, they might well find the most 'natural' translation of "gavagai" to be the Martian expression we translate as 'undetached rabbit-part.' Linguists and translators tend to be more interested in human language users than Putnam's various thought experiments involving Martians, Twin Earths, brains-in-a-vat, etc.

wisely depends on empathy, on folk psychology, on projecting himself into the native's sandals. We assume others are like us" ("Comment on Parsons" 291). In *Pursuit of Truth*, he says that "We all have an uncanny knack for empathizing another's perceptual situation," which we use to make our analytic hypotheses or interpretive guesses, and that there's a "pre-established harmony" of perceptual similarity standards, ultimately accounted for by natural selection (42). Consequently,

> The indeterminacy of translation is unlikely to obtrude in practice, even in radical translation. [...] The linguist assumes that the native's attitudes and ways of thinking are like his own, up to the point where there is contrary evidence. He accordingly imposes his own ontology and linguistic patterns on the native wherever compatible with the native's speech and other behavior, unless a contrary course offers striking simplifications. (48–49)

In *Word and Object*, Quine refers to "the principle of charity" in interpretation, coined by Neil Wilson in 1959.[3] Following Quine, Davidson also invokes the principle of charity in a series of essays written in the 1960s and 70s. Indeed, he writes that he applies it "across the board" (*Inquiries* xvii). Davidson describes "radical interpretation" rather than translation: interpreting speakers without any foreknowledge of the meanings of their words, or any detailed knowledge of their propositional attitudes, according to what they seem to hold true in the presence of environmental stimuli (such as the presence of a rabbit). We interpret a speaker in such a way as to "maximize agreement," and we "maximize the self-consistency" we attribute to the person being interpreted (27). For Davidson, "charity is not an option"; rather, it "is forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters" (197). Indeed, "What makes interpretation possible [...] is the fact that we can dismiss a priori the chance of massive error" (168–169). We assume that our interlocutors remain inside what Peter Strawson called "the bounds of sense."[4] Davidson also ties charity to truth: "I would extend the

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3   Wilson had a limited goal – to explain how hearers try to establish the referents of proper names used by other people: "We select as designatum that individual which will make the largest possible number [...] of statements true" (532) – but subsequent philosophers elaborated and expanded on this principle.

4   One can also put a negative slant on this principle. Michael Forster remarks that one doesn't usually need to show charity to people one represents as one's equals or superiors (184, note 144). And Ian Hacking suggests that "[l]inguistic imperialism is better armed than the military for perhaps it can be proved, by a transcendental argument, that if the native does not share most of our be-

principle of charity to favor interpretations that as far as possible preserve truth: I think it makes for mutual understanding, and hence for better interpretation, to interpret what the speaker accepts as true when we can" (*Subjective* 149).[5]

As Daniel Dennett points out, the logic of charity can actually be divided into two parts: a "normative principle" – one should attribute to (rational) people the propositional attitudes (beliefs, desires, etc.) and utterance meanings they "ought to have" given their circumstances, and a "projective principle" – one should attribute to a person "the propositional attitudes one supposed one would have oneself in those circumstances" (342–343).[6] The normative principle encompasses Davidson's various accounts of charity, and was also foreshadowed by Quine, who wrote

> The maxim of translation underlying all this is that assertions startlingly false on the face of them are likely to turn on hidden differences of language [...] The common sense behind the maxim is that one's interlocutor's silliness, beyond a certain point, is less likely than bad translation – or, in the domestic case, linguistic divergence. (*Word* 54)

Quine also foreshadowed the projection principle: writing about indirect quotation he says, "we project ourselves into what, from his remarks and other indications, we imagine the speaker's state of mind to have been, and then we say what, in our language, is natural and relevant for us in the state thus feigned" (200). Our perception of other people's beliefs and hopes and fears and desires and intentions similarly involves empathy and "something like quotation of one's own imagined verbal response to an imagined situation" (200). Consequently, contingency and uncertainty are inherent in our ascriptions of *all* propositional attitudes.

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liefs and wants, he is just not engaged in human discourse, and is at best subhuman" (149). But insisting on the similarities among all peoples is actually the contrary of dismissing some of them as subhuman.

5   Davidson also seeks to replace the traditional semantic concept of reference with a semantic theory of truth-conditions which yield interpretations of sentences. This necessarily precludes incommensurability and most indeterminacy. There is no space to discuss this here.

6   Dennett actually writes "a creature" rather than a person, but again, I'll limit this discussion to humans. He also suggests that "the opposition between Projection and Rationalization is at most a matter of emphasis" (344). There's the bit where you say it and the bit where you take it back.

3. Conceptual Schemes and Translation

Davidson, however, wants to keep this uncertainty in check. He takes the logic of rationality, the reliability of perceptions, and the necessary truth, coherence and consistency of most beliefs a step further, notoriously arguing that there can be no such thing as radically different and untranslatable (or non-intertranslatable) conceptual schemes: "Different points of view make sense,[7] but only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability" (*Inquiries* 184). Obviously, different languages have different resources – different systems or categories for organising or dividing up perceptual experience and expressing points of view. There are many things that are easy to express in one language but require more effort in another, which is why bilinguals tend to codeswitch. Multilingual speakers can change languages at will, but they can never occupy a neutral vantage point from which to compare supposedly rival conceptual schemes. As Quine puts it, someone "cannot proclaim cultural relativism without rising above it, and he cannot rise above it without giving it up" (*Confessions* 243). For Davidson, if languages are essentially intertranslatable (however much difficulty and indeterminacy this involves), they clearly do not constitute different conceptual schemes, and cannot be radically incommensurable. So the only conceptual scheme there is, is the set of all possible languages.

This scheme is consequently capacious, a house of many mansions. It is big enough to encompass all of Nelson Goodman's "ways of world-making" – all the ways the world can be described, seen, pictured, and so on, by all the different sciences, arts, religions, etc. And as Davidson points out,

> Whorf, wanting to demonstrate that Hopi incorporates a metaphysics so alien to ours that Hopi and English cannot, as he puts it, "be calibrated," uses English to convey the contents of sample Hopi sentences. Kuhn is brilliant at saying what things were like before the revolution using – what else? – our post-revolutionary idiom. (*Inquiries* 184)

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[7] By "make sense," Davidson seems to mean "can be understood," rather than "is an intelligible thesis" (Forster 171, note 21).

Furthermore, for there to exist different conceptual schemes, there would need to be something neutral and common lying outside them all.[8] What could this be? Davidson insists that the common something "cannot, of course, be the *subject matter* of contrasting languages, or translation would be possible" (190, emphasis in original). Hence the supposed dualism of an organising system – a scheme (or language) – and something waiting to be organised – sensory experience, uninterpreted content – is unintelligible.[9]

These arguments stand or fall on the inter-translatability of languages. Are all the concepts expressed in all languages readily translatable? In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn famously argued that in a scientific revolution or paradigm shift (such as Newtonian physics, Darwinism, general relativity, or quantum theory), the scientific community splits in two, with only partial communication between those advocating the new theory, and those who resist it. New theories involve changes in the meanings of scientific terms and concepts. This leads to incommensurability and mutually untranslatable 'languages' – or at least small groups of interdefined terms – because "there is no language, neut-

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8   Charles Taylor, who very much endorses the notion of differing conceptual schemes, opposes this anti-Whorfian logic, and insists on the possibility of using a "language of perspicuous contrast," in which one can neutrally describe differing ways of life and formulate alternative understandings of the world (125). This seems somewhat utopian.

9   One way of explaining the non-existence of uninterpreted content is John McDowell's Kantian dismissal of what Wilfred Sellars dubbed "the myth of the Given," or raw sense data. In *Mind and World*, McDowell insists that perceptual content or experience – the world's impacts on our senses – *already has conceptual content*: "experiences in general are states or occurrences in which conceptual capacities are passively drawn into operation" (30). "One's conceptual capacities have already been brought into play in the content's being available to one, before one has any choice in the matter" (10). There is no extra-conceptual "given," and our empirical knowledge results from co-operation between passive receptivity and active understanding. In Kant's aphorism, "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" (*Critique of Pure Reason* A51/B75). For McDowell, importantly, "[t]his joint involvement of receptivity and spontaneity allows us to say that in experience one can take in how things are" (25). Davidson, on the contrary, sees experience as only a *causal*, extra-conceptual impact on sensibility, but not a *rational* one, not the kind of thing that could give us reasons for holding beliefs: "nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief" (*Subjective* 141). But, as mentioned above, he also holds that "belief is in its nature veridical" (146), so even though experiences don't justify beliefs, beliefs about experiences do.

ral or otherwise, into which both theories, conceived as sets of sentences, can be translated without residue or loss" (*Road* 36).

In the 1969 Postscript to *Structure*, Kuhn argued that scientists who wish to communicate across groups have to "become translators" (201). They need to isolate the problematic terms with no common measure – or more precisely, no common *language* – and try to elucidate (or gloss, or paraphrase) them using shared everyday vocabularies. Of course, "translate" is used metaphorically if the word itself (for instance, *force*, *mass*, *temperature*, *space*, *time*, *electron*, *light*, *particle*) doesn't change, but only its meaning or extension, in the same language. But ultimately, this doesn't suffice: "one must go native, discover that one is thinking and working in, not just translating out of, a language that was previously foreign" (203).

In subsequent essays Kuhn distinguished more sharply between language learning and translation, describing them as "very different processes: the outcome of the former is bilingualism, and bilinguals repeatedly report that there are things they can express in one language that they cannot express in the other" (*Road* 238). Furthermore,

> anything which can be said in one language can, with imagination and effort, be *understood* by a speaker of another. What is prerequisite to such understanding, however, is not translation but language learning. Quine's radical translator is, in fact, a language learner. If he succeeds, which I think no principle bars, he will become bilingual. But that does not ensure that he or anyone else will be able to translate from his newly acquired language to the one with which he was raised. (*Road* 61)[10]

Kuhn complains that "Quine simply takes effability for granted. [...] Examining the sort of evidence available to the translator, he then argues for the indeterminacy of translation, but most of his arguments could equally well be read as pointing instead to its impossibility" (*Incommensurability* 54, note 7).

He also discusses the problems faced by historians of science interpreting texts from earlier times, with an obsolete and puzzling lexicon. One of his favourite examples is Aristotle's concept of motion (*kinesis*, *metabole*). This didn't just mean change of position, but involved qualitat-

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10 As Forster points out – wisely choosing to disregard Jerry Fodor's theory of a supposedly "hard-wired" "language of thought" (171, note 24) – "it is quite possible to come to understand another person's language/concepts without interpreting or translating them in(to) any of one's own at all – as the example of infants learning their first language/concepts reminds us" (138).

ive changes of all sorts (an acorn growing into an oak tree, a healthy person declining into sickness, melting ice turning from solid to liquid, and so on). Aristotelian motions are changes of state, transitions from something to something else. There is no single word in the English lexicon to express this. We can easily understand the Greek concept if it is *explained* to us – this requires, in Hans-Georg Gadamer's term, a fusion of the writer and the reader's horizons, which is easy enough – but there simply isn't a current English word that expresses Aristotle's understanding of motion.

Although Davidson explicitly identifies conceptual schemes with "sets of intertranslatable languages" (*Inquiries* 185), and not *interpretable* ones, his argument against *radically different* conceptual schemes presupposes the possibility of *conveying the sense* of an alien word or concept by a "nontranslating interpretation" (translating the meaning, but not the word itself), which is what Kuhn does with his examples from Aristotelian physics. After all, Kuhn has said, somewhat unwisely, "I could read texts, get inside the heads of the people who wrote them, better than anybody else in the world" (*Road* 276). This is not the kind of boast one could make without having explained, in modern English, the supposedly 'incommensurable' ideas to be found in those heads. Given the success of such explanations, whereas Kuhn says things like "though the world does not change with a change of paradigm, the scientist afterwards works in a different world" (*Structure* 121), and "the proponents of different paradigms practice their trades in different worlds" (149), Davidson ripostes that "Instead of living in different worlds, Kuhn's scientists may […] be only words apart" (189).

Of course, beliefs, propositional attitudes, modes of thinking, feeling, and perceiving, etc., have varied over the course of history, and even between cultures at the same point in history. But if historians, classicists, anthropologists and linguists writing today can give us, however loosely, a sense of the 'alien' concepts in these cultures, in Davidson's terms these are no longer incommensurable schemes. Opposing Davidson, Michael Forster denies that "nontranslating interpretations," glossing and paraphrasing foreign concepts, show that they are part of the same conceptual scheme as one's own language. He states that "not all successful interpretations of foreign words in one's home language need employ, or even presuppose the possibility of, their translation into it (and certainly not their *literal* translation into it *as it is already constituted*)" (138, emphasis in original). But this was not Davidson's argument.

And translations can (attempt to) change the way target languages are constituted. Following Johann Gottfried Herder and Friedrich Schleiermacher, 'foreignizing' translators who find an unfamiliar concept can attempt to express (or at least approximate) the source language meaning by modifying or 'bending' the usage of the closest available target language word (see MacKenzie, *Language Contact* ch. 7, and MacKenzie, "Translatability"). Although no individual translator's foreignizing choices are likely to have much impact, translations (or imitations) of important literary works (notably the Greek and Roman classics) have long enriched the conceptual range and expressive potential of other languages. Notable advocates of such translations include Antoine de Rivarol, who argued in 1785 that French was merely part of an "alloy" that would only achieve perfection by "trading" with its neighbouring languages and digging into the classical tongues (38), and Schleiermacher, who argued that "much in our language that is beautiful and strong was developed, or restored from oblivion, only through translation," and that the German language could "flourish and develop its own strength only through extensive contact with the foreign" (62). Translators can also refrain from translating, and try to introduce a loanword, of which there are of course a great many in English, from *angst* and *auto-da-fé* to *zeitgeist* and *zombie*.

Yet, notwithstanding his insistence on the limits of translation, Forster glosses and paraphrases Greek terms just as Kuhn does, for example *chlōros*, "which the epic poets sometimes apply to objects which we would classify as green, such as green wood or healthy foliage, and at other times to objects which we would classify as yellow, such as honey. [...] the word *chlōros* implies, in addition to a color, the idea of moistness" (178, note 83; 162). It is true that this word cannot readily be imported into modern English, but it can be interpreted. How many words like this it takes to constitute a wholly different conceptual scheme remains a matter of opinion.[11]

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[11]   In *Reason, Truth and History*, Putnam opposed Kuhn's arguments about incommensurability, decrying "the tendency to confuse or conflate concept and conception" (116), and insisting that, while seventeenth-century scientists, for example, clearly had different *conceptions* of many key scientific terms than we do, incorporating many beliefs that we no longer share, they were still referring to the same *concepts*. And if changed concepts share partial reference, and a common ontology, semantic change need not necessarily imply semantic incomparability. We have to attribute to "members of other cultures past and present [...] shared references and shared concepts, however different the *conceptions* that we also attribute" (119). Later, however – perhaps in re-

Of course, indeterminacy remains in both translation and nontranslating interpretation. Languages can vary greatly, and have lexicons that divide up reality, and the things we say about it, very differently, and very disparate ways of relating words to one another in sentences. The exact meanings of words are determined by their complex systematic interrelationships with other words in a semantic field,[12] and as Ferdinand de Saussure put it, meaning arises through a system of linguistic oppositions: "in language there are only differences *without positive terms*" (120). The underlying logic here goes back to Spinoza, who argued in 1674 that the identity of everything in the universe depends on, or is determined by, its relations to other things, or to what it is not; in short, *Omnis determinatio est negatio*: determination is negation (Melamed 175–176).

Moreover, words are often used in language-specific collocations, often for poetic or 'musical' effect (such as rhyme, rhythm, assonance, alliteration). Effects that depend on the sound-patterns specific to a language are ineluctably lost in translation, and translators often sacrifice a modicum of semantic faithfulness in pursuit of effects in the target language. So yes, translations often fall short of communicating the full semantic content of difficult texts from other times and places, but their very existence gives the lie to wholly incommensurable conceptual schemes.

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sponse to Paul Feyerabend's criticisms – he conceded that "certain natural languages do sometimes quantify over 'objects' which are unique to those languages" (*Ethics* 49). For example, Shawnee (one of the languages described by Whorf) "has an 'ontology' of patterns that (normal) English lacks, although we could, of course, *add* it to English; and I think that the conceptual scheme of English is constantly being enriched by interactions with other languages, as well as by scientific, artistic, etc., creations" (50). Kuhn and Feyerabend would probably still insist that such translations into English only provide partial, imperfect introductions to other ways of thinking, and that for a fuller understanding language learning is still required.

[12] The qualification "in a semantic field" is important; this argument is far less radical than, e.g., Davidson's holism: "we can give the meaning of any sentence (or word) only by giving the meaning of every sentence (and word) in the language" (*Inquiries* 22). Kuhn describes the way languages structure semantic fields differently (the lack of structural homology) as cases of "incommensurability" and localised untranslatability (*Road* 49); a more holist approach might allow that all the senses involved are simply distributed differently across clusters of words. There might be indeterminacy, but not incommensurability or untranslatability.

4. Conceptual Change and Brandom's Spirit of Trust

But even if – and it remains an if – all words in all languages can be in-
terpreted in today's English, including by 'bending' current word-usages,
their meanings can also change. And this is the problem with rigorously
employing charity, the projective principle, and suchlike: you are unlikely
ever to learn anything new. If you always maximise agreement with your
own beliefs, or alternatively perceive what Quine called "silliness" and
attribute it to bad translation, you will never come to terms with unfamili-
ar concepts used by other people, or once familiar concepts that appear to
have changed. Following Frege, most philosophers of language argue that
the sentence or proposition is the basic, if not the minimal unit of expres-
sion that can have pragmatic force (or in Wittgensteinian terms, the
shortest unit that can be used to make a move in a language game).[13] Hol-
ists and inferentialists such as Brandom (in *Making it Explicit*) go fur-
ther, arguing that the content of individual sentences can only be ex-
plained by way of their inferential relations with surrounding sentences.
And hermeneutic theorists such as Schleiermacher go the full distance,
suggesting that a complete text, a text and all its intertexts, the whole of a
writer's oeuvre, or an entire literary tradition can have an effect on a local
meaning. But my focus here is on the meaning (which is to say, the use!)
of troublesome individual words, either new coinages for new concepts,
or old words given new senses in line with evolving concepts. And none
of our concepts are immune to change.[14]

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[13]   Frege wrote, "it is only in the context of a proposition that words have any
       meaning" (Nur im Zusammenhange eines Satzes bedeuten die Wörte etwas)
       (*Foundations* §62). Wittgenstein paraphrased this in both the *Tractatus* (§3.3)
       and *Philosophical Investigations* (§49). Davidson states that words have no
       meaning "in any sense that transcends the fact that they have a systematic
       effect on the meanings of the sentences in which they occur" (*Inquiries* 18),
       and that "[i]t is sentences that predict (or are used to predict), sentences that
       cope or deal with things, that fit our sensory promptings, that can be compared
       or confronted with the evidence" (*Inquiries* 193).

[14]   This is especially the case if, with Quine, we reject the distinction between
       analytic sentences that are true by virtue of meanings alone – the standard
       example is "all bachelors are unmarried" – and synthetic ones that have both a
       linguistic and a factual component – e.g., "[f]or some reason, Hobbes,
       Descartes, Locke, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, Voltaire, Kant, Schopenhauer,
       Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein were all unmarried." But bachelor
       ("unmarried and male") rests on a background of world knowledge – it pre-
       sumably doesn't apply to the Pope and Catholic priests, 21-year-olds, divor-
       cés, widowers, unmarried men with long-term live-in partners, etc. Quine ar-

Obviously we can't change too many of them at once – philosophers love to quote Otto Neurath's metaphor (which Quine used as an epigraph in *Word and Object*) about conceptual change: "We are like sailors who must rebuild their ship on the open sea, never able to dismantle it in drydock and to reconstruct it there out of the best materials" (201). If you remove too many rotten planks at once the ship will fill with water and sink. But conceptual change, at the level of the individual and in a language as a whole, is prevalent and ongoing. As Charles Sanders Peirce put it in the 1870s, "men and words reciprocally educate each other; each increase of a man's information is at the same time the increase of a word's information and *vice versa*" (7.587).

John McDowell writes of "the active business of adjusting one's world-view in response to experience. Ensuring that our empirical concepts and conceptions pass muster is ongoing and arduous work for the understanding. It requires patience and something like humility" (40). And in his interpretation (or "strong misreading") of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in his book *A Spirit of Trust*, Robert Brandom attributes to Hegel

> the observation that every belief we have had or judgment we have made has eventually turned out to be false, at least in detail, and [...] that every belief or judgment we ever will or even could have will similarly eventually be found wanting – if we but subject it to sufficient critical scrutiny. (99)

This is a long way from Davidson's account of the permanent necessity of beliefs being true at any given time.

In the preface to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel offers a splendid definition of truth, which is the totality of our concepts: "The True is thus a Bacchanalian revel, with not a member sober; yet because each member collapses as soon as he drops out, the revel is just as much transparent and

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gues that analyticity depends on synonymy, but establishing whether two terms are synonymous necessarily involves matters of fact (synthetic propositions), which confounds the distinction. Quine's holism leads him to argue that "no statement is immune to revision" ("Dogmas" 43). Gilbert Harman puts this more aggressively: those who make the analytic-synthetic distinction "suffer from a lack of imagination" and an "inability to imagine that certain sentences are false. But [...] after a little practice such things can be imagined" (181).

simple repose" (27).[15] In Brandom's gloss, this means that a concept that shows itself to be incompatible with others, or inadequate to reality, will fall beneath the table like a drunken reveller, but always to be replaced by another one. And we are not interested in the insensible drunks on the floor, but in those who replace them, or in the analogy, the new or revised or more adequate (or 'truer') concepts.

Kuhn gives a nice example of a changed concept: when European naturalists first encountered the duck-billed platypus – a semi-aquatic, warm-blooded animal that lays eggs but then suckles its young – they had to revise their concept of *mammal*. (Or in Gadamerian terms, they had to question their prejudices.) But the reader who came across the expression "egg-laying mammal" for the first time, and decided that this silliness must result from a bad translation, or linguistic divergence (maybe 'eggs' means something different in Tasmania?) would be mistaken, and would not learn something new. (*Incommensurability* 247)

Conceptual change is inescapable, and something we do better to recognise and accept, rather than trying to obviate it with vain appeals to charity. Brandom likens the process of conceptual change to common law jurisprudence, or Anglo-American case law, in which judges decide cases according to legal precedent, rather than a written statute. In case law, there *is* no statute that can be applied to a current case. There are only previously decided cases that can serve as precedents and, at the judge's discretion, be applied to current circumstances, or alternatively disregarded or overridden. The precedents are considered to be normative, and binding for current and future cases – unless or until a judge determines that circumstances have changed. In turn, the current judge's decision serves as a precedent, and becomes a part of the common law tradition that future judges will either adhere to or override, because of changed circumstances. Brandom makes this into a narrative of progress, of concepts being refined and improved, and justice becoming more ideal. This is very much a Whig interpretation of history (448–450, 564–565, 705–706, 745–748).

Just as case law is never settled for all time, neither is the meaning of our concepts. Just as legal precedents can be disregarded, our concepts can be reinterpreted in new circumstances. And just as judges usually have good reasons for reframing the law by a different use of precedents (so it *doesn't* depend on "what the judge had for breakfast," as the saying

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[15] "Das Wahre ist so der bacchantische Taumel, an dem kein Glied nicht trunken ist, und weil jedes, indem es sich absondert, ebenso unmittelbar auflöst, ist er ebenso die durchsichtige und einfache Ruhe."

goes), there are probably good reasons for the changed or entirely new concepts we encounter, and Brandom argues that we should provisionally accept them, in what he calls a spirit of trust. He describes "a progressive tradition of imperfect, but cumulative, ever more explicit, and ultimately successful expressions of [...] concepts" (634), and foresees a postmodern "age of trust" in which we correct our forebears' conceptual errors, and expect our successors to correct us (621, 726).[16]

Many of us are inclined to take it on trust that new and revised concepts in the natural sciences – including revisions of long-established 'natural kind' terms – are 'better' (or closer to 'the truth') than their predecessors, even though Kuhn warns us that "[a]ll past beliefs about nature have sooner or later turned out to be false. On the record, therefore, the probability that any currently proposed belief will fare better must be close to zero" (*Road* 115). Concepts in the human sciences are usually more contested than those in the natural sciences: we may not have much confidence that, say, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the *Übermensch*, the trickle-down effect, securitisation, inaesthetics, anti-wokeism or posthumanism will take us in the right direction. In the human sciences, we might prefer, like Richard Rorty, to navigate among different worldviews while maintaining a certain ironic distance from all of them. Rather than seeking a "final vocabulary" (73) of sacrosanct concepts and beliefs, we can try out different vocabularies, borrowed from other people and from books. For the Rortian "ironist," no concept or statement is ever indefeasible: with enough imagination, *anything* can be redescribed, and "there is no answer to a redescription save a re-re-redescription" (80). (And indeed, there are many, including Brandom, who redescribe Rorty's irony as cynicism or alienation.) So we might well want to resist the Hegelian notion of "Absolute Knowing," and the single, ultimate, optimal true description that will be accepted at "the end of inquiry." As Kuhn

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16   For Brandom, the postmodern "age of trust" will be achieved by "forgiveness" and "confession" (592–600). Expanding on the end of the "Spirit" chapter in the *Phenomenology*, he argues that we "forgive" earlier users of concepts for their errors and failures, and trust that our own failures will be forgiven in the future by those who analyse the concepts of our time. We "confess" the contingency of our own attitudes and beliefs, because we know that "what things are for consciousness is not just whatever they are in themselves" (593). This attitude of forgiveness "ushers in the form of community Hegel calls 'absolute Spirit,' and the form of self-consciousness he calls 'Absolute Knowing'" (598). My argument about trusting that the users of changed or new concepts know what they are doing does *not* require this rather peculiar Hegelian underpinning.

puts it, "Scientific development is like Darwinian evolution, a process driven from behind rather than pulled toward some fixed goal to which it grows ever closer" (115). It is not evident how we could ever know that we had reached this goal, or that we were in possession of all the possible evidence, so that our concepts and theories were ideal and unimprovable and complete and correct, and 'matched the world,' never to be improved on.

Contra Brandom, conceptual change need not always be part of a linear march towards the truth. Scientific work may meander and take wrong turnings, never getting near the end of inquiry. Concepts can always be criticised and, if need be, revised, and experience leads us all to make incremental changes to many of our concepts. You may well be uncertain of the value or the truth (or even the meaning) of seemingly new or revised concepts, but you are more likely to learn something (not necessarily something true) if you pay attention to them, and trust that the people using them know what they are trying to do and say. According charity and projecting empathy in the face of the new, the different and the unknown, and seeking maximal agreement with one's own current ontology and linguistic uses can also be seen as a way of allaying anxiety, and retreating into the same and the familiar. On the contrary, the spirit of trust necessarily embraces contingency and incorporates a measure of ontological uncertainty and an openness to the conceptually unfamiliar.[17]

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[17]   I would like to thank an anonymous reader for suggesting that I end by actually stating my implied argument!

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