

The Indeterminacy of Quine's Indeterminacy Thesis.

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Abstract

W. V. Quine argues that observational sentences and general concepts are indeterminate. The implication of this is that there is no unique meaning and translation of any sentence or concept in any chosen language as there is a proliferation of translational manuals. This paper argues that if the indeterminacy thesis is true then this has invariably and greatly affected the potency of the fundamentals of Quine's arguments by its own criterion. This is because if the thesis is true, it follows that the thesis itself is indeterminate and it is therefore unjustified to declare translation and meaning indeterminate. By Quine's theory, a general regress besets us all here but we must first make a significant sense of the import of this article. The paper, however, explores the consequences of this conclusion.

Background to Translation and Meaning

Quine's task in *Translation and Meaning* is to find out how much of language, science, and the world we can make a meaning of by understanding language as a social tool to respond to the effect of stimulation on our nerve endings. The attempt is that if language is understood as a response to stimulation, then it would become clear what scope would be left for meaning, the analytic-synthetic distinction, synonymy, etc., all of which are constituents of language. Quine is not a Lockean empiricist who claims that the meaning of an expression is the idea associated with it in the mind of the speaker. He is not a Wittgensteinian theorist who claims that the meaning of a certain word is the way it is used to describe the world. Quine's position is that we should remove all these theories of meaning. We should, as much as possible, remove all talk about meaning altogether. This is because the talk of meaning presupposes a certain entity called meaning. But, this talk about meaning is what Alston referred to in *Quine on Meaning* as the habit of hypostatization, the habit that Quine rejects.¹ Talk of meaning like this confuses our language. All we should deal with is how our socially learned words are used as responses to stimulation. It is then safe to refer to Quine's theory here as stimulus theory. Quine is making an enquiry into the way our socially learned words are used to respond to stimulation.

Translation and Meaning

Quine's task in *Translation and Meaning* is to examine how much of language we can understand by studying it as an instrument used for responding to stimulation, a prime example of which is a flash of light zapping the retina. It may then be asked: how does Quine's task affect meaning, the analytic-synthetic distinction, synonymy, etc, all of which are important concepts in language? In other words, it may generally be asked: how does Quine's theory affect language? Quine's belief is that if our language can be understood in terms of stimulus/-response, then it would become clear that it does not leave any significant scope for meaning. The outcome is that meaning in language as related to intension becomes irrelevant. Quine sees his task as:

to consider how much of language can be made sense of in terms of its stimulus conditions, and what scope this leaves for empirically unconditioned variations in one's conceptual scheme.²

Quine's contention is that if language is studied as a relationship between stimulation and behaviour response, then by assenting or dissenting to that stimulation it may become clear how we may make sense of our linguistic system and whatever significance it may hold.

For Quine, language is described as the complex of present dispositions to verbal behaviour. The issue here is to explain human behaviour (Quine calls it verbal behaviour) by its currently observable correlation with stimulation. This means that language should be understood as disposition to stimulus response. This enquiry is an attempt to study the words and utterances of a speaker based on his / her dispositions to respond to external stimulations alone. This study will include the understanding of the set of stimulations that will elicit the disposition either to assent or dissent in the speaker. If we study the words and sentences of a language based on the dispositions to respond to verbal stimulations alone, the question is: what are the consequences of this model for language and the nature of words and utterances in general? Quine argues that by studying these dispositions we would understand whether our language is determinate or indeterminate. From this nature of the study of language, what is the kind of meaning that words can have? Again, what scope does it leave for the distinction between statements that are necessary and statements which are contingent? Questions like these are what Quine's enquiry in *Translation and Meaning* tries to explain.

Radical Translation

When we use words or language as a social instrument to respond to the world, it is important to examine what status meaning takes in such a process. Quine says in *Pursuit of Truth* that “the meaning of a sentence of one language is what it shares in its translations with another language...”.³ Then to determine the meaning of words and sentences in one language, it becomes pertinent to determine what it shares with other languages by its translations. This assumption is what led to Quine’s enterprise of radical translation. In this enquiry of radical translation, Quine imagines a linguist who is to translate an alien language into his or her own native language without the help of a native informant. The only data that the linguist has to rely upon to get the translation scheme of the native are the native utterances and their attendant observable behavior.⁴ This is just because the linguist has no other means of translating the language of the native. A linguistic scheme is formulated prior to its use as response to the stimulation. It may also be said that the linguistic scheme is formed just as we are responding to the stimulation. Therefore, the linguist is expected to formulate a translation manual to be used in his enquiry.

One of Quine’s objectives is to show that the meaning that words and sentences take does not go beyond their relationship with verbal or non-verbal stimulation. Quine’s research therefore attempts to show that if language can be sufficiently explained by its relationship with natural disposition to stimulation, then it would become sufficient to argue that any theory or concept that places any different interpretation of meaning onto words and sentences becomes incorrect. This means that if some key concepts in language such as meaning, analyticity, synonymy, semantic rule, etc., are to convey any meaning at all, they are to convey stimulus meaning.

To form his translation manual, the linguist starts his enterprise by noting how the native uses his words in response to present stimulation. For example, the native utters ‘Gavagai’ at the sight of ‘Rabbit’. The linguist immediately notes that ‘Gavagai’ translates to his own sentence, ‘Rabbit.’ However, since the native might use a different sentence at the sight of a rabbit which might translate to ‘animal,’ ‘white,’ or ‘rabbit,’ the linguist has to find out when the native wishes to assent to the sentence ‘Rabbit’ at the sight of a rabbit and not at the sight of an animal or a white object. Then at the sight of a rabbit, the linguist has to utter

the word 'Gavagai' and study the native's assenting or dissenting response. But, to achieve this feat, he has to be able to translate the native's 'Yes' and 'No.' However, Quine's translator will leave some important aspects of language-speaking out of the enquiry here. There are some culturally coded gestures which usually accompany either 'Yes' or 'No.' Different gestures are employed for different contexts. It then becomes an issue how Quine's translator will translate these elements of body language.

The linguist learns the native's equivalence of 'yes' and 'no' by watching the native's response to the sentence 'Gavagai' that follows the physical stimulation accompanying the appearance of a rabbit. If he elicits 'evet' in so many instances of the sight of a rabbit, then 'evet' is taken to be equivalent to 'yes,' while 'yok' is found to be the equivalent of 'no.' For further clarity, questions are asked to make sure that the native's 'yes' and 'no' are adequately mastered. For Quine, the linguist uses this method to develop the working manual with which to penetrate the heart of the native's language. For instance, the linguist can now translate the native's sentence 'Gavagai' as 'Rabbit'⁵. He can also translate his 'yes' and 'no.' With this development, Quine recasts *meaning* in terms of *stimulation*. The affirmative stimulus meaning of a sentence such as 'Gavagai' *for a given speaker* is defined as the class of all the stimulations that would prompt his assent to it. Conversely, the class of all stimulations that would prompt dissent for a given speaker is defined as the negative stimulus meaning of a sentence.⁶ An example of a negative stimulus meaning is the case in which the native would dissent to the stimulation of a hedgehog because it is not a rabbit, and he is being asked about rabbits. Therefore, the stimulus meaning of a sentence for an individual sums up his disposition to assent to or dissent from the sentence in response to present stimulation.

Occasion, Standing, and Observation Sentences

Given Quine's stimulus theory, various kinds of sentences depend on their relationship with the disposition of the subject to respond to the conditioning stimulation. These sentences are classified as occasional, standing or observational. An occasion sentence, for example, is one in which the subject uses his disposition to assent or dissent, given the current stimulation. The scope of time within which what is referred to as the current stimulation is determined is the 'modulus.'⁷ The modulus sets spacio-temporal limits to the present stimulation. The sentence 'see a rabbit' is uttered at the sight of rabbit. When the rabbit

disappears, the sentence becomes 'we saw a rabbit'. The interval of the time when the spectators undergo the present stimulation of a rabbit is referred to as the modulus.

An occasion sentence is different from the other kinds of sentences because its stimulus meaning is solely dependent on the present stimulation within the modulus. This means that the stimulation that elicits assent during a certain modulus may elicit dissent at another. In this case, minimally worded sentences such as 'Red,' 'Gavagai,' 'It hurts,' or 'It is raining,' etc., are all occasion sentences existing within a particular modulus. However, for *standing sentences*, the eliciting stimulation has a longer span. The subject has the tendency of repeating his earlier response, given the same stimulation. Hence it is possible for subjects to span multiple moduli. For instance, the subject's assent to the sentence 'The weather is hot' has a longer modulus than to the sentence 'Gavagai.' Here the sentence 'The weather is hot' is a standing sentence. There is also a daily assent to the verbal stimulation of a sentence such as 'It is 1:00 pm.' For standing sentences, their stimulation may keep the response unchanged over a considerably longer time. Sentences with short moduli are referred to as occasion sentences, while those that span longer moduli are called standing sentences. In the case, it is the *modulus* that distinguishes occasion sentences from standing sentences.

In addition, there are also *observation sentences*. An observation sentence is one that keeps its stimulus meaning unchanged, given some other *collateral information*. Examples of such sentences are 'No bachelor is married,' and 'No child is an adult.' Observational sentences, as the examples might, show, may have their site in either a belief or system of mores in the sense that the foundation of the acceptability of language, strictly speaking, may be said to be conventional. This fact in turn may explain the relationship of observational sentences to beliefs, perhaps even mores. Quine refers to observation sentences as occasion sentences that wear their meaning on their sleeves.⁸ An observation sentence is a sentence to which all the speakers of a given language have the disposition to assent, given the same conditioning stimulation, and in spite of any other contrary stimulation. For a sentence to be referred to as an observation sentence, it has to satisfy two criteria. The first is general acceptability: the sentence must command an outright assent or dissent by all speakers. The second condition is intersubjectivity. This means that all speakers must have the same disposition about the sentence. Quine argues that observation sentences can be translated by the linguist based on the criteria identified. Quine notes as well that truth functions such as

negation, logical conjunction, and alternation can be translated by the field linguist from the native language to his home language.⁹

Synonymy and Analyticity

Given the preceding exposition, how can we determine sentence synonymy and the analyticity of various statements in question? Following Quine, an observation sentence is an occasion sentence which maintains its stimulus meaning unchanged for subjects, even in the presence of any conflicting stimulus information. Sentence synonymy becomes explicit in terms of stimulus meaning. Synonymous sentences are observation sentences that have the same stimulus meaning. In this case, 'Gavagai' and 'Rabbit' turn out to have the same stimulus meaning and hence they are synonymous. Quine argues that sentence synonymy is related to the *stimulus* synonymy of sentences. Stimulus synonymy is also related to stimulus analyticity. An analytic sentence is a sentence that is true *come what stimulation*.¹⁰ Kant also identifies *a priori*-synthetic sentences such as '7 + 5 = 12' as necessary, but while intuition¹¹ determines the necessity of such sentences for Kant, it is stimulation that determines stimulus analyticity for Quine. Stimulus analyticity has a social acceptability and sameness in intersubjective disposition that every speaker asserts whatever the stimulation. 'There have been black dogs,' '2 + 2 = 4' and 'No bachelor is married,' are all stimulus-analytic simply because they *have a feel that everyone appreciates*.¹² According to Quine, analytic statements are of two kinds: (1) those that are *logically true*, and are non-experiential, some examples of which are tautological, such as 'No unmarried man is married,' 'All married men are married,' or 'No married man is unmarried.' These are all true under any reinterpretations or redescription of 'Man' and 'Married.' (2) Those that are turned to logical truth by substituting synonyms for synonyms, an example of which is 'No bachelor is married,' are similarly true under all foreseeable circumstances,¹³ according to Quine's logic.

Of the sentences that are directly conditioned by experience, Quine argues that there is an objective entity in the world to which speakers may either rightly or wrongly refer. It has to be noted that for Quine, the only value of our language is that it is used as response to stimulation. The fact of the matter is the stimulation to which sentences respond. For instance, the sentence 'This is red,' *has a non-verbal stimulation about which we can be either right or wrong*, i.e. if a red thing is shown to the speaker and he utters 'Red,' then he is technically

correct in his assertion. The listeners can also have the retinas of their eyes affected by the irradiation of red light and draw a consequent conclusion. It is also the case with some other sentences such as 'It is raining,' or 'It is hot,' that they can be proven true or false depending on the circumstances conditioning their utterance. All these sentences have a certain non-verbal stimulation about which their speaker can be right or wrong. From this exposition of Quine theory, it can be argued that sentences are used as responses to stimulation: that is, when we use a sentence to respond to certain stimulation, there is a unique and enduring form of stimulation to which our sentence responds. For instance, the statement; 'This is red' refers to an objective red light. This condition is objective in the sense that speakers' responses to the stimulation are the same and are presumed to have the same stimulus meaning to all actual and potential speakers.

However, it must be stated again that since we use language to respond to stimulation, it may either follow that the formation of our linguistic scheme exists prior to its use to respond to stimulation or that we form our linguistic scheme as we respond. To respond to the world, different linguistic schemes could be formed in as much as they are supported by evidence. For instance, the sentence 'Ehoro' in Yoruba can be roughly translated as 'Rabbit' based on the chosen translation manual which translates 'Ehoro' as a 'Rabbit' and not as 'rabbit stage' or 'undetached rabbit part.' Again, 'Ehoro' in Yoruba can be translated as 'Rabbit stage,' (Word and Object, P 54), based on the manual chosen to translate 'Ehoro' as 'Rabbit stage.' Other translational manuals may be chosen to translate stimulus sentences. These manuals are equally successful in the translation of 'Ehoro' as the theory of Radical Translation predicts. Translating one language to another must follow a definite translation manual.

Now, Quine argues that the linguist may translate the native occasion sentence, 'Gavagai' as 'Rabbit,' according to the translational manual chosen. But, some other translational manuals can be used, leading to a different translation, although both sentences would be based on the same evidence. Therefore, the translation of the occasion sentence 'Gavagai' as 'This is a rabbit' is indeterminate because it can equally be translated as 'This is a rabbit stage,' 'This is an undetached rabbit part,' 'This is an integral part of a rabbit,' 'This is a rabbit fusion,'¹⁴ etc, depending on the translational scheme used. These roughly synonymous statements exemplify what Quine refers to as 'inscrutability of referents.'¹⁵ The argument is

that any translation chosen will fail to be a unique translation for the ‘Gavagai’ since there are other equally sufficient translations for the sentence.

Sentence and Terms

Quine’s argument for the indeterminacy of meaning is presented as follows. There are some utterances such as ‘Red,’ or ‘Rabbit,’ whose stimulus meaning can be determined by either the dissent or assent elicited by the stimulation (in these instances, of either the irradiation of a retina with red light or the presence of rabbit in field of vision). Consequently, for such sentences, there is a stimulation about which speakers can be either right or wrong. However, there are terms such as ‘rabbit,’ ‘gavagai,’ ‘red,’ etc., which are used to describe the abstraction of the properties of the individual things. These general terms do not have non-verbal stimulation about which speakers can either be right or wrong. Their meanings depend on the translation manual used. Now, since it is possible to have more than one translation manual, the question is: which is to be used? Quine’s argument is that any translation manual used will “fail to determine a unique choice of translation manual.”¹⁶ This is because there are other acceptable translational manuals which can be used in translating the terms.

The indeterminacy thesis can be better understood in this way. These conclusions are what Quine arrives at, in the attempt of a linguist to achieve a complete translation of an alien language: (1) Observation sentences can be translated. (2) Truth-functions can be translated. He argues also that (3) *Stimulus* analytic and stimulus contradictory sentences can be recognized, and questions of intrasubjective stimulus synonymy can be settled. But he notes that stimulus synonymous sentences cannot be translated. This is because it is possible for there to be more than one possible referent for any stimulus sentence, such as ‘Gavagai.’ These statements, as it were, exemplify Quine’s idea of *Analytical Hypotheses*.¹⁷ It should be noted, however, that analytical hypotheses and auxiliary definitions are what Quine refers to as “the linguist’s jungle-to-English dictionary and grammar.”¹⁸ (Word and Object, p 70). By this metaphor, I understand Quine to refer to the translation manual that the linguist will use in his translation exercise in a foreign environment where language appears as alien or foreign..

But Quine raises a sticky problem about analytical hypotheses. The difficulty is as follows: while it is possible that in the case of an observation sentence such as ‘Gavagai’ there is a fact of the matter according to which the linguistic scheme could be right or wrong, in the

case of general sentences, this state of affairs is simply not the case. This development occurs simply because these sentences do not have a direct conditioning stimulation. And there is no fact of the matter about which to be right or wrong for the analytical hypothesis used to translate the general terms. It is then possible that there are different sets of analytical hypotheses which are compatible with all the linguistic behaviour and empirical facts, but which give conflicting translations. For instance, it is possible for one analytical hypothesis to translate a certain native expression as 'are the same as.' For that translation manual, 'gavagai' will translate as "This is the same as a rabbit." This statement will constitute an acceptable translation since it agrees with the disposition of the subject and the stimulation in question.

On the other hand, that same native expression may be translated by another analytical hypothesis as 'are stages of the same animal.' According to this hypothesis, 'gavagai' will be translated as 'This is a rabbit stage.' Other analytical hypotheses may translate the same sentence differently. Since there is no fact of the matter in this case, because 'gavagai' is a term and not a stimulus sentence, it becomes difficult to argue that one translation is better than the other in determining the meaning of 'gavagai.' However, a stimulus sentence is also vulnerable to indeterminacy of reference. Stimulus sentence and term are different in the sense that while a stimulus sentence has a direct objective stimulation about which speakers can either be right or wrong, the term does not have such clarity. Translation manual(s) is/are relied upon to determine the significance of any term.

The Indeterminacy of the Indeterminacy Thesis

The exposition in the preceding section may be accepted as a fair presentation of Quine's indeterminacy thesis. In this case, the thesis may be summarily stated as follows: *No sentence, statement, or concept has a unique meaning since there are numerous but equally sufficient translational manuals with which to determine their meaning or translate it into other languages.* The relevant question which readily follows is this one: is the thesis as summarily stated determinate? The question may be approached from two angles. The first one is Quine's angle and the second is the critic's angle. If it is found to be determinate, then Quine might have scored a strong point against language as well as his critics. Quine's task in Radical Translation is to convince his readers that the translation of one language into the other is an indeterminate enterprise, meaning that in selecting a particular translational manual, it is

guaranteed that no particular sentence or concept can have a unique meaning given the multiplicity of manuals at our disposal. If a sentence or concept lacks a unique meaning it then becomes difficult to translate it from one language to the other with any rigor or certitude.

Quine's argument might be sketched in this form.

- (1) All statement, sentences and concepts are indeterminate.
- (2) To show that (1) is true we must create a sense of determinacy.
- (3) To create a sense of determinacy, a sentence must then be determinate.
- (4) Therefore, to show that statements, sentences and/or concepts are indeterminate, a statement must be determinate. Such a statement should be used as a paradigm to show that others are indeterminate.

In view of this preceding argument, Quine's answer to the question of determinacy would be that the statement of the thesis is determinate. Quine would argue that it is determinate because a statement must be used as a paradigm to understand determinacy and to show that others statements are indeterminate.

Yet from critic's point of view, the argument may be presented as follows:

- (1) All statements, sentences and/or concepts are indeterminate.
 - (2) F is a sentence.
 - (3) G is a statement.
 - (4) H is a concept.
 - (5) Therefore, premises 2, 3 and 4 are indeterminate following from premise 1.
- The summary statement of Quine's thesis (being a statement) falls within premise number 3. Therefore, the critics answer to the question is that it strictly follows that the statement is indeterminate.

In view of the two arguments presented, an adherent of Quine may object that Quine's argument is more convincing and therefore sufficient. What must be done now is to weigh the validity and sufficiency of each argument. For our convenience, we shall refer to Quine's argument as argument A and the critic's argument as argument B. Argument A runs the error of presuming that when we have a true general statement as a premise of an argument, there must be at least a particular instance of that general statement which is false, for us to make sense of that general statement. Forinstance, the statement 'All men are mortal' will presuppose a statement 'There is a man who is immortal' in order to make sense of the concepts of 'mortality' and 'immortality.' Obviously, this conclusion does not logically follow from the premise(s). In fact, logically, I can say that such a view has violated the law of non-contradiction. Saying that a thing both is and that it is not at the same time is contradictory and

then untrue. Therefore, argument A is not a sufficient argument nor is it necessary. Besides, it is not a valid argument.

Let us assess argument B. The argument includes a valid move from the general statement to particular instances of the general statement. For instance, if “All men are mortal” is true and “Socrates is a man” is true, then it is strictly valid to conclude that the statement “Socrates is mortal” will be true. To conclude otherwise will contradict the entire argument. The whole thrust of the argument is to show that argument B is a valid and sufficient argument in and of itself.

In view of the assessment of the two arguments, we can see that Quine’s argument is invalid and insufficient in this context. Argument B is valid and sufficient to establish the point showing that the statement of the indeterminacy thesis is itself indeterminate by Quine’s very own argument. The case of indeterminacy is more complex because each term in the statement is also indeterminate, according to Quine. And if each term of any statement is indeterminate, this fact leaves a very large margin of possibility for error regarding the claim that language is indeterminate. This is the point Miriam Solomon makes in *Quine’s Point of View*:

If Quine’s skeptical considerations are applied consistently, they yield the result that *none* of language is determinately translatable, not even the signs for assent and dissent which are required for translation of observation sentences. For one could ask the skeptical question, how can we tell that the native ‘evet’ should be translated by our ‘yes,’ rather than by our ‘no,’ or by some other English utterance?.¹⁹

So, if each term of a particular language is indeterminate and the statement of Quine’s indeterminacy thesis is a statement of a particular language that consists of terms, what strictly follows is that the statement of Quine’s thesis is indeterminate. It must be noted here that whichever way the thesis is couched, since Quine’s thesis is against language in general, as long as it contains terms of a particular language, whichever language it is, it is vulnerable to the same argument of indeterminacy. Well, perhaps, one may advise Quine to use another means apart from language to present the thesis so as to free it from the attack.

Consequences of the Indeterminacy of the Indeterminacy Thesis

One may then ask, what are the consequences of the indeterminacy of the indeterminacy thesis? In other words, what purpose does this discovery serve in philosophy? At least two

issues can be identified as the consequences of this argument. The first is the absurdity contained in Quine's argument. This absurdity runs as follows: although Quine attempts to show the world that translation is indeterminate, the attempt degenerates into arguing that meaning and the entire language itself are indeterminate.²⁰ If an entire language is indeterminate, then all Quine's write-ups become suspicious, necessarily and by definition, as they are linguistic in nature. Again, if the entire language is indeterminate and Quine is using an indeterminate language to show this fact, his attempt becomes the apparent case of an absurdity. Quine is like a scientist on Earth who invents an apparatus and argues with the prosthetic aid of the apparatus that the entire solar system, including its individual constituents, is faulty. Such a scientist should not be taken seriously, the reason being that if his discovery is true, then his apparatus/prosthesis is itself a faulty one, being one part of the constituents of that faulty solar system. It follows that such an apparatus should be given up because it can only achieve very little if it can achieve anything at all. Such is the case regarding Quine's indeterminacy thesis: it is self-stultifying. An indeterminate linguistic tool cannot be used to declare language indeterminate. It then follows that language is not indeterminate as Quine has argued. Even supposing that the entire language is indeterminate, the same language cannot be used as the medium to show it. Such a medium should be sought elsewhere, and not in language.

This logical chain leads to the second issue. According to William P. Alston in *Quine on Meaning*, Quine's indeterminacy of translation degenerates into a global indeterminacy of meaning. This degeneration is so significant that

Quine's argument leads to the conclusion that no one means anything determinate either by any of his terms or by any of his non-observation sentences. And since the constitution of language is ultimately derivative from the speech activity of its users, it follows that no term or non-observation sentence in a language means anything determinate.²¹

But this conclusion is not true of the way that speakers of a particular language understand and use their language. For instance, my first language is Yoruba. In Yoruba language, 'ehoro' is an approximate interpretation of 'rabbit'. So when a Yoruba speaker says 'Ehoro' ('Rabbit' in English), he does not have a proliferation of translational manuals in perspective, and neither do his listeners. What he means is a whole enduring 'ehoro' and this is what the listeners understand the term to mean. That is why Yoruba language is spoken and understood by the

prospective users without any disruption in communication. It must be noted that some of the fundamental purposes of language are for the pragmatic means of day-to-day communication and a vehicle through which a certain culture is communicated and expressed. Yoruba has peculiarly rich cultural values which need a determinate and an undistorted language to carry their meanings through and display and exhibit the richness embedded in the culture. Therefore, Yoruba preserves a clear manual for communication and cultural enrichment.

The same thing obtains with the word ‘Apon,’ an approximate interpretation of ‘Bachelor.’ When a speaker of Yoruba utters ‘Apon,’ the listeners understand it to mean ‘an adult male who is unmarried’ and not a ‘detached part of a bachelor’ or ‘a bachelor stage’ or another as Quine will want us to think. And when the word is uttered no question follows. The reason why there is usually no question or that none is expected is that all the speakers of the language already have the idea (or something like it) of ‘Apon’ registered in their minds. This thesis is the one that Chomsky’s and Katz’s mentalistic theory of language argued. Basically, they argue that the fundamentals of language do not consist in the systematic structure of the disposition towards stimulation; these fundamentals of language, they claim, consist in some other implicit mental properties which are inherent in human beings. This argument leads to the conclusion that the taxonomic theory of language leaves so many important things about the nature of language –learning and acquisition unexplained.²²

This point is identical to the one that Alston is making in *Quine on Meaning* when he states:

If everything Quine says about that were correct, I would still know what ‘rabbit’ means in my language. I know this just by being a master of my language. Knowing this is an essential part of what it is to *have* that language; knowing this is required for being able to use that language as a vehicle of thought and means of communication. If I didn’t know such things as that ‘rabbit’ denotes complete organisms rather than parts or stages of complete organisms, I wouldn’t be able to engage in communication the way I do.²³

If no unique meaning is attached to terms and statements used in a particular language, then communication becomes difficult, even untenable. No listener can make a meaning of what he utters. In other words, having a unique meaning is one sure characteristic which makes a particular language an adequate instrument of speaker–hearer communication. This is the way Yoruba language is practically used and understood in its society. So if practical and societal

experience is part of Quine's empirical fact, then the practical and societal use of Yoruba language is part of the behaviouristic fact. Hence it may be argued that this practical use of Yoruba language defies Quine's theory. And if Quine's prediction that "when theory and experience conflict, it is theory that gives way" is anything to go by, then in view of the way Yoruba language is used, Quine's theory will have to give way. Specifically for Quine:

the total field is so underdetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice as to what statements to reevaluate in the light of any single contrary experience.²⁴

What I have argued is that Yoruba language is meaningful just because sentences, statements and concepts are used determinately and if it had been understood the way Quine argues, communication would have been impossible. In fact, if Alston's inference from Quine is correct, i.e., the entire language is indeterminate, then it becomes extremely difficult, if not perilous, to embark on the exercise of translation at all. This is because, as Barry Hallen has pointed out in *African Philosophy; The analytic Approach*, the linguist approaches the alien's language with some supposedly determinate 'regulative principle'²⁵ without which translation can never be possible at all.

Guiding the linguist's interpretation of aliens' behavior will be the "regulative principle" that most of the native's rules (intentions/beliefs) are the same with ours, which is to say that most of them are true.²⁶

Hallen continues:

The, in a sense, elementary good sense of this claim is underscored once more by pointing out that the only beliefs and the truths the field linguist brings to the translation situation are those of her own natural language culture.²⁷

The point which I am making here is to the effect that if Quine's linguist has a determinate cultural background and determinate technical principles with which to approach an alien's language, then at the background of Quine's entire theory are the determinate fundamentals of language. This fact cannot be denied, implying that language is too pragmatically important to be rejected as indeterminate. Now, let us now assume that language is determinate. Assume further that the linguist's language and the alien's language are both determinate. Then, it reasonably follows that from two determinate languages, a competent linguist, over time, should be able to determinately translate the alien's language to his own. I may be so bold as to

say that this fact is the fundamental principle which has made it possible for one language to be interpreted to the other and which has made a speaker of one language be able to learn and understand other languages. Examples of multi-lingualism abound in our societies, implying that languages can be determinately translated into one another.

Conclusion

What I have argued is that Quine's indeterminacy thesis is defective in the sense that it is self-destroying. This danger makes manifest the absurdity which is contained in the thesis itself. I have also argued that language is not so construed as indeterminate. Language, as the Yoruba example has shown, is used and understood determinately even if it is indeterminate. If language is so construed as Quine has argued, I have argued that this would have practically made fundamentals of language and communication impossible. In effect, such a linguistic predicament would have made the existence of any human society impossible since without the determinate fundamentals of language, organised human society would have been practically impossible. However, questions such as whether it is possible to behave deterministically within an interderministic context, or whether a deterministic moments can arise within a general indeterminacy, or whether, pragmatically speaking, there could be a functioning system within even the greatest systematic indeterminacy, are for future research to debate and perhaps decide.

Endnotes and References

¹ Alston P. W., "Quine on Meaning", In: Hahn L. E. and Schlipp P. A, (ed) *The Philosophy of Quine*, (Illinois: Library of Living Philosophers Volume XVIII, 1986), pp 51- 53.

² Quine W. V. O., *From A Logical Point of View* (Harvard, Harvard University Press), p 26.

³ Quine W. V. O., *Pursuit of Truth* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1990), p 37, See also Quine W. V. O., *Word and Object*, p 38.

⁴ Quine W. V. O., *Pursuit of Truth*, p 38, Quine also made this point in Quine W. V. O., *Word and Object* (Cambridge, M.I.T Press, 1960), p 28.

⁵ Quine refers to each of these words as a sentence. This is another issue that could be taken up about Quine. A researcher may attempt to engage in a conceptual distinction between word, statement, proposition, expression, and sentence.

⁶ Quine W. V. O., *Pursuit of Truth*, p 32.

⁷Quine W. V. O., *Word and Object*, p 28.

⁸Quine W. V. O., *Word and Object*, p 42.

⁹Quine W. V. O., *Word and Object*, p 58.

¹⁰Quine W. V. O., *Word and Object*, p 66.

¹¹Kant I, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Translation by Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan and Company Limited, 1963), p 53.

¹²Quine W. V. O., *Word and Object*, p 66.

¹³Quine W. V. O., *From A Logical Point of View* (Harvard, Harvard University Press), pp 22-23. Quine's contention is that while the logically true statement is non-experiential, the analytic statements such as 'Bachelors are unmarried males' is true come what stimulation via a principle of synonymy. This statement depends on the stimulation and may be experiential.

¹⁴Solomon M., "Quine's Point of View", *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume LXXXVI, NO 3 1989, p 116.

¹⁵It should be noted that this situation may also be referred to as "indeterminacy of referents."

¹⁶Solomon M., "Quine's Point of View", *The Journal of Philosophy*, p 116.

¹⁷Quine W. V. O., *Word and Object*, p 68.

¹⁸Quine W. V. O., *Word and Object*, p 70.

¹⁹Solomon M., "Quine's Point of View", *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume LXXXVI, NO 3, 1989, p 116.

²⁰This argument may be seen in Alston P. W., "Quine on Meaning" In: Hahn L. E. and Schlipp P. A., (ed) *The Philosophy of Quine*, (Illinois: Library of Living Philosophers Volume XVIII, 1986), pp 51- 53.

²¹Alston P. W., "Quine on Meaning", In: Hahn L. E. and Schlipp P. A., (ed) *The Philosophy of Quine* (Illinois: Library of Living Philosophers, 1986), Volume XVIII, p 58.

²²Chomsky N., "Methodological Preliminaries" In, Rosenberg J. F and Travis C., (eds), *Readings in the Philosophy of Language* (New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1971), pp 325- 360, and

Katz J., "Mentalism in Language", In, Rosenberg J. F. and Travis C., (eds) *Readings in the Philosophy of Language* (New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1971), pp 374-378.

²³Alston P. W., "Quine on Meaning" p 60.

²⁴Quine W. V. O., *From A Logical Point of View*, pp 42-43.

²⁵Quine sometimes refers to this phenomenon as the "principle of charity" or "sense of analogy."

²⁶Hallen Barry, *African Philosophy; The Analytic Approach* (New jersey, Africa World Press, 2006), p 36.

²⁷Hallen Barry, *African Philosophy; The Analytic Approach*, p 37.