

Untranslatable Languages: a Defence for Davidson

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Abstract: Timothy Williamson uses a thought experiment about superintelligent Martians who speak a language humans are incapable of understanding (much of) to argue against the thesis of universal translatability of languages defended by for instance Donald Davidson. Williamson concludes that the notion of truth in such theses is tied to human abilities, and is therefore relativistic. This paper defends Davidson's thesis of universal translatability by arguing that Williamson conflates the notions of intelligence and rationality; by pulling these notions apart the challenge dissipates.

Key words: interpretation, meaning, principle of charity, relativism, translation, truth.

Resumen: Timothy Williamson utiliza un experimento mental sobre marcianos superinteligentes que hablan un lenguaje que, en su mayor parte, los humanos son incapaces de entender para criticar las tesis de la traducibilidad universal de los lenguajes defendidas, por ejemplo, por Donald Davidson. Williamson concluye que la noción de verdad en tales tesis está vinculada a capacidades humanas y es por ello relativista. Este artículo defiende la tesis de Davidson de la traducibilidad universal argumentando que Williamson solapa las nociones de inteligencia y de racionalidad; si se diferencia ambas nociones, el problema desaparece.

Palabras clave: interpretación, significado, principio de caridad, relativismo, traducción, verdad.

1. Introduction

Truth is a central concept in Donald Davidson's philosophy. He argues that our primitive grasp of the concept of truth is what gives us the capacity to acquire language and beliefs, and thereby to become a rational agent. He describes how this process is possible, given a pre-theoretic grasp of truth, in great detail in his (posthumously published) *Truth and Predication*,¹ arguing that an emergence of verbal communication necessitates a minimal set of shared assumptions by the potential speakers. Davidson's proposed set of assumptions, the principle of charity, make it a necessary feature of linguistic communication that interlocutors can take each other to be (on the whole) correctly talking about salient features of their shared environment. They must be able to locate other speakers' utterances in a logically coherent network, recognising that utterances about immediately observable aspects of the of the interlocutors must be (mostly, at least) mistake free. Aspects of the shared immediate environment can then be recognised as causes of these observation sentences, which themselves presuppose the recognition that they can be mistaken—the notion of error presupposes a grasp of concept of truth by requiring a contrast between veridical and erroneous utte-

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1 Donald Davidson 2005, (London: Harvard University Press).

rances. This ability to locate utterances in a logical space, to grasp their relations and consequences, be that logical or ethical, is what rationality itself amounts to.

The first utterances we can understand are therefore necessarily about the salient features of our environment, about the objects and persons we can readily perceive. Complexity, which includes abstract concepts can be built on the foundations of our understanding of utterances with a more observable content, but our sensitivity to agreement and disagreement with our fellow interlocutors will always remain crucial; in practice we need to have a grasp of basic logical constants such as negation and conjunction to make sense of speakers.

Our comprehension of languages is elucidated as an ability to construct theories of truth that entail all the possible sentences a speaker may utter; thereby giving us knowledge of why and when the speaker's utterances are true or false. The philosophy of language that emerges from these premises is normative: to have meanings we must have minimal but inherent standards of correctness and acceptability, provided by the principle of charity. It follows that notions such as convention and reference are not necessary for understanding, which explains why our potential for speaking languages is so flexible and universal. Being rational is a necessary condition for being a speaker, rationality, based on a normative grasp of truth, is what gives speakers of languages a shared platform upon which to base verbal communication.

An interesting consequence of Davidson's philosophy of language is that it is incoherent to suppose that there could be creatures that speak a language that we could in principle not understand. This is a foundational conclusion for Davidson's philosophy, because the notion of meaning is tied to truth. An inability of an interpreter to detect any sort of regularity between the presumed speaker's behaviour, the noises he makes, and the immediate environment would make it impossible for the interpreter to come up with any kind of theory of meaning for understanding the speaker. Consequently he has no evidence to suggest that the presumed speaker is doing more than producing random (or at most animal) noises. Truth is the central concept for all interpretation because all language users must have had an inherent understanding of truth in order to acquire their linguistic skills. Given a grasp of truth, there are no principled obstacles to the translatability of languages, and consequently, for Davidson, all truths are expressible in language.²

Timothy Williamson³ challenges Davidson's philosophy with a dilemma. He argues that either the notion of truth in the project is anthropocentric, or it makes speakers of language potentially omniscient.⁴ The first horn is crippling for Davidson, whereas the absurdity of the second horn depends on the operative term «potentially». An anthropocentric truth falls short by being a relativistic concept, and therefore Davidson's philosophy falls short of giving a general philosophy of truth, language and rationality. If Williamson is right, it is possible that there are languages that are unintelligible to humans and therefore countless truths that are humanly unintelligible. Williamson's serious challenge against Davidson's philosophy proceeds by blocking Davidson's argument against conceptual schemes in order to show that his notion of truth is in fact relative to human abilities, which would be an intolerable result. But opting for the second horn, which is what I propose to do, makes the potential omniscience nothing worse than omniscience in principle. This is hardly as absurd as Williamson purports it to be, in fact it is the hopeful aim of many sober scientists to unco-

2 See esp. Davidson 1984, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), Davidson 2001, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), and Davidson 2005 (*op. cit.*).

3 Timothy Williamson 1987, «Anthropocentrism and Truth», *Philosophia* 17. 33-53.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

ver all the secrets of the universe, *c.f.* Stephen Hawking's «theory of everything». The relevant question here is: Are we clever enough? (Answer: probably not.)

In §2 I present Williamson's argument and in §3 I reject it with two possible responses available for Davidson. There is some ambiguity as to what Williamson's crucial premise about Martian languages amounts to, and the two responses are intended to cover both eventualities. In the end it is Williamson who falls short.

2. Williamson's argument

Williamson begins with the recognition that intelligence is not specific to humans, that there seems to be a gradation of intelligence that starts with simple life forms and ends with humans. It is surely a contingent fact that humans happen to be the most intelligent creatures around, and most likely there exist superintelligent aliens somewhere in the universe whose cognitive capacities far exceed ours, as ours exceed (say) cats'. Williamson argues from this that since it is very likely that

...cats can think some simple thoughts but are physiologically incapable...of thinking about complex numbers...we must assume that creatures can evolve whose thoughts could be as closed to us as ours are to cats.⁵

This is the crucial premise, for if Williamson can establish it, he is able to go on to argue that there can therefore be languages that are unintelligible to humans, contradicting Davidson's rejection of conceptual schemes, or his thesis of translatability of languages. If superintelligent Martians can think thoughts that are unthinkable by humans, and thoughts are expressible in language, then Martians express their thoughts in a Martian language that is in part unintelligible to humans. What's worse, the bits of their language that would be unintelligible to humans might not be recognisable as a language by humans at all, contradicting Davidson's argument that by the principle of charity all languages must be recognisable as languages. Williamson argues that human languages might form a subclass of Martian languages, that there might be a core language we share with Martians while the bulk of Martian discourse were unintelligible to humans, and thus untranslatable to human languages. The devastating conclusion is that truth is not the crucial key to universal linguistic comprehension Davidson takes it to be, and insofar as his philosophical system is based on this conception of truth, it fails.

3. Two Davidsonian responses

There are two equally viable ways for Davidson to respond to Williamson. Either he denies that Martian is untranslatable, or he denies that the «untranslatable language» of Martians is a language at all. Both responses may initially raise a few eyebrows, so let me develop them a little. I'll take the two responses in turn.

3.1. *The Martian language is not untranslatable to human languages*

It is crucial that Williamson premises his whole argument on the cognitive superiority of Martians, comparable to our cognitive superiority to cats. But his mistake is to suppose that cats could

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

have simple thoughts, for in the context of Davidson's philosophy this must be taken to mean truth-evaluable thoughts, otherwise the challenge misses its mark. But Davidson has famously argued that non-linguistic creatures can't have thoughts, so there is no continuum of language-use and complexity of thought between humans and cats.⁶ Instead, the difference is qualitative: humans are language users, cats are not. If Martians are language users like us, there is no relevant analogy between cats and humans that applies to humans and Martians. Williamson has therefore supplied no reason why Martian language might in principle be unintelligible to us, all he has shown is that Martians are capable of understanding concepts too complex for humans. This doesn't yield an argument for untranslatability of Martian languages, all it means is that *in practice* we can't grasp many Martian concepts. This is tolerable because Davidson's argument doesn't require, nor entail, that all speakers should in practice be able to grasp (or, *a fortiori* to have) all the same concepts. It thereby avoids charges of omniscience, by not requiring that a given human actually is able to grasp all Martian concepts. The argument does require, however, that there are many concepts humans and Martians share, but this is assumed by Williamson anyway.

There are many measures of intelligence (and it is not the onus of this essay to provide any comprehensive analysis of them) but an ability to grasp complex concepts is clearly one such measure. The cleverest among us are often those who can grasp and articulate the most complex issues. The complexities involved in cutting-edge sciences for instance are such that most laypeople have resigned themselves to not even pretending to comprehend the concepts involved. They are, in practice, unable to ever understand (say) a research article in Quantum Chromodynamics. The language used in the article may be English at its core, but employs concepts many people might be (biologically, even) unable to ever grasp due to a simple lack of processing power. This language is like Martian in that it takes an everyday language as its subclass.

The crucial point here is that Davidson's philosophy distinguishes intelligence from rationality: all language users are rational while their intelligence varies widely. The higher the intelligence, the greater their vocabulary and mastery of concepts, allowing some to entertain and express thoughts the less intelligent can't. But can this line of thought reach Williamson's conclusion, and without recourse to esoteric Martians? Predictably not, it fails for the same reason. Davidson explains that languages are translatable because they can be learned through the employment of the principle of charity, that is, by the realisation that languages are used by speakers to talk truly about the world, that we can note the same salient features in the environment as the speaker, and correlate utterances with these salient features. Once the communication has reached a sufficient level of sophistication, abstract concepts can be added through description and definition, paving the way to infinite expressibility. If Martian is a language, then it is in principle learnable by humans, even if in practice most of its concepts may prove too difficult. Evidence to suggest that this is the correct interpretation of Williamson can be seen when he writes that Martians themselves tell us that «only their more jejune expressions had English equivalents.»⁷ But if their language is a language, those expressions could of course be coined into English by the Martians themselves, who in Williamson's thought experiment appear as fluent English-speakers. Clearly no human language ever stays the same—new words and grammar come as old ones go, and no word meaning is guaranteed to remain constant.

6 See Davidson 1975, «Thought and Talk» in Davidson 1984 (*op. cit.*) and Davidson 1982, «Rational Animals» in Davidson 2001 (*op. cit.*).

7 Williamson, p. 36.

And yet we call many of these different entities «English.» It is clear that the Martian dialect of English could (and should) be called English.

Williamson attempts to shield his argument from this kind of defence, what he brands Putnamian «division of linguistic labor», which would take Martians to be simply experts of Martian concepts.⁸ Williamson notes, I think correctly, that a Martian concept which humans can't grasp is not like «elm» or «beech», because we still grasp that these pick out different kinds of trees even if we can't tell the two apart, nor know how they are different. He suggests a better analogy, that of esoteric mathematical concepts, such as «Hausdorff space». My agreement on this issue with Williamson is incidental, for it doesn't establish his point. Even if there were many speakers of English incapable of ever grasping this concept, it doesn't follow that the compound «Hausdorff space» therefore isn't part of the English language. Clearly many English speakers successfully do use it to make true or false claims they moreover know to be true or false precisely *because of their grasp of the English language*. Davidson's notion of truth and language doesn't require that all speakers will in practice be able to grasp the same concepts, in principle will do. This means that in practice intelligence will present philosophically uninteresting limitations to our abilities to grasp concepts, which in no way threatens to relativise the concept of truth nor make rationality an exclusively human concept. Intelligence comes in degrees; rationality doesn't.

Nor can Williamson argue, with Künne, that the different modes of sensory perceptions to humans that Martians may possess make their language untranslatable to English.⁹ Suppose, for an analogy, a community of colour blind speakers whose word «gred» applies to both green and red objects. We couldn't thereby suggest that «gred» simply means «green or red», because according to this hypothesis true sentences like «All gred objects are of the same colour» would have no true translation to English. The crucial move is that since for the community of colour-blinds the sentences about green and red things would have no truth value, their notion of truth is relative to their colour vision. The move is clearly fallacious, because no colour blind scientist, say, would claim (at least based on only the fact that he can't personally see the difference) that green and red didn't pick out objectively distinct features of the world, any more than he would claim that sentences about the ultra-violet or infra-red have no truth value just because their truth-value can't be determined with the naked eye. The colour-blinds may be initially ignorant about green and red, but they would come around given the overwhelming evidence. For instance the non-colour-blinds' ability to consistently differentiate between the two kinds of gred, resulting in their amazing prowess at finding strawberries in the field, say. What is expressible or true is in no way limited to what is observable to the naked eye of some homogenous linguistic community.

If Martian is a language like English, then English has all the expressive potential Martian has, but some sentences of this «Martian English» would be as opaque to us simple humans as Martian was in the first place. But all the same, in principle we could learn it, and so there is nothing here for Davidson to worry about.

3.2. *The Martian language is not a language at all*

Taking the opposite moral from the cat analogy, we might suppose Williamson to have meant that the Martians are superior to us in exactly the way we are superior to cats. That is, not only are

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁹ Wolfgang Künne 2003, *Conceptions of Truth*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 246-247.

we more intelligent than cats in terms of brute brain power, we are also language users while cats are not. Being language users allows us to conceptualise our environment in ways cats couldn't dream about, it allows us to structure and accumulate our knowledge, making us intellectually superior to cats at almost every level. Suppose the Martians are superior to us in this kind of way. That would mean that while they share our language skills the way we share with cats many non-verbal ways of interaction, allowing us to communicate with animals such as our pets, the Martians can communicate with us in our language, and they would moreover have their own «superlanguage». Superlanguage is a way of structuring and communicating information undreamed of by humans, just like cats couldn't have a clue about how rich human language is, we can not even begin to imagine the extents of riches in the Martian superlanguage.

But if this is right, then superlanguage isn't a language. It isn't learnable via truth, and truths aren't expressed in superlanguage. Davidson's theory of language connects truth and language in a way that make them interdependent; we can't have one without the other,¹⁰ and superlanguages are something entirely different. We might thus use the notions of *superconcept*, *superthought* and *supertruth* to distinguish ordinary from superordinary, but the fact is that we have no idea what superlanguage and the related superconcepts would even be. To be sure Davidson has never discussed superlanguages, and it seems safe to suggest that the possibility of a superlanguage is orthogonal to Davidson's philosophy of language. Superlanguage is by definition something humans are in principle incapable of grasping, quite like cats are incapable of grasping the concept of language. To complete the analogy, we might suggest that what cats and dogs have, and what we share with them, is a sublanguage, with the corresponding subthoughts and subconcepts. When we communicate with our pets we use sublanguage, we don't demand (nor expect) that our pets will engage in debates with us, but interactions mediated by sublanguage can be very emotionally fulfilling nonetheless, and the comradery that emerges is not unlike that between two humans. It is therefore clear that humans use sublanguage quite regularly also between each other. Language, however, is not «sublanguage and more», it is a completely distinct way of interacting.

It may be the fact that people tend to very easily confuse or muddle their use of sublanguage with their use of language which explains why people so commonly assume that their pets understand language. If the use of sublanguage together with language is commonplace for humans, it is understandable that we find it difficult to pull the two systems apart. Understandable or not, it is a mistake all the same. For Williamson to suggest that the Martian superlanguage is in this way «like our language and more» is to commit this same mistake in the opposite direction. The Martians would have three systems to our two, allowing them to communicate with us (and our pets), but blocks us (and our pets) from engaging with them on the level of superlanguage.

4. Conclusion

My diagnosis of Williamson's argument suggests that he intended the argument from §3.1 to yield the conclusion of §3.2, *i.e.* that a difference in conceptual sophistication between linguistic communities entails untranslatability of languages. His mistake was to confuse a continuous gradation of intelligence with a bogus continuum of rationality. He needs a different argument to show that there is more than one kind of rationality—simply stipulating a new kind of Martian «superra-

10 Full-blown concept of truth, that is. As stated earlier, a pre-theoretical grasp of truth is a necessary condition for language acquisition.

tionality» amounts to changing the subject. Davidson can therefore consistently claim that we can't grasp Martian concepts due to our stupidity, while maintaining that this has no implications about rationality, or our possession of it, nor the universality of language and truth.

The deciding question is whether the Martians make use of the Principle of Charity. If they do, their language is translatable into English, no matter how terse and difficult it may be for humans to understand. Davidson himself is very clear on this point:

Since charity is not an option, but a condition of having a workable theory, it is meaningless to suggest that we might fall into massive error by endorsing it. Until we have successfully established a systematic correlation of sentences held true with sentences held true, there are no mistakes to make. Charity is forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right on most matters. If we can produce a theory that reconciles charity and the formal conditions for a theory, we have done all that could be done to ensure communication. Nothing more is possible and nothing more is needed.¹¹

If they don't, their communication is conveyed in superlanguage, and all bets are off about what else is really going on. Truth, in any case, is not involved. I can only suggest, vacuously enough, that superlanguage is something that is based on supertruth and supermeaning, which in some sense are more sophisticated versions of truth and meaning. It is perhaps noteworthy that science fiction writers often make their aliens capable of communicating in some superior manner that usually involves telepathy and mind-bending. The idea of Martians with a superlanguage is nothing new.¹²

11 Davidson 1974, «On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme», in Davidson 1984 (*op.cit.*), p. 197.

12 I would like to thank Mark Textor for extremely helpful suggestions on an earlier draft.

