

# A CRITICAL EXPOSITION ON QUINE'S NOTION OF MEANING AND INDETERMINACY

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## Abstract

*This paper contained a critical discussion of Quine's theory of meaning in terms of his indeterminacy thesis. In analytic philosophy, especially in semantics, language is used as a tool to interpret the knowledge of the world. A language consists of propositions. Every proposition in our language must be meaningful. So, meaning is the fundamental component of a proposition. Now the problem is: how do we determine the meaning of a proposition? Quine exemplified that every way to determine the meaning of a linguistic expression by traditional semantics is totally wrong about meaning. Instead of following the traditional semantics, Quine relies on a behaviouristic approach towards meaning. He qualified traditional semantics as a "myth of museum" that exhibits meaning in a certain kind of entity. This article consists of four different sections. In the very first section of this paper, I intended to explain the argument of Quine against traditional semantics on meaning as an entity. The second section deals with a critical evaluation of Quine's notion of stimulus meaning and conceptual scheme. In the third section, I attempted to explain Quine's critical observation on meaning in terms of the indeterminacy thesis. This final section holds concluding remarks, in which I object to some misconceptions regarding Quine's theory of meaning.*

**Keywords:** *Semantics, entities, myth of museum, stimulation, Radical translation, Indeterminacy of Translation*

## Paper

W. V. O. Quine is considered the most interesting and prominent figure in 20th-century analytic philosophy. His way of looking at philosophy was different from others. His *naturalistic* interpretation brings an evolution in philosophy, more significantly, in analytic philosophy. His predominant philosophical thesis can be found in the collection of essays *From a Logical Point of View* (Quine, 1953)<sup>1</sup> and *Words and Objects* (Quine, 1960)<sup>2</sup>. He was primarily concerned about the traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Quine, W. V. O. (1953). *From a Logical Point of View*

<sup>2</sup> Quine, (1960). *Word and Objects*

semantic interpretation of language and criticised all the traditional semantics concerning meaning.

The concept of meaning is a conflicting discourse in philosophy, especially in the philosophy of language. Surprisingly, the fact is that several theories have been propounded by different philosophers but those contradict each other. A popular theory of meaning is the *referential theory of meaning*, which holds an objectifying pattern, i.e., every meaningful assertion stands for an object or fact. Therefore, a meaningful linguistic expression represents a fact of the world, which is a matter of empirical verification. But the interesting fact is that the referential theory of meaning seems useless or fails to define the meaning of such linguistic expressions, which do not refer to any object of the world though meaningful. Frege, in his popular article “On Sense and Reference” (Frege, 1892) expounded that the *referential theory of meaning*<sup>3</sup> becomes insufficient when we talk about two different propositions that are informatively identical. For example, the linguistic expressions “morning star” and “evening star” are informatively identical (because they refer to the same object) and even different in meaning. Moreover, the referential theory of meaning fails to interpret that linguistic expression that contains abstract objects or something that stands for non-existential entities (Frege, 1892). Hence, Frege conceived that the meaning of a linguistic expression is contained in its sense, not reference.

However, from the above analysis, two different theories can be found in analytic philosophy, viz. *referential theory of meaning* and *sense theory of meaning* (Hong, 2019, pp. 40-45)<sup>4</sup>. But, regarding meaning, Quine was against both of the theories of meaning. He argued that both theories are wrong in such a way that both theories failed to cognize the basic nature of language. And therefore, both theories are wrong concerning meaning. Quine argued that a careful investigation of the nature of language and the acquisition of the meaning of a linguistic expression from a referential point of view has become purely obscure. The same can be argued for the sense theory of meaning. Quine claimed that to define meaning as an *entity* falls under dogmatism. This paper is an attempt to explain Quine’s concept of meaning in terms of his *indeterminacy of translation* (Quine, 1969) thesis and provide a comprehensive analysis.

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<sup>3</sup> Referential theory of meaning believes that there is a one to one correspondence relationship between name and the objects stands for the names.

<sup>4</sup> L, Hong (2019). “Meaning in the Philosophy of Language” published in *Advances in Social Science*, ICCSE, pp. 40-45.

## Section-I

Quine, to talk about meaning conceived that meaning must *be* public. Therefore, the primary criterion of meaning is to share information between a speaker and a hearer. In this regard, he was totally opposed to the traditional analytic concept of meaning. He claimed that the meaning of a linguistic expression must be understood not from an intuitional point of view (as propounded by Frege and Russell) but from a behaviouristic point of view (Alston, 1986, pp.64)<sup>5</sup>. Gilbert Harman (1967) mentioned that:

“At the heart of Quine’s philosophical position lies his attack on standard philosophical view on meaning. If Quine is right, almost everything that other linguistic philosophers have said and say about meaning is wrong.”<sup>6</sup>

In account of criticising traditional semantics, Quine argued that traditional semantics is totally wrong about meaning. His arguments against meaning can be discussed or explained from two different points of view: rejection of analyticity and rejection of meaning as an *entity*. To deal with meaning, a general conception that has been propounded by traditional semantics regarding meaning is that every meaningful linguistic expression stands for an object and must be categorised as either analytic or synthetic.

However, the mentalistic interpretation of meaning as an entity is a kind of dogma, according to Quine. Regarding meaning, Quine shared the idea that the mentalistic notion of meaning must be replaced by a behaviouristic approach (Alston, 1986; Murphey, 2012). He mentioned that:

“Meaning are, first and foremost, meaning of language. Language is a social art which we will acquire on the evidence solely of other’s people overt behaviour under publicly recognizable circumstances. Meaning, therefore, those very models of mental entities, end up as grist for the behaviourist mill.”<sup>7</sup>

Now, the question is: why does Quine promote meaning as not a psychic entity? To formulate an appropriate answer to this question, we have to look deep inside the theory of meaning propounded by traditional semantics. An unsolved debate regarding meaning can be found in the philosophy of language between the sense or descriptive

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<sup>5</sup> Alston (1986) “Quine on Meaning” in *The Philosophy of W.V.O. Quine* (ed., reprint in 1998). USA: Chicago and La Salle, pp. 64.

<sup>6</sup> Harman, G. (1967). “Quine on Meaning and Existence” published in *The Review of Metaphysics*, USA: Philosophy Education Society. Pp.124.

<sup>7</sup> Quine, *Ontological Relativity*, pp. 26.

theory of meaning and the reference theory of meaning (Hong, 2019). The referential theory of meaning holds that linguistic expressions become meaningful because they *stand for a thing* (Lycan, 2008). For example, the linguistic expression “Rabindranath” is meaningful, because the expression denotes the individual Rabindranath. Referential theory of meaning holds an onto-mapping relationship between language and fact. The linguistic expression “cat on the mat” is meaningful if there is a case that a cat on the mat is in reality or the world. On the other hand, the sense theory of meaning states that a linguistic expression becomes meaningful not because it stands for an object but rather for its sense.

However, a careful observation of the philosophy of language shows that from the time of Frege, the problem of meaning came to appear (Lycan, 2008). Frege was the first philosopher to claim that there is a clear distinction between meaning and referring. According to Frege, two names having the same reference may differ in meaning like “morning star” and “evening star”. Moreover, there are such names that do not refer to any object but can meaningfully occur in a sentence, for example, the name “Pegasus”.

But, Quine wasn’t satisfied with Frege’s approach towards meaning. He stated that even one argues that meaning is the sense of the proposition to avoid the meaningfulness of such terms that do not refer to any object but lack a critical observation of meaning. By accepting meaning as a sense of proposition, Frege primarily accepted meaning as something that indicates abstract entities- sense. Quine rejected this concept of meaning as an abstract entity of the individual mind. Therefore, he stated that:

“Uncritical semantics is the myth of museum in which exhibits are meaning and the words are labels. To switch language is to change the labels.” (Quine, 1969)<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the meaning for Quine is a property of behaviour, not entities of mind. Quine has mentioned that there are two different ways to know the meaning of a word, viz. sound<sup>9</sup> (phonetic part) and semantic part<sup>10</sup>. The semantic part deals with the use of words. This part, for Quine, is more complex than the phonetic part. In the article “Ontological Relativity” (Quine, 1969), he remarks:

“The semantic part of learning a word is more complex than the phonetic part, therefore, even in simple cases: we have to see what is stimulating

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 27

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp.28

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp.28

the other speaker. In the case of words not directly ascribing observable traits to things, the learning process is increasingly complex and obscure; and obscurity is the breeding place of mentalistic semantics. what the naturalist insists on is that, even in the complex and obscure parts of language learning, the learner has no data to work with but overt behaviour of other speaker.” (Quine, 1969)<sup>11</sup>

However, to explain Quine’s behaviouristic approach towards meaning, this is the first requirement to understand his understanding of language acquisition as described in the celebrated article “Speaking of Objects” (1957, reprint in 1969). Quine’s way of looking at language was purely *ostensive*. He argued that to learn a language, we must rely on the linguistic behaviour of a native person. He exemplified the way a child learned language from his/her parents through an interpretation or indication. In the very beginning, a child learnt some bulk words like, ‘water’ and ‘mamma’ without knowing whether the term “water” is a stuff or not, and similarly for the rest of the other words. In these cases, the leaning pattern consists of an objectifying pattern in general. But, gradually the child learnt the particular homogeneous linguistic pattern and learnt the individuation use of a particular word. In this process of language learning our stimulation plays an important role.

Quine conceived that stimuli evidence is the only source to define the meaning of linguistic expressions. For example, consider an undiscovered alien language; now, if a linguist attempts to determine the meaning of the alien language, the only evidence the linguist will rely on stimuli experience in the form of a native’s assent or dissent (Quine, 1969) for a particular linguistic expression. Therefore, every linguistic expression will be categorised by the paraphrased meaning of *stimuli affirmation* (Quine, 1960). In account of stimuli meaning, Quine defines stimulation by saying that:

“...a stimulation  $\sigma$  belongs to the affirmative stimulus meaning of a sentence  $S$  for a given speaker if and only if there is a stimulation  $\sigma$  such that if the speaker were given  $\sigma$ , then were asked  $S$ , then we are given  $\sigma$ , and then were asked  $S$  again, he would dissent the first time and assent the second.” (Quine, 1960)<sup>12</sup>

It is, therefore, to be claimed that the meaning of a particular sentence must be confirmed by a stimuli assent or dissent of a given speaker. Now, the problem is: if stimulation is the basic criterion to determine the meaning of a linguistic expression by

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp.28

<sup>12</sup> Quine, Word and Objects, pp. 29

a given speaker, then can it be said that the stimulus meaning of this certain expression carried the exact meaning of the linguistic expression by the given speaker? In this case, our conceptual scheme plays an important role. It is to be pointed out that Quine's understanding of the conceptual scheme shared an opposite view of Kant. The problem of meaning (which is the basic investigation of this paper) is rooted not only in Quine's indeterminacy thesis but also in his relativistic interpretation of conceptual schemes.

## Section-II

Our very conceptual scheme cognized the knowledge of the world with the help of linguistic utterance or behaviour from a native person. Quine claimed that every linguistic utterance of a given speaker needs a translation. A conceptual scheme is a psychological aspect of a human being that helps us to cognize the knowledge of this world. In our society, we use language to communicate with each other. Successful communication is possible with the help of this conceptual scheme. Within a linguistic framework, every speaker possesses a conceptual approach or scheme. The worldview represents our conceptual framework and then casts the knowledge of this world employing language. Thus, a conceptual scheme is the most basic form of human thought. Donald Davidson (1973) exemplified that:

“We may accept the doctrine that associates having a language with having a conceptual scheme. The relation may be supposed to be this: if conceptual scheme differs, so do languages.” (Davidson, 1973)<sup>13</sup>

Now, the point is whether there is a unified core of conceptual schemes or there are many conceptual schemes. Some philosophers adhered to the view that there is a unified core of the conceptual scheme, and some others, recognized conceptual relativity. This makes the debate philosophically worthy because the philosophical implication of this debate takes the centrality of linguistic communication between the speaker and hearers.

Based on the above discussion, one may say that there is only one conceptual scheme and this conceptual scheme may be considered as the universal characteristic of all languages. The concept of a universal core conceptual scheme can be realized in Kant's writings, especially in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant, 1781).

In the eighteenth century, Kant's critical explanation concerning knowledge and its foundation unlocked a new way for us to look for knowledge and reality. The

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<sup>13</sup> Davidson. D (1973). “On the Very Idea of Conceptual Scheme” included in Proceeding and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association, vol.47. USA: American Philosophical Association. Pp. 06

*synthesised approach of Kant's philosophy almost ends up the classical debate between rationalism and empiricism. The importance of both pure sensation (intuition) and pure understanding (categories/ concepts) is logically explained in Kant's philosophy. And, therefore, Kant stated that: "thoughts without content are empty, intuition without concepts are blind." (Kant, 1781, A 52, B 76).*<sup>14</sup>

It is to be pointed out that Kant's notion of knowledge is clearly an indication of the concept of a unified core conceptual scheme. According to Kant, the two faculties of knowledge, i.e., *intuition* and *categories*, are like inborn glasses fitted into our minds. And, therefore, all our knowledge concerning reality (phenomenon one) is impossible to cognize without the application of these two *a priori* faculties of mind. Hence, a particular knowledge that is formulated within my conceptual framework must be identical to others' knowledge on that particular subject because of the identical conceptual scheme of our mind. For example, if a machine is pre-programmed by a fixed Mold, whatever material/ ingredient we put in the machine, every time its outcome will be the same and equal. Similarly, if two persons share an equal conceptual scheme, i.e., grounded on Kant's intuition and categories their formulation of knowledge of a particular object must be identical. And, hence, the Kantian notion of the conceptual framework of mind suggests that my conception of a red rose must be identical with yours because of our common and identical foundation of mind.

However, in return to the primary objective of this paper, it is to be said that Kant's unified core conceptual understanding of mind influenced almost everyone, especially the analytic philosophers Frege, Russell, Carnap and so on. But Kant was not critical of the conceptual scheme of mind as Quine does after the mid-twentieth century. A critical discussion of Quine's understanding of conceptual scheme is found below in this article. However, in Quine's philosophy, especially while we are discussing language and meaning, a critical discussion over a conceptual framework of mind becomes important or, to say, necessary. It has been already pointed out that language represents the world, and the world is the subject matter of language. Language becomes blind if reality is not concerned. The connection or relationship between language and the world is made possible through our very conceptual scheme. If the conceptual scheme is one, core and uniform to all, then we share the same kind or, to say, identical type of knowledge about an object of reality. But, if the conceptual scheme varies from individual to individual or more implicitly subject to the subject, then the knowledge represented by the language of an object will become relative.

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<sup>14</sup> Kant, I. (1998). *Critique of Pure Reason* (P. Guyer & A. W. Wood, Trans.). UK: Cambridge University Press (Original work published 1781), pp. 193-94.

More precisely, if the conceptual scheme becomes relative, then the knowledge of an object becomes uncertain *in terms of translation*.

Kant's a priori conceptual schemata of mind was popular until the appearance of Quine. It is our general perception that before the appearance of Quine's conceptual relativity, philosophy in general and analytic philosophy, in particular, was dominated by the Kantian unified core of the conceptual scheme. Quine's critical investigation of the cognitive aspect of the human mind brings a reformation regarding the conceptual scheme. Quine claimed that every sentence concerning knowledge of the world holds a cognitive aspect. In his book *Word and Objects* (1960), Quine stated that different aspects of meaning should be determined based on purely empirical grounds.<sup>15</sup> Cognitive language is associated with sensory stimulation. That is to say, all knowledge concerning the empirical world can be acquired from sensory stimulation.<sup>16</sup> That is the cognitive aspect of the human mind is followed by our very conceptual scheme. While cognizing the knowledge of the empirical world, our sensory stimulation experiences the linguistic behaviour of a speaker. Hence, Knowledge, mind, and meaning are interlinked to each other. Now, the question: Does Quine accept Kant's notion of a unified core conceptual scheme? It is to be pointed out that Quine must be opposed to the Kantian notion of a unified core of the conceptual scheme of the human mind. He has rejected the uniform nature of the conceptual scheme and proposed conceptual relativity. It has already been mentioned by Quine that *our language is a social art or conduct* (Quine, 1969). In his article "Speaking of Objects", Quine explained the nature of the human mind in the following:

"It is hard to say how else there is to talk, not because our objectifying pattern is an invariable trait of human nature, but because we are bound to adapt any alien pattern to our own in the very process of understanding or translating the alien sentences". (Quine, 1969)<sup>17</sup>

Quine remarked that we humans are not only dealing with our own language but also prone to know an alien language or a newly discovered native language. When we translate a native language, it implies two possibilities. The first possibility is my translation of a native expression can be in so-and-so form, i.e., my translated meaning and the meaning of the native expression must be identical or determinate. The second possibility is that the meaning of my translation of a native expression may be relatively true. If we accept a unified core conceptual scheme that is shared by every human

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<sup>15</sup> Gosselin, Mia (1990). *Nominalism and contemporary nominalism*. London: Kluwer Academic Publishers. pp. 62.

<sup>16</sup> Hylton, Peter. (2018). *Quine*. New York and London: Routledge Classics. pp.114.

<sup>17</sup> Op.Cit. Quine. *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*. pp.1.

being, then any translation based on the conceptual scheme must be determined or, to say, identical or must be in so-and-so form. Now, let us explain based on Quinean way of understanding whether the conceptual scheme of the human mind is a unified core of conceptual scheme or relative.

Quine exemplified his idea of *conceptual relativity* with his famous example, “Gavagai”. Let us explain in brief. Quine imagined a newly discovered language, i.e., an alien language. Now, if a lexicographer tries to translate the native or alien language or the newly discovered language into his language, he must apply his own conceptual scheme to the native’s expression. Suppose the lexicographer experiences a native utterance “gavagai” in front of a rabbit. Based on this experimental data, the lexicographer immediately defined the native utterance “gavagai” as identical to the word “Rabbit”. These observational data help him to make the synonymy of meaning between ‘gavagai’ and ‘rabbit’. Here, in this case, the linguist or the lexicographer applies his own objectifying pattern and then cognizes the native utterance, i.e., gavagai is synonymous with the rabbit. Now, the question raised: Is experimental data sufficient to confirm the term “gavagai” is synonymous with the term “rabbit”? To answer this question, Quine said:

“...the linguist’s bold further step, in which he imposes his own objectifying pattern without a special warrant, is taken when he equates the native expression or any part of it with the term “rabbit”.” (Quine, 1969)<sup>18</sup>

Quine here argued that our empirical data is not sufficient to justify whether the translated meaning of the native expression is determinate or not. We can never access other’s conceptual schemes. Therefore, our objectifying pattern for alien language is unwarranted. Quine states that:

“Given that the native sentence says that a so-and-so is present, and given that the sentence is true when and only when a rabbit is present, it by no means follows that the so-and-so are rabbits. They might be all the various temporal segments of rabbits.” (Quine, 1969)<sup>19</sup>

However, Quine broadly elaborated that our very conceptual scheme is relative. Having all the necessary and sufficient conditions for access to the native expression, there is no certainty to claim that the so-an-so are rabbits. In the case of defining the term “Gavagai” as synonymous with “rabbit”, the linguist does not make a clear

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, pp.02.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, pp. 02.

distinction between ‘rabbit’ and ‘undetached parts of rabbit’, or ‘rabbit’ and ‘baby rabbit’, or ‘rabbit’ and ‘rabbit hood’, or ‘rabbit’ and ‘rabbit stage’. The native utterance “Gavagai” may be for ‘baby rabbit’, or ‘undetached parts of rabbit’, or for ‘rabbit hood’, or for ‘rabbit stage’. All these possibilities or choices can be possible because we have no way to access the native conceptual scheme.

Quine’s conceptual relativity argument goes not only against Kant but also criticizes the notion of Rudolf Carnap. Carnap considers that we have a prior conceptual framework for the empirical justification of certain statements. With the help of this prior conceptual framework, a statement is meaningfully constructed in language.<sup>20</sup> Quine, against Carnap, claimed that we have no prior conceptual scheme to determine the meaning of a sentence. Meaning can be determined only based on speaker behaviour because every observational sentence depends on the empirical ground. Therefore, rather than accept any a priori conceptual framework, Quine looks towards pragmatism to determine the meaning of a sentence (Gibson, 20226). He conceives that every time our conceptual scheme is guided by observational data. Therefore, there is no a priori conceptual framework present in our minds.

### Section-III

Language, meaning and ontology in Quine’s philosophy of language play an important role. In this regard, he not only goes against traditional semantics, but surprisingly, he is more critical and deeper than others. The problem of meaning is concerned with extensional and intentional debates among philosophers. But, Quine, as a behaviourist, is concerned about the problem of meaning and determinacy. Before the appearance of Quine, a general idea about meaning was composed, i.e., the mapping relationship between language and the world. For example, Wittgenstein’s *Picture Theory of Meaning* (Wittgenstein, 1921) suggested that there is a one-to-one correspondence relationship between language and the world. And therefore, every linguistic expression about a fact creates a mental image inside our mind. That’s why the utterance of the linguistic expression “*cat on the mat*” immediately creates an image even though there is no cat on the mat as a fact in front of the hearer. Here comes Quine with a critical mind over meaning and its relationship with the world. Quine, rather than semantics, was more behaviouristic. He conveys that language should be cognized *behaviourally*. For example, in the case of the native utterance “gavagai” the available evidence for the linguist is the native’s assent or dissent. Here, the linguist observes the linguistic expression in the form of assent or dissent only to translate the

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<sup>20</sup> Sinclair, Robert (2012) “Quine and Conceptual Pragmatism” in *Transaction of the Charles S. Price Society* (vol. 48 no. 3). Indiana University Press. pp.337.

native expression into his own. Meaning, as Quine is concerned, is not possible of a certain linguistic expression without its extensional value or referent. So, the term consists of a linguistic utterance that must have a reference. Moreover, if the meaning is the result of translation (as claimed by Quine), then the reference is the essence. Because translating an expression into our own needs evidence. For Quine, the evidence of a translation involves observational data. In the case of the native expression “gavagai”, the presence of a rabbit is only evidence for the linguist. In “Speaking of Objects”, Quine explained how translation is fundamental for language. In this article, Quine elaborated on how a child learns words from a mother’s utterance and gradually learns about the uses of words. This example signifies that observation of linguistic utterance is the basic method of learning words and formulating meanings. It will become a lengthy discussion that may not be relevant to this current issue. And, hence instead of discussing how a child acquires language, I focused on how Quine established his indeterminacy thesis.

However, Quine’s intention was not only to describe how a child learns language; he aimed to investigate whether the meaning of a certain linguistic expression is determinate or indeterminate. To investigate this, he found that the meaning of an utterance while it comes under translation becomes relative. The ontology or essence of language is meaning. If there is no way to justify whether the meaning of a linguistic utterance is fixed or not, then the very essence of language, i.e., the meaning, will become relative.

However, before discussing Quine’s *indeterminacy of translation*, we have to understand: What is a translation? Translation means to define the meaning of a hitherto untouched language by a linguist in his own linguistic framework. Indeterminacy arises when a linguist translates a newly discovered language within his language based on the empirical ground by applying his objectifying pattern. Here, in the case of translation, the linguist radically translates a native expression because he has no manual to access the native mind. Hence, we have no way to claim that the defining term of the linguist is determinate.

Quine claimed that to make a determinate translation, we need a fully successful manual for translation. A manual is called a successful manual for translation if the manual translates every sentence of a native language in a determinate way.<sup>21</sup> Quine rejected the idea of a successful manual that could translate every sentence of a newly discovered language. He stated that every translation is based on our ordinary practice or empirical experience. Our notion of a relative conceptual

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<sup>21</sup> Op. Cit. Hylton, Peter. *Quine*, pp.200.

scheme is never able to access a native mind. So, it is a clear mistake or worthless to claim that the meaning of the term is determinately identical to its synonymous term. Hence, we have no translation manual that helps us to translate every language of an untouched language or alien language in a determinate way. Therefore, every translation of an empirical or observational sentence is a *radical translation* (Quine, 1960). A radical translation can never be determined. In every case of translation, our translation is indeterminate. A determinate translation that is based on our empirical ground is impossible.

There is a misunderstanding among scholars regarding Quine's interest in the indeterminacy thesis. According to some of them, Quine is interested in an indeterminacy thesis only for linguistic translation. But, the origin of his indeterminacy thesis is shaped in his article "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (Quine, 1951). In this article, Quine rejected the very possibility to define the meaning of synonymy. The impossibility of defining synonymy between two words leads us to accept that the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions is not possible. So, this article by Quine, not only rejects the analytic-synthetic distinction in language, it opens the path for the indeterminacy thesis.

However, Quine's indeterminacy of translation thesis follows from his idea of conceptual analysis of the human mind. His behaviouristic approach or pragmatic approach toward the conceptual scheme implies the indeterminacy thesis. The origin of this indeterminacy thesis in Quine's philosophy lies in Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1951, reprint in *From a Logical Point of View*, 1953) and six years later in "Speaking of Objects" (1957, reprinted in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, 1969). His *indeterminacy of translation* thesis takes full phrase in his work *Word and Object* (1960) and his article "Ontological Relativity" (Quine, 1969; printed in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, 1969).

In "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", Quine goes against the principle of analyticity to distinguish between analytic and synthetic truth. In this article, he concludes that every meaningful sentence is related to empirical confirmation or infirmation (Quine, 1953). Our empirical confirmation or infirmation failed to define synonymy between "Bachelor" and "Unmarried man". According to him, meaning, analyticity, and synonymy constituted a circle. So, it is a myth to define one with the help of another. He concludes that we don't need to accept such concepts to characterize human knowledge.<sup>22</sup> Mind, knowledge, and meaning are interrelated to

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<sup>22</sup> Kemp, Gary (2006). *Quine: A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York and London: Continuum. pp. 35.

each other. Quine (1969) focused on how a lexicographer attempted to cognize the meaning of a native expression or utterance (i.e., Gavagai) based on empirical ground and translate the native expression “Gavagai” as synonymous with the term “Rabbit”. In this case of translation, the linguist or the lexicographer failed to distinguish between rabbit and rabbit-stage. So, there is a possibility that the native expression “Gavagai” may be for “Rabbit-stage”, not for “Rabbit”. Therefore, Quine exemplified that any translation of an alien language of our own language falls into the trap of indeterminacy because we have no way to access the native mind.

However, Quine in the second chapter of his work *Word and Object* (Quine, 1960) established his indeterminacy of translation thesis systematically. He conceived that translating one language into another is an attempt to determine synonymy. In the case of the native expression “gavagai”, the linguist translated the utterance of the native in his own language based on empirical confirmation or infirmation. Based on empirical ground, the linguist defined the meaning of “Gavagai” as synonymous with the meaning of “rabbit”. The objectifying method here used by the linguist lacks determinate justification, i.e., a proper way to justify the so-and-so is rabbits. The only evidence the linguist relies on is his empirical observation in the form of a native’s confirmation or infirmation. So, every translation made by the linguist is a *radical translation*, because he has no way to access the mind of the native to determine the so-and-so are rabbits.

Quine’s indeterminacy thesis can be further analysable from two different aspects, i.e., ‘*argument from above*’ and ‘*argument from below*’. Argument from above claims that scientific theory is underdetermined by the evidence. Translation, in a particular scientific theory, is made possible based on some evidence. Likewise, in another scientific theory, translation takes place in the same way. Quine explained that two different simultaneous translations of a given utterance are possible in which both are true respective of different theories. It is wrong to say that translation in two different scientific theories has identical stimulus meaning. For example, the native utterance “gavagai” appears whenever there is a “rabbit”, but there is no certainty to claim that both have the same stimulus meaning. Therefore, every translation under all the possible empirical evidence in the form of the native assent or descent is indeterminate.<sup>23</sup> The *argument from below* establishes Quine’s idea of indeterminacy of reference (Quine, 1960). In the case of the native utterance “gavagai” and the

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<sup>23</sup> Glock, Hans-Johan (2003). *Quine and Davidson on Language, Thought and Reality*. New York: Cambridge University Press. pp. 173.

translation of the linguist “Lo! Rabbit”, we are unable to say that both utterances refer to the same object.<sup>24</sup>

However, a lexicographer or a linguist makes his worldview based on his conceptual scheme. And we have no way to determine whether the linguist is right or wrong. Now, there raised a key question: how does a translation take place in language? According to Quine, in every case of translation, especially an alien language, we used our conceptual scheme based on empirical evidence. All the objective data we get through our experience is unable to make a determinate translation. Translation in every case is radical translation. In this regard, Quine mentioned:

“The utterances first and foremost surely translated in such a case are ones keyed to present events that are conspicuous to the linguist and his informant. A rabbit scurries by, the native says ‘Gavagai’, and the linguist notes down the sentence ‘Rabbit’ (or ‘Lo, a rabbit) as tentative translation, subject to testing in further cases.” (Quine, 1960)<sup>25</sup>

However, there is a misinterpretation that Quine’s indeterminacy of translation is an empirical matter. For them, the indeterminacy of translation should be interpreted epistemologically. The empirical data experienced by the linguist helps him to translate the meaning of synonymy. Quine's indeterminacy thesis is not only an empirical investigation of meaning. A careful outlook towards this thesis implies that the indeterminacy of translation is an ontological investigation of meaning, not an empirical investigation. Quine claimed that the purpose of translation is to determine the synonymy meaning of the parts of a sentence. In this regard, Peter Hylton (2008) mentioned that:

“Some commentators have interpreted indeterminacy epistemologically, as the claim that, although there is a uniquely correct translation, the evidence available to the linguist, and the procedures she can legitimately employ, do not suffice to determine it. If that was what Quine meant, then indeterminacy would simply be a case of the more general idea of underdetermination of theory of evidence- the idea that our evidence does not uniquely determine a single theory of the world.” (Hylton, 2018)<sup>26</sup>

Now, the doubt among scholars would be clear that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis is an ontological investigation of meaning. Quine holds that language, reference and ontology are interrelated. An object is ontologically committed when we put the object

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, pp. 174.

<sup>25</sup> Quine, W. V. O. (2013). *Word and Object*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. pp.25.

<sup>26</sup> Op. Cit. Hylton, Peter. *Quine*. Pp. 202.

under the value of a first-order logical language or regimented language that contains proper names, variables, quantifications, etc. (Quine, 1960). Therefore, the indeterminacy thesis not only investigates how translation becomes indeterminate but also provides a foundation for Quine's projects of ontological relativity. It is to be noted that if the meaning is a translation (as claimed by Quine) and translation becomes indeterminate, then the ontological claim that is committed by a proposition becomes relative under the condition of a background language. And, hence, the search for the meaning of a proposition implies searching for the answer to the ontological question- 'what there is?'. Therefore, it is to be said that dealing with the meaning means dealing with ontology. For example, in the case of the native expression "gavagai", the ontological commitment made by the native becomes relative to the linguist because of the indeterminacy of translation.

However, Quine argued that the indeterminacy of translation is raised not only when a linguist tries to translate an alien language but also elaborated that we can challenge the translation of our home language. In this regard, he asserts that:

"On deeper reflection, radical translation begins at home. Must we equate our neighbour's English words with the same strings of phonemes in our own mouth? Certainly not; for sometimes we do not thus equate them. Sometimes we find it to be in the interests of communication to recognize our neighbour's use of some word, such as "cool" or "Square" or "hopefully," differs from ours, and so we translate that word of his into a different string of phonemes in our idiolect." (Quine, 1969)<sup>27</sup>

In the case of translating our home language, we use a social method of learning. With the help of this social method of learning a homophonic translation takes place (Quine, 1969). In a particular society, we use a particular language and a particular manual to translate the sentence of our home language. It is wrong to claim that using a particular language means we have an identical conceptual scheme. For Quine, our conceptual scheme can be similar but not identical. To make a determinate translation we need an identical conceptual scheme, which is something like impossible.

Quine's indeterminacy thesis depends on his behaviouristic explanation of meaning. For him, A linguist experiences the speaker's linguistic behaviour to interpret or translate the speaker's utterance. His behaviouristic approach toward the meaning clearly shows that every translation of a native utterance is a *radical translation* because only based on the behaviour of a native, one cannot determine the meaning of synonymy. A neurological approach has been taken by some philosophers to solve

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<sup>27</sup> Op. Cit. Quine, W.V. O. *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*. pp.46.

Quine's indeterminacy thesis. In neurology, there is an appeal made by neurologists regarding the acquisition of meaning. In neurology, it is argued that meaning in two different manuals can be synonymous through mentalistic explanation.

However, a logical analysis of Quine's indeterminacy thesis rejected the neurological approach in semantics. A neurologist becomes neurolinguistic when he deals with the structure of meaning in terms of our brain function. They explain how does human brain becomes capable of acquiring language. It is the study of the language-brain relationship that appeared after the 1960s. Neurolinguistics are more concerned about the causal relationship between language acquisition and brain function rather than the meaning of language. Their activities involve the whole process from producing a linguistic utterance to changes in the cerebral part of the brain. Meaning, as Quine is concerned is not an internal matter of brain or nervous functionality, rather it is a matter of the speaker's behaviour. And therefore, meaning is always an external effect defined based on observational data. One can defend that if one can analyse the speaker's mind or able to analyse all possible functions of the human brain, then it can be possible to find out the definite meaning of a linguistic utterance. Quine conceived that neurology only provides us with a causal explanation of meaning. Neurology explains the cause of verbal sentences, i.e., it suggests to us how our brain activity occurs when we hear a sentence from a speaker. So, it makes a correlation between verbal expression and some regions of the brain. It tells us how some parts of our brain function when we observe a verbal expression from a speaker. It says nothing about the meaning of the verbal expression or observational sentence uttered by a speaker. Meaning is the subject matter of semantics. There is no role for neurology in semantics. So, the meaning of a sentence, for Quine, still can be determined based on the behaviouristic approach. Neurology only deals with the function of our brain, not the meaning. The relevance of neurology comes to appear when we ask for an explanation of our verbal behaviour. Thus, for Quine, it is impossible to solve the indeterminacy thesis based on the neurological approach toward the study of meaning, because indeterminacy lies in linguistic meaning, not in the explanation of verbal behaviour.<sup>28</sup>

The indeterminacy thesis of Quine can be explained through the underdetermination project of Quine. Quine's underdetermination project states that science does not consist of one particular theory. Many theories are interrelated with each other. The indeterminacy arises in meaning when we shift one theory to another theory. For him, there is the possibility that two different theories have the same

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<sup>28</sup> Gaudet, Eve. (2006). Quine on Meaning. New York: Continuum Studies of American Philosophy. Pp.61

empirical ground, but it is wrong to claim that the meaning of a sentence (observational sentence) is synonymous with each other in both of these theories. In the case of the native utterance “gavagai”, the meaning of assent by the native and the meaning assent by the linguist is not determinate, though the empirical ground is the same.

Thus, every translation of an untouched language, for Quine, is a *radical translation*. A linguist used his manual to interpret a foreign language or alien language. So, according to him, two manuals can be equally true, but wrong to claim that both are interchangeable in a determinate way. In this regard, Quine asserted that:

“A manual of Jungle-to-English translation constitutes a recursive, or inductive, definition of a *translation relation* together with a claim that it correlates sentences compatibly with the behaviour of all concerned. The thesis of the indeterminacy of translation is that these claims on the part of two manuals might both be true and yet the two translation relations might not be usable in alternation, from sentence to sentence, without issuing in coherent sequence. Or, to put it another way, the English sentences prescribed as a translation of a given Jungle sentence by two rival manuals might not be interchangeable in English contexts.” (Quine, 1992)<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, based on radical translation, the translated meaning of a native sentence has become indeterminate. There is the possibility that the meaning of a sentence may differ in another manual. So, based on the indeterminacy thesis, it is hard to say whether a manual is true or false. Every manual translates a sentence of a native language based on a behaviouristic approach or observational data. Having sufficient observational data, we cannot say the meaning of the term “rabbit” is synonymous with the meaning of the term “gavagai”.

#### Section-IV

Quine’s indeterminacy thesis is hard to believe when we are concerned about meaning in our daily life conversation. But, a critical study on semantics, as propounded by Quine hard to ignore. If meaning is the linguistic use or behaviour of a given speaker, then the meaning of any particular linguistic expression becomes a kind of radical translation and hence falls under indeterminacy. A misconception regarding Quine’s theory of meaning most of the time argued by scholars, i.e., Quine was fully negative concerning meaning. Opposed to this objection, it must be pointed out that Quine never disbelieved in meaning; rather, he proposed that any way to define meaning becomes obscure. And therefore, any theory to define meaning is insufficient.

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<sup>29</sup> Quine, W.V. O. (1992). *Pursuit of Truth*. USA: Harvard University Press. pp. 48.

Moreover, it is to be noted that Quine was optimistic about meaning. He argued that to cognise the meaning of a linguistic expression in the most promising way, we must master this or that particular language.

However, Quine's philosophical position is revolutionary and praiseworthy. On the one hand, it challenged Kant and Carnap and thereby opened a new vista in the philosophy of language, and on the other hand, it equally challenged Noam Chomsky's very idea of the internalization of language. It also sets the future of the philosophy of language by denying the unified core of the conceptual scheme and adopting conceptual relativity. Thus, in a sense, it goes closer to later Wittgenstein. For Quine, every meaningful sentence is somehow linked with empirical investigation. Going through Quine's indeterminacy thesis, we can see that there is an attack against meaning in the indeterminacy thesis. According to Quine, meaning is defined in terms of *sameness of meaning* (Quine, 1960). To determine the sameness of meaning is nothing but to define synonymy. In "Two Dogmas", Quine clearly shows that every way to define synonymy unsatisfied us. We define synonymy based on the empirical ground. In the example of "gavagai," Quine stated that having necessary and sufficient evidence to experience the native utterance, a linguist fails to define synonymy between "gavagai" and "rabbit".

Quine's indeterminacy of translation and inscrutability of reference, I do reckon, forces us to rethink *meaning*. According to Quine, in the matter of translating a native sentence, we use our objectifying pattern, then translate the native sentence in our language and impose an ontological value. There is no necessity to claim that the ontological commitment that we are making when we use the term "rabbit" is identical to the ontological commitment assent by the native when the native uses the term "gavagai". So, not only does the indeterminacy of translation happen when we shift to another language, but we also claim ontological relativity. Thus, we conclude by saying that *shifting the language means shifting the ontology* (Quine, 1969). Because there is no criterion to justify whether the native's expression "gavagai" is identical to the linguist's translation "rabbit". Here, the linguist's translation "gavagai" can stand for "rabbithood", "undetached part of rabbit", and so on, even though after the native's confirmation/assent in the presence of the rabbit or infirmation/descent in the absence of the rabbit. And, therefore, changing language or shifting language i.e., from a native alien language to the hitherto spoken home language to define the meaning of synonymy means shifting ontology or more specifically making ontology relative because there may be all the necessary and sufficient conditions present to translate an utterance, even though there is no justification to claim that 'x's translation 'y' under all their necessary and sufficient conditions imply that "x=y" and vice-versa.

However, a common question can be raised: What is the standpoint of Quine regarding meaning? Here I would like to mention two aspects of meaning: Meaning realism and meaning relativism. Quine has been suggested to become more critical concerning meaning. His confirmational holism states that a sentence in a particular language theory becomes meaningful only if the proposition is confirmed by the theory. Translating the sentence into another theory falls into a sort of *radical translation* and *indeterminacy of translation*. Even, for Quine, in our home language, we are not certain about determinacy. Because, for him, our home language is also subject to a question from an indeterminacy point of view. From this entire discussion, it can seem to others that Quine is a sceptic regarding the ontology of meaning. My response to this view is negative. Indeed, in Quine's questions against meaning and its determinacy, he was not a sceptic regarding meaning; rather he is a meaning relativist under a particular theory.