
Language and Conception of Reality: An Intervention on Conceptual Scheme Relativism

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Citation

Adesanya, Oreoluwa Idris. Language and Conception of Reality: An Intervention on Conceptual Scheme Relativism. *Language, Literature and Culture*. Vol. 2, No. 3, 2019, pp. 93-101.

Received: March 28, 2019; Accepted: June 2, 2019; Published: June 19, 2019

Abstract: The link between language and reality is considered by some philosophers as that of an “unbreakable bond”, “tyrannical hold”, or an “unbridgeable gap”, which depends on certain conceptions of language as categorizing, organizing and fitting reality or experience. These views as expressed by the likes of Benjamin Lee Whorf, Edward Sapir, Willard Van Orman Quine, Thomas Khun and Paul Feyerabend, who are considered by Donald Davidson as conceptual relativists: are opposed to the realist doctrine in metaphysics that reality exists independently of the human mind, that is, of human conception and categorization in terms of thought and speech. However, these views have been considered as expressing various strands of conceptual scheme relativism, which is a doctrine radically rejected by Donald Davidson. Davidson devises various arguments and metaphors to challenge the very idea of a conceptual scheme and the relativism which apparently comes with it in his paper, entitled: *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme*. According to Davidson, conceptual schemes can be associated with language and the relation between conceptual schemes and language could be expressed by illustrating how language performs the same role that conceptual schemes perform in categorizing, conceptualizing, and perceiving experience or reality, as such, translatability into a familiar tongue, is conceived by Davidson as a criterion of languagehood, with the implication that any language which is not translatable into another cannot be said to be a language at all. Therefore, speakers of two different languages that fail of mutual translation must be users of two distinct conceptual schemes, going by Davidson’s interpretation. In defense of his assumption that there can be no language at all that is not translatable into another, Davidson appropriates Tarski’s Convention T, which is a theory of truth for formalized languages as a theory of meaning for natural language. This paper, upon an interrogation of Davidson’s major arguments against conceptual relativism, therefore avers that Davidson misappropriates Tarski’s theory of truth for formalized languages as a theory of meaning for natural languages, thereby, directly reducing “meaning” to “truth”. The paper therefore confronts the basic assumptions underlying Davidson’s notion of conceptual schemes and his rejection of conceptual scheme relativism, while also considering his more recent convictions about the very notion of language.

Keywords: Conceptual Schemes, Scheme-Content Dualism, Conceptual Relativism, Language, Reality, Experience

1. Introduction

A unique feature of metaphysics is its attempt to give a comprehensive account of the nature and structure of reality as a whole and not simply piecemeal. If this claim is anything to go by, then we assume that there is a reality existing independently of human conception and categorization in terms of thought and speech. The supposition is that there exists a reality outside and independent of the human mind. This is known as the realist view in metaphysics. For so many years prior to Immanuel Kant, there was a dominant view that the mind or the conscious self does not have direct

access to the external world, as such, the mind is only fed with ideas, perceptual impressions or sense data, that are given as representing the external physical world. Hence, the seemingly unbridgeable gap between the object known and the knowing mind. With the emergence of Immanuel Kant, there was a radical shift from the belief in the mind-independence of objects or external physical reality, to the opinion that the object known is in part constituted by the knowing mind. Hence, the gap between the known object and the knowing mind is bridged.

As for Kant, appearances which inhabit the phenomenal world are partly our construction, since they are obtained by

our imposition of *a priori* concepts. For him, only things-in-themselves, the *noumena*, are objectively independent from the influence of our “rational and perceptual apparatus.” With the emergence of a certain “linguistic turn” in philosophy, attention has been centered so heavily on language and its relation to reality. In expressing this shift in attention, Michael Devitt and Kim Sterelny have it that: “For reference to be possible, “the gap” between the object referred to and the referring mind must be closed; the object must, in some way, be made dependent on our way of referring, dependent on our language.” [1] The emergence of logical atomism and of its twin-sister, logical positivism ensured that “attention has centered so heavily on language that the metaphysical issue has tended to disappear; or to be redefined in linguistic terms; or, worst of all, to be confused with linguistic issues.” [1], p. 235.

However, the likes of Benjamin Lee Whorf, Edward Sapir and others hold the position that all thinking or thought is in language, and as such, that each “language structures a view of reality.” Their views open door to a sort of conceptual relativism which is objected to by the likes of Donald Davidson, whose views reflect a deep level of indebtedness in this paper. This paper is set out to giving a succinct exposition of the major discussions and controversial theses that have consumed a vast literature on language and its relation to human conception of reality.

2. The Realism Debate and the Linguistic Turn in Philosophy

As being hinted above, the realist view of the world is that of the existence of mind-independent objects. This is a view that such physical entities as stones, trees, rocks exist and do not depend for their existence on human minds. External physical entities exist independent of our awareness, perception, or thought about them. Going by this doctrine, existing entities external to our minds do not depend on or arise from the imposition of our concepts or theories. They are just there. As opposed to realism, idealism proposes the view that though external physical entities exist, they do not exist independent of the human mind. Hence, Berkeley’s dictum: “esseestpercipi”, “to be is to be perceived.”

The view that there is an existing reality, external to and independent of the human mind creates a huge gap between the world and the mind, that is, between the object known and the knowing mind. As being noted earlier, it was Kant who bridged this gap between the human mind and external physical reality. For him, the objects known are in part constituted by the knowing mind. Kant’s revolutionary influence paved way to what is referred to as the “linguistic turn” in philosophy. In the 20th century, amongst the analytic thinkers, arguments leveled against realist doctrines typically begin from a thesis in the philosophy of language. “For reference to be possible, “the gap” between the object referred to and the referring mind must be closed; the object must in some way, be made dependent on our way of

referring, dependent on our language.” [1], p. 235.

Such analytic philosophers as Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, G. E. Moore were more popular with a familiar doctrine of logical atomism, while those of the Vienna school, like Moritz Schlick, A. J. Ayer and others known as the logical positivists, came up with their famous verifiability principle. Bertrand Russell, known to have been the major patron of logical atomism makes the following statement: “the atoms that I wish to arrive at as the sort of residue in analysis are logical atoms and not physical atoms. Some of them will be what I call “particulars” - such things as little patches of colour or sounds, momentary things – and some of them will be predicates or relations and so on. The point is that the atom I wish to arrive at is the atom of logical analysis, not the atom of physical analysis.” [2] Therefore, when we look at reality from a logical point of view (expressed in the language of logic), it seems to reduce to particular things possessing certain qualities and standing in certain relations to one another. Logical atomism proposes that language like other phenomena can be analyzed in terms of aggregates of fixed irreducible units or elements. For Russell, logical atoms are the ultimate constituents of reality. For him, there exists a correspondence between logic and metaphysics, since we could analyze the nature of reality via analysis of language. Russell proposes that there is a perfect correspondence between “atomic sentences” and “atomic facts” and therefore argues that for each atomic fact there is a matching or corresponding atomic sentence. While atomic sentences assert that a certain thing possesses a certain quality, atomic facts consist in the possession of a quality by some specific, individual thing.

As for Ludwig Wittgenstein, the business of philosophy should be the analysis of language. Wittgenstein in his early philosophy shared much with Russellian atomism by holding the claim that language pictures reality. In the early stage of his philosophical career, he tends to share a positivist view which is an empirical attitude about language and meaning. In his first work in philosophy, *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein claims that “philosophy is not a body of doctrines, but an activity.” [3] For him, philosophy involves the clarification of propositions. For him, there is no thought which cannot be put into language, and it is by means of language that reality expresses itself. Wittgenstein is of the view that language pictures the world as well as reality, this is his principle of picture theory, that “the proposition is a picture of reality.” The main thesis of the picture theory is that every well-formed proposition is a logical representation of the world. In Wittgenstein’s later work, *Philosophical Investigations*, he deviated from the views he earlier held in the *Tractatus*. Here he proposes his theory of language game. Language game incorporates language use and sense in a comprehensive system. Language is now seen as games that we play with words. For him, the words are the instruments in language game and they have meaning in their application or ‘use’ by humans. In explaining his viewpoint, he states, “what we do is bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday

use.”[4]

A. J. Ayer, in his *Language Truth and Logic* gave impetus to logical positivism by discarding such “metaphysical thesis that philosophy affords us knowledge of reality transcending the world of science and common sense.” [5] The positivists felt that such philosophical thought was literally meaningless, and sought to prove this by their principle of verifiability, which states that “meaning is method of verification.” If a statement is verifiable, it should have associated with it a way of telling whether it is true or not, if it falls short of this requirement, it is meaningless. With this weapon, the positivists hoped to eliminate metaphysics. They dismissed metaphysical issues and replaced them with linguistic ones. They sought the task of philosophy in analyzing the meanings of statements in terms of empirical evidence, or experience, through which they are to be tested.

3. Language (Conceptual Schemes) as Organizing Reality (Content)

As being hinted in the introduction to this paper, the likes of Benjamin Lee Whorf, Edward Sapir, Hilary Putnam amongst others hold the view that “all thinking is in a language”, and also that each “language structures a view of reality” with the extreme view that “the views of reality structured by languages, or at least by families of languages, differ.” [1], p. 218. Whorf for instance is a profound adherent to this point of view. He expresses the view that language is “the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual’s mental activity.” [6] Edward Sapir also shares this same viewpoint with Whorf, claiming that there is a way that language imposes on experience. Whorf also sometimes suggest that a language not only forces people to think in certain ways but also constrains their world view. In describing how language influences or distorts our view of reality, Whorf prefers to use the word “unbreakable bonds”, while for Sapir; “tyrannical hold” which prevents us from having certain thoughts.

Moreover, Whorf, while discussing the way the syntax of a language structures a view of reality and how different languages can be syntactically different in a way that influences or constrains our world views, gives an illustration of how “Standard Average European” (SAE) languages like English and American Indian languages like Hopi, are syntactically different. His major argument is that for we speakers of SAE languages, there is a way they impose a certain conception of time on us. We see time as a “smooth flowing continuum in which everything in the universe proceeds at an equal rate, out of a future, through a present, into a past; or, in which, to reverse the picture, the observer is being carried in the system of duration continuously away from a past and into a future.” [6], p. 57. The point being made here is that Standard Average European languages make us see time as a concrete material thing, rather than something abstract. We see time as an objective quantifiable object like space. We talk about time the same way we talk

about physical entities, thereby quantifying them the same way. For instance, ‘ten days’ has the same linguistic form as ‘ten men’. Our tense/aspect system has a tripartite distinction of past/present/future which encourages this view of time. Even metaphor is spatialized and reified. [1], p. 222. Whorf expands this view thus in his words:

all languages need to express durations, intensities, and tendencies. It is characteristic of SAE... to express them metaphorically. The metaphors are those of spatial extension, i.e. of size, number (plurality), position, shape, and motion. We express duration by ‘long, short, great, much, quick, slow’, etc.; intensity by ‘large, great, much, heavy, light, high, low, sharp, faint’, etc.; tendency by ‘more, increase, grow ...’; and so on through an almost inexhaustible list of metaphors that we hardly recognize as such, since they are virtually the only linguistic media available.

It is clear how this condition “fits in”. It is part of our whole scheme of OBJECTIFYING – imaginatively spatializing qualities and potentials that are quite nonspatial [6], p. 145.

Whorf further illustrates how the case is different in a language like Hopi. In Hopi language, physical and temporal entities have distinct or divergent linguistic structures. In contrast to how we have it in SAE languages, metaphors that represent duration, intensity, and tendency are not spatial in Hopi language. “Most importantly, their tense/aspect system does not map onto our past/present/future dichotomy. Whorf claims that their “tense” makers are validity forms; they have epistemic interpretations. One form indicates direct report: it applies roughly to occasions in which we use simple past or present. Another indicates expectation: it is roughly equivalent to our future, though it can be used to describe an event distant from but simultaneous with the utterance. Finally, there is the *nomic* form: it is roughly equivalent to the English generic present, as in ‘A man lives and dies in sin’. In addition, there are temporal conjunctions. These link clauses and translate approximately as ‘earlier than’ and ‘later than’.” [1], p. 222-223. Whorf’s major task in drawing out these illustrations is to show how SAE influences or constrains us to a conception of time and how Hopi language influences or constrains the Hopi people to another. We cannot therefore attribute our conception of time to them.

Donald Davidson writes in the opening lines of his essay, *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme*, that conceptual schemes have been used by various philosophers to mean “ways of organizing experience” or “systems of categories that give form to the data of sensation”, and more generally; they are said to be like “points of view from which individuals, cultures or periods survey the passing scene.” [7] Here we can infer an understanding of conceptual schemes as performing a mediating role between our views of the world and the world itself, which means that we do not have a direct view of reality itself, just as Kant has posited, but that our view of the world is mediated by a conceptual scheme.

Davidson writes that: “we may accept the doctrine that associates having a language with having a conceptual scheme.” He goes further to argue that “we may identify

conceptual schemes with languages...Languages we will think of as separate from souls; speaking a language is not a trait a man can lose while retaining the power of thought." [7], p. 184-185. Therefore, language is very crucial to thought, as it is a way of expressing thought. We have discussed earlier on in this paper, how Whorf favours the doctrine that language somehow constrains and prevents thought, therefore, that language influences our thinking and conceptions of reality.

The view that languages or conceptual schemes organize reality opens doors to conceptual relativism, as earlier pointed at in this paper. Davidson strongly rejects this view, and instead argues that translatability into a familiar tongue is a criterion of language-hood. Therefore, we cannot make sense of a language which cannot or could not be translated into a familiar idiom. We shall shift to this issue in the next section.

4. Conceptual Scheme Relativism

Conceptual scheme relativism is the doctrine Davidson chiefly repudiates in his *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme*. He talks about conceptual schemes as being used by philosophers to imply ways of organizing experience or reality. For Davidson, the various views of the roles of conceptual schemes can be split into two groups, and this is expressed in the following words by Broadbent:

those which talk of the scheme organizing, systematizing, and dividing up content; and those which talk of the scheme fitting, predicting, accounting for, and facing content. Similarly, the various views of the content can be split up into two groups: those which talk of the scheme's relation to experience, the passing show, surface irritations, sensory promptings, sense-data, or the given. [8]

As such, if conceptual schemes divide up or organize experience, there is a sense in which we could talk of different schemes, thereby leading us to conceptual relativism. Even the experience or reality which they organize will be so divergent or incommensurable to the extent that there could be no scheme-neutral content. Let us agree with Davidson that we may associate having a conceptual scheme with having a language, and therefore that "there may be no translating from one scheme to another, in which case the beliefs, desires, hopes, and bits of knowledge that characterize one person have no true counterparts for the subscriber to another scheme. Reality itself ' (content being organized)' is relative to a scheme: what counts as real in one system may not in another." [7], p. 183. The doctrine of conceptual scheme relativism thereby translates to the view that two languages may be radically different to the extent that they are not inter-translatable, even the content or reality they organize or divide up is relative to a language. This point is further expressed in Davidson's words that: "Languages that have evolved in distant times or places may differ extensively in their resources for dealing with one or another range of phenomena. What comes easily in one language may come hard in another, and this difference may

echo significant dissimilarities in style and value." [7], p. 184. The assumption that underlies the above point made by Davidson is that "if conceptual schemes differ, so do languages."

Whorf for instance, seems to think that Hopi cannot be translated into Standard Average European languages like English and French. Davidson singles him out as: "wanting to demonstrate that Hopi incorporates a metaphysics so alien to ours, that Hopi and English cannot, as he puts it, "be calibrated,"." Davidson goes on to fault Whorf's claim by stressing that he "uses English to convey the contents of sample Hopi sentences." [7], p. 184. This is a point we shall raise in a later section.

Such views as expressed by the likes of Benjamin Lee Whorf, Edward Sapir and the rest are a good illustration of the conceptual relativism Davidson objects to. According to Whorf, the Hopi syntax seems to defy translation into SAE thereby giving way for a radical incommensurability in languages. Noam Chomsky and the likes deny this view. For them, there is a rich set of "linguistic universals" common to or shared by all languages.

Davidson expresses in his words that: "Alternatively, there is the idea that any language distorts reality, which implies that it is only wordlessly, if at all, that the mind comes to grips with things as they really are. This is to construe language as an inert (though necessarily distorting) medium independent of the human agencies that deploy this view of language that surely (according to Davidson) cannot be maintained." [7], p. 185. Related to this view is that people construct their theories of the world partly on the basis of their innate inheritance and largely on the basis of the experiential stimuli they receive. This leads us to Whorf's claim that the theories we construct are influenced and probably constrained by the language of the community in which we live. For Whorf, a language "is a classification and arrangement of the stream of sensory experience;" and as such "the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds." [6], p. 213-55. This statement confirms the fact that language organizes experience or reality, and if this assertion is anything to go by, then we should accept the view that different languages organize experience or reality in different ways, hence, Sapir's exaggeration that: "No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality." [9] The social realities that different languages represent or organize are drastically distinct or divergent, and thereby incommensurable. The world's in which Sapir's linguistically different societies live "are distinct worlds." This view is also reiterated by Whorf when who claims that: "different languages differently "segment" the same situation or experience." [6], p. 162. Whorf is found using such expressions as "we dissect nature," "we cut nature up" [6], p. 213. While for Sapir, "the 'real world' is to a large extent built up on the language habits of the group." [9], p. 162.

This discussion is incomplete without mention of the

scientific radicals: historians of science like Thomas Kuhn, and philosophers of science like Paul Feyerabend. The same way Whorf has argued that linguistic communities can be incommensurable, because of the vast dissimilarities in conceptual frameworks, Kuhn and Feyerabend also admit that scientific communities can also share the same feature, in the sense that each scientific community or “paradigm” uses distinct incommensurable schemes. According to Davidson, ““Incommensurability” is, of course, Kuhn and Feyerabend’s word for “not intertranslatable.”” [7], p. 190. According to Kuhn, the progress of science should not be viewed as a steady development towards increasingly true theories, rather, science progresses by revolutionary changes in paradigm. Paradigm in this sense represents Kuhn’s word for conceptual schemes. For Kuhn, all scientific activities are carried out within a particular paradigm at a given moment in the history of science. Paradigms, according to Kuhn, determine certain factors that influence how science is being perceived at a given period, including the problems, values, terms, concepts, methods, techniques, principles and theories that are accepted at the period, as well as views on the world itself, existence and truth. Paradigms therefore determine the general approach to science at a given period in scientific practice. However, a current paradigm might be challenged by an anomaly or certain natural occurrences which it is unable to provide explanations for, as such, the old paradigm may be eventually replaced by a new paradigm which is able to account for these changes, by using a conception of science, different from that of the old paradigm. These revolutionary changes in paradigm or what Kuhn refers to as “paradigm shifts” eventuate huge dissimilarities between the old paradigm and the new paradigm, in such a way that their conceptions of science, of terms and concepts, of truth, including the values used to guide their choice of theory, and even the worlds they work in, are drastically incommensurable. The implication this holds for conceptual relativism is that the languages (scientific language) used or understood by different scientific paradigms are so different that they are unintertranslatable, since there will be no way to compare them, as there is no scheme-neutral content (reality/world) by which to compare between the scientific languages used by two distinct scientific paradigms. They do not even share a common conception of truth, which is a precondition for Davidson’s “principle of charity”. This informs Kuhn’s aphorism that: “though the world does not change with a change in paradigm, the scientist afterward works in a very different world.” [10]

Davidson explicitly mentions Kuhn, Feyerabend, Whorf, Strawson, and Quine in his critique of conceptual scheme relativism. Both Kuhn and Feyerabend are of the view that the languages of different theories in the one area are not inter-translatable and hence the theories are “incommensurable”. This school of scientists championed a radical critique 20th century scientific orthodoxy, stemming from the logical positivists on the one hand and Karl Popper on the other hand. For the positivists, science consists in the accumulation of data which are often theoretically reviewed

as theories become more general and precise. As for Popper, theory change is not an elaboration or accumulation of facts, but a replacement, what he calls a revolution and not merely a reform.

However, both positivist and Popperian views of science presuppose a common scientific language, which is common to all scientific theories, this language is the language of observation. It was taken that even when theories differ, they share the same language in which reports of experiment and observation can be given. On the other hand, Kuhn and Feyerabend and others reject the whole orthodox picture, while denying the existence of any scientific language that is neutral between all competing theories (the scheme-neutral content). According to Thomas Kuhn:

Philosophers have now abandoned hope of finding a pure sense-datum language ... but many of them continue to assume that theories can be compared by recourse to a basic vocabulary consisting entirely of words which are attached to nature in ways that are unproblematic and, to the extent necessary, independent of theory ... Feyerabend and I have argued at length that no such vocabulary is available. In the transition from one theory to the next words change their meanings or conditions of applicability in subtle ways. Though most of the same signs are used before and after a revolution ... e.g. force, mass, element, compound, cell ... the ways in which some of them attach to nature has somehow changed. Successive theories are thus, we say, incommensurable. [11]

The scientific radicals hold the opinion that comprehensive theories cannot be compared the way the positivists and Popperians wanted, since there are no shared concepts and hence, no logical relations between the theories.

In contrast to the view held by Davidson, W. V. O. Quine defends the claim that translation from a particular language to another is indeterminate. For Quine, “language is a social art” which is only acquired through inter-subjectively available hints as to “what to say and when.” Quine therefore submits that “there is no justification for collating linguistic meanings, unless in terms of men’s dispositions to respond overtly to socially observable stimulations.” Therefore, that “an effect of recognizing this limitation is that the enterprise of translation (itself) is found to be involved in a certain systematic indeterminacy...” [12] This is a behavioural conception of language which begins from the standpoint of the “radical translator”, who operates as an observer, carefully monitoring the behaviour of the native speakers of a language which give assent to and dissent from utterances, and to check in what contexts or circumstances they will be disposed to give assent to and dissent from particular sentences in the language. Davidson’s notion of radical interpretation is a follow up of this view.

In relation to his thesis of indeterminacy of translation, Quine discusses his notion of indeterminacy or inscrutability of reference, or what he sometimes refers to as ontological relativity. According to this claim, “if there exists one correct referential hypothesis regarding the terms of another’s language, then there will be many other equally correct ones.

Put in terms of ontology, if it is correct to attribute one system of ontological commitments to another person, then it will be equally correct to attribute others.” [13] This being the case, there will be no way in which we can choose which correct referential hypothesis is most adequate, as they are all adequate. For Quine, reference is relative, and this relativity results in its indeterminacy. Quine argues that the reference of terms used in one language is relative to a choice of a manual of translation that will correlate them with that of others. What the other person refers to in his language depends on the correlation between his words and those of users of other languages that best save the observable data or behavior. The implications of Quine’s behaviouristic conception of language for conceptual scheme relativism, is that it logically culminates in what Davidson refers to as “scheme-content” dualism. Quine holds a holistic view of language, in the sense that we cannot demarcate individual statements and compare them with instances of experience, rather, language should be taken as a whole system. This is the basis for his rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction and radical reductionism, which he refers to as the two dogmas of empiricism. Analytic statements are those that are made true based on their linguistic components or meanings, while synthetic statements are those that are made true by experience. For Quine, statements which are true, independent of experience (analytic statements) cannot be isolated from statements whose truths depend on experiential support (synthetic statements), therefore, the distinction between analytic statements and synthetic statements does not hold. Quine also rejects reductionism, which is the claim that we can isolate the experiential support for particular statements. According to Quine, “...it is nonsense, and the root of much nonsense, to speak of a linguistic component and a factual component in the truth of any individual statement. Taken collectively, science has its double dependence upon language and experience; but this duality is not significantly traceable into the statements of science taken one by one.” [14] The implication of this view is that statements cannot be justified based on meaning or experience in isolation, but rather as a corporate body. To this effect, Quine writes that:

My countersuggestion...is that our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body. [14], p. 41.

However, by holding the claim that it is our collective statements that can be justified by experience, Quine creates a gap between our entire system of statements and experience, which culminates in a dualism between conceptual scheme and empirical content, which Davidson refers to as the scheme-content dualism. Davidson reacts to this dualism when he writes that:

I want to urge that this second dualism of scheme and of content, of organizing system and something waiting to be organized, cannot be made intelligible and defensible. It is itself a dogma of empiricism, the third dogma. The third, and perhaps the last, for if we give it up it is not clear that there is anything distinctive left to call empiricism. [7], p. 189.

4.1. Davidson’s Rejection of Conceptual Scheme Relativism

Davidson’s rejection of conceptual relativism is hinged on two basic assumptions. The first assumption made by Davidson is that conceptual schemes can be associated with language, in the sense that language plays the same roles as conceptual schemes in categorizing and organizing our perception of reality or experience. The second assumption is that translatability into a familiar language or idiom is a criterion of languagehood, as such, a condition that a proposed language must satisfy before it can be duly regarded as a language is that it must be interpretable, and thus, translatable into another language. However, in order to prove the impossibility of a language which cannot be translated into a familiar idiom, Davidson focuses on two different ways distinct conceptual schemes could fail to be translated: Either completely or partially. According to him, a complete failure of translation occurs when there is a language which is so different that there is no significant range of sentences which can be translated, while a partial failure of translation occurs when some of the language’s sentences can be translated, but a significant subset cannot. Davidson argues that one cannot make sense of either possibility, and therefore concludes that sense cannot be made of the claim that there could be a conceptual scheme which is incommensurable with that of others. However, Davidson began his search for a criterion of languagehood which does not entail translatability by analyzing how the supporters of conceptual scheme relativism have formulated their positions on the subject. These can be divided into two groups: those which talk of the conceptual scheme organizing, systematizing, and dividing up content; and those which talk of the scheme fitting, predicting, accounting for, and facing content. In a similar way, the various views of the content can be divided into two groups: those which emphasize the scheme’s relation to experience, the universe, the world, or nature; and those which talk of the scheme’s relation to experience, the passing show, surface irritations, sensory promptings, sense-data, or the given. After examining these various views on the roles of scheme and content, Davidson comes to the conclusion that none provides a basis for the acceptance of the claim that there are incommensurable conceptual schemes or untranslatable languages. His first target was to examine the claim that conceptual schemes organize reality, and if such a claim that provide a criterion of languagehood which does not depend on translatability into a familiar tongue. For Davidson, the notion of organizing a single reality is faulty, since it does not make sense to organize a single object, as the notion of organizing itself, requires multiple objects to be organized: “we cannot attach a clear meaning to the notion of organizing a single object (the world, nature, etc) unless that object is understood to contain or consist in other objects.” [7], p. 192. Davidson also finds fault with the claim that the content which conceptual schemes organize is experience. For him, this view faces exactly the same problems as the view that

conceptual schemes organize reality, since in order to make sense of this idea, experience needs to be split down into multiple experiences to be organized. The claim that one language could have predicates for experiences which another language lacks only makes sense by using a language which contains predicates for all various experiences. This does not help in making sense of the idea of languages which cannot be translated.

After examining the notion of organizing schemes and the contents which they organize, Davidson then diverts his attention to the claim that conceptual schemes fit or cope with experience or “sensory promptings”. For him, “for a theory to fit or face up to the totality of sensory experience is for that theory to be true.” [7], p. 193. Going by this view, for a theory to fit all experience, then it is certainly in need of modification, and as such, could be said to be false. Davidson’s argument is that because this account requires all theories to be true, in the sense of fitting all possible experience, it fails to add anything significant to the intuitive understanding of truth.

For Davidson, to make sense of alternative conceptual schemes is to talk of alternative conceptual schemes which are “largely true but not translatable”. Davidson argues that we cannot make sense of a language which expresses truths, but cannot be interpreted, since the notion of truth cannot be divorced from the idea of interpretation. For him, our best understanding of truth is that which is given by Tarski’s convention T, which claims that:

A satisfactory theory of truth for a language L must entail for every sentence S of L, a theorem of the form ‘S is true if and only if P’ where ‘S’ is replaced by a description of S and ‘P’ by S itself if L is English, and by a translation of S into English if L is not English. [15]

Davidson claims that if Tarski’s work represents the best available understanding of truth, then translation and truth are interdependent to such an extent that one cannot understand what it would mean for a conceptual scheme to be “largely true but no translatable”. Davidson has thus shown why neither the view that conceptual schemes organize the world or experience, nor the view that conceptual schemes organize or fit experience, enable to find a criterion for languagehood which can apply to languages that are untranslatable. Therefore, he cannot make sense of the idea of an untranslatable language. Davidson considers next, the possibility of partial failures of translation. He attacks the possibility of conceptual schemes, whose languages can partially be translated. The idea behind this claim is that if there are a significant number of sentences which can be translated then one may be able to “make changes and contrasts in conceptual schemes intelligible by reference to the common part.” [7], p. 195.

4.2. Interrogating Davidson’s Arguments Against Conceptual Relativism

In contrast to Quine’s thesis of the indeterminacy of translation, Davidson holds the view that “translatability into a familiar tongue is a criterion of language hood.” Davidson

argues that by his very principle of charity, when interpreting a speaker of a language which is not yet understood, the first step is to presume that there is a basic agreement on beliefs, and aim to maximize agreement based on the shared notion of truth. Otherwise, interpreting such a language will be impossible. For him, interpreting by the principle of charity cannot mislead. If there is no foundation of agreement between the interpreter and the alien (speaker of the language to be interpreted), then there can be no adequate understanding of such a language, such that disagreement will be impossible. A drawback of Davidson’s theory of meaning which underlies his idea of interpretivism: the view that under appropriate conditions, a fully informed interpreter can discern all that there is to know about the language of an alien speaker, and the principle of charity, is that the Tarskian theory of truth which Davidson uses to formulate his theory of meaning for natural languages is originally developed by Tarski for formalized languages. Even Tarski claims that appropriating a theory of truth for formalized language and extending it to natural languages will end up in confusion. According to him:

...The very possibility of a consistent use of the expression ‘true sentence’ which is in harmony with the laws of logic and the spirit of everyday language seems to be very questionable, and consequently the same doubt attaches to the possibility of constructing a correct definition of this expression. [15], p. 28.

The direct implication of Davidson’s theory of meaning is that meaning is analyzed in terms of truth or to put it in other words, what Davidson does is to equate truth to meaning. Although, we can draw out the connection between truth and meaning in Davidson’s theory, but there is no logical way in which sense could be made of a straightforward reduction of “meaning” to “truth”. Hence, knowing that a sentence is true does not imply knowing what the sentence means. Moreover, Davidson’s association of a conceptual scheme with language and his Quinean conviction that a language cannot be separated from the theory in which it is borne out, has come under attack by critics like Piotr Dehnel, Xinli Wang, and the rest. Dehnel on his part contends that “language is not a totality of sentences, but a set of syntactic and semantic rules used to produce sentences.” What this implies is that language is not a totality of sentences held true by a linguistic community, neither is it a theory which faces the tribunal of experience, but a set of syntactic and semantic rules that govern the formulation of sentences. [16] According to Xinli Wang, neither a scientific language nor a natural language can be considered as a conceptual scheme. Davidson construes scientific language as a form of *sentential* language, which he associates with schemes, but Wang argues that ideally, when the very idea of a conceptual scheme is closely examined, one realizes that what forms many parts of a conceptual scheme, such as a categorical framework, like a lexical structure of a scientific theory, are not a set of sentences or beliefs, as Davidson contends. Another point raised by Wang is that a conceptual scheme is meant to serve as the conceptual framework of a theory or the system of concepts in which a

theory is couched or explained, and cannot be the theory itself or the language expressing the theory. Wang further contends that a conceptual scheme is not supposed to be conceived as what we believe, what we experience, or what we perceive from the world or how we perceive the world, but a conceptual scheme is what shapes our beliefs or belief-systems, what schematizes our experience or what makes our experience possible: a scheme according to Wang, is what determines the way in which we perceive the world or reality. In this point of view, a conceptual scheme is therefore something “forced on us conceptually, something we commit tacitly as fundamental presuppositions of our common experience or beliefs.” Against the presupposition that a conceptual scheme describes reality or “fits” reality or experience, like Quine and Davidson suggest, it is the theory a conceptual scheme formulates or the theoretical claims made within a conceptual scheme that describes reality or experience as it were. Therefore, Wang contends that “... it would not improve matters to stipulate that a conceptual scheme is the totality of sentences held to be true by its speaker or the believer’s total belief system,” [17] just as the “principle of charity” suggests.

However, Davidson contends that the conventional attribution of meanings to sentences and what is often referred to as a language in the sense of a set of rules and vocabulary that a community uses, that is often outlined in a dictionary is a secondary notion which is merely formulated for ease of communication without having to go by radical interpretation. For him, “...there is no such thing as a language; not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have proposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases.” [18] According to Michael Dummett, this argument is absurd, since “words have meaning in themselves, independently of speakers... They have them in virtue of belonging to the language, and hence in virtue of the existence of a social practice.” [19] Unlike Davidson, Dummett contends that words and meanings are framed by the social practice of a language, which is in turn constituted by conventions. Jonathan Knowles reacts to Davidson’s rejection of the notion of shared languages by contending that the notion still survives notwithstanding Davidson’s arguments against it. Knowles writes that Davidson’s “views seem to entail that in principle we must all be seen as speaking as many languages as we have successful interpreters, insofar as these all will have somewhat different experiences of the world, and thus different linguistic dispositions. But such a view of our linguistic competence is surely absurd.” [20] However, Knowles finds the basic problem with Davidson’s rejection of the notion of shared-languages in the “framework” that generated it, which is “Davidson’s overall philosophy of language and communication.” [20], p. 315. Another confusion that Davidson’s later rejection of shared-language or language in the traditional understanding brings to mind is if he was making reference to the individuated conception of language or the traditional notion of language in his rejection

of conceptual relativism.

5. Conclusion

This paper has been able to do justice to the wide-range of discussions and controversial theses that relate to language and human conception of reality. The discussion of these issues projects indebtedness to the views shared by Donald Davidson on language and or conceptual schemes as they relate to reality. As being evident in this paper, Davidson completely rejects conceptual relativism, or the doctrine that different languages could reflect the same reality in completely different or divergent ways. This he does by explicitly mentioning the likes of W. V. O Quine, Thomas Khun, Paul Feyerabend, Benjamin Lee Whorf and P. F Strawson, as the major proponents of conceptual scheme relativism. In this paper, Davidson’s theory of meaning, which underlies his principle of charity and doctrine of interpretivism, has been evaluated, based on its straightforward reduction of “meaning” to “truth”, and misappropriation of the Tarskian theory of truth for formalized languages as a theory of meaning for natural languages. Davidson’s notion of conceptual scheme and his arguments against the relativism which apparently comes with them vis-à-vis his entire philosophy of language and communication have been interrogated in this paper, in a bid to show that Conceptual relativism has survived the challenge of Davidson’s arguments.

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