W. V. O. QUINE'S MODEL OF LANGUAGE

Abstract

(An examination of the recent suggestions by D. Davidson (1974) and M. Dummett (1974a, 1974b) reveals that there is scope for a theory of meaning in Quine, as against the conventional undesrtanding of Quine as a Skeptic of meaning. This paper explores Quine's theory as lying within a pragmatic framework in the light of the suggestions, made by the above writers.)

One of the live issues in current philosophy of language is the problem of meaning. In recent years, it has reached new horizons of understanding. Searle's (1969) "by saying what one literally means", for example, attempts to delineate the relation between semantics and speech acts. How far he has succeeded to map the relation between them in his philosophy of language is something which is not known as yet. A new variant in this line of thinking is the attempt made by Donald Davidson (1974) to map the relation between belief and meaning. His attempt to explain what utterances mean with reference to belief leads him to classify it under a 'theory of radical interpretation' much in the same way as Quine was led to 'theory of radical translation' in his own attempt to explain meaning.

A theory of interpretation, according to Davidson, may be said to describe an aspect of the interpreter's competence at understanding what is said. The basic idea behind this theory is that our grounds for attributing beliefs to speakers, and our grounds for assigning meanings to their utterances are interlocked. Davidson's claim is that, the process of making detailed sense of a person's intentions and beliefs cannot be independent of making sense of his utterances. At the outset, his position of radical interpretation is of comparable interest to Quine's own thesis of radical translation. But a deeper reason could be found in that it entails the view that Quine's theory seems to be that his doctrine of radical translation is completely unintelligible without a corresponding theory of meaning. If this argument is correct then it follows that the prevalent opinion

which holds that Quine's philosophy of language has no theory of meaning has to be radically revised so as to fit in this view. Consequently, it is a mistake to hold that a theory of radical translation cannot accommodate a theory of meaning, though the argument for a certain indeterminacy, just as in the case of Davidson also, certain indeterminacy of interpretation may not be completely dispensed with.

Following this, the thesis I wish to advance here is that Quine's account of meaning necessarily arises out of a 'pragmatic' outlook on language, and, if this is accepted, then it is very easy to pass on to the next stage of understanding, that Quine's theory of meaning is very much in the spirit of the newest solution in linguistics, viz., pragmatics. It is my view that it is only within that particular framework, his behavioural account of meaning can get explained as blurring the distinction between science and philosophy, as he himself claims. The crucial point has been glossed over by many writers on Quine, though its importance for Quine's outlook has been generally recognised.

The view sketched above may be disturbing to many interpreters of Quine, (Harman, 1967, Katz, 1974 and Gellner, 1975), (least of all to himself), all of whom, in one sense or other believe that Quine's theory of language will ultimately lead to a kind of 'semantic skepticism' (see esp. Katz, 1974), i.e., disbelief in meaning. Quite opposed to this is the strong methodological claim, according to which meaning cannot be totally excluded in the construction of a theory of speech acts (Searle 1969). Besides there is another totally different interpretation which seems to follow more faithfully Quine's original account avoiding the extreme view of skepticism (Harman, 1967), on the one hand and trying to explain the account of meaning from a methodological point of view on the other, Among the many nuances of understanding, in the last reference, one may distinguish the following as significant : Firstly, his characterization of Quine's endeavour as knowability by virtue of meaning, as I shall later mention, is the semantic ingredient of the knowledge of language, and has to be explained on that basis; secondly, his way of representing Quine's criticism against

meaning is more applicable to 'meaning-equivalence' or 'sentence-meaning equivalence' than to the postulation of meaning as just an occult entity. On Harman's view, the postulation of meaning can be related to the notion of equivalence by virtue of meaning in two different ways; that is, either meaning equivalence is used to explain meanings or postulation of meaning, *to* account for the meaning equivalence. Hence the relation between meaning equivalence and meaning may be described as one of explicandum-explicans relation. From what Harman says it is obvious that he represents the former as a more plausible interpretation than the latter. As he has shown it, this leads to what Quine would call indeterminacy of meaning; the third feature is Harman's stipulation of the indeterminacy of translation as providing the basis of an account of verbal disagreement. It is this last mentioned point that has come to the fore in recent discussions. One may argue that it is exactly here that parts of Harman's discussion have certain bearing on more recent discussion of the relation between belief and meaning (Davidson 1974).

To quote :

> "There is no real (underlying) distinction between a difference in view and a difference in meaning. But if the disagreement is systematic to a degree sufficient to override our conservative commitment to the identity scheme, then we call it a difference in meaning; otherwise we call it a difference in belief."
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> (Harman 1967 : 148)

The evidence for the second point mentioned above is also implicitly found in Quine; that is, he distinguishes between 'meaning-in-general' and 'meaning-equivalence' (synonymy). In Bar-Hillel's terminology, the former would correspond to "possession-of-meaning" or 'significance', and according to his own division of labour, the grammarian should deal with significance and the lexicographer with synonymy. Thus, Quine's programme may be aptly described as one that is interested in meaning equivalence of sentences rather than meaning in general. In brief, Quine's criticism against meaning may on the one side be regarded as forming a front against 'meaning equivalence'

synonymy) etc., while at the same time, it can also be positively construed to imply a model of language which also contains a theory meaning as an indispensable part therewith. This view has been also particularly reinforced by one of the recent interpretations of Quine (Dummett 1974). In contrast to Davidson's own understanding of Quine as advancing a radical theory of interpretation, Dummett's interpretation shows that the importance of the model of language, found in Quine's famous 'Two Dogmas' consists of an outline of a new model of meaning, which entails an indeterminacy of interpretation. On his view, the problem of interpretation is analogous to the problem of translation and the indeterminacy in the latter entails the indeterminacy in the former.

That is, contrary to the previous interpretation of Quine as consisting of a denial that there is a determinate capacity which constitutes knowledge of the meaning of an individual sentence, this new interpretation tries to account for what it is in Quine's account to understand a sentence 'means'. To understand a sentence from Quine's point of view, is not in the same sense as Russell used it to know the proposition as true; on the other hand it enables us to interpret it as involving links with other sentences of the language. On Russell's view, communication becomes possible in a "descriptively readied idealized language" which corresponds to a world of logical constructions. In this view of communication, there is utterly no recognition for a language as an articulated structure of natural language. But for Quine, the purpose of concept language and of language is efficacy in communication and prediction and our statements about the eternal word face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body.....In taking a statement as a unit we have drawn our grid two finely. The unit of empirical significance is the whole of science. Sentences higher up in the theories have no empirical significance which they can call their own; they confront the tribunal of sensory evidence only in more or less inclusive categories". Firstly, language is an articulated structure, and secondly to understand a sentence is to understand the language to which it belongs. In Dummett's words, Quine's model of language, understanding the sentence involves an 'argument' by which the sentence in question is

conclusively established; this, in turn involves an understanding of the inferential links it has with certain other sentences of the language. Thus in his what is essentially a 'holistic' approach, the understanding of a molecular sentence depends on the understanding of a considerable fragment of the language, which Quine would call the 'total theory'. For Quine, it is this total theory which serves the primary vehicle of meaning. Quine's work would thus be best regarded as a contribution to formal semantics, a theme which has become more pronounced in later years.

According to Dummett's interpretation, the model presented by Quine in his *Word and Object* which gives a recognition of the social character of language, stands in contrast with the *Two Dogmas* account, which gives no use of language as an instrument of communication and therefore it leads to a kind of solipsism. Such an interpretation, in my opinion, opens up a new direction of enquiry in Quine's philosophy of language. This is especially so when we take into account Harman's own interpretation of Quine as embodying a doctrine about the knowledge of language which involves 'knowability by virtue of meaning'. The latter expression becomes intelligible in the light of what is said above as models. That is to say, the latter interpretation while saying that he always considers the semantic ingredient of knowledge of language as essential for understanding meaning touches on the fringes of pragmatic character of communication. But the contention here is that Dummett's arguments cannot go thus far because he does not finally establish how the polarity of difference originates from the two models of language. His only evidence for the difference lies mainly in two of the 'bold theses' advanced in *'Two Dogmas'* which have been quietly dropped in *Word and Object* : A study of these two bold theses and the way they have been dropped, and the tensions inherent in them however do not reveal that there could be warrant enough for holding the models as much opposed as they are between a 'solipsistic' and a 'communication' model.

The evidence, then, again, for the recognition of the social character of language in the latter model, as issuing in a complex of dispositions, shared by all speakers of language, to assent

to and dissent from, is derived from the following objections to the first model made by Dummett : (1) the revision of the assignment of the truth to the sentences of language is always working inwards, i. e. it works from the 'periphery' to the 'interior'. As a consequence, this makes the sentences close to the centre of the structure (e. g. Theoretical) as subject to alteration in response to well-defined inferential connection, and thus making it 'excessively deterministic.....(2) Such a picture fails to take account of the creative character of much of our theorising.

On his view, this excessive deterministic character of the model somehow seems to entail solipsistic account in the *Two Dogmas*. One of the major shortcomings of such an interpretation is that it concerns only with the assignment of truth to the sentence of a language in the face of any recalcitrant experience by the speaker who has that experience; The reason why it should be rejected follows from his account of the *Word and Object* model. For Quine's *Word and Object* presents a model according to which experience makes its direct impact on peripheral sentences, is accounted for in terms of the stimulus meanings of these observation sentences—the dispositions to assent to and to dissent from them, in response to certain patterns of sensory stimulation, which are shared by the speakers of the language. Thus the links or inferential connections between sentences appear, naturally as conditional dispositions to assent to or dissent from sentences, given a prior assent to or dissent from other sentences; and these are taken to be as essential to the use of the language as an instrument of communication between its speakers. In other words, the semantic ingredient of the knowledge of language is issued in a complex of dispositions, shared by all speakers of the language, to assent to or dissent from sentences. But later on (esp. in section IV), Dummett observes that the *Word and Object* model makes an implicit appeal to the very same model of language, and nothing said in the latter has been shown to repudiate the former (362). Again he seems to concede that the linguistic dispositions of the speakers would also be conceived in terms of the "*Two Dogmas*" model of language (ibid). He also seems to concede that the model presented in *Two Dogmas* is still operating in *Word and Object* (363). Hence the

making of the former, which represents a solipsistic model as directly opposed to the communication model of *Word and Object*, seems to be much more puzzling, if not doubtful. But nothing, however, seems to be lost; nor an alternative account requires a different kind of characterisation of the model from the above. But we can conceive that such a view has been derived from Dummett's own reformulation of the theses adumbrated in Quine's indeterminacy of translation. Thus, Dummett's argument proceeds as follows : first he tells us to imagine two M-speakers who have learned L by means of divergent translation schemes and he says that their disagreement over a sentence of L was traceable to their conscious use of different mappings from L into M. Secondly he applies the same thesis to the language L alone which involves speakers within the same language (Stroud 1969; Quine, 1970); as a third step of the argument, he applies it to the same speaker and rejects it altogether. The reason for this rejection must be obvious from the line of thinking described above. Quine's account may be taken as explicating just a complex of dispositions to assent and dissent, only in the case of two speakers who have had exactly the same experience, but yet disagree about the truth value of some sentence. But the fact that two people have the same experience is a banality, therefore Quine's account may instead be construed as "recognising the inconsistency of acknowledging this obvious fact with trying to maintain that there is a completely determinate meaning attached by both speakers to the sentence". In other words, his thesis would deny that any such two speakers referred to above, must associate with any sentence of the language the same possible means of conclusively establishing it as true.

Now we can reformulate Quine's challenge as one which is aimed at those who adopt the view according to which two speakers attach the "same, identical, and fully determinate" meaning to the sentence. We can also understand his theory as not being able to explain how the logic of meaning equivalence is in operation in the particular context. Dummett argues that, if the indeterminacy of meaning, which necessarily follows from the indeterminacy of language as a social phenomenon, is based on the inability to give conclusive demonstration of the truth-

value of a sentence by both speakers of the language, then Quine's thesis becomes extremely dubious. For, on Quine's account none of us have the conclusive ground for assigning the truth value to any sentences whatsoever. But what Quine has to say on the common core of meaning which lies in the recognition of something as being, or not being, conclusive demonstration of the truth or falsity of the sentence. On Dummett's view, this has to be accounted for by a more clearly articulated view of 'disagreement' between two speakers, which lies in recognising different conditions as conclusively establishing the correctness of an assertion. Thus in his reformulation, the same thesis may be read as : that two speakers of a language, each of whom conforms to all the linguistic dispositions the possession of which characterises the mastery of the language and who have had exactly the same experiences, may yet disagree about the truth-value of a sentence of the language even when both agree that its truth-value has been conclusively established. Dummett also suggests, in parenthesis, that the Quine of 'Reasons' envisages only such a possibility of sharper disagreement. One of the underlying sources of this disagreement between two speakers can be traced to a disagreement about meaning which each gives in his own 'ideolects'. This meaning in consequence is not determined by the linguistic dispositions common to all speakers but which go beyond and even without conflicting with those common to all speakers of L (376). It is exactly here the problem of interpretation which requires us to pay attention to the individual's personal linguistic dispositions. Such a disagreement may be, in Dummett's own words, described as a fundamental kind of disagreement in the argumentation of natural languages than a mere verbal disagreement about meaning itself.

The more interesting part of Dummett's discussion is that where he traces the sources of such disagreement to the natural language itself. "Natural language is not closed in a way in which a formal language is" (378). This may perhaps seem to conflict with the above assertion according to which we cannot reduce them into a mere verbal disagreement. But now, what happens to the problem of meaning with which we have started our discussion ? The conclusion may be stated as follows : I think Quine has neither landed us in the complexities of a semantic theory, nor ends up

with the total rejection of the possibility of shades of meaning which a theory has to account for. But his outlook is rather pervaded with two other features, one of which has already been characterized as the semantic component of the knowledge of language. And the other is what determines this semantic component, viz., pragmatics. That this is indeed part of the outlook of the logical pragmatism of Quine (Gellner 1975) is evidenced by his behavioural account of communication and argumentation which occur between two speakers of the same language. It is therefore not without doubt that Dummett's distinction between the two models is entirely satisfactory. Otherwise, how can we place Quine's claim in the *Two Dogmas*, which claims to blur the distinction between science and philosophy on the one hand, and moving ahead with a pragmatic outlook on the other. I think Quine's theory of disagreement has implicitly recognized, what Bar-Hillel has recently characterised "the essentially pragmatic character of natural languages." (1970 : 207 ff.)

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NOTES

(1) The idea of (linguistic) competence to speak is of course used by Chomsky in his linguistic theory. 'The competence to understand' appears to be a new variation of this concept.

(2) "One effect of (*abandoning the dogmas*) is ... blurring of the supposed boundary between speculative metaphysics and natural science. Another effect is a shift, towards pragmaticism." (Quine, 1951). This seems to hold the key for the understanding of Quine's pragmatic theory of meaning.

(3) See esp. 289. Katz says : "semantic skepticism appears explicitly as a premise in the argument for indeterminacy of translation." (290) *ibid*: (see also 293 - 297).

References

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(13) Stroud (1969), "Convention and Translation" in *Words and Objections.* Donald Davidson and J. Hintikka (1969).