

Class Sixteen: Translation and Conceptual Relativism

Philosophy and Science Fiction - Ryan Simonelli

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1 Problems of Relativism

- **Revisiting Whorf:** When we read Whorf and then Deutscher responding to Whorf, we distinguished between two versions of the Whorfian thesis. Recall, they were the following:
 - **Strong Whorfianism (Whorf himself):** Your language constrains what you're *able* to think.
 - **Weak Whorfianism (Deutscher):** Your language shapes how, by default, you *do* think.

Deutscher argued that, whereas the latter weak was quite plausible, and he gave some good examples of it, the strong version was implausible. Now we're back to consider the strong version under the label of *conceptual relativism*.

- **Moral Relativism:** Bar-On first considers *moral* relativism as progressing in three steps:
 - **Diversity:** There are other cultures or communities that have different moral standards than us.
 - **Inability to Adjudicate:** There is no way to adjudicate the correctness of these moral standards.
 - * One side wouldn't be able to convince the other of the correctness of the standards of their community.
 - **True Relativism:** There is no fact of the matter as to which of the two sets of moral standards is correct.

Most people have no problem accepting the first step for moral relativism, and many would accept the second. The real controversial thesis seems to be the third.

- **Conceptual Relativism:** Here, the very possibility of diversity—the idea that people of different cultures have different concepts—seems to be controversial and exciting, implying that there are ways of thinking that are inaccessible to the members of the respective communities.
 - In light of a relatively trivial reading of conceptual relativism, perhaps the particularly interesting analogue with moral relativism is really with the second step, involving something like the impossibility to reconstruct the concepts of one scheme with the concepts of the other. This would yield genuine conceptual inaccessibility.

2 Problems of Translation

- **The Link to Translation:** The idea of conceptual relativism is often linked with the idea of the impossibility of translating from one language to another. There are two ways this link might be understood:
 - **The Non-Whorfian Way (Bar-On):** "Possession of a language requires possession of a set of concepts. The words and phrases of a language serve to express those concepts." So different and incommensurable conceptual schemes will be reflected in different and untranslatable languages.

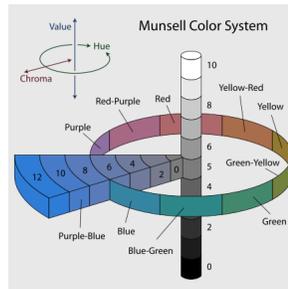
- **The Whorfian Way:** Language determines what concepts one possess, so differences in language actually account for differences in conceptual schemes rather than just reflecting them.
- **The Evidential Argument Against Untranslatability:** It seems that any purported example of untranslatability (and so conceptual relativism, linked to this untranslatability) is self-defeating, since it will involve a specification of the purportedly inexpressible meaning of the purportedly untranslatable word or phrase.
 - From this, it seems like if there *is* genuine untranslatability, it'll be forever outside of our cognitive and linguistic reach, but that doesn't mean that there *isn't* genuine untranslatability.
- **Davidson's Metaphysical Arguments Against (Total) Untranslatability:** Something's being a language at all requires *some* translatability. They must be getting *some* things right about the world in their language in order for it to make sense to call it a language at all, and the only way we can make sense of this claim that they get some things right is through the possibility of translating some of their sentences into our language.
- **Some Potential Examples of Partial Untranslatability:** Bar-On gives some purported example of partial untranslatability:
 - **Malagasi:** The work "Mikabari," in Malagasi, means to perform a *kabary*, a special type of speech given in certain types of ceremonial occasions, that we have no concept of because we don't have these types of ceremonies.
 - **Vietnamese:** In Vietnamese, there's a single word that means *someone who leaves to go somewhere and something happens at home so they have to go back home*. It seems that we have this concept, but we obviously don't have a word for it.
 - **Navajo:** In Navajo, there is one color word, *doot'lizh*, that covers green, blue, and purple.
 - * It might seem that we could translate this as "green or blue or purple," but saying this conveys uncertainty about the color that "doot'lizh" doesn't.
 - **Another Simple Example (German):** In German, there is no one word for the concept *chair*. There is "stuhl," which covers hard chairs with backs but also stools, and there's "sessel" which covers armchairs and recliners, but "chair," is, in a sense, untranslatable into German.
- **Interpreteability without Translatability:** It seems that, though these words aren't "translatable" into English in a normal sense of the term, they're still *interpretable*, in that we can specify the truth-conditions of sentences involving them with the use of English.
 - This seems to be the notion that Davidson really intends to be speaking of when talking about "translatability."
- **The Question of Conceptual Relativism, Reframed:** Is it possible for there to be a language that confers concepts that are inaccessible to us in the sense that we cannot use English to specify what has to be the case in order for sentences of that language to be true?
 - **The Evidential Argument, Again:** Once again, if it is possible, we can't possibly have an examples of it, but that itself doesn't mean that it's not possible.
 - * If the language is *partially* translatable, and so *learnable* for an English speaker, then they might be able to say (in English) that such and such concept can't be explicated in English, without being able to specify the content of such and such concept in English.
 - **The Case of Arrival:** Might there be cases like this in the scenario depicted in *Arrival*, where there's some concept expressible in Heptapod B that Louise is able to grasp in virtue of having learned Heptapod B, but for which she couldn't explicate (in the sense of even interpret rather than translate) in English?

3 Conceptual Relativism without of Interpretation Issues

- **The Case of Alien Sensory Concepts:** Bar-On closes by considering the case of *alien sensory concepts*, which are presumably *inaccessible* but without any impossibility of *interpretation*.

- **Some Examples:**

- * **Extra-Coned Aliens:** We have three types of cones in our eyes and that leads to a three-dimensional color space, which can be depicted (apologies for the black and white) as follows:



If aliens had a similar visual system but with another cone (like pigeons), there'd be a fourth dimension to the color space—there'd be colors that we couldn't conceive of for which these aliens would have words and concepts.

- * **Echolocating Aliens:** Consider a case in which aliens have a completely different mode of sensory awareness such as echolocation. They would plausibly have a class sensory concepts pertaining to this sensory modality that are completely inaccessible to us.
 - This sort of case is often brought up in discussions of the “hard problem of consciousness.” Thomas Nagel has a famous paper on the topic called “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”
- **Relativism without Failure of Interpretability?** Bar-On suggests, in such a case might have conceptual relativism even when there's not any problem with interpreting the meanings in the sense of assigning truth conditions to sentences.
- **Not a Version of Whorfianism:** Insofar as the aliens have words for their sensory concepts, their language will express concepts that are inaccessible to us, but it won't be *because* of their language that they have these concepts.
- **The Case of the Inventive Alien Field Linguist:** Consider an alien field linguist who developed a pair of goggles (say), which showed as numbers the light frequencies to which the four-coned aliens are sensitive and was thereby able to use their sensory words competently in response to things. Would we credit her as acquiring the concepts? Might we even go as far as to credit her as having the relevant types of experiences?