

Publicness and Indeterminacy

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This paper is concerned with one rather specific question:

Is indeterminacy of translation a consequence of the publicness of meaning?

As I understand professor Quine, he thinks that the answer to this question is yes.¹ I shall provide some support for this interpretation. Personally, I believe that the answer is no, but I shall not try to establish that answer. I don't know how to do that, or even if it is possible to do it.

Instead, I shall examine what I take to be Quine's reasoning from the publicness thesis to the indeterminacy thesis. I shall reconstruct the reasoning into an explicit argument, and try to show that this argument cannot be successful. It is not easy to say in advance in what way that argument cannot be successful, since that depends on the structure of the argument, but I shall make it explicit below (section 3).

1. What is publicness of meaning?

The thought that linguistic meaning is public has been a main theme for a long time in the 20th century (analytic) philosophy of language. It features in different versions in Wittgenstein, Quine, Donald Davidson, Michael Dummett and others. The common element in these versions is primarily the rejection of a certain picture of linguistic meaning, according to which mental factors, private in the sense of being epistemically inaccessible to others than the speaker himself, determine what his

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words mean. The rejection of this picture sometimes takes the form of tenets which explicitly concern knowledge or knowability of linguistic meaning, i.e. the possibility of knowing what meaning another speaker attaches to her words (as in Davidson's writings). Sometimes it takes the form of a more metaphysical statement about the nature of language, or meaning, or speakers, e.g. that a speaker's understanding of an expression can be made manifest in practical capacities (as in Dummett's writings).

The more metaphysical versions are, however, motivated by epistemological considerations. You can, for instance, reason like this: "People really communicate linguistically. But it wouldn't be real communication unless they know what the others mean by their words. But for such knowledge to be possible, linguistic meaning must be of such and such a nature." The "such-and-such" a nature can be e.g. reducibility to behavior. You might say that linguistic meaning is public in the sense that what a speaker means reduces to his linguistic behavior (which is in itself something publicly observable). In that case you have chosen a metaphysical notion of publicness, even if motivated epistemologically.² I prefer to tie the notion of publicness directly to the underlying epistemological idea. One reason for this is that I am interested in the various metaphysical conclusions, about the nature of language, that can be drawn, and that have been drawn, from the epistemological premisses.

I want to distinguish between two different theses, which I shall call Basic Publicness and Standard Publicness, according to whether the possibility, or the actuality, respectively, of knowledge of other speakers' language is what matters. The thesis of Basic Publicness is then the following:

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(BP) What a speaker means by his words can be known by others

So the thesis of basic publicness denies that what meaning a speaker attaches to his words can be something essentially private, epistemically inaccessible to other speakers.

The thesis of Standard Publicness is this:

(SP) What a speaker means by his words is normally known by others

The thesis of Standard Publicness states that, at least in ordinary communicative situations, speakers understand each other correctly, and can be credited with the knowledge of understanding correctly. I also include in that thesis that speakers normally know, of the members of their own speech community, what they normally mean by their words. You know e.g. that your barber normally means car by 'car', etc.

I shall not further dwell on the interpretation of these two tenets, or their relation to each other. Much can be said. For Quine I think both (BP) and (SP) are important, but the second, that of Standard Publicness, is the more important one, as we shall see.

2. Quine's way from publicness to indeterminacy

The thesis of indeterminacy of translation is a metaphysical thesis, a thesis concerning the nature of language. So, an argument from publicness to indeterminacy is an argument from an epistemological premiss to a metaphysical conclusion. As I see it, Quine has such an argument, or at least, if not an explicit argument, a line of reasoning of that kind. The following passages are from Word and Object and Pursuit of Truth, respectively, with more than thirty years in between:

Language is a social art. In acquiring it we have to depend entirely on intersubjectively available cues as to what to say and when. Hence there is no

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justification for collating linguistic meanings, unless in terms of men's dispositions to respond overtly to socially observable stimulations. An effect of recognizing this limitation is that the enterprise of translation is found to be involved in a certain systematic indeterminacy;³

Critics have said that the thesis [of indeterminacy of translation] is a consequence of my behaviorism. Some have said that it is a reductio ad absurdum of my behaviorism. I disagree with this second point, but I agree with the first. In psychology one may or may not be a behaviorist, but in linguistics one has no choice. Each of us learns his language by observing other people's verbal behavior and having his own faltering verbal behavior observed and reinforced or corrected by others. We depend strictly on observable behavior in observable situations. [...] There is nothing in linguistic meaning beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behavior in observable circumstances.⁴

If we break down the statement about learning (through observation of behavior) into components, we get the following structured representation of Quine's reasoning:

1. Speakers learn language from other speakers (PUBLICNESS)
2. Their only source of information is observation (EMPIRICISM)
3. What can be known by ordinary, everyday observation about what others mean, can be known by observation of their behavior in observable circumstances (BEHAVIOR RELEVANCE).

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4. Hence, there is nothing in meaning beyond what is determined by observable behavior in observable circumstances (LINGUISTIC BEHAVIORISM, from 1, 2 and 3)

5. Hence, correctness of translations is indeterminate (INDETERMINACY, from 4)

I have labelled each step in this argument according to which thesis I think it expresses or is a fairly immediate consequence of. According to these labels, what I ascribe to Quine is an argument from the two premisses of publicness and empiricism to the intermediate conclusion of linguistic behaviorism, and further from that intermediate conclusion to the final conclusion of indeterminacy. I shall now comment on the steps of this argument in order to support my exegetical claims.

Publicness

Quine points to the fact that we learn our language from others, and I have characterized that view as the tenet of Publicness. More precisely, I think that it, more or less, expresses the view of Standard Publicness, in the form that speakers, in learning a language, do learn what other speakers mean by their words. Clearly, this is not an obviously correct interpretation of Quine. I think there are two crucial issues. The first is whether language learning is to be characterized at all as leading to knowledge about other speakers' semantics. The second is that Publicness is stated in terms of meaning, and it almost goes without saying that using the term 'meaning', in attributing a view to Quine, can only be done with utmost care. Let's start with the first issue.

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Is it really Quine's view that as we acquire a language, we learn what other speakers, our teachers, mean by their words, or what semantic properties their words and sentences have. The relevant alternative view of language learning is that of a process of acquiring a set of speech dispositions which in fact largely overlap with the speech dispositions of others, one's teachers, without necessarily involving any knowledge of what they mean, or even of the overlap itself. If this were Quine's view, then ascribing Publicness to him would be wrong. I don't think it is.

Although Quine often writes as if language learning does not consist in anything more than development of speech dispositions, there are passages which do include cognitive components, i.e. components of knowledge about other speaker's speech habits:

In the case of occasion sentences [language learning] amounts to learning what occasions warrant assent to the sentences, or dissent.⁵

It is hard not to understand this passage as concerning knowledge of some kind of community standards of assent and dissent. And in another passage Quine writes

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 the other speaker.⁶

In this case knowledge of the other speaker, knowledge of a feature of a linguistic disposition, is explicitly included in a description of what language learning involves.

But I think something else to be more important than such scattered pieces of textual evidence: Quine's reasoning from language learning to linguistic behaviorism

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would not make good sense if language learning did not include learning what others mean. Clearly, if knowing a language only consists in having certain speech dispositions, then, trivially, linguistic behaviorism is true. There can be no interesting argument from language learning to linguistic behaviorism. Therefore, since Quine explicitly reasons from language learning to linguistic behaviorism, I don't think Quine can be credited with such a view of language learning.

Furthermore, if knowing a language consists in having certain speech dispositions, and something else, like associating meanings with one's words, then linguistic behaviorism doesn't trivially follow, but then it cannot be argued either. On that assumption, it is perfectly alright to say that the meanings of your words are determined by your private mental experiences and intentions, inaccessible to me, and that my language learning consists in this: on the basis of observing your speech behavior I acquire my own speech dispositions, and begin to associate meanings with my words, in a way which is cognitively inaccessible to you. And if this is true, then linguistic behaviorism is clearly false. Again, it would not be reasonable to ascribe this view of language learning to Quine.

The problem is that if language learning does not amount to anything more than developing one's own language, then language learning does not offer any restriction on what linguistic meaning can be like. It can be as mentalistic as anything. By contrast, if learning a language does involve learning what others mean, then any restriction on what can be known about others will be a restriction on what meaning can be. If your mental events are epistemically inaccessible to me, and I can know what your words mean, then what your words mean cannot depend on your mental events.

So, if there are restrictions on what can be known about others, it is plausible to reason from those restrictions, and from the assumption that we learn what others

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mean, to conclusions about linguistic meaning. And Quine does place restrictions on what can be known about others: viz. restrictions coming from empiricism itself (see below). In this light, by far the most natural interpretation of Quine is that it is part of his views that language learning does involve learning what others mean by their words.

The second issue is whether you can ascribe to Quine the view that the knowledge a speaker has, in knowing a language, is knowledge of what other speakers mean, or what their words mean. As I understand it, Quine alternates between two notions of meaning, one objective and one uncritical, or intuitive. The intuitive notion is more or less the traditional notion, wedded to the traditional notion of synonymy. In fact, reference to some intuitive notion is used for the very formulation of the indeterminacy thesis, for it is with respect to intuitive standards of sameness and difference of meaning that the incompatibility of different translation manuals are judged:

In countless places [the translation manuals] will diverge in giving, as their respective translations of a sentence of the one language, sentences of the other language which stand to each other in no plausible sort of equivalence however loose.⁷

Here, in Word and Object there is appeal to an intuitive notion of equivalence of sentences, of the same language, and in Pursuit of Truth we have a similar appeal to coherence and to interchangeability:

The thesis of 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 incoherent sequences. Or, to put it another way, the English sentences prescribed as

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translation of a given Jungle sentence by two rival manuals might not be interchangeable in English contexts.⁸

There is a question whether the indeterminacy thesis can be stated at all without appeal to some uncritical notion. I think it cannot.⁹

By contrast, when Quine states that “there is nothing in linguistic meaning beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behavior in observable circumstances“ he is, as I understand him, speaking of meaning in an objective sense, viz. meaning insofar as can be gleaned from overt behavior in observable circumstances. There would not be much point to the statement if Quine’s view was simply that there is nothing in linguistic meaning at all.¹⁰ Rather, the indeterminacy thesis can be seen as amounting to the claim that there is a gap between objective meaning and intuitive meaning, between objective synonymy and intuitive synonymy, between objective and intuitive equivalence: there is no objective basis for many of our intuitive semantic discriminations.

So, use of the term ‘meaning’ in ascribing the publicness view to Quine is perfectly alright. Clearly, it is the objective sense of ‘meaning’ which is intended in the statement of the Publicness.

Empiricism

Empiricism is the view that all knowledge derives from sense experience. As a consequence of empiricism, knowledge about other speakers, including knowledge of what they mean, must be based on observation. We do not have any direct epistemic

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access to their minds, but must base all knowledge about their minds, about what they feel, mean, want, believe and intend, on observation.

Behavior relevance

Strictly speaking, it isn't ruled out by empiricism that I can gain knowledge about what a speaker means by way of an observation which isn't an observation of that speaker's behavior, nor, in any ordinary sense, an observation of any circumstances of behavior, but an observation of something else, from which I infer something about what she means. So publicness and empiricism are not enough for concluding the truth of linguistic behaviorism. We could bridge the gap by declaring that anything observable could taken as circumstances of behavior, but that would take much substance away from the doctrine.

Rather, I think it is best to include as a separate premiss that behavior, observable behavior in observable circumstances, is just what is relevant for observation based knowledge about what others mean. So we add the premiss that everything that we can know, on the basis of ordinary (i.e. everyday) observation, about what others mean, can be known on the basis of observation of their behavior. This does not exclude the existence of indirect evidence, which I can get by observing other things, but it assures us that no indirect evidence is necessary.

The premiss of Behavior Relevance does not exclude the possibility of arriving at knowledge of meaning on the basis of scientific observation. Neither does it exclude the possibility that this knowledge could not be had by ordinary observation alone. I might infer something about meaning on the basis of meter readings from a machine that monitors the speaker's neurochemistry. However, the premiss of Publicness tells us that ordinary speakers do have the knowledge there is to have. Since ordinary speakers rely only on ordinary observation, scientific observation isn't necessary either.

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Linguistic behaviorism

Thesis 4 is simply a statement of the doctrine of linguistic behaviorism. Linguistic behaviorism is not, for instance, a stimulus-response theory about language learning, or anything similar. This, I think, is pretty clear from the quoted passage from Pursuit of Truth,¹¹ but is also made quite explicit elsewhere.¹²

Indeterminacy of translation

The indeterminacy thesis is presented in the following ways in Word and Object and Pursuit of Truth:, respectively.

The thesis is this: manuals for translating one language into another can be set up in divergent ways, all compatible with the totality of speech dispositions, yet incompatible with one another. In countless places they will diverge in giving, as their respective translations of a sentence of the one language, sentences of the other language which stand to each other in no plausible sort of equivalence however loose. [...] It is in this last form, as a principle of indeterminacy of translation, that I will try to make the point plausible in the course of this chapter.¹³

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 behavior of all concerned. The thesis of 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 incoherent sequences. Or, to put it another way, the English sentences prescribed as translation of a given Jungle sentence by two rival manuals might not be interchangeable in English contexts.¹⁴

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A reasonable reconstruction is the following:

- a) A manual of translation between two natural languages is correct, or acceptable, if it agrees with the speech dispositions of all speakers concerned.
- b) Two manuals of translation between the same two languages are mutually compatible if they give, for each sentence s in the one language, translations s' and s'' which are intuitively equivalent: it must then be possible to interchange s' and s'' without loss of coherence of the discourse. Then the two manuals can be used in alternation.¹⁵
- c) There are, or can be construed, two manuals between the same two languages which are both correct, and yet not mutually compatible.

In order to give the indeterminacy thesis full substance the criteria of correctness of manuals must be fleshed out. I come back to this issue in section 5.

This concludes my presentation of the indeterminacy argument itself.¹⁶

3. The strategy of attack on Quine's argument

As the argument is laid out, it is an argument from three premisses, Publicness, Empiricism, and Behavior Relevance, to the conclusion, Indeterminacy, via an intermediate position, Linguistic Behaviorism. I am going to assume the truth of Empiricism as well as of Behavior Relevance. Given those assumptions, what remains is an argument from the premiss of Publicness. So Quine's argument, as I see it, has two steps:

Publicness \Rightarrow Linguistic Behaviorism

Linguistic Behaviorism \Rightarrow Indeterminacy

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This is the argument I shall examine. I am going to treat the first part as a very strong argument, something like a transcendental argument, i.e. an argument of this form: Publicness is true. Linguistic Behaviorism is a condition for the possibility of Publicness. Hence Linguistic Behaviorism is true. Similarly, I shall treat the second part as amounting to a claim that Linguistic Behaviorism necessitates, in some loose sense, Indeterminacy. Quine has never presented his considerations in this way, and he does view the indeterminacy thesis as an unproven conjecture (by contrast, he seems to view linguistic behaviorism as established). These choices are, of course, to my advantage, since it is easier to attack a stronger claim, but my attack on the argument still has a general interest, since if I am right, Quine's considerations cannot in principle be strengthened into a conclusive argument.

The problem with (what I shall call) Quine's argument is that linguistic behaviorism comes in several varieties, some stronger and some weaker. The formulation above of the thesis covers them all. What I shall do is the following. I shall first try to show that although Publicness, Empiricism and Behavior Relevance together do support Linguistic Behaviorism, they only support a weak form of linguistic behaviorism. Then I shall try to show that although linguistic behaviorism does support the indeterminacy thesis (or rather, a version of it), only a strong form of linguistic behaviorism supports that thesis. I shall further try to show that the strong form is indeed stronger than the weak form, in the obvious sense that truth of the weak form is compatible with the falsity of the strong form of linguistic behaviorism. Schematically we have:

Publicness \Rightarrow Weak Linguistic Behaviorism

Strong Linguistic Behaviorism \Rightarrow Indeterminacy

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Not: Publicness \Rightarrow Strong Linguistic Behaviorism

Not: Weak Linguistic Behaviorism \Rightarrow Indeterminacy

In fact, my conclusion can be stated in a more perspicuous and general form:

For any version V of Linguistic Behaviorism it holds that

If (Publicness \wedge V), then (not: V \wedge Indeterminacy)

From this it does not follow that Publicness, Empiricism and Behavior Relevance are compatible with the falsity of the indeterminacy thesis, but it does follow that no conclusive argument for indeterminacy can be given from these premisses via linguistic behaviorism.

4. From Publicness to Linguistic Behaviorism

Let us rewrite the first part of the argument somewhat, by fusing the Publicness, Empiricism and Behavior Relevance into one single premiss:

1. What a speaker means by his words is known, or can be known, by others on the basis of observation of his behavior in observable circumstances.¹⁷
2. Hence, what a speaker means by his words is determined by his observable behavior in observable circumstances.

As far as I can see, this is a valid argument. It is an argument of the following kind:

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X knows that p . From p X concludes that q . In virtue of this X knows that q . Hence q is a consequence of p

If q were not a consequence of p , X's belief in q on the basis of p would not be knowledge.

So far so good. There is an acceptable argument from Publicness (and the other premisses) to Linguistic Behaviorism. But there are stronger forms of Linguistic Behaviorism which do not follow from the premisses. In order to see that we shall note a few general things that do not follow from premiss 1.

First, it does not follow that if two speakers, John and Jill, have identical speech dispositions, or speech dispositions which are as alike it is possible for two persons to have, then their words mean the same. It may well be that Ralph by observation arrives at sufficient knowledge of the speech dispositions of John and of the speech dispositions of Jill, and despite the fact that these speech dispositions are identical, Ralph interprets John and Jill differently. He may translate one and the same sentence differently when in the mouth of John from when in the mouth of Jill, regarding the translation scheme for John as giving incorrect results if applied to Jill. Moreover, and more importantly, it does not follow from 1 that in so doing he would be wrong, or that he would not have knowledge both of what John means and of what Jill means. It is compatible with 1 that he interprets them differently and yet knows what both means.

How can this be? It can be that Ralph is simply disposed to interpret them differently. It can be that his disposition for interpreting John is a result of causal influence on Ralph by various background factors. Similarly for his disposition for interpreting Jill. This need not detract us from regarding Ralph as knowing what John and Jill mean. For Ralph may be extremely reliable as an interpreter. It may be that

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whenever, or virtually whenever, Ralph has firm beliefs about what other speakers mean, he is right. His beliefs may be the result of extremely reliable cognitive processes, which involve making conclusions about meaning on the basis of observation of speech behavior.

Thus, if we allow a reliability conception of knowledge of meaning, we have no reason to deny that Ralph has the knowledge in question. Should we allow it? Clearly it cannot be rejected on the basis of a claim that there is a stronger connection between meaning and behavior, since this connection is what was supposed to be established. Rather, whether the reliability conception is acceptable turns on general considerations about knowledge of meaning.¹⁸ I return to the question of knowledge in section 6. In this section I shall go on with the assumption that reliability is allowed.

Thus, although the inference from 1 to 2 is still valid, 2 must not be interpreted as implying that two speakers mean the same with their words, if their speech dispositions are identical. By analogous reasoning we can conclude also that one speaker need not mean the same at an earlier time as he does at a later time, even if his speech dispositions have remained the same.

This is still compatible with Linguistic Behaviorism, as stated in 2. If meaning is determined by the dispositions to speech behavior in observable circumstances, then, we can say, there is a function from speech dispositions to meanings. This is fully compatible with the possibility that which function it is depends on contextual factors: had the background been different in relevant respects, the function from speech dispositions to meanings would have a different function. With the

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background factors held constant, on the other hand, there can be no difference in meaning without a corresponding difference in speech dispositions.

So, although it follows from 1 that meaning is determined by observable behavior in observable circumstances, it does not follow that meaning is determined only by observable behavior in observable circumstances. For if that were true, then there would have to be an invariant relation between speech dispositions and meaning, invariant between speakers and across time.

I agree that if two speakers mean different things with the same sentence, then there must be some physical difference in the world underlying this difference in meaning (some form of supervenience), and the difference in Ralph's dispositions to interpret the speakers must be connected with that difference in order for Ralph to be reliable. But that underlying physical difference need not be observable. It can still be causally connected with differences in Ralph's dispositions. Even if it is observable, Ralph need not have observed it. And even if Ralph has observed it, it need not be behavior, or circumstances of behavior, in any reasonable sense of "circumstance". Moreover, Ralph may have no reason to conclude anything about interpretation from these observations, despite the fact that they causally affect his general dispositions for interpreting. So, in more than one way, Ralph's disposition for interpreting may be affected by what is not observable behavior in observable circumstances.¹⁹

Now, for the sake of making my attack on Quine's argument perspicuous, I shall define a notion of what I shall call Meaning Determining Behavioral properties, or MDB properties:

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The property F is a meaning determining behavioristic property, or MDB property, iff it holds that

- i) whether an expression a, as used by a speaker X at a time t, has F, depends on, and only on, X's dispositions, at t, to observable speech behavior in observable circumstances, and
- ii) if an expression a, as used by a speaker X at a time t, has F, and an expression b, as used by a speaker Y at time t', has F, then expressions a and b have the same (objective) meaning

In this definition I intend "observable speech behavior in observable circumstances" to be restricted as before.

Now if all expressions used by speaker X, and all expressions used by speaker Y, have MDB properties, and X and Y use the same expressions, and every expression has the same MDB property in the mouth of X as it has in the mouth of Y, then each of these expressions has the same (objective) meaning in the mouth of X as it has in the mouth of Y. And if all natural language expressions, by all speakers, have MDB properties, then, indeed, there is an invariant general relation between speech dispositions and meaning, invariant between speakers and across time.

Hence, if it does not follow from the premisses of Publicness, Empiricism and Behavior Relevance that there is an invariant general relation between speech dispositions and meaning, then neither does it follow from those premisses that all natural language expressions have MDB properties. This will be of central importance.

Let us say that

Any version of Linguistic Behaviorism counts as weak iff it is implied jointly by Publicness, Empiricism and Behavior Relevance

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From this definition it follows that Weak Linguistic Behaviorism does not imply that all natural language expressions have MDB properties. For if it did, that would, by transitivity, be implied by the three joint premisses also, contrary to what has been argued.

5. From Linguistic Behaviorism to Indeterminacy

For a direct and conclusive proof of the thesis of indeterminacy of translation three things are needed: first, a set of conditions of correctness of translation manuals; secondly, a proof that these conditions are adequate and that the set is complete (contains all adequate conditions); and third, a proof that mutually incompatible manuals satisfy the conditions.

How plausible you find the indeterminacy thesis depends on how plausible you find both the claims about adequacy and completeness of the conditions, and the claim about the correctness of incompatible manuals, given these conditions.

At least the wording, and perhaps the substance, of the criteria of translational correctness have shifted in Quine's writings over the years. In Pursuit of Truth Quine says:

A pioneer manual of translation has its utility as an aid to negotiation with the native community. Success in communication is judged by smoothness of conversation, by frequent predictability of verbal and non-verbal reactions, and by coherence and plausibility of native testimony. It is a matter of better or worse manuals rather than flatly right or wrong ones.²⁰

Our radical translator would put his developing manual of translation continually to use, and go on revising it in the light of his successes and failures

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of communication. The successes consist—to repeat—in successful negotiation and smooth conversation.²¹

I shall not here attempt a general evaluation of this proposal. I only wish to note that, if the proposed criteria of smoothness of conversation, frequent predictability of verbal and non-verbal reactions, and coherence and plausibility of native testimony, is taken literally, it does not give us very much of a reason for believing in the second part of the claim: that mutually incompatible manuals satisfy the criteria. All sorts of factors, any seemingly insignificant detail, may play a role in making conversation more or less smooth, etc., and in this way creating a preference between manuals in other respects equivalent.

The criterion does not, of course, give any particular reason for disbelieving in indeterminacy either, but this does not matter much, since any substantial, non-arbitrary criterion opens the possibility that it will be equally well satisfied by several, intuitively incompatible, manuals. That does not even have anything to do with behaviorism. Clearly Quine intended a stronger conclusion. If the general argument from Publicness to Indeterminacy proceeds by way of the Pursuit of Truth criteria of translational correctness, then, as far as I can see, the argument fails in the second step, from Linguistic Behaviorism to Indeterminacy.

Instead I shall turn to Quine's treatment of the subject in Word and Object. These are based on the notion of stimulus meaning. Quine defined the stimulus meaning of a sentence s, as used by a speaker X, to be a pair of the positive and the negative stimulus meaning, respectively, where the positive stimulus meaning is the set of (types of) stimulations (triggering of sensory receptors) which makes X disposed to

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assent to s, and the negative stimulus meaning is the corresponding set related to the disposition to dissent.²²

In terms of stimulus meaning Quine then defined the concepts of observation sentence, stimulus synonymy, stimulus analyticity (the property of being assented to under any stimulation) and stimulus contradictoriness (correspondingly).²³ Quine also explained how logical connectives in the alien language can be identified in terms of stimulus meaning. For instance, negation is characterized by the fact that the positive stimulus meaning of a negative sentence is the same as the negative stimulus meaning of the negated one, and vice versa.²⁴

On top of this Quine introduced the notion of an analytic hypothesis. An analytic hypothesis about an alien language is a hypothesis about grammar, about what words its sentences contain, and how these are to be paired with words in the home language.²⁵ From the analytic hypotheses you can then derive translations of whole sentences.

In these terms Quine then could state criteria of acceptability, or correctness, of translation manuals. It shall have a not too complicated analytical hypothesis, and further be such that:

1. Observation sentences are translated into observation sentences with the same stimulus meaning.

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2. Truth function particles are translated according to their contributions to stimulus meanings, specified by Quine earlier in the chapter.
3. Stimulus-analytic sentences are translated into stimulus-analytic sentences, as far as possible, and similarly for stimulus-contradictory sentences.
4. Pairs of intrasubjective stimulus-synonymous sentences are translated into pairs of intrasubjective stimulus-synonymous sentences.

Quine does not present this as a complete set of conditions for translational correctness, and the conditions are seen as ideal rather than strict. But let us suppose that these conditions in fact are strict, and that the list is complete. Under this assumption, we can almost prove the indeterminacy thesis, and at least make it eminently plausible. What we have to provide is a method which, given an acceptable translation manual M , allows us to construct another manual M' , such that M' is both acceptable and incompatible with M . Various tricks can be employed to this effect.

For instance this one. There is clearly an upper limit to the length of sentences which the natives have assent/dissent dispositions to at all. Suppose that this limit is a length of 3000 words. And suppose we have a translation function \underline{G} which satisfies the conditions. Then we define an alternative translation function \underline{H} such that

$\underline{H}(s) = \underline{G}(s)$ for sentences up to 3000 words

$\underline{H}(s) = \text{"It is not the case that"} \wedge \underline{G}(s)$ for sentences of more than 3000 words

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Clearly the following holds: H is correct, since it agrees with G on all sentences to which there are any speech dispositions, and H is incompatible with G, since for infinitely many sentences their translations contradict each other. Moreover H is recursively definable if G is (just add the two clauses which defines H to the recursive definition of G).

So, with the suggested set of conditions, indeterminacy can more or less be proved. And we have good reasons to believe that if we have something like the suggested set of conditions, then some similar trick will produce the required correct and incompatible alternative manual. Quine himself has devised a method for alternative translation of terms²⁶ (but Quine does not himself regard these alternative manuals as incompatible), and Gerald Massey has devised a method for alternative translation of whole sentences together with reassignments of illocutionary force to the natives' utterances (which unfortunately makes them incorrect in the sense of the Word and Object conditions, since Masseys alternatives, because of the reassignments, do not preserve stimulus meaning).²⁷

There is no guarantee that every set of behavioristic conditions of correctness will allow several correct and mutually incompatible manuals. But on the other hand it is not even possible to give a direct and conclusive argument for indeterminacy without having a set of conditions, which is arguably both adequate and complete. For instance, we cannot just happen to "find" an example of indeterminacy: if we have two alternative manuals we still need a set of conditions accepted as adequate and

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complete for concluding that both are correct, since otherwise we will just be in the situation of not having made up our minds about which to prefer.²⁸

So we have seen that at least some sets of behavioristic conditions of correctness of translation allows us to more or less prove the indeterminacy thesis, and that we need an adequate and complete set for such a proof. Let us use this for our definition of Strong Linguistic Behaviorism:

Any version of Linguistic Behaviorism counts as strong iff it determines a complete set of specific behavioristic conditions of translational correctness.

But now we can easily give a definition of a set of MDB properties in terms of a set of correctness criteria. We do this by way of letting the set of correctness conditions, which do determine sameness of objective meaning, also determine sameness of MDB properties. As an example we can use the set of Word and Object conditions:

Two expressions have the same MDB Property if, and only if, they are paired by a translation relation which satisfies conditions 1. through 4.

This is an acceptable definition, since the conditions of translational correctness themselves are stated in behavioristic terms. Two expressions are correctly intertranslatable iff they have the same objective meaning, and they have the same objective meaning iff they have the same MDB property. Hence, if we accept those conditions, we accept the existence of MDB Properties, or, more precisely, that all natural language expressions have such properties. Similarly, any such set of

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conditions in behavioristic terms provides a corresponding definition of sameness of MDB properties.

Now for the conclusion: As argued here, any version of Linguistic Behaviorism which allows a demonstration of the indeterminacy thesis, i.e. any version of Strong Linguistic Behaviorism, will imply that natural language expressions have MDB properties. But, as I argued in the previous section, it does not follow from the joint premisses of Publicness, Empiricism and Behavioral Relevance, that natural language expressions have MDB properties. Therefore, no version of Linguistic Behaviorism which is implied by these premisses, i.e. no version of Weak Linguistic Behaviorism, does imply the truth of the indeterminacy thesis. For if it did, it would imply that natural language expressions have MDB properties, contrary to what was argued in the previous section.

If this is correct, then no successful argument from Publicness to Indeterminacy, via Linguistic Behaviorism, can be given.

6. The nature of knowledge of meaning

It is time to return to the question of knowing what others mean. Above I have appealed to the reliability conception of knowledge, with this result: given two incompatible translation schemes, which satisfy some set of behavioristic correctness conditions equally well, an interpreter, the child, or the linguist, can simply know which is the right one. But is this appeal to the reliability conception licit?

If an interpreter settles for one out of two manuals, there must be some relevant difference between them. Quine has discussed the question of relevant and irrelevant differences before. Concerning the reasons for not perceiving the indeterminacy Quine writes in Word and Object:

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[A fifth cause is] that linguists adhere to implicit supplementary canons that help to limit their choice of analytical hypotheses. For example, if a question were to arise over equating a short native locution to 'rabbit' and a long one to 'rabbit part' or vice versa, they would favor the former course, arguing that the more conspicuously segregated wholes are likelier to bear the simpler terms. Such an implicit canon is all very well, unless mistaken for a substantive law of speech behavior.²⁹

So some principles of selection are merely practical supplementary canons of no theoretical importance. But what the dividing principle is, is not obvious, and neither is it obvious why such a thing as sentence length should belong to the supplementary side. On Quine's view, stimulus meaning is a behavioristically relevant property, and sentence length is not. But if that division is to have any force in the present context, it must be a consequence of Publicness and the other two premisses, and it is not at all clear why that should be so.

If there is a reason, then, it has to do with the concept of knowledge. You may object that where knowledge is concerned there must be evidence for what is known. A mere disposition for preferring one manual could not count as a basis for knowing that it is right. The interpreter must base his choice on evidence, and this is why we distinguish between stimulus meaning and sentence length.

I do not think that this answer is good enough. It is not a priori clear what to count and what not to count as evidence for the correctness of a manual. Our best shot for deciding the question is to see what interpreters, children and linguists, actually rely upon in arriving at their interpretations. At least, this strategy is clearly not in conflict with canons of naturalized epistemology. And if we follow that strategy, sentence length cannot be dismissed off hand.

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But the objection can be pushed one step further. You can argue that where there is evidence, there must also be justification. The interpreter must be able to justify his choice of manual. I do not mean that the requirement of justifiability would force us to distinguish between stimulus meaning and sentence length. I don't think it would. But I think that this requirement does imply the existence of an invariant connection between speech dispositions and meaning, or between speech dispositions and further observable features, on the one hand, and meaning, on the other. For without stable general principles to appeal to, there would not be any justification. You cannot just appeal to one observable feature in the one case, and another observable feature in the other case. Unless backed up by further justification, such a procedure is simply ad hoc.

Again, however, I think that this objection fails. There is no a priori reason why knowledge in general, or knowledge about meaning, should be fully justifiable. And again I cannot see that the requirement of justifiability is in any way a consequence of the canons of naturalized epistemology.³⁰

So I conclude that my appeal to the reliability conception of knowledge in section 4 is alright. And then, Quine's argument from Publicness, Empiricism and Behavioral Relevance, via Linguistic Behaviorism, to Indeterminacy, interpreted as a strong, transcendental like argument, fails.

But, again, this is not a refutation of the indeterminacy thesis. It is not even a refutation of the claim that indeterminacy is a consequence of publicness, since the possibility remains that this be established by some quite different argument. But that remains to be produced.

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Notes

1. I do not here use the term “consequence“ as standing for logical, or semantic consequence. Else it would be wrong to ascribe the view to Quine. There was some terminological misunderstanding on this point between Professor Quine and myself after my talk in Karlovy Vary. What I mean to ascribe to Quine is the view that publicness is a reason for believing in the indeterminacy thesis, or, similarly, the belief that the indeterminacy thesis is true because of publicness.
2. In Fredrik Stjernberg’s The Public Nature of Meaning. Stockholm Studies in Philosophy 10, Almqvist & Wiksell International, Stockholm 1991, Stjernberg oscillates between epistemological and metaphysical alternatives, and finally (p 18) proposes

Meaning is accessible, given suitable capacities, constraints, and (empirical) evidence

This is to say that the meaning of a linguistic expression is knowable by others than the user of the expression, given that they fulfil certain extra conditions. I do not agree with Stjernberg about the need for stating those extra conditions, but that is a topic for another occasion.

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3. Quine, W.V.O., Word and Object, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1960, p ix, opening passage of the preface.
4. Quine, W.V.O, Pursuit of Truth, 2nd edition, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1992, pp. 37-38.
5. Quine, The Roots of Reference, Open Court Publishing, La Salle, Ill., 1973, p 63.
6. 'Ontological relativity' p 28.
7. Word and Object, p 27.
8. Pursuit of Truth, p 48.
9. In his reply to Harman in Davidson and Hintikka (eds), Words and Objections, Reidel, Dordrecht 1969, pp 295-97, Quine regrets the appeal to the uncritical notion of equivalence in Word and Object. But clearly, the notions of coherence and of interchangeability in English contexts are equally uncritical.

As long as it is essential to the indeterminacy thesis that it is stated in terms of translation from an alien language to English (The Home Language), it is also essential that the thesis rely on uncritical semantic notions. If the thesis can equally well be stated in terms of translation between two alien languages, without assuming that either is translated into English, then use of uncritical notions can be avoided. The reason is that we cannot, from the present point of view, apply any uncritical semantic notions to another language save as relative to a manual of translation into English.

I do not myself regard it as a weakness of the thesis that it employs an uncritical notion, since it is in virtue of this employment that the thesis has a direct bearing on that uncritical notion. If two non-equivalent English sentences can be correctly translated to the same alien sentence, and hence have the same objective meaning, we can conclude that the uncritical distinction in meaning,

between the two English sentences, does not have any objective basis. In fact, I see this as the gist of the indeterminacy thesis.

By contrast, it is hard to see how we can reach a similar conclusion about meaning, in the uncritical sense, without having to rely on further assumptions, if the thesis itself is stated without uncritical notions. One suggestion for stating it thus is to use the idea of alternating between manuals. We can exploit this idea without appealing to coherence, by deeming the alternation itself as an unacceptable manual. More precisely: Take the two correct manuals M and M' . Construct a third manual M^* by simply taking half of the translations from M and half from M' . So for every second sentence s , $M^*(s) = M(s)$, and for the rest it holds that $M^*(s) = M'(s)$. And now it may turn out that M^* is not a correct manual. (In a similar vein Andrzej Zabłudowski, in 'On Quine's indeterminacy thesis', The Philosophical Review, Vol. XCVIII, 1989, pp 35-63) suggests that we take the union of two manuals (p 46)).

The problem with this suggestion is that so far we do not have the right to conclude that correct manuals do not preserve meaning (in the uncritical sense). We could do this, if we could conclude that M^* does not preserve meaning, but we are not entitled to this either. Sure, if both M and M' preserve meaning, then so does M^* , but the reason why M^* is incorrect may be that it lacks additional virtues which correct manuals have (like having a particular overall structure). It may be that both M and M' have these additional virtues, and that M^* does not, even though it preserves meaning. In order to reach the desired conclusion about intuitive meaning, we would need the extra assumption that preservation of meaning is enough for making a manual correct. And surely that assumption is controversial, even from a behaviorist point of view.

10. Also, Quine says in Pursuit of Truth, p 37: "The meaning of a sentence of one language is what it shares with its translation in another language".
11. Passage referenced in note 4.

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12. Quine, 'Linguistics and philosophy', i The Ways of Paradox, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1976.
13. Word and Object, p 27.
14. Pursuit of Truth, p 48.
15. I have here amalgamated Quine's compatibility conditions, in b), from Word and Object and Pursuit of Truth. The reader may, as Quine himself does, prefer the latter conditions only.
16. To my knowledge this view about Quine's reason for the indeterminacy thesis is not to be found in the literature. On the whole, too little attention has been paid to the theme of publicness in this context. In Robert Kirk's monograph Translation Determined, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986, Quine's linguistic behaviorism is dismissed as unjustified (pp 89-90), and isn't even considered important for the indeterminacy thesis itself. On Kirk's behalf it can be said that the book appeared the year before Quine's 'Indeterminacy of translation again', Journal of Philosophy 84, 1987, containing the same passage quoted above from Pursuit of Truth.

Fredrik Stjernberg (op. cit. chpt 2) shares Kirk's view: Quine's behaviorism is inessential to the indeterminacy thesis. Stjernberg goes as far as claiming that not even telepathy would be of any relevance to the thesis, but then he seems to view telepathic capacity as a capacity to observe others' mental symbols (inner linguistic behavior, as it were), rather than a capacity to directly perceive thought content.

Dagfinn Føllesdal has stressed the relevance of publicness to indeterminacy, in 'Indeterminacy and mental states', in Robert Barrett och Roger Gibson (eds), Perspectives on Quine, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1990, and in 'In what sense is language public', in Paolo Leonardi och Marco Santambrogio (eds), On Quine, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, but without making the publicness thesis precise and without presenting an articulated argument.

Closest to my own view is Dorit Bar-On in ‘Semantic Verificationism, linguistic behaviorism, and translation’, Philosophical Studies 66, 1992, pp 235-259. Bar-On’s semantic verificationism is almost the same as Basic Publicness here. Bar-On, however, discerns roughly this argument for linguistic behaviorism: Semantic psychologism (à la Chomsky) is compatible with the falsity of semantic verificationism. Therefore semantic psychologism must be rejected, and then linguistic behaviorism is a plausible alternative. Here we differ, and even more so in that Bar-On seems to view linguistic behaviorism as a stimulus-response theory about language learning. Fredrik Stjernberg helped me to get clear about these differences.

17. We reason from the three premisses like this: speakers do know what other speakers mean (Publicness), on the basis of observation (Empiricism), and whatever such knowledge they can have, on the basis of the ordinary (non-scientific) observations they do make, can be had (and probably is had) on the basis of observation of behavior in observable circumstances (Behavior Relevance).
18. Edward Craig has made a similar point about the reliability conception of knowledge in connection with publicness of meaning, in ‘Meaning, use and privacy’, Mind 91, pp 554-555, note 2, discussing Dummett’s views, and in ‘Privacy and rule-following’, in Jeremy Butterfield (red), Language, Mind and Logic, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986, pp 174-76, discussing rule following and the private language argument.
19. You can still ask whether the situation I imagine is plausible. You may think that it is quite unreasonable to suppose that two speakers may have the same speech dispositions, and yet mean different things by their sentences. In fact, I sympathize with this view, but only provided “speech dispositions“ is taken in a sufficiently wide and unspecified sense. As soon as the notion of speech disposition is delimited in any reasonably sharp and reasonably narrow way,

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there are, I strongly suspect, factors which do affect speakers' interpretation of other speakers but which aren't included under that specified notion. What is really implausible, I would say, is the idea of a specifiable totality of behavioral facts which are relevant to meaning.

20. Pursuit of Truth, p 43.
21. Pursuit of Truth, pp 46-47.
22. Word and Object, pp 32-33.
23. Word and Object, pp 42, 46 and 55, respectively.
24. Word and Object, p 57.
25. Word and Object, p 68.
26. The gavagai-example in Word and Object, section 12, and the introduction of "proxy"-functions in 'Ontological reduction and the world of numbers', The Ways of Paradox, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1979, pp 217-220, and 'Ontological relativity', i Ontological Relativity and Other Essays, pp 55-58.
27. Gerald Massey, 'The indeterminacy of translation: a study in philosophical exegesis', Philosophical Topics, Vol 20, 1992. It may be noted that Massey's alternative conditions are no less behavioristic than Quine's.
28. In his book Robert Kirk tries to render the indeterminacy thesis more empirical by letting it concern what real field linguists might do, but he is forced to add clauses about freedom from prejudice etc., since otherwise the thesis would lose interest. And conditions of correctness reenter with such qualifications.
29. Word and Object, p 74.
30. See e.g. 'Epistemology naturalized', in Ontological Relativity and Other Essays, pp 82-83, Pursuit of Truth, pp 19-22. 28

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List of symbols

p 11:

\Rightarrow

p 21:

\wedge