

Disquotation, Translation, and Context-Dependence

Abstract

It has been known for some time that context-dependence poses a problem for disquotationalism, but the problem has largely been regarded as one of detail: one that will be solved by the right sort of cleverness. I argue here that the problem is one of principle and that extant attempts to solve the problem (which are based upon the notion of translation) cannot succeed. Along the way, I suggest that there are other familiar disquotationalist theses that are plausible only if we ignore context dependence. And I argue against another way that translation is sometimes deployed, and not just by disquotationalists: as an alternative to semantics.

Disquotational theories of truth and reference claim that those notions can be adequately characterized in terms of such apparent trivialities as these:¹

- (1) “Every bottle is empty” is true iff every bottle is empty.
- (2) “David Ortiz” refers to David Ortiz.

These statements concern expression *types*: The type sentence “Every bottle is empty” and the type name “David Ortiz”. But many sentence types—for example, “That woman is a great musician”—do not express propositions on their own. As a result, the type sentence

- (3) “That woman is a great musician” is true iff that woman is a great musician.

does not express a proposition (since its right-hand side does not). So the disquotational model is of no obvious use where context-dependent expressions are concerned.

¹The arguments given here apply equally to pro-sentential (Grover et al., 1975) and substitutional (Hill, 2002) theories of truth. I focus on disquotational approaches simply because they are more widely discussed.

If such cases were exceptional, then one might regard the problem as merely one of detail. But it has become clear over the past few decades that context-dependence is the norm in natural language. For example, actual utterances of “Every bottle is empty” almost never mean that *absolutely every* bottle is empty but only that every bottle in some contextually specified group is empty (see Stanley and Szabó, 2000). And empty of what? Air? Or just beer? It turns out, then, that (1) suffers from the same problems as (3) does (see Carston, 1988). Even old friends like “Snow is white” are context-dependent in virtue of the context-sensitivity of color adjectives (see Szabó, 2001; Reimer, 2002; Kennedy and McNally, 2010), not to mention tense.

Proper names are a particularly interesting case. There are many people named “David Ortiz”, and there are two broad ways in which this fact can be theorized. On the first, such names are ambiguous in essentially the same way that “bank” is. There is not just one word “bank” but two, which just happen to be spelled and pronounced the same way.² On this view, then, there are as many names “David Ortiz” as there are people with that name.

If that were the correct view, then names would pose no problem for disquotationalism. We would simply have:

- (4) “David Ortiz₁” refers to David Ortiz₁.
- (5) “David Ortiz₂” refers to David Ortiz₂.

just as we have:

- (6) “bank_{financial}” is true of x iff x is a bank_{financial}.
- (7) “bank_{river}” is true of x iff x is a bank_{river}.

But there are strong arguments against the ambiguity theory of names (Gray, 2014; Bach, 2015; Fara, 2015).³ The more popular view nowadays is thus that names are predicates, a possibility suggested by such constructions as “There are many David Ortizes”.

²They are both homonyms and homographs, whereas “deer” and “dear” are just homonyms. (Among the evidence for this claim is the fact that the two words “bank” have distinct etymologies. It is just an accident of history that they are spelled and pronounced the same way.)

³For a long time, I resisted those arguments. It was when I thought about the use of bare surnames, as in “Ortiz is next up to bat”, that I came around. It just doesn’t seem plausible to me that there are as many *surnames* “Ortiz” as there are people with that surname. If not, however, then we already need whatever resources the predicate view of name requires.

It might seem as if the predicate view of names is readily accommodated by disquotationalism, thus:

(8) “David Ortiz” is true of x iff x is a David Ortiz.

But this would only characterize the reference of the *type* “David Ortiz”. It would not help us to understand how the notion of truth should be applied to specific utterances of, say, “David Ortiz is Dominican”. On the predicate view of names, the statement

(9) “David Ortiz is Dominican” is true iff David Ortiz is Dominican.

is every bit as problematic as (3), and for essentially the same reason: There is nothing sensible to be said about how the notion of truth should be applied to the type sentence “David Ortiz is Dominican”. When that sentence is uttered, a specific person will (ordinarily) be referred to, and the token sentence uttered will be true just in case *that* person is Dominican. But the disquotational schema does not apply to utterances of (9) any more than to utterances of (3).

As things now stand, therefore, it is a reasonable hunch that the notions of truth and reference do not really apply to type expressions at all. Perhaps there are some type sentences that it does make sense to call true or false (e.g., statements of pure mathematics). If so, however, not only are those rare exceptions, but one might well argue that even ‘eternal’ sentences are only derivatively called true or false: It is, in the first instance, the tokens of eternal sentences that are true or false; the sentences themselves can be called true or false only because the truth-values of their tokens does not vary with the occasion of utterance.⁴ It appears, therefore, that disquotational theories of truth and reference have the wrong subject-matter.

I don’t claim that this is a knock-down argument against disquotationalism (though I do think it is quite a powerful one). Its lesson, for our purposes, is that the question how disquotationalism should handle context-dependence is of fundamental importance. It’s surprising, then,

⁴Indeed, the term “eternal sentence” comes from Quine, who defines it thus: “a sentence whose truth value stays fixed through time and from speaker to speaker” (Quine, 1960, p. 177). It is the *tokens* whose truth-value does not vary. Even on Quine’s account, then, tokens are what is primary. Elsewhere, Quine (1970b, pp. 13–4) notes both that disquotation only really applies to ‘eternal’ sentences and that truth is actually applied to token sentences, but he never seems to consider how those two facts can be reconciled.

that so few efforts have been made to answer that question.⁵ Indeed, I am aware of just one such attempt, which is due to Hartry Field, and I can think of no alternatives to the view he defends. In the remainder of the paper, then, I will argue that no solution of the sort Field offers can succeed. We'll begin that discussion in §2. First, I want to discuss another way in which context-dependence threatens to undermine one of disquotationalism's central theses.

1 The Generalizing Role of Truth

Disquotationalists typically claim that the truth-predicate plays only an 'expressive' role: It functions, we are told, as a device of generalization (Quine, 1970b, p. 11). Suppose, for example, that Alex says:

(10) Some of the things that Obama said were true.

The standard disquotationalist claim is that such uses of "true" are merely 'expressive': In making this utterance, Alex says the same thing they would have said had they instead uttered the disjunction of the various sentences that Obama uttered, and in some strong sense of "the same" (Gupta, 1993, pp. 66ff). The truth-predicate is useful only because Alex may not know which sentences Obama uttered and so cannot utter the disjunction themselves.⁶

But this assumes that the sentences Obama uttered were not context-dependent. Since they almost certainly were, it is just false that Alex could have said the same thing they said by uttering (10) by instead uttering the disjunction of the sentences Obama uttered. Moreover, for the reasons discussed above, it would make no sense for Alex to attribute truth or falsity to the type sentences that Obama uttered. So, when Alex generalizes over 'the things Obama said', they are not talking about the type sentences that Obama uttered but about something else. What?

Suppose you were to ask Alex, "And what things did Obama say that were true?" You would not be likely to get an answer like:

(11) Obama said "He will be elected President".

but instead one like:

⁵I suspect this is because of the almost exclusive attention paid in disquotationalist writing to formal languages.

⁶In other cases, such as "All of the axioms of Peano arithmetic are true", we cannot, even in principle, utter all the sentences mentioned, because there are infinitely many of them.

(12) Obama said that Biden would be elected President.

The point here is one made long ago by Sir Peter Strawson (1950, p. 130): Only very rarely, in natural language, do we attribute truth to sentences (or even to utterances). We just do not often say things like “The sentence ‘John broke the window’ is true”. We do say things like “It’s true that John broke the window, but it was an accident”.⁷

One might worry that, if we regard “true” as primarily applying to propositions, and analyze (10) as quantifying over propositions, then we will be committed, as Field (1994, pp. 266–7) puts it, to “strange entities”. But that is just a mistake. What is being claimed is that, to evaluate statements like (10), speakers need to know things like:

(13) It is true that Biden will be elected President iff Biden will be elected President.

because the ‘things Obama said’ are things like: that Biden will be elected President. This view will commit us to ‘strange entities’ only if ‘that-clauses’ themselves refer to strange entities. Not only does that need argument,⁸ but, if that-clauses do refer to propositions, then we are committed to ‘strange entities’ anyway, quite independently of how we handle generalizations involving “true”.

I conclude, therefore, that there is no reason to think that actual speakers make use of a disquotational notion of truth—a deflationary notion of *sentential* truth—in evaluating such generalizations as (10). It is a different question, of course, whether one could do so. I doubt it, but the claim I am opposing is that a disquotational notion of truth is *required* if we are to make sense of such generalizations as (10). That is supposed to force opponents of disquotationalism to accept at least the legitimacy and utility of the disquotational notion, which would give disquotationalists a significant dialectical advantage (Field, 1986, p. 59; see also Heck, 2004, §2 and McGee, 2005, p. 147). But the disquotational notion is of no obvious use in this connection, and the notion of truth actually used by ordinary speakers in making and evaluating such generalizations is the propositional notion of truth at work in (13).⁹

⁷Compare: The sentence “John broke the window” is true, but it was an accident. That seems ungrammatical—a point emphasized by Higginbotham (2006) in a different but related context.

⁸On some views, that-clauses refer to representations of some sort: sentences (Davidson, 1968) or decorated trees (Larson and Ludlow, 1993; Higginbotham, 2006).

⁹Which might, for all I’ve said, be deflationary, but it would be a deflationary notion of *propositional* truth. The arguments made here do not apply to deflationism of that sort,

2 Disquotation and Translation

As Field (1994, p. 260; 2017) emphasizes, a disquotational truth-predicate will apply, in the first instance, only to sentences of one's own language and so not, e.g., to sentences of a foreign language one does not speak.¹⁰ That might seem surprising. Even if one does not oneself know what the Polish sentence "Śnieg jest biały" means, for example, one might have thought that one could nonetheless understand what it means to say that the sentence "Śnieg jest biały" is true.¹¹ But, according to disquotationalism, that is an illusion. The reason is straightforward: If attributing truth to "Śnieg jest biały" amounts simply to erasing the quotation marks, then "'Śnieg jest biały' is true" is just a verbose form of "Śnieg jest biały" itself. Since, by hypothesis, "Śnieg jest biały" is not a sentence one understands, one doesn't understand "'Śnieg jest biały' is true" either.¹²

In fact, however, all this argument immediately shows is that a disquotationalist cannot make do just with what Field calls a 'pure' disquotational notion of truth: one explained entirely in terms of disquotation. Rather, there is a need also for what Field calls an 'extended' disquotational truth-predicate, which is explained in terms of translation. A sentence I do not understand is true in the 'extended' sense just in case it can be translated by a sentence I do understand that is true in the 'pure' sense.

One might worry that appealing to translation will bring in semantics through the back door. But the disquotationalist can insist, with W. V. O. Quine (1960, Ch. 2), that the standards of correct translation do not have to be explained in terms of sameness of semantic content but can instead be explained in broadly pragmatic terms. There might then be no single 'correct' translation, but only a range of equally acceptable ones. That is not obviously a problem, however (Field, 1994, p. 273).¹³

since propositions are not context-dependent. (That said, it's potentially an interesting question whether deflationism is compatible with relativism about propositional truth.)

¹⁰Shapiro (1998, pp. 55ff; 2003; 2005) argues that this restriction causes trouble. Field (2001b, pp. 147–8) discusses the argument briefly. (I tend to sympathize with Shapiro but need not take a stand on the issue here.)

¹¹Waiving, for the moment, context-dependence.

¹²Essentially the same point applies to the idiolects of other people since, as Quine (1968, p. 199) famously put it, "... radical translation begins at home".

¹³Moore (2020) argues that there are more serious problems just around the corner, but I'll not pursue that issue here.

The extended notion of truth can also help the disquotationalist deal with context-dependence. For me to say that a specific utterance of “That woman is a great musician” is true is for me to say that it can be translated by a sentence of my language that is itself disquotationally true. Now, if what’s meant by “a sentence of my language” is a *type* sentence, then this does not help, since there are almost no type sentences to which it makes sense to apply the notion of truth. But there is an alternative: Take the truth-predicate to apply, in the first instance, only to utterances made by me at the present moment (Field, 1994, pp. 279–80; Heck, 2004, §4; David, 2005, p. 389). Utterances of sentences like:

- (14) That woman is a great musician iff the token sentence I just uttered is true.

will be true whenever they are uttered (assuming that, on that occasion, the utterance expresses a proposition). Such a notion has limited application, to put it mildly, but its utility can be extended by translation: If I say that some utterance *U* not being made by me now is true, then that means that there is some sentence of my language, a present utterance of which would adequately translate *U*, and that *that* utterance, if made by me now, would be true in the pure disquotational sense.¹⁴ That works as well for utterances of context-dependent sentences as it does for utterances of eternal ones. The ‘extended’ notion of truth that translation makes available thus offers the disquotationalist a solution to the problem posed by context-dependence.

Field (1994, pp. 280–1) makes a slightly different suggestion: that the translation be made not into natural language but into Mentalese, the language of thought. It is easy to see why such a view might seem attractive: The language of thought is arguably not context-dependent (Gross, 2005), so one can apply the truth-predicate within the language of thought in a straightforwardly disquotational manner. An utterance made in natural language will then be true just in case it can be translated by some sentence of my version of Mentalese that is disquotationally true. And, again, that works as well for utterances of context-dependent sentences as it does for utterances of eternal sentences.

Nothing in what follows will depend upon which of these views one prefers. My target is any view that appeals to translation to resolve

¹⁴All the “would”s here might give one pause, but let that pass. (Note, however, just how many things we have to let pass to get a view that is even worth discussing.)

the problem that context-dependence poses for disquotationalism. But these reflections do already show that another claim commonly made by disquotationalists needs to be reconsidered. Disquotationalists are fond of saying that we ‘acquire the truth-predicate’ by learning how to apply it to sentences we understand. That is supposed to be easy to do, since ‘ S is true’ is just equivalent to S .¹⁵ But children learning “true” understand few (if any) *sentences* to which they could sensibly apply “true”, so they certainly do not learn the word by applying it to (type) *sentences*. This is just the old point of Strawson’s, noted earlier, in a different guise.

3 Translation and Context-Dependence

Imagine that we are in a crowded restaurant and that Maria gestures in the direction of a woman seated at the bar, saying:

(15) That woman is a great musician.

In order to focus attention squarely on the relevant issue, ignore the other sources of context-dependence besides the demonstrative, and assume that Maria is speaking the same language I do, so that there is no question what sentence I need to utter in order to translate her utterance, namely, (15) itself. But any utterance of (15) by me will also be context-dependent, so I need to accompany my utterance by a ‘demonstration’ if I am to say anything definite.¹⁶ Indeed, given our simplifying assumptions, the only thing I need to decide, to figure out how to translate (15), is which person I should demonstrate. Suppose the right person is Yoko Miwa (who is, indeed, a great musician). Then a correct translation of (15) would be:¹⁷

(16) That woman [said while demonstrating Yoko Miwa] is a great musician.

But why, to translate Maria’s utterance correctly, do I need to demonstrate Yoko Miwa rather than Diana Krall or Geri Allen? Because Maria

¹⁵See Kripke (1975, p. 701) for a discussion that’s often cited as inspiration. Whether Kripke actually held such a view is not so clear.

¹⁶In fact, demonstrations are optional (Mount, 2008; Heck, 2014; King, 2014). But we can ignore such complications.

¹⁷A different proposal is that (15) should be translated as “Yoko Miwa is a great musician”. The ensuing discussion would be different in detail but similar in spirit. See note 18.

was *talking about* Yoko Miwa. Had she been talking about Geri Allen, then I'd have needed to demonstrate her instead. But to say that Maria was talking about Yoko Miwa is just a different way of saying that she was *referring* to Yoko Miwa. So how I should translate Maria depends upon to whom she was referring. Conclusion: How we should translate a context-dependent utterance depends upon semantic facts about it; defining 'extended' disquotational truth in terms of correct translation thus does, after all, bring in semantics through the back door.

The obvious objection is that this argument tendentiously assumes the legitimacy of such semantic notions as *talking about*. But the argument really just needs the following two premises:

(REL) How I should translate an utterance of a sentence like (15)—in particular, whom I should demonstrate—is determined (in respect of the demonstrative) by some relation between the speaker and an object in the world: the one I need to demonstrate.

(IND) The mentioned relation can be explained independently of translation.

We'll consider the status of these premises shortly.

To see why they are sufficient, recall that the 'pure' disquotational notion of reference is supposed to be characterized by such trivialities as:

(17) "Yoko Miwa" refers to Yoko Miwa.

In fact, however, for reasons we have already seen, the 'pure' notion has nothing to say about utterances of demonstratives and other context-dependent expressions, such as (it would now seem) proper names. The disquotationalist thus requires an 'extended' notion of reference, call it *E-reference*. This notion, like the extended notion of truth, can be explained in terms of translation, thus:¹⁸

¹⁸One might suggest that we should instead try:

(*) Maria's utterance of "That woman" E-refers to Yoko Miwa iff her utterance is correctly translated by "Yoko Miwa".

But, first, the left-to-right direction arguably fails, for sense-reference reasons, though that does depend upon how demanding the standards of 'correct translation' are. Second, if names are context-dependent, then (*) does not avoid the problems discussed in the text. Finally, the question will still arise what makes it the case that it is "Yoko Miwa" that correctly translates Maria's utterance (rather than "Geri Allen"), and that still seems to depend upon there being some relation between Maria and Yoko Miwa herself, which is the premise we are currently discussing.

- (18) Maria's utterance of "that woman" E-refers to Yoko Miwa iff her utterance is correctly translated by an utterance made by me¹⁹ (while I demonstrate Yoko Miwa) of "that woman".

The question here, to re-iterate, is what facts determine which translation of Maria's utterance is correct, which is to say: what facts determine whom I should demonstrate when translating Maria's utterance. We obviously cannot just assume that those facts are 'semantic'. But—this is the first premise, (REL)—surely those facts must crucially involve *some* relation between Maria and Yoko Miwa: What else could possibly make it the case that I need to demonstrate Yoko Miwa when translating Maria? That claim does not beg the question against the disquotationalist by assuming that the relation in question must be semantic. There are plenty of non-semantic relations between speakers, utterances, and the rest of the world. Perhaps one of them will do the work the disquotationalist needs doing.

If someone wanted to insist that the burden here is on the disquotationalist to tell us which non-semantic relation will do that work, then I wouldn't disagree (though I'm allergic to burden-of-proof arguments). It really is very unclear what non-semantic relation might determine what the correct translation of Maria's utterance is. (It *is* clear what semantic relation might determine it.) There was a time when one might have been forgiven for thinking it was *pointing at* (Quine, 1968, p. 194), so that the right person for me to demonstrate is the person Maria was pointing at. But it has long been appreciated that pointing is not necessary for demonstrative reference.²⁰ Still, *pointing at* is a useful example, because it nicely illustrates the sort of relation the disquotationalist needs: a non-semantic relation that will do the work of a semantic one.

The problem is that, if what determines how we should translate Maria is whom she was pointing at, then, by (18), Maria has E-referred to the person she has pointed at; so E-reference reduces to *pointing at*. The same goes for any other non-semantic relation that might be offered instead. If we assume that this relation is explicable indepen-

¹⁹Better: by oneself (i.e., in your case, you), but let me speak of myself, for ease of exposition. We need to refer to an utterance of our own, recall, because we can only apply the pure disquotational notions of truth and reference to present utterances of our own. But nothing substantial would change if we spoke instead of utterances made in English.

²⁰Indeed, pointing, in the relevant sense, probably isn't a purely physical relation but in part an intentional one (Reimer, 1991). The papers mentioned in note 16 develop a stronger version of this point.

dently of translation—that is the second premise, (IND)—then, by the disquotationalist’s own lights, E-reference is reducible to some relation that is characterizable independently of translation. That would make E-reference a non-disquotational notion of reference (Field, 1994, p. 281), one the disquotationalist has now been forced not just to recognize but to employ.

Thus, (REL) and (IND) entail the falsity of disquotationalism, as was claimed above.

There are several replies a disquotationalist might make.

1. Deny (REL). Thus, we find Field (1994, pp. 279–81) arguing that, in explaining how to translate Maria’s utterance of “that woman”, we can make do just with facts about her “internal processing”: Whom I should demonstrate is determined by what other ‘mental files’ Maria associates with this particular utterance of “that woman”. But there are several difficulties with this view. The simplest is that there may not be any other such ‘files’: Maria may never before have seen nor heard of Yoko Miwa (Heck, 2004, pp. 339–41).
2. Concede both premises, so that E-reference is a non-disquotational notion of *something*, but deny that E-reference has very much to do with *reference* as friends of semantics would understand it (Field, 1986, p. 89; 1994, p. 255). But it’s difficult to see how E-reference could come apart from reference: If Maria was talking about Yoko Miwa but E-referred to Geri Allen, of what possible significance could E-reference be?²¹ For present purposes, then, I shall set this view aside. We would need to know much more about what the relevant relation is supposed to be before we could discuss, let alone evaluate, such a view.²²
3. Deny (IND). There may be many relations between Maria and various objects in the world of which we will want to take note in deciding how to translate her words. But, this reply insists, correct translation cannot be reduced to such relations. All we can say, in the end, is that the correct translation is the one that allows

²¹Of course, it is no help to the disquotationalist if E-reference corresponds to semantic reference and ‘talking about’ to speaker’s reference (Kripke, 1977).

²²There is a suggestion that Field (2001a; 2001b) makes elsewhere, concerning ‘indication relations’, that could probably be adapted to the present context. I discuss this proposal in other work (Heck, 2022), however, and so will not discuss it here.

us to make the best sense of Maria. Translation, on this view, is ineliminably pragmatic.²³

This last reply is the most interesting, and it needs much more discussion.

Such views always seem to leave it frustratingly vague exactly what ‘making sense’ of someone involves. But waive that. What is distinctive of this reply is the central role it assigns to translation: What determines to whom Maria’s utterance of “that woman” refers is what the best way of translating her is. That, in turn, is determined by which way of translating her ‘makes best sense’ of her. A proponent of the third reply is thus defending this thesis:²⁴

(RefTrans) In uttering “That woman is a great musician”, Maria referred to Yoko Miwa (and said of her that she is a great musician) iff it would make the best sense of Maria for me to translate her by uttering “That woman is a great musician” while demonstrating Yoko Miwa.

In what follows, I aim to refute the claim that translation can, in this way, ground an extended disquotational notion of reference.²⁵

Given our discussion to this point, it might seem strange that the objection I am about to offer has nothing to do with context-dependence. The objection targets the role that is played in (RefTrans) by translation. It therefore also shows that disquotationalists cannot use translation to explain extended notions of truth and reference that apply to sentences of other languages. But if the problem only arose when truth was attributed to sentences from other languages, it could be dismissed as marginal and deferred indefinitely. The case of context-dependence, on the other hand, is not marginal but fundamental, because context-dependence is the norm in natural language. So the case of context-dependence is the crucial one, even if the objection is more general.

²³Nor does the disquotationalist have to follow Quine (1970a) in limiting the evidence for which translation is correct to Maria’s linguistic and other behavior. Making sense of her might require us to take into account how her brain works, the evolutionary history of her species, and who knows what else (see Chomsky, 1969).

²⁴To emphasize: This view denies (IND) because what follows the biconditional in (RefTrans) describes a relation between Maria and Yoko Miwa that essentially involves translation.

²⁵As will be clear, the argument applies just as well to the alternative mentioned in note 18.

I should also emphasize, before we continue, that my objection targets only those views that take the standard of correct translation to be ineliminably pragmatic: ‘making best sense’ of other speakers, whatever that might mean. Views that regard correct translation as determined by preservation of independently specifiable features of utterances, or of relations in which those utterances (or their utterers) stand to the world, are immune to this objection. But those are the first and second replies above, and I have already argued that they are not viable. Only by making translation an unavoidably pragmatic enterprise can disquotationalists avoid the danger

that when we describe the standards of acceptable translation for indexicals in detail we will have to bring in machinery that is powerful enough to provide a reduction of the semantic notion of reference to non-semantic terms. . . (Field, 1994, p. 281).

And that, of course, would be fatal to disquotationalism.

So what is my objection? It is that no translation manual can ever allow one to make sense of a speaker’s words. Or, to put it more concretely: Even if I were in possession of a translation manual for Maria that was known to be correct—one that gave me, for each possible utterance she could make, a (non-context-dependent) sentence that I knew correctly translated it—that would not, by itself, help me to make sense of Maria’s words, not even a little bit. That may seem incredible. But this claim is, in fact, just a minor variant of one that Donald Davidson defends in “Radical Interpretation”.

The central question that concerns Davidson in that paper is what knowledge I could have that would allow me to ‘interpret’ the utterances of another speaker. Before he introduces and defends his own answer, Davidson (1973, p. 317) discusses one that is inspired by Quine: that it would be enough for me to know how to translate Maria’s words. Davidson argues that that is not enough. Someone might know that Maria’s utterances of “Śnieg jest biały” are correctly translated into Icelandic as “Snjór er hvítur” and yet not have the slightest idea what Maria’s words mean. The Icelandic translation will help only those who know, and make use of, information about what the Icelandic sentence means. If we put knowledge of how to translate into Icelandic together with knowledge of what the Icelandic sentence means, then that will yield the information that, when Maria utters “Śnieg jest biały”, she speaks truly iff snow is white. And that, says Davidson, is what I actually need

to know to make sense of Maria. So the translation was “an unneeded intermediary” (Davidson, 1973, p. 318).

The problem with this argument is that it is not immediately clear how to extend it to the case in which the translation is made not into some language I do not understand, such as Icelandic, but into one I do understand: English. In that case, a correct translation manual would tell me that “Śnieg jest biały” should be translated as “Snow is white”. To be sure, if I did not understand English, that would not help me. But, since I do understand English, it does help me. And Davidson’s own account might seem no better off. His view is that I would be able to interpret Maria if I knew a theory of truth for her language, one that delivered such theorems as:

(19) When Maria utters “Śnieg jest biały”, she speaks truly iff snow is white.

As Davidson (1973, p. 317) himself says, however, “any theory is in some language”. And since this one is written in English, either I do not understand English, in which case (19) is no more helpful than

(20) Maria’s utterances of “Śnieg jest biały” are correctly translated into English as “Snow is white”.

is, or else I do understand English, in which case (20) is every bit as helpful as (19) is.

It is my contention that the apparent force of these considerations is due entirely to use–mention confusions. Once those have been cleared up, it will be clear why no translation manual can ever help us to ‘make sense’ of Maria.

This issue has, as the mention of Davidson will have made clear, a long history. It will be worth our while, therefore, to consider it in a more general setting. We’ll do that in the next section and then return, in §5, to the question how our discussion bears upon disquotationalism.

4 Translation and Semantics

It has often been suggested that translation might do the work that Davidson and others have thought we needed semantics to do. For example, Jerrold Katz and Paul Postal (1964) once argued that semantic theories should, in effect, translate sentences of natural language into a language composed of ‘semantic markers’. In response, David Lewis

(1970, pp. 18–9) makes a point very similar to Davidson’s.²⁶ Jerry Fodor (1975, pp. 119–22) then argues that Lewis must be wrong since language comprehension does not require us to know what our words mean but only how to translate them into Mentalese. In response, Ernie Lepore and Barry Loewer (1981) build on Davidson and Lewis. Later, however, Stephen Schiffer (1989, Ch. 8) develops a view similar to Fodor’s. Apparently, then, more needs to be said.

As said above, I contend that all forms of ‘translational semantics’ (to borrow from Lepore and Loewer) rest upon use–mention confusions.²⁷ But, since I personally find Fodor’s version of the view the most tempting, I’ll focus on it, ‘without loss of generality’. I.e., my criticisms of Fodor will plainly generalize.

Here is a rough model of the ‘translational conception of comprehension’, but one that will do for our purposes.²⁸ When someone utters a sentence, what I first do is determine how the sentence is composed of its constituent words. Perhaps this is quite complex; perhaps the ‘words’ are not at all what we’d ordinarily call “words” but are just morphemes. But once the syntactic analysis is complete, all that is left for me to do is to translate each ‘word’ that occurs in the original sentence by a corresponding expression of Mentalese, and then to put the Mentalese words together in a way that is determined by the syntactic analysis. When I’m done, I’ll have a Mentalese sentence that translates the original

²⁶Davidson’s version of the argument, although published later, seems to have been independent.

²⁷Here is Fodor (1975, p. 108): “A speaker is a mapping from messages onto wave forms, and a hearer is a mapping from wave forms onto messages”. Here is Lewis (1975, p. 3): “What is a language? Something which assigns meanings to certain strings of types of sounds or of marks.” So where is the disagreement? Lewis’s ‘meanings’ are propositions, but Fodor tells us that “messages are most plausibly construed as *formulae* in the language of thought” (Fodor, 1975, p. 109, my emphasis). It’s use for Lewis and mention for Fodor. My goal in the text is to explain why it has to be use.

²⁸This is essentially the model of semantic theory proposed by Katz and Fodor (1963, esp. §7), minus various complications that exercise them a great deal but are irrelevant here (e.g., ambiguity). I believe this is also the view that Davidson (1967, pp. 307–8) has in mind when discussing the proposal that a theory of meaning can consist just of syntax plus a dictionary. (Katz and Fodor speak in terms of a grammar and a dictionary, though Davidson does not cite them, or anyone else.) Davidson’s objection is that such a theory simply fails to address the problems that exercise semanticists (e.g., the semantics of belief sentences). He did not, I think, anticipate that someone might simply deny that those problems are of much interest, which seems to be how Field (1994, p. 269) would respond, and perhaps also Fodor.

Big Papi	→	David Ortiz
Queen V	→	Venus Williams
Baby Horse	→	Alex Morgan

Table 1: Nicknames of Athletes

sentence of natural language, and then I can use the Mentalese sentence to interpret the present utterance of the natural language sentence.

On the translational account, then, a central role is played in interpretation by competent speakers' possession of a lookup table that pairs 'words' of natural language with corresponding 'words' of Mentalese. And, in many ways, that seems like a very natural idea.²⁹ But we need to be careful. There are several different ways to think of such a table and the information it contains.

Consider, for example, table 1. One way to read the table is as pairing nicknames of athletes with their given names, in which case the first line might be written more explicitly as:

- (21) "Big Papi" is a nickname for the person whose given name is "David Ortiz".

So, on this interpretation, the table purports to describe a relation between names (that is, between linguistic expressions). Fully to appreciate the content of the table, so understood, one does not have to understand any of the names contained in it. Even if you have never heard any of these names before, that will not affect your understanding of the table.

A second construal would regard the table as pairing nicknames of athletes with those very athletes, that is, with the people who have those nicknames. In that case, the second line might be written more explicitly as:

- (22) "Queen V" is a nickname for Venus Williams.

In this case, the table describes a relation between words and people. Fully to appreciate the content of the table understood this way, one does have to understand the names that occur in the right column, though not the names that occur in the left column: If one has never heard of Venus Williams, then one cannot understand (22).

²⁹Were it not for the creativity and productivity of linguistic competence, we could make do with a phrase book: a table pairing sentences of English with sentences of Mentalese. The issues would be no different.

Yet a third construal (we'll stop here) would regard the table as purporting to state some true identities, in which case the third line might be written more explicitly as:

(23) Baby Horse is Alex Morgan.

In this case, the relation the table describes is wholly worldly. Fully to appreciate the content of the table understood this way, one must understand the names that occur in both columns.

It's strangely puzzling, isn't it? It's not that it's unclear what the three construals are. But how did you understand the table when you first encountered it? In practice, the three construals tend to morph into one another. Even if the table had been intended the second way, as pairing nicknames with people, someone who was completely unfamiliar with the names on the right could nonetheless read the table in accord with the first interpretation and thereby acquire information about co-reference. And even if the table had been intended the first way, someone who was familiar with the names on the right could nonetheless read it in accord with the second way and so extract information about the reference of the nicknames.³⁰ It just is very easy to slide back and forth between use and mention this way—as sure a sign of danger as ever there was—especially where written language is concerned: We simultaneously read the names with understanding and see them as objects in their own right.

Now, how does all this bear upon the case of Fodor *et al.* versus Davidson *et al.*? What that dispute is really about is *what information* competent speakers have that allows them to interpret speech (Peacocke, 1986):³¹ Is it information about what expressions refer to? Or is it just information about how those expressions should be translated? We are using table 1 as a simple model of the sort of 'lookup table' that a speaker might use to interpret utterances of natural language sentences. So the question we need to ask is what information that table contains. But what we have just seen is that the answer to that question depends upon how we interpret the table. So the question becomes: On which construal of the table does it encode information possession of which would allow someone successfully to interpret utterances of the nicknames?

³⁰Note that this does depend upon the given names' being presented (i.e., named) in a certain 'canonical' way. If "David Ortiz" were replaced by "Bob's favorite name", then the conflation we are discussing would not be possible.

³¹Strictly speaking, in Davidson's case: What information someone *could* have that *would* allow them to interpret speech (Davidson, 1984b, p. 313).

The third construal is clearly no help. On this construal, the information contained in the table is simply a bunch of identities. Those identities have nothing to do with the names used to express them: They contain no information about those names. But information that does not even concern the nicknames cannot help one to interpret them. Any construal of the table adequate for interpretation will thus have to be one on which the names in the left column are mentioned, not used.³²

The first construal at least satisfies that condition, but it is no help either, for the reason already mentioned: One can know how to translate expressions from one language to another without understanding any of those expressions. The right way to state this point is: The *information* that a translation manual contains is insufficient to allow one to understand the language being translated.³³ It is true that, if one does understand one of the two languages, then one can parlay one's knowledge of how to translate into knowledge sufficient to allow for interpretation.³⁴ But that is irrelevant. The question was *what information enables interpretation*, and what Lewis and Davidson are claiming is that information about how to translate one language into another is insufficient by itself. They are just right about that.

It is when the table is interpreted the second way that it encodes information sufficient for interpretation: What you need to know is, for each nickname, who bears that name; that is what the table, so interpreted, tells you. To be sure, the table conveys that information by *using* people's given names. But of course the table has to be written "in some language" (Davidson, 1973, p. 317). That does not imply that the table contains (let alone only contains) information *about* the given names that are used in it (as on the first interpretation). On the contrary, on

³²A different route to this point would begin with the observation that, when we are attempting to understand what someone else has said, we start by identifying the *linguistic expression* they have produced (Fodor, 1975, pp. 110–1). Certainly, this seems to be the model with which linguists operate.

³³I owe this point to my former teacher Jim Higginbotham. He makes points in the same vicinity in Higginbotham (1988, §III).

³⁴It is, actually, much less clear than is usually supposed how the transition from the mentioned sentence to the used one is to be made. In the ordinary case, one just 'reads' the quoted sentence. As noted above, however, this requires the mentioned sentence to be 'presented' in a way that makes it readable and not, again, as 'Bob's favorite sentence'. But, waiving that point, what is the analogue of 'reading' in the case of Mentalese? Even if that question can be answered, it is surprising that we are now supposing that language comprehension involves one's forming, and then 'reading', *names* of sentences of Mentalese, since that is what a translation manual between English and Mentalese requires. (Special thanks here to Bill Warren.)

this construal, the table encodes a data structure that maps nicknames to people: the people who have those nicknames.

If one wants to respond that people cannot literally be contained in such a data structure, then one is succumbing to what appears to be an almost irresistible temptation to confuse *what information is contained* in a data structure with *how that information is encoded*.³⁵ As we are imagining it, the mapping from names to their bearers is encoded in a table-like structure that competent speakers have in their heads, one that is written in Mentalese (or whatever). So, of course, people are not contained in the table. They are *mentioned* in the table through the *use* of their names.³⁶ The same is true of the natural language names: They too are only mentioned in the table, through the use of *their* Mentalese names.

Surely it has to be uncontroversial that we are, in some sense, able to think about other people.³⁷ Nor is a proponent of the translational conception in a position to deny that competent speakers are able to think about linguistic expressions, since such a capacity is presupposed by the ability to translate.³⁸ But then there cannot possibly be any obstacle in principle to our using whatever allows us to do those two things—think about people and think about their names—to construct a

³⁵I find it helpful to think, in this connection, about strongly typed programming languages. If you want to write a program in C++ that will interpret decimal numerals, for example, then what you will need (at the level of digits) is a `map<char, int>`, which is very different from a `map<char, char>` (the first construal) or a `map<int, int>` (the third one). Similarly, converting decimal numerals to integers is a very different programming problem than converting them to binary numerals, even if integers are represented, in the machine, in binary.

³⁶This seems to be what Fodor overlooks. He writes: “Pretty obviously, there are computational procedures which map a representation of the acoustic properties of a speech event onto a representation of the message it encodes” (Fodor, 1975, p. 117). But these representations are the *medium* in which the computation is performed. What is computed is a function from acoustic properties to ‘messages’, e.g., propositions. We’re not translating representations but mapping sounds to meanings. (Fodor’s own usage betrays him: He had previously insisted that messages *are* representations. See note 27.)

³⁷Granted, of course, the BIG issue is how that is possible, and it is an option to confine one’s disquotationalism to Mentalese and to make use of non-disquotational notions of truth and reference only in explaining how natural language utterances are mapped to ‘messages’, as encoded in Mentalese. We’ll discuss the significance of this sort of option in §6.

³⁸I take it to be less controversial than it might seem that language-users are able to think about expressions (cf. Soames, 1992). Linguistic theory gives us good reason to suppose that this capacity is innate (see e.g. Chomsky, 1986), though, at the early stages, such thought might occur only sub-personally.

data structure that pairs expressions of natural language with people. If we can think about words and we can think about things, what possible barrier can there be to our thinking about relations between words and things?

I suspect that part of what has made translational accounts seem attractive is a tendency to conflate two senses of "translation". What philosophers usually have in mind when they speak of 'translation' is a relation between linguistic expressions, as on the first construal. That is how I have been using the term. But colloquial language is less strict. The third construal is reminiscent of what 'translators' at the United Nations do: They listen to speech in one language and then repeat what they have heard in another language. Understanding an utterance cannot consist in translating it in either of those senses: Translation in the philosophers' sense does not (by itself) provide understanding; translation in the UN sense presupposes understanding. What we actually need is a process whose input is as on the first model (a sentence) and whose output is as on the third (its meaning). But that's no longer translation, in any sense. It's semantics.

5 Translation and 'Making Sense'

Consider the (very partial) translation manual in table 2. Someone who understands neither English nor Polish can only understand the table in accord with the first interpretation we discussed in the previous section: as mapping Polish sentences to English sentences. Such a person could not even begin to use this translation manual to 'make sense' of Maria's speech. For those of us who do understand English, of course, matters are different: Now the translation manual tells us *what Maria has said* when she utters various Polish sentences, and we can ask whether it makes sense for Maria to have said what this phrasebook says she has said. But that, we can now see, is because our understanding of English allows us to understand the table in accord with the second interpretation discussed in the last section. On that construal, the table pairs Polish sentences not with English sentences but with 'interpretations' of them: It tells us what the Polish sentences mean.

This is, once again, really a point about the information that is contained in a translation manual. That information, being wholly meta-linguistic, is useless by itself if our goal is to 'make sense' of someone's speech. What obscures this point is the fact that a statement like:

Śnieg jest biały	→	Snow is white
Śnieg jest zielony	→	Snow is green
Trawa jest zielona	→	Grass is green

Table 2: A Translation Manual

- (20) Maria’s utterances of “Śnieg jest biały” are correctly translated into English as “Snow is white”.

can *convey*, to English speakers,³⁹ more information than (20) actually contains, since we can combine that information with our understanding of “Snow is white” (and our knowledge of how translation works) to conclude that:

- (19) When Maria utters “Śnieg jest biały”, she speaks truly iff snow is white.

But, and this is the crucial point, it is only semantic hypotheses like (19) that can be used to make sense of Maria, be it good sense or bad. Possession of a translation manual does not obviate the need to consider such semantic hypotheses. Moreover, there is simply no reason we cannot just consider (19) directly, bypassing the translation manual. That is what Davidson (1973, p. 318) means when he says that translation “is an unneeded intermediary”. The really crucial point, though, is that translation is not just unnecessary but also useless, except in so far as it can be used to generate such semantic hypotheses as (19). The semantic hypotheses are what do the actual work.

In the specific case with which we were concerned earlier, the question was why I need to demonstrate Yoko Miwa when uttering “That woman is a great musician” if I am to translate Maria correctly. I argued that this must be because Maria stands in some relation to Yoko Miwa herself—that’s the premise (REL). The question that remains is whether this relation is itself explicable independently of translation, as the other premise (IND) insists it must be. The objection we have been considering is that it is not: While various relations between Maria and objects in the world may well be relevant to how she should be translated, the best

³⁹Actually, since (20) is written, it will only convey more information only to someone who can *read* English. Spoken versions will convey more information only to those who can understand *spoken* English. This illustrates, once again, the gap between the information (20) actually contains and what it *conveys* to certain people.

translation can only be chosen on pragmatic grounds, in terms of what ‘makes best sense’ of her; there is no translation-independent characterization of the relevant relation to be had. What the foregoing shows is, as promised earlier, that no translation of Maria makes *any* sense of her, good or bad, by itself. If you want to make sense of Maria’s utterance, then what you need is an hypothesis about who she was talking about. Since translation certainly is not needed to generate such an hypothesis, (IND) follows: The relation between Maria and an object in the world that determines how she should be translated does not have to be explained in terms of translation.⁴⁰

This does not, I should emphasize, imply that pragmatic factors do not play a crucial role in characterizing the relation between Maria and the object of her speech. Indeed, Davidson’s view, as is well known, is precisely that what makes a semantic hypothesis like (19) correct is that it (together with similar hypotheses) enables us to ‘make best sense’ of Maria. So, while Davidson would accept the letter of the argument I am giving here, he would, I suspect, have been somewhat unhappy with its spirit. On his view, the right thing to say is that there is no *interpretation*-independent characterization to be had of the relevant relation between Maria and an object in the world, and that the correct *interpretation* of Maria can only be chosen on pragmatic grounds.⁴¹ If so, then reference itself is an ineliminably pragmatic notion.

We’ll consider the significance of this aspect of Davidson’s view in the final section.

6 In Closing, a Caveat

It’s been known for some time that context-dependence poses a problem for disquotationalism. But the problem seems to have been regarded as a fiddly technical one that will be resolved by the right kind of wizardry. I’ve argued here that the problem is both fundamental and one of principle. Moreover, attempts to invoke translation to explain how the notion of truth should be applied to utterances of context-dependent sentences founder on a dilemma. If ‘correct translation’ is determined by a relation that can be explained in terms independent of translation, then we have

⁴⁰Of course, one *could* involve translation in the explanation. But one *could* involve translation in almost any explanation, and adding it to this one would not relieve us of the need to consider semantic hypotheses.

⁴¹That is, on Davidson’s view, Maria has referred to Yoko Miwa iff a theory of truth incorporating that very hypothesis allows one to make best sense of her speech.

just grounded a non-disquotational notion of reference. If, on the other hand, we try to explain correct translation in terms of what would ‘make best sense’ of someone, then translation is the wrong sort of relation to do the job: It invokes mention where use is required.

The arguments presented here cannot, however, show that semantic notions are robust enough to do serious scientific work. Since Field (1994, esp. §2) often seems to think of that view—sometimes known as *intentional realism* (Fodor, 1987)—as disquotationalism’s main opponent, that is a significant limitation. So let me explain why we must concede this point (and so why you can accept the arguments presented above even if you are not an intentional realist).

Quine (1960, Ch. 2) held that the way to investigate meaning is to investigate translation: If you want to know what Maria’s words mean, and what it is for them to mean that, then the right questions to ask are (i) how Maria’s utterances should be translated into your language and (ii) what the standards of correct translation are. Quine articulates an answer to (ii) using the notion of radical translation. Davidson (1967), by contrast, thinks that we should ask (i’) what the correct theory of truth is for Maria’s language and (ii’) what the appropriate standards are by which to adjudicate correctness. Davidson (1973) articulates an answer to (ii’) in terms of radical interpretation.

So Quine and Davidson disagree about what form a ‘theory of meaning’ for Maria’s language should take. Quine thinks we can get by with translation, whereas Davidson thinks we must provide a theory of truth. That is why Davidson rejects deflationism (see e.g. Davidson, 1990, 1996). But if the question is what it is for Maria’s utterances to mean what they do, then Quine and Davidson are quite close, as we see at (ii) and (ii’), and they are much closer to each other than either is to Fodor (1987; 1990) or to the early Field (1972; 1978). There are, of course, plenty of differences between Davidson and Quine here—most importantly, Davidson is no behaviorist—but Davidson’s notion of radical interpretation is not just named after but is explicitly modeled on Quine’s notion of radical translation. In particular, both have a significant pragmatic component.

Now, despite Davidson’s occasional protests to the contrary, I agree with Michael Rescorla (2013, p. 480) that Davidson’s insistence that facts about content essentially depend upon pragmatic (and even normative) factors is inconsistent with intentional realism. And yet, so far as I can see, all of the arguments given above are compatible with Davidson’s general outlook. Indeed, I have borrowed heavily from Davidson’s arguments against Quine. So my reasons for rejecting disquotationalism are,

in effect, just Davidson's. So, unless Davidson's views are inconsistent at this point, which I very much doubt they are, then the arguments given here cannot establish intentional realism.

There is another lesson worth making explicit. It often seems to me as if disquotationalists think that, if interpretation (or translation) is essentially governed by pragmatic constraints, then that already undermines 'inflationary' views. And if 'inflationism' means 'intentional realism', then that may well be correct. But if it does not, then Davidson stands as a counterexample: What it is for Maria's utterances of "Śnieg jest biały" to be true iff snow is white is for that to be the most fruitful way of 'interpreting' her. That may not be intentional realism, but it is not deflationism either, since non-disquotational notions of truth and reference figure crucially in the theory Davidson would have us use to make sense of Maria.

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