

Translation and Understanding

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**Hamilton College
Humanities Forum:
Translation and
Cultural
Exchange**


OVERVIEW

- I. Disagreement and Misunderstanding
- II. How We Translate: Three Principles
- III. Words and Things
- IV. Truth and the Self

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I. Disagreement and Misunderstanding

- We think of verbal communication mainly in terms of everyday conversation. And because such conversation typically flows so smoothly, we seldom pay much attention to the pitfalls and failures of mutual understanding.
- But misunderstanding in daily conversation is not all that rare. Indeed, the way we interact socially often conceals it: We converse as though comprehension is wholly transparent and effortless—often covering over when it is not.

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- Occasionally we note that what somebody said wasn't clear to us or that we didn't understand what was meant. But typically we just let it pass—unless getting things just right is for some reason important.
- When it is, things often don't look good. Misunderstanding is especially rife in the humanities—despite our training in the use of words. Academics sometimes even find it hard to recognize that they agree!
- And when they don't, misunderstanding may be rampant—and people may become intent on putting their point forcefully, in ways that can hinder more than enhance.

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- Consider scholarly disagreements in humanities journals—not about things we can readily settle, such as how often a word occurs in a text, but about how, e.g., to interpret or evaluate a passage.
- We often see those who disagree with us about those latter issues as simply not grasping what we're saying.
- And looked at from the outside, there's some justice in that: Disagreements in journals (and at conferences) often seem due to misunderstanding—in both directions and in ways that, seen from the outside, may seem not all that hard to avoid.

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- Mutual comprehension can also be elusive in discussing political, moral, and aesthetic issues—to the frustration of all concerned.
- Some make a virtue of the apparent ubiquity of mutual misunderstanding—as with Harold Bloom's intriguing idea that writers tacitly, but actively and creatively, misread those of the predecessors (and professors?) who most influence them.
- I'll return to Bloom in §II. But I want first to ask how we tell, in both controversial and mundane contexts, that somebody misunderstands us. How do we identify an exchange as a case of misunderstanding?



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- The mark most commonly appealed to is intractable disagreement about matters each person sees as obvious—intractable relative to what each has already said.
- Suppose you advance a moral, political, aesthetic, or academic judgment, defend it ably, and I still don't come around. It might of course be that I'm defective in some way—academically incompetent or morally or aesthetically insensitive.
- But another possibility is that I just don't get it—that I somehow miss your point or fail to grasp the force of the considerations you adduce. I simply misunderstand you.

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- Disagreement by itself need not, of course, signal any misunderstanding; only when it's intractable is misunderstanding often the best explanation of disagreement.
- Why else, one may wonder, would anybody resist the force of one's point and what one says in support of it? "If the person simply understood what I'm saying"
- Intractable disagreement may well be our most common mark of misunderstanding, but misunderstanding also occurs even when somebody agrees with us—agreeing for what we see as the wrong reasons, and so still missing our point.

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- And misunderstanding occurs also when somebody fails to grasp what we mean by our words—because the other person uses pivotal words in different ways.
- I'll return in a moment to these three ways in which misunderstanding occurs. But it's important first to see the crucial tie between understanding and translation.
- When you grasp my meaning—i.e., the meaning of something I say—you make what I say your own. You render what I say in your own terms, in words you would use to talk about the things under consideration.

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- So all understanding of others' remarks is a translation—a rendering of what the other person says into one's own words.
- Translation is typically thought of across languages—e.g., from Greek to English or German to Mandarin. But it can be useful to think of the use each individual makes of such languages as being itself a distinct language—what linguists call an idiolect.
- And then your rendering of my words into your own is your translating my idiolect into your own. All mutual understanding is mutual translation—and all failures of understanding are failures of translation.

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- Sometimes people converse without any attempt at mutual understanding, each simply reacting to the other's remarks with whatever comes to mind to say. These interactions aren't relevant to theorizing about understanding and interpretation
- But speech acts other than assertions, such as those brilliantly described by J. L. Austin, do figure; questions, requests, expressions of doubt or wonder, and the like all require interpretation.
- And the factors described above, which apply to assertion, are readily adapted to apply to speech acts of other sorts.

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II. How We Translate: Three Principles

- I've described three factors that explain others' misunderstandings of us:
 - (1) Others disagree with us about what's true—in ways that persist no matter how much we explain ourselves;
 - (2) Others agree with us, but for reasons different from those we give; and
 - (3) Others use words differently from us.
- These ways of identifying and explaining cases of misunderstanding reflect three principles that govern how we understand and translate others' remarks.

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- Consider first intractable disagreement. We tend to construe others' words so as to minimize the number of things they say that we think are untrue. We seek, normally without explicit thought or attention, to maximize agreement.
- Such construing typically isn't conscious, but it can be. When somebody says something that sounds wrong to us, we often think, "What that person must mean is such-and-such." We render others' words into our own so as to maximize truth—that is, truth as we see things.
- That's a first principle of translation.

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- Seeking to maximize agreement—being charitable in construing others' remarks—is known in philosophy as the principle of charity (Neil L. Wilson, W. V. Quine, Donald Davidson).
- Suppose I say, "It's raining, and also not raining." You automatically come up with things I probably mean that would make it true—different places or a slight drizzle.
- But there are risks. Suppose what I say seems to call for such rendering—without which you would see it as untrue. In putting what I say into your words in a way that makes them true by your lights, you risk using words differently from me.

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- And that's another way we misunderstand: using words differently. And that gives us a second principle: Just as we construe others' remarks in ways that as much as possible make them true, we also construe other as using words correctly.
- And that's using words as we use them— i.e., whoever is doing the construing. We map others' words onto words of our own that sound the same, or have standard lexical entries that map onto our words.
- We assume that same-sounding words and standard lexical entries reflect sameness at least in the things words apply to.

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- We construe others' remarks so their words apply as ours do and their statements are as often as possible true, as we see things. A third principle of translation appeals to the reasons people give for saying things.
- Independent of lexical meaning and truth, we seek to construe so that the reasons others give for things seem to us, as much as possible, to be germane and compelling.
- We construe others so that their remarks— whether or not we see them as true—hang together in ways we regard as rational.
- And that partly governs how we translate.

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- Since remarks can go together rationally but still be untrue, maximizing truth and maximizing forcefulness of reasons are independent.

So even when others agree with us, it can seem to be "for the wrong reasons."

- And maximizing truth and rationality are each independent of whether another's words map straightforwardly onto ours.
- All three considerations are versions of the principle of charity:
We construe others charitably in respect of the truth of their remarks, their use of words, and the rationality of their thinking.

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- Because the three principles of charity are independent of one another, they can, as already noted, conflict. Maximizing truth and rationality, e.g., may come only if we take liberties with standard uses of words.

- And the best way to construe remarks as true may come only at the cost of their going together in maximally rational ways.

- The inevitability of such conflicts has not been noted in the literature. But it's crucial to see that such conflicts occur—so that there may often be alternative ways to balance the claims of rationality, truth, and the use of individual words.

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- Moreover, when there are alternative ways to balance truth, rationality, and the use of individual words in the way we construe another's remarks, it may be that none of the alternatives is plainly better than some of the others.
- That explains why there's often no way to decide among alternative interpretations of others' remarks—and among alternative translations of texts: The alternatives rely on equally good ways of balancing.
- Indeed, the failure to note the need to balance these three factors may be due to the discomfort such deadlocks occasion.

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- The three principles work off of three crucially different units of language: (1) sentences in the case of truth, (2) individual words apart from their roles in sentences, and (3) combinations of sentences for the forcefulness of reasons.
- That underscores their independence, and why there often are equally good alternative ways to balance the three.
- When we construe others' remarks as true and their reasons as forceful, we do so as we see those things. Others may lead us to rethink things, but there is in the end nothing to rely on but how we see things.

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- So interpretation and translation always rely on how the interpreter thinks about the things under discussion and uses of words. There's no way around that.
- So in historical matters interpretation is unavoidably "Whiggish," as Richard Rorty noted; we cannot avoid interpreting by appeal to how we now see things.
- As useful as it is to immerse ourselves in our target period, each plank in such immersion will rely on our interpreting things, and every interpretation must at bottom rest on appeals to our views about what's true and what's rational.

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- Bloom argues that writers engage in an intellectual struggle with those who most influence them, which leads to agonistic misreadings of those predecessors—more stronger writers giving misreadings that are more compelling.
- On my argument, such misreading is due not to any intellectual struggle—Bloom's "anxiety of influence"—but to the role one's own views must play in interpreting others, views that seldom match earlier writers'.
- Compelling misreadings may often go with Bloomian intellectual struggle, but misreading is not due specifically to it.

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- Let me address an objection that will have occurred to many in what I've said. I said it's a mark of misunderstanding that we disagree with others—at least when that disagreement is intractable, i.e., when it doesn't yield to rational discussion.
- But don't people sometimes just disagree—and intractably? Why not take intractable disagreement at face value? People understand one another, but don't agree.
- Still, it often also seems that intractable disagreement is due to people just "going past" each other—to their "thinking differently," i.e., mutual misunderstanding.

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- More important: We have no way to tell that people actually do understand each other apart from broad, general agreement on very many relevant matters. We judge there's mutual understanding despite intractable disagreement only when people agree on most other things relevant to the issue at hand.
- It's of course a judgment call as to how much background agreement we need to judge that there's mutual understanding.
- But without broad agreement on very many relevant issues, we couldn't conclude that mutual understanding does ever occur.

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III. Words and Things

- Charity in construing others' assertions and supporting reasons relies on our own views about what's true and rational.
- But how do we determine what others' individual words apply to?
I argued that we rely on words' sounding and being spelled alike, and on standard lexicons.
But can these factors by themselves ensure that words do actually apply to things in the same ways?
- A puzzle about this will illustrate the issue.

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- Suppose one wants to know what the word 'rabbit' refers to. Presumably it refers to rabbits; we get that for free—just by removing the quotation marks.
- But that's hardly informative. And as the 20th century philosopher, W. V. Quine, noted, whenever there is a rabbit, there is also an undetached part of a rabbit—and whenever there's a part of a rabbit, so long as it's undetached there's also a rabbit.
- So it's true to assert that there's a rabbit in this room in just those circumstances in which it's true to assert that there's an undetached rabbit part in this room.



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- That's at the level of whole sentences: The sentences 'There's an undetached rabbit part' and 'There's a rabbit' are true in exactly the same circumstances.
- But the terms 'rabbit' and 'undetached rabbit part' plainly do not apply to the same things: One applies to whole animals and the other to parts of those animals—albeit only when undetached from the whole.
- Suppose, then, I say something using the word 'rabbit', e.g., 'There's a rabbit over there in the corner'. Is it clear that I mean my word 'rabbit' to apply to the whole animal, and not to an undetached part?

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- It's tempting to say that of course my word 'rabbit' applies to the whole animal; any other construal would be silly. But if we press the question about whether my word applies to the whole animal or an undetached part, how might we support one answer rather than the other?
- It won't help to say, as before, that my word 'rabbit' applies to rabbits; that's just to say, unhelpfully, that I use the word 'rabbit' to apply to whatever I call rabbits.
- And it's plainly uninformative and circular to settle what 'rabbit' applies to by appeal to the very word that's in question.

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- A natural suggestion is to appeal to whole sentences in which I use the word 'rabbit'—in particular, to the conditions under which such sentences are true.
Shouldn't that determine how I'm applying the word 'rabbit'?
- But that can't help. That's because the sentences 'There's a rabbit' and 'There's an undetached rabbit part' are true in exactly the same circumstances.
- So appealing to sentences of mine that contain the word 'rabbit' can't determine whether my word applies to whole animals or to undetached parts.

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- But how about counting? There are lots of undetached parts for every one rabbit. So can't you settle what my word 'rabbit' applies to when I say "There's a rabbit in the corner" simply by asking me how many there are?
- No. The trouble is that if my word 'rabbit' did apply to undetached parts, my other words—'there is', 'is the same', and the like—would be adjusted to compensate.
- How would that work? I might construe your question about how many as asking how many groupings of parts, rather than how many parts—and then I'd say one.

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- There is arguably no way around this. Any gerrymandered construal of ordinary nouns like 'rabbit' could be offset by compensatory adjustment in words like 'is'.
- You could hypothesize that my words apply only to middle-sized objects; that hypothesis about how to construe my words could provide an answer.
- But there would always be an alternative theory about how to construe my individual words. And we could decide among such alternative hypotheses only by some even higher-level theory about how words apply in the lower theory—and so forth on up.

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IV. Truth and the Self

- How troubling is the puzzle about rabbits vs. undetached parts?
- Not very. Whether my word 'rabbit' refers to rabbits or undetached parts, it surely refers to something leporine—as opposed to canine or feline or inanimate altogether.
- Our detour through that puzzle was to give an illustration of how hard it can be to get independent support for our usual assumption that phonetics, orthography, or standard lexical translation of words do preserve sameness of application.

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- But the puzzle also points to how it is that we are ever able to get any grip on what somebody's individual words apply to.
- It's by appeal to the role those words play in full sentences. Our only grip on what a individual word applies is by appeal to which sentences the word occurs in are true and which are not.
Only because leporine objects make sentences with 'rabbit' in them true do we know that 'rabbit' applies to such objects.
- Truth and falsity of sentences is required to determine what words apply to.
Without sentences, words would float free.

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- Truth and falsity of sentences is also basic to assessing rationality. We see one thing (A) as supporting another (B) only if we're disposed not to assert A and also deny B.
- A (say, it's raining) is a compelling reason for believing B (it's wet outside) only if we would resist affirming A while denying B.
Rationality consists in how we assign truth and falsity to sentences in suitable groups.
- All interpretation and translation hinges on charity about rationality, use of words, and the truth of statements.
And since the first two hinge on what we take to be true, truth is most basic.

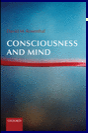
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- I urged that we can tell what individual words apply to only by appeal to the truth and falsity of sentences that contain them.
- But that way of determining the application of individual words may not always match homophonic or lexical translation. Words that are spelled or sound alike or that standard lexicons tell us are equivalent may not be equivalent when judged by their roles in containing sentences.
- But that's just the independence of charity about individual words from charity about truth of sentences. And as we saw, those two must be balanced against each other.

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- I want to close by considering a question about the possible need to interpret one's own remarks.
- I've argued elsewhere that we are all self-interpreters in the way our mental lives appear in our stream of consciousness.
- The thoughts, desires, feelings, and perceptions we have are conscious only when we are aware of ourselves as being in those mental states. And being aware of such states requires interpretation about what states we are in. Conscious awareness is itself a form of self-interpretation.

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- But I want here to pose only a narrower question about self-interpretation:
Do we need to interpret our own remarks?
- Here's a reason to think we needn't.
If I say 'I'll meet you at the bank', you may have to disambiguate my use of the word 'bank', but I don't need to.
I know automatically which I have in mind.
- But the quandaries about interpretation we've been considering are more subtle and complex. So our knowing what we mean in that particular way may not settle whether we need to interpret our own remarks as well as those of others.

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- Here's a reason to think we might:
We're in no better position to tell whether our own use of 'rabbit' applies to whole animals or undetached parts than we are with anybody else's use of the word.
- We have no more to go on in such self-interpretation than in interpreting others.
- But that puzzle about how individual words apply doesn't figure here.
Recall how charity in interpretation and translation works: We construe others' statements as true and their reasons as good—both as we see those things—and their words as applying as ours do.

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- Interpretation and translation are anchored in our views about truth and rationality and in our use of words. All translating and interpreting unavoidably relies our own views and our own use of words.
- Moreover, the application of our individual words and our assessments of rationality both depend on what we see as true.
- Since all interpreting of others rests on our taking some statements to be true and others not, all translation and interpretation rests on self-interpretation—on interpreting ourselves, albeit seldom consciously, as believing some things and not others.

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- Interpreting oneself as holding a belief makes one aware of having it. But that needn't make the belief conscious; one might be aware of it just by noting one's being disposed to say various things that would express such a belief.
- Nor need self-interpretation be in place prior to interpretation of others; access to one's own thoughts need not precede understanding of others' speech.
- Rather, our ability to interpret what we believe develops together with our ability to interpret others. Interpretation of self and other go together holistically.

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Summary

- The need to translate others' remarks, even those in a common first language, is evident from the often overlooked failure to understand what others say.
- Such translation—as with translation from other languages—depends on construing others charitably with respect to what they think is true and rational and how they use individual words. These three factors can conflict; so there will often be alternative ways to balance them with no way to decide among them.

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Thank you for your attention

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