TRANSLATION AND LINGUISTIC RELATIVISM.
AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL APPROACH[1]

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to provide a reconstruction of the philosophical discussions generated by the issue of translation from one language to another. Modern philosophers have already observed that language influences the way we think.

The hermeneutic tradition was followed by the establishment of a linguistic research tradition whose first doctrinal thesis was to notice the relativistic consequence of the plurality of languages. Later, epistemological relativism also underwent a linguistic turn. Exploratory concepts such as radical translation, indeterminacy of translation, paradigm and incommensurability, conceptual scheme, translation and interpretation were discussed.

*Keywords***:** "Linguistic turn", linguistic relativism, translation, interpretation, meaning and truth.

1.   Looking for the starting point. Two research traditions

The story is well-known by everyone. We find it in *Genesis*, 11, 4-9:

> 4. Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.'

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5. But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. 6. The Lord said, 'If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. 7. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.'
8. So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. 9 That is why it was called Babel[c] – because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.[3]

This biblical story teaches us that language is the cement of social cooperation, and that the diversity of languages could lock or close different communities and the channels of communication and common understanding. But we can overcome these difficulties if we are able to translate our languages into each other so that mutual understanding becomes possible. Moreover, to be able to speak another language and to translate from one language into another presupposes a language. This became a cultural virtue at the end of the Renaissance. Many intellectuals began to write their works in national language and not in Latin. Marcilio Ficino wrote *Sopra l'amore*, a dialogue in platonic fashion, in Italian. The new trend at the dawn of modernity was to use national languages in all domains. In France, as an examplary case, the change was very fast, from Descartes who has made the transition from Latin to French to Voltaire who had already begun to think of a comparative perspective between Shakespeare and Molière. The Bible was also translated into national languages and the need to talk about translation and interpretation was recognized.

Linguistic relativism was expressed as a clear hypothesis by German Romantic philosophers beginning with the end of the eighteenth century. They proposed the concept of *Volksgeist*, the idea that every national or ethnic group has some characteristics which are in a causal or a determinative relation with a spiritual moving force. J. G. Herder, one of the leaders of *Sturm und Drang* movement, published the book *Ursprung*

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[3]   See *The Bible, Biblica*. The International Bible Society. New International Version, https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/genesis/11/, accessed on March 5th, 2017.

der Sprache in which he argued that language shapes the frameworks in which each linguistic community thinks. Wilhelm von Humboldt asserted that language can't be reduced to a set of sounds and signs, but is even more than a view of the world, namely, the primary place where our thoughts are born. The diversity of languages became a reason that helped explain the diversity of nations and their identity in different forms, from cultural identity to political identity as a national state. This cultural approach led to the birth of hermeneutics as a new domain of research which continues nowadays. Translation is seen as an alteration through which original meanings are transformed under the impact of another cultural framework, yet there is no other way because human understanding is nothing but translation and presupposes a language: "inside or between languages, human communication equals translation. A study of translation is a study of language" (Steiner 1998, 49).

The other research tradition, formed more recently, at the beginning of last century, has its roots in cultural anthropology and linguistics and it gradually led to a cognitivist approach that has raised questions with epistemological relevance. The constitutive moment is represented by the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis regarding the principle of linguistic relativism. In the "Preface" of his book *Language. An Introduction to the study of speech*, Sapir mentions that his main purpose is to offer an explanation regarding the variability of language in time and place and its relations to other fundamental human interests (see Sapir 1939, iii). According to Sapir, "Culture may be defined as *what* a society does and thinks. Language is a particular *how* of thought" (Sapir 1939, 233). He claims that it is difficult to find the causal relations between our cultural experience and the manner in which these are expressed by language as a social and historical product.[4]

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[4] Sapir explains this difference in terms of his own theory: "The drift of history, another way of saying history, is a complex series of changes in society's selected inventory – additions, losses, changes of emphasis and relation. The drift of language is not properly concerned with changes of content at all, merely with changes in formal expression. It is possible, in thought, to change every sound, word, and concrete concept of a language without changing its inner actuality in the least, just as one can pour into a fixed mold water or plaster or molten gold. If it can be shown that culture has an innate form, a series of contours, quite apart from subject-matter

Moreover, Sapir worked with the distinction between cultural content and linguistic form and he clearly express the idea that the structures of the two aren't isomorphic because language isn't the only determining factor. Therefore, if we conceive two communities which share a common language we have to accept the possibility that they can't share the same thought because other determinants are different. For example, if we take into account our perceptions of things from the external world, we'll discover that it is possible to have one word or many words for a perceived thing or even to have none. This means that we are free to propose different linguistic descriptions of the world. Language is just a condition, not the only determining causal factor of our descriptions of the world.

This weak form of linguistic relativity proposed by Sapir was challenged by a strong one based on the recognition of a determining relation between language and thought proposed by Benjamin Whorf. The strong version is based on the idea that the given structure of language constrains us to describe the world in a certain way and, as a result, it also shapes our thought and our cognition of the world. We usually describe the world in terms of substances and properties because the elementary structure of assertions, based on two elements, the subject and the predicate, determines our conception about the world:

> We cut nature up, organize it, into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech and is codified in the patterns of our language. (Whorf 1956, 214)

It is important to note that Whorf has studied Native American languages and he was interested to reveal the differences between European languages

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of any description whatsoever, we have a something in culture that may serve as a term of comparison with and possibly a means of relating it to language. But until such purely formal patterns of cultures are discovered and laid bare, we shall do well to hold the drifts of language and of culture to be non-comparable unrelated processes. From this it follows that all attempts to connect particular types of linguistic morphology with certain correlated stages of cultural development are vain." (Sapir, 1939, 233-234)

(the so-called Standard Average European – SAE) and indigenous language. He discovered that in Native American Languages there are many terms which correspond to a single term in SAE. The well-known example was that regarding more than twenty words for "snow" in Eskimo (Inuit) language (similarly in Sami language, in Scandinavia). Or, another example, in the case of drinking water, there are two different words in Hopi language, one for natural sparkling water, another for water which is put in a container. Moreover, Whorf discovered that in Hopi language there aren't nouns for units of time (one day, two years and so on) because they treat times as a single process which can't be cut in countable instances or sequences. One of the preferred examples was that of two languages which use different terms for colors. The conclusion was that if the two languages are so different then the members of the two linguistic communities will have difficulties to understand one another because the translation can't be completed when the vocabulary and background linguistic structures place the speakers in different worlds.

My aim in this paper is to follow this second research tradition which was developed starting from the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis about linguistic relativism and to offer a reconstruction of the debate in an epistemological framework which takes into account the relation between language, translation, knowledge and truth. I think that such an approach should consider some of the main theories which contain at least some elements of linguistic relativism.

2. The place of linguistic relativism among relativisms

How shall we understand linguistic relativism in epistemological terms? How should we explain the truth of an assertion in relation with the language in a relativistic manner? A general taxonomy of different cognitive relativisms was proposed by Mandelbaum. He makes a distinction between subjective, objective[5] and conceptual relativisms.

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[5]   Mandelbaum takes the expression "objective relativism" from Arthur E. Murphy. See below.

Subjective relativism holds that "any assertion must be viewed in relation to the beliefs and attitudes of the particular individual making the assertion" (Mandelbaum 1982, 35). Epistemologically speaking, this means that the truth or falsity of an assertion is relative to the epistemic subject who made the assertion, to his/her subjective interests, attitudes and biases. As a consequence, "true" is replaced with "true for:" this means that things are for an epistemic subject just as they seem to be for that subject. Moreover, the possibility of disagreement is dissolved because the distinction between correct and incorrect judgments can't be supported any longer since all judgments we believe in will be correct or true just for the reason that we believe them. In European thought, this tradition started with Protagoras' doctrine of humans as measure of all things and continued to be mentioned more as a possible philosophical standpoint. Many forms of subjectivism, and I include methodological relativism among them, don't include the relativist thesis. It is obvious that linguistic relativism can't be identified as subjective relativism given that language is intersubjective by its very nature.

Objective relativism of a knowledge relation is based on the principle that there is always a personal reason for any assertion which was made, or that the person who has made the assertion occupies a particular position in that epistemic situation, or that any assertion is able to refer only to some of the aspects of the object with which it is concerned. Consequently, the truth of an assertion is dependent on the context in which the assertion was made. Unlike the subjective relativist, the objective one

> would deny that what is taken to be true or false is primarily a function of the beliefs and attitudes of the particular person making the assertion; rather, it is relative to the nature of the total context in which the assertion is made. (*ibidem*)

The difference between the two relativisms is that in the first case our knowledge becomes personal knowledge and is subjective because is relative to our own system of beliefs, whereas in the second case our knowledge remains objective because the components of the context

which produce our beliefs are independent from the purposes of the epistemic subject.

The third form, conceptual relativism, holds that our assertions have to be interpreted with reference to the cultural context in which they are embedded, namely, not in their relations with the objects, as in the case of objective relativism, but in their dependence on the intellectual or conceptual background. Wittgenstein's later work, Whorf's linguistic relativism, Kuhn's theory about knowledge based on paradigms, and Rorty's idea of contingent vocabularies are usually considered good samples of conceptual relativism. This enumeration already contains a theoretical place for linguistic relativism as a case of conceptual relativism.

In Mandelbaum's view, conceptual relativism is culture bound and there is no way to ground it in data which aren't culture bounded. Therefore, someone who supports conceptual relativism makes claims which contain the so-called "self-excepting fallacy," namely "the fallacy of stating a generalization that purports to hold of all persons but which, inconsistently, is not then applied to oneself."[6]

Let us return to objective relativism as a preliminary step to a better understanding of linguistic relativism.

The term "objective relativism" was proposed by Arthur E. Murphy in his article "Objective Relativism in Dewey and Whitehead" (Murphy 1927). The two philosophers suggest that events and relationships, and not objects, are the ultimate constituents of what there is. What are the epistemological consequences of this position?

Mandelbaum mentions some difficulties of objective relativism under three headings:

> first, with respect to the role of interest or purpose in judgments concerning matters of fact; second, with respect to the influence of the standpoint of the observer on the judgments he makes; and, third, the consequences which follow from the fact that any judgment is selective, dealing only with particular features or aspects of the object or situation judged. (Mandelbaum 1982, 35)

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6   Mandelbaum (1982, 35). See also Mandelbaum (1962).

We are easily ready to accept that every judgment about facts stands in a relation to a situation in which the epistemic subject making the judgment is bound to some interests or purposes which relate to the content of that judgment. But such interests and purposes can interfere in two ways. On the one hand, the epistemic subject is instrumentally interested about an object of knowledge because he would like to bring about or to avoid a state of affairs. On the other hand, the epistemic subject may be interested in an object for the simple reason that it interests him. In this case, the purpose is to explore, to understand or to explain the state of affairs or the object. The two ways aren't mutually exclusive. The objective relativist claims that any epistemic subject who knows something is trapped at least in one of the two situations, and there is no escape from them.

In an instrumental or pragmatic way we can introduce the same approach based on the idea that a standpoint is the framework in which the subject develop its organic functions (just as the Darwinian theory of evolution asserts) and its mental capacities (as in Dewey's theory of education). A standpoint can be conceived in two ways, temporally or spatially. Those objective relativists who are concerned with historical knowledge put the relativity of our judgments in connection with the moment when they were made. Those objective relativists who are concerned with sense perception lay emphasis on the fact that different observers look at the same object from different points of view. Certainly there isn't a sharp line between the two ways.

In the case of historical knowledge, relativists can use two ways in order to understand the influence of temporal factors on historical judgments of the past. Each way depends on selections and interpretations; this is something proper to the writing of history. The first (and less radical) is the claim that selection and interpretation are made starting from present interests. This means that we focus our attention on some events and they are seen as continuous with the present. If the present changes, the interpretations of the past will change also. The second and radical claim is that "the past itself undergoes significant change through later developments" (Mandelbaum 1982, 40).

If we turn to the hard core of this kind of relativistic argument springing from Whorf's hypothesis, then I think that we can conclude

that the way the world appears to be to the user of a language depends on the implicit metaphysics of that language. In Whorf's terms, this means that:

> The background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stick in trade. (…)
> The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented as a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic system of our minds. (Whorf 1956, 212-213)

3. The "linguistic turn" of cognitive relativism

Would this mean that the worlds in which we live will be more or less similar depending on the language we speak or will we be able to understand each other through communication and translation? We agree that even if languages are so different from each other and our minds are determined or structured by them, we can understand each other as members of different linguistic communities. We can express the same ideas in different languages and we can cooperate even if we can't speak the same language. We can translate one language into another and obtain the same practical effects. Moreover, members of a scientific research community communicate with each other and share a common vocabulary of the scientific discipline in which they work. But what is the relationship between the research community and the linguistic background on which the social network operates? Does language influence community structuring?

I will further argue that Thomas Kuhn's relativism is the best example of such an approach. He starts his *The Copernican Revolution* with some remarks about the observations made by two astronomers, a Ptolemaic one and a Copernican one, to notice the differences between them and their relativistic cognitive commitments. When the two

astronomers look at a sunrise, they will see different things just because the Ptolemaic believes that the Sun moves around the Earth while the Copernican believes that the Earth moves around the Sun. They will use the same statements about what they perceive, but their observations are influenced by the previously mentioned beliefs, so that they will think that they are talking about different things.

This idea was developed by Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, where he used the concept of paradigm in order to explain the differences between two scientific communities which share different views about the world, and the concept of incommensurability in order to explain the relations between two different paradigms.

Let's consider two examples. The first is about Lavoisier and Priestley, and their attempt to explain the phenomenon of burning. Lavoisier saw oxygen and talked about "oxygen" where Priestley saw and talked about "dephlogisticated air." As a consequence, the two scientists saw different things and their descriptions of the world differed. The second example concerns Newton and Einstein. In their case, the word "mass" as it is used by Newton cannot be translated by "mass" as it is used by Einstein. Although the words are the same in material mode, as succession of letters, their meanings are different. Therefore, because the meaning of a word is given in a holistic mode, the two scientists work with different concepts of mass. The two concepts are incommensurable and a translation can't be made.

Kuhn explained and developed his ideas in "Second Thoughts on Paradigms" (1977), then, in "The Road since *Structure*" (2000) proposed that incommensurability has to be understood in terms of differences between taxonomies which are used as classificatory schemes. Moreover, Kuhn introduces the new concept of lexical network. We learn a language by learning some words in an ostensive manner. Let's imagine a small child on a walk with his father in a zoological garden. The child previously learned to recognize and to discriminate some species of birds, but that day he will learn to identify swans, geese, and ducks. Ostension is the best tool to learn something in these circumstances, because phrases like "all swans are white" may play a role, but we have no guarantee that they suffice for identification. The father sees a bird, points to it, saying "Look, there's a swan!" "A swan!",

the boy repeats, and adds something new in his taxonomy as a network of relations between words and objects. They continue their work and in a short time the child points to a bird, saying "Daddy, there's another swan!" But he hasn't yet learned what swans are and he must be corrected by his father: "No, that's isn't a swan, that's a goose". The next identification of a swan will be correct, but the next bird identified as a "goose" is, in fact, a duck. The child develops his lexical network adding the new word and better understanding the differences between a real swan, goose and duck. After a few such encounters and other corrections, the child will acquire the ability to identify these different species of birds.

This is just one of the possible stories about how is possible to learn a language by ostension and how to use a taxonomy. Different persons can learn a language in different ways and they can use different lexicons. For example, let's suppose that someone has only the word "bird" in their vocabulary. If they will correctly use this word for descriptions of their perceptual experiences when they sees a swan, a goose or a duck, the effect will be that they will use the language efficiently all the while avoiding some practical troubles caused by the poverty of their language. This means that our personal taxonomy could be different because we associate different cognitive and non-cognitive meanings to the words we use. For example, we associate some emotions and feelings to the word "earthquake" if we have experienced this kind of natural phenomenon. The problems that arise concern a) the possibility of different people being engaged in communication given that the taxonomies they use only partly overlap, and b) the possibility of translating one language or vocabulary into another.

A relatively similar "linguistic turn" was developed by Quine (1960) in his theory about the indeterminacy of translation, in relation to a behaviorist theory of meaning. Quine proposed the so-called *gavagai* thought-experiment. Let's suppose that a linguist tries to find out the meaning of "gavagai," an expression used by a native speaker of an unknown language. The ostensive way is the best to capture the meaning: if the speaker points to a rabbit when he utters the term "gavagai," we'll conclude that this is its meaning and that the word "gavagai" has to be translated by "rabbit." But it is a mistake to think that we always have the capacity to compare a foreign language with

our own and that the background language and referential devices help us do this. It is easy to imagine that when the native speaker utters the word "gavagai" pointing to a real rabbit he refers to something else, for example, to undetached rabbit-parts, to a young rabbit or to rabbit-tropes. The conclusion is that it is better to work with several translation hypotheses even if the sensory stimuli and the behavioral data are the same for speakers of two different languages. There are many ways to make a translation fit the behavior of the speaker.

The difference between Quine's theory about the indeterminacy of translation and Kuhn's theory about different lexicons is that the first talks about the possibility of multiple partial translations, the second gives strong reasons for the impossibility to translate a language into another. So how do we explain the possibility that two speakers of different languages can understand each other? How do they overcome the inconveniences of translation?

4. Translation and interpretation

Let's start by going back to the distinction made by Frege between sense and reference.[7] We can easily understand it with the help of an example. When we talk about the planet Venus we can use two alternative expressions, "Morning Star" and "Evening Star." The meanings or senses of the two expressions are different, but their reference is the same, the planet Venus. Therefore, we can speak about the same thing using different expressions which refer to that thing in different senses.

Therefore, in a translation it is important to preserve not only the reference, but also the sense. It is clear that in the case of the words which are rigid designators we can do this easily. The reference of the word "water" will be H_2O in all the native languages spoken on Earth and we can talk about it using different descriptions, such as "the most important liquid on the Earth, the liquid which covers the Earth" and so on.

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[7]   See Frege (1949) for the English version. The original German version, "Über Sinn und Bedeutung" was published in the year 1892.

Generally speaking, we can use different descriptions for the same reference. For example, for the city of Luxemburg I can use different descriptions such as, "the capital of Luxemburg, the city I am currently visiting, one of the capitals of the European Union together with Brussels and Strasbourg, the seat of the European Court for Justice." The meanings of all these descriptions are different even if they have the same reference. But it is important to preserve the same sense if we want to preserve the initial thought or intention of the speaker. This request is very strict if we don't want to change the meaning through translation.

If we take into account again the ideal project of translation in a pure form as radical translation we'll assert that the difficult task for the translator is to preserve exactly the initial meaning of the words and sentences. The ideal task of the translator is to perfectly translate a sentence from one language into another sentence from a different language without any change in meaning. But, as I have said above, this task depends on the translator's prior linguistic knowledge.

Indeed, we can identify, with Quine, a case in which translation of a language is possible without any prior linguistic knowledge and solely on the basis of the observational knowledge (the observed behavior of the speaker and our acquaintance with the perceptual stimulations that give rise to that behavior). All the members of a linguistic community will be able to understand each other when they speak about basic perceptual stimulations. For example, when we see something, a tree, all of us agree that the word which have to be used is the word "tree". We suppose that all languages are basically learned starting from basic stimulations. Therefore, it will be easy to translate from one language to another if we speak about this kind of perceptual stimulations. But, if we remember the above example of seeing a rabbit, the so-called *gavagai* mental experiment, we have to admit that things are not so simple and safe even if these conditions of a radical translation are met.

This puzzle is a serious reason to look for an alternative. Davidson (1984) proposed a broader conception of the behavioral evidence available to a speaker/ translator/ interpreter, and he rejects Quine's idea about the special role of perceptual stimulations. He introduces the concept of "understanding a language" and claims that a theory of translation is necessary but not sufficient to ensure the understanding of

the translated language. For example, this is the case of a translation into a language which isn't understood by the speaker. As a result, the notion of "translation" is replaced with the notion of "interpretation".

"Radical interpretation" implies an interpretation of the linguistic behavior without any support from a speaker's prior knowledge. The domain of this prior knowledge should be comprised of a speaker's different beliefs about the world and the ways in which it structured by a conceptual schema, as well as the accepted meanings of the speaker's different utterances. As a consequence, we can speak of which meanings are assigned to the speaker's utterances if and only if we have sufficient knowledge of what the speaker believes, and we can grasp these beliefs if and only if we know what the speaker's utterances mean. Is there a way out of this mess? Davidson solved the problem by stating the principle of charity, according to which we usually work with the presupposition that all the speakers of a different language are rational, they want to communicate with each other and their intention is to tell the truth.

For example, let's suppose that we travel to a country where a language entirely different from ours is spoken. Let's suppose that we are in Japan, in Sapporo City, in winter times. When a Japanese will take some snow in his hands and he will say a word looking at it, we'll suppose, according to the principle of charity, that all he wants to do is to give us the linguistic equivalent for the word "snow". We don't have any reasons to suppose anything different regarding his behavior.

But is such a behaviorist approach complete from an explanatory point of view? Or do certain mentalistic components remain, at least in terms of understanding, unexplained? Let's focus on the problem regarding the relation between a translation from one language to another and the capacity to understand this process as a mental activity. I'll adapt the so-called "Chinese Room" thought-experiment proposed by Searle (1980) to the case of translation. Some philosophers and scientists think that, in the future, artificial intelligence will be able to translate more accurately from one language to another. Let's suppose that we construct a computer that takes Chinese characters as input and, running the computer programme, it produces other characters in another language as outputs, say in Romanian. Are we warranted in thinking that the computer is a Chinese and Romanian speaker? Does

the computer literally understand Chinese or Romanian? Or does it merely stimulate the ability to understand Chinese and Romanian? Searle's argument is that, without understanding (or, in Searle's terms, intentionality), we can't say that the machine thinks. If we take into account the case of multiple translations we'll say that is obvious that the computer isn't a human translator (or a human mind) because it can provide only statistics of uses and not a certitude based on feelings, as in the case of the humans. We'll conclude that, in Searle's terms, any translation is epistemically subjective, and that it is always related to interpretation and in need of understanding.

5.   Conclusion: the languages we speak, the worlds we live in…

But what are the consequences of such an approach that draws the contours of an inevitable relativism? To what extent does speaking different languages mean thinking differently about the world or living in different worlds? Davidson developed an idea that associates having a language with having a conceptual scheme. The relation is a very simple one: if conceptual schemes differ, so do languages, but if the languages differ, this does not mean that the conceptual schemes are also necessarily different:

> speakers of different languages may share a conceptual scheme provided there is a way of translating one language into the other. Studying the criteria of translation is therefore a way of focusing on criteria of identity for conceptual schemes. (Davidson 1974, 6)

Therefore, we have to consider the possibility that more than one language may express the same scheme and this means that these languages are intertranslatable. But is the relation of translatability transitive? Davidson's answer is that some language, say Saturnian, may be translatable into English and that some further language, like Plutonian, may be translatable into Saturnian, while Plutonian is not translatable into English. Corresponding to this distant language would be a system of concepts altogether alien to us.

Therefore, we return to the basic idea that the two worlds are different because we talk about them in different languages which aren't translatable. We explained this incommensurability, according to Kuhn's view, with the help of his theory about paradigms (or traditions). But what might it mean to live, due to one's differing paradigms or traditions, in different worlds? Following Kuhn's theory, we'll agree that it is possible to imagine that there is only one world, our own, that is described from different points of view with the help of different languages. Strawson proposed a purely epistemic alternative to the kuhnian linguistic and ontological approach. He claimed that "It is possible to imagine kinds of worlds very different from the world as we know it" (Strawson 1966, 15). But is it possible to imagine that these different worlds are described from the same standpoint with the help of the same language?

The case of natural kinds or essences seems to be the most challenging in terms of the relationship between worlds and languages. Here is is possible to only sketch what the bearing of a different thought-experiment might be. The thought-experiment of the so-called "Twin Earth", proposed by Putnam (1973), helps us to understand this puzzling problem. Let's suppose that there are two identical Earths. The difference in the case of water is that on Twin Earth "water" refers to something that has the same perceptual properties but isn't H_2O, having a different chemical structure, XYZ. Putnam proposed two theories about the meaning of the word "water":

1. "Water" has a meaning relative to the world, but constant. Therefore, "water" means the same thing in World 1 and Word 2, but it is H_2O in World 1 and XYZ in World 2.
2. "Water" is H_2O in all possible worlds. Therefore, in World 2 we use the same word for a thing with the same properties, but the word "water" has in World 2 another meaning.

Putnam prefers the second theory and asserts that the word "water" is a rigid designator and it denotes the liquid H_2O in all possible worlds.

If we prefer the same second choice then we have only one step back to return to Davidson's proposal to define meaning on the basis of conditions of truth. This is a robust solution at least when it comes to

facts. Undoubtedly, the Romanian translation for "Snow is white" will be "Zăpada este albă".

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