

Language, Rules, Mistakes, and Understanding: Attempts to Solve a Quinean Puzzle

In his article, “Ontological Relativity¹,” W.V. Quine makes the assertion that, as interpreters, we use both homophonic translation and the principle of charity during communication with others (199). Under the homophonic rule, we assume that when words sound the same as words used by others who speak our language, they are being used in the same way (199). When we communicate with others who seem to be using our language, we assume that they will be using language in the same way we do, and assume the words they use will be similar to the ones we use. However, we yield to the principle of charity instead of homophonic translation when someone seems to have made a mistake in their use of language (199). Put another way, this means that when a person speaking our language seems to have made a mistake, we assume that they are using language differently instead of assuming that what they are saying is absurd or nonsensical. However, this leaves unanswered an important question: how does an interpreter determine when a speaker is using a language that is different, yet very similar, to the language the interpreter is using versus when a speaker is using the same language and is simply mistaken? Since Quine does not provide an answer to this question, it is necessary to look elsewhere. Ludwig Wittgenstein discusses rule following, so it seems as though this will be a helpful place to look to determine when a speaker is mistake. Donald Davidson, on the other hand, attempts to explain the phenomenon of clear and effective communication when language is used in an unusual way. In the end, it seems as though Wittgenstein’s explanation will be inadequate for answering this question, and that Davidson provides a better answer, but one that still needs clarification.

¹ The JSTOR version of “Ontological Relativity” provided on Blackboard was the source of these page numbers.