The experience of a translator is often frustrating: perfect translations, even just good ones, are not easy to come by. To an ordinary translator, the idea that there are too many perfect translation schemes between any two languages would come as a great surprise. Yet a venerable—though much debated—philosophical thesis expresses just this idea. It is the thesis of the indeterminacy of translation, originally propounded by Quine and endorsed by other philosophers. The thesis implies that most of the “implicit canons” ordinary translators use in selecting and assessing translations lack objective status. This implied claim is my primary concern in this paper.

I want to take up the following issue, which has been largely neglected in the ever growing literature on indeterminacy. If the indeterminacy thesis is right, then our pretheoretic understanding of ordinary translation practices reflects a serious misconception. Given how prevalent and persistent this misconception is, a proponent of the thesis ought to either account for it, or tell us how to replace it. I will be arguing that this burden cannot be satisfactorily assumed by the champion of indeterminacy.

In section 1, I shall provide a pretheoretic sketch of the actual practice of (non-radical) translation. My description will focus on normative judgments made by translators in evaluating proposed translations for given sentences. Those judgments, I believe, reveal our pretheoretic commitment to the objectivity of linguistic facts. In section 2, I will first outline an anti-objectivist construal of these judgments which attempts to incorporate the indeterminacy idea. I will then argue that this construal is not available to the champion of indeterminacy. In section 3, I will argue that acceptance of Quinean indeterminacy requires becoming a true eliminativist regarding ordinary translation practices. However, as I argue in the final section, such a thorough-going eliminativism would threaten the cogency of the reasoning which originally led Quine to the indeterminacy thesis.

My purpose in the paper is twofold. First, I want to show that the proponent of Quinean indeterminacy is in a serious bind: accepting indeterminacy
leads to eliminativism about ordinary translation discourse, but accepting this eliminativism undermines the very reasoning that purportedly supports indeterminacy. Secondly, by highlighting central features of ordinary translation practices, I will be taking an initial step toward a positive, non-eliminativist view of translation.

1. The Practice of Translation—A Sketch

1.1 Translation, we may say,\(^1\) is the replacement of textual/discourse material of a source-language (SL) by equivalent material of a target-language (TL), with the consequent replacement of the SL graphology/phonology by (typically non-equivalent) TL graphology/phonology. What is the nature of the equivalence in question? Under what conditions does it obtain? While we cannot hope to provide general answers to these questions in the present discussion, we can examine the sort of considerations that often play a role in actual translation procedures. I shall begin by considering some examples.

1.11 This English mini-text

Is life worth living?—It depends on the liver.

has received the following French translation, heralded as “one of the happiest translations ever made” (see [22], p. 3f.):

La vie vaut-elle la peine?—Question de foie.

In commenting on this translation, Leonard Forster says:

This is a very clever rendering, in which the English pun on ‘liver’ has been reproduced in the French pun on ‘foie’.\(^2\) But… on closer inspection, the French means something different. A spiritual, perhaps Christian, element has been introduced into the French which may possibly be implied in the English but which is certainly not expressed…. What has been rendered—and brilliantly rendered—is the fact of the pun; not the pun itself, which is probably untranslatable. ([22], p. 4, emphasis added)

Poetry, of course, is a very rich source of similar examples, as poets often make deliberate use of the ambiguity of linguistic expressions. In cases of deliberate ambiguity, a translation which itself were not ambiguous would be regarded as deficient. Often, the translation that would be considered the best available would preserve the ambiguity feature, at the expense of so-called lexical meaning.\(^3\)

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1 In what follows, I shall be drawing upon Catford’s discussion in [6], especially Chapters 2–5.

2 The French words *foie* and *foi* are homonyms; the first means *liver* (the organ), the second means *faith*. (D.B.)

3 In the present section I shall avail myself freely of the pretheoretic notion(s) of meaning. Issues concerning the philosophical legitimacy of this notion will be taken up later on.
Chomsky’s famous “Flying planes can be dangerous” was originally used to illustrate a type of syntactic ambiguity. In this case, too, a good translation of the sentence in its original context into any other language would strive to render “the fact of” ambiguity, even at the expense of preserving its meaning. And, as several of the following examples will show, the sacrifice of meaning is by no means peculiar to contexts that are humorous (contain jokes or puns) or poetic, or to contexts involving metalinguistic discussion.

Consider the following sentence, from J. L. Austin’s “Truth” ([1]):

> [W]e may not like calling it a fact that the word *elephant* means what it does, though...we have no hesitation in calling it a fact that contemporary English speakers use the word as they do.

Given the point of the text, a Hebrew translation which discussed the English language would be very awkward. A better translation would render ‘elephant’ by *pi14* (or even by some other Hebrew word, since the lexical meaning of the word ‘elephant’ is hardly important here), and would render ‘English’ by the Hebrew word *iv-rit* (meaning Hebrew).

In “Self-Reference and Translation” ([5]), Tyler Burge discusses some examples which show that sometimes the point of a text dictates sacrificing the preservation of reference in favor of the preservation of self-reference. Consider

(1) This very sentence begins with a four-letter demonstrative.

When given as an example in some text, its natural translation into German would be

(1’) *Dieser Satz faengt mit einem hinweisenden Artikel mit sechs Buchstaben an.*

(1’) shares with (1) the following feature: each says something about *its* first word. (1’) seems to be a perfectly correct translation of (1), yet it does not preserve the reference of (all) the expressions within the original sentence. In fact, the example shows that even so-called truth-conditions need not always be preserved by a correct translation.

The phenomenon is not restricted to texts containing indexical expressions. Consider

The result of putting the quotation of “The result of putting the quotation of *w* for *S1* in *w* is not a theorem” for *S1* in “The result of putting the quotation of *w* for *S1* in *w* is not a theorem” is not a theorem.

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4 I shall be using italics to transcribe foreign words, as well as to specify meanings of English words. I shall use single quotation marks when talking about English words.
This sentence is taken from a discussion by Quine of Godel's result ([17], p. 307). Existing translations of it do not only alter the reference of the subject singular term in the English sentence; they also change the referents of the quotations. For instance, the Spanish text contains an appropriate Spanish expression within the quotations.\(^5\)

1.15 Finally, consider a somewhat different example, discussed by Catford. Like English, Burushasky (a Pakistani language), has two lexical items used to talk about one's siblings: \(a\-cho\) and \(a\-yas\).\(^6\) But whereas English distinguishes male and female siblings, Burushaski distinguishes siblings of the same and of different gender as the speaker. A woman would use \(a\-cho\) to talk about her sister, a man would use \(a\-yas\) to talk about his sister (and if a woman uses \(a\-yas\), she would be talking about her brother). Catford represents the differences between the English and Burushaski items in the following table: ('+', '-' means \(male\), '-' means \(female\))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Situation</th>
<th>Burushaski</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Speaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brother</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sister</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a result of these differences, the same \textit{unambiguous} expression, say, \(a\-yas\) will have to receive different translations into English, depending on the Burushaski speaker's gender.

1.2 The examples in 1.11–1.15. illustrate—in different ways—how considerations of global characteristics of the source-text (e.g., its point) and of the relations linguistic items bear to other items come into decisions about translation.\(^7\) Given such considerations, what is the correct translation of a given linguistic item in one context may not be its correct translation in another. This context-dependence tends to reduce the usefulness of certain popular philosophical notions, like the notion of \textit{a proposition}, for purposes

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\(^5\) See reference to the Spanish translation in [17], p. 299. As Burge points out, this shows that the famous “Church-Langeford test” (according to which quoted—or mentioned—material is not to be translated) must be modified.

\(^6\) As Catford explains in a footnote ([6], p. 39), \(a\) is an obligatory pronominal prefix; the lexical items are actually \(cho\) and \(yas\).

\(^7\) Considerations about the intended (target) audience may also enter into decisions about translation. E.g., in translating a book for children, one may prefer to avoid glosses, and opt for the nearest equivalents. These are contextual considerations of a different kind—pertaining to the context of the translation, rather than that of the source text. I shall ignore them for the sake simplicity.
of discussing actual translation practices. It is common wisdom among practicing translators that preserving the proposition expressed by a sentence is often not sufficient for good translation. I think some of the examples we have seen (and see examples below) show that it is sometimes not even necessary. In view of this, a practice-oriented theorist of translation may agree with Quine that the unitary philosophical notion of proposition "seems to facilitate talk of translation precisely because it falsifies the nature of the enterprise" ([18], p. 208), without yet accepting the reason Quine has for this claim, namely, that translation is essentially indeterminate.

Philosophers keen on propositions are prone to insist that, when the proposition expressed is not preserved, the result is a translation which is less than *exact*. Now, the notion of "exact translation" is an important one. Translators and critics often reject proposed translations for being "inexact." But I think philosophers should be wary of imposing standards of exactness that are unrealistically (and needlessly) strict. I think the examples in 1.13 and 1.14, for instance, illustrate cases where propositional content is sacrificed but not exactness of translation. In these cases, the propositional content is simply not relevant, given the point of each text. (The translations cited in 1.13 and 1.14 would pass what is perhaps the most stringent—and probably also unrealistic—test for exactness of translation: we could easily get from the translations back to the original sentences by a process of backward translation.)

I am inclined to think that there is no single set of linguistic features whose preservation would always be regarded as either necessary or sufficient for exact translation in the eyes of practicing translators. It is not only that features thought to be essential—"propositional content," "linguistic meaning," or what have you—can sometimes be sacrificed without loss of cognitive significance. But also sometimes features which we might expect always to be able to sacrifice without loss, such as the sound of words, or gender marking, may be important enough that their preservation would be required for exact translation.8

I think we need a notion that is in some respects more stringent, and in others looser, than notions often entertained in philosophical discussions of translation and meaning. The required notion—call it "translation-meaning"—would be better suited for discussing translation as it is actually practiced. Very loosely:

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8 I am thinking here not only of examples from poetry, lyrics and commercials. I am sure one could cook up a story in which the hero's response to a certain sentence or word could only be understood if it is noticed that the sentence (word) sounds like (and hence reminds him of) some other sentence (word). An adequate translation in such a case would have to be sensitive to that; the target reader's basic understanding of the plot would be impaired otherwise.
The translation-meaning of a linguistic item\(^9\) is the set of features which would be associated with it by SL users, and which are relevant to its translation, in a given context.

As I understand the notion, the translation-meaning of a linguistic item can vary from context to context. So translation-meaning ("tr-meaning," for short) is not the same as what David Kaplan has called "character" (see [10], pp. 24ff.). For, while the character of even a context-sensitive term (like, e.g., the Burushaski \textit{a-cho} above) is \textit{not} itself context sensitive, the tr-meaning of any linguistic item, on my picture, is. Thus, it will not do to propose that preservation of character is what is (always) necessary for exact translation.\(^10\)

Translations are typically evaluated according to the extent to which they approximate full preservation of tr-meaning. An exact translation will be one which exhibits maximal preservation of tr-meaning. I think that whether—and to what extent—we can, in particular cases, achieve exact translations is an open question which \textit{must not} be closed by philosophical legislation. A clear example of what I would regard as a philosophical attempt to legislate in these matters is the following "Exact Translation Hypothesis":

\begin{quote}
Anything that can be said in one natural language can be translated exactly into any other language.\(^{11}\)
\end{quote}

\(^9\) I use "linguistic item" to cover linguistic expressions, as well as segments of texts/discourses of varying lengths. I think of linguistic items as \textit{types}.

\(^{10}\) For Kaplan, an expression’s character is a function from possible contexts to what he calls "content." An expression’s content is a function from circumstances of evaluation to an extension (like Carnap’s "intension"). Two occurrences of an expression can agree in content but differ in character. (E.g.: ‘D.B.’ and ‘I’.) Two occurrences of an expression can also agree in character but differ in content. (E.g.: ‘I’ uttered by me now, and ‘I’ uttered by you.) Kaplan roughly equates character with "linguistic meaning"—e.g., the invariable element \textit{the speaker of this utterance} which ‘I’ has in common, e.g., with the German \textit{ich}. Though Kaplan does not discuss this, I can easily imagine a philosopher seizing upon Kaplan’s more refined picture, and claiming that character is what exact translation must preserve. The Burushaski example, I think, would show this to be wrong. \textit{a-cho} (\textit{a-yas}) does \textit{not} have the same character as ‘my brother’ (‘my sister’). Still, I would argue, \textit{in some contexts}, ‘my brother’ would provide an exact translation of \textit{a-cho} (or \textit{a-yas}). However, in other contexts—I allow—the fact that the Burushaski and English expressions have different characters may hinder exact translation—it may come into the tr-meaning of the relevant expression. I thank Keith Simmons for emphasizing the difference to me.

\(^{11}\) This is a formulation offered by Edward Keenan (in [13]) for a thesis put forth by Jerrold Katz. Katz thinks something like this hypothesis follows from the Principle of Effability, which he claims has been propounded in somewhat different forms by Frege, Tarski and Searle:

\textit{PE}: Each proposition can be expressed by some sentence in any natural language.
The next set of examples will suggest that it often isn’t possible to achieve exactness. This is because there are systematic and pervasive ‘mismatches’ between source- and target-languages which can stand in the way of maximal preservation of relevant features. The examples are divided according to the kind of mismatch involved.

1.31 Lexical Mismatches: Let a designator be a pattern of phonemes which (a) stands for, or represents something (e.g., an object, or class of objects, a phenomenon, an experience); and (b) performs its symbolic/representative function by encapsulating, as it were, a complex of extra-linguistic features. A lexical mismatch occurs when SL has a designator which has no appropriate equivalent in the TL.12 We can distinguish two kinds of lexical mismatches, corresponding to (a) and (b).

A “referential mismatch” occurs where an SL designator stands for idiosyncratic aspects (or elements) of the extra-linguistic environment of the SL speakers—whether natural or socio-cultural—which are completely missing from the environment of the TL speakers. Thus, the absence of an adequate English translation for the Hebrew word hamsin, which refers to a certain mid-Eastern weather condition, simply reflects the absence of this extra-linguistic phenomenon from the natural environment of English speakers. Similarly, the word ma’apil (meaning a so-called illegal immigrant arriving in Israel by boat at the time of the British Mandate) stands for an idiosyncratic element in the history shared by (contemporary) Hebrew speakers. And the (syntactically unanalysable) Malagasi word kabary stands for a ritual (a special kind of formal speech given only on certain types of ceremonial occasions) which has no analogue in the social environment of English speakers (see [13], p. 164).

A “linguistic mismatch” occurs when the relevant elements, though present in the background of both SL and TL speakers (and even recognized by them as distinct elements), are, for whatever reason, compressed by a single designator in the one language but not in the other. Thus, Vietnamese is reported to have a single lexical item which means someone leaves to go somewhere and something happens at home so that he has to go back home (see [14], p. 6). A projector is the thing that shows pictures on the wall in the language spoken by the Chipaya of Bolivia (ibid.). More familiar are ex-

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12 This notion of designator is borrowed from Dagut, [7]. I have opted for “mismatches” instead of Dagut’s somewhat misleading “voids.” The following discussion has benefited from examples and ideas found in Dagut and in Catford ([6]).
amples of different color vocabularies which divide the color spectrum in incompatible ways. And we have encountered earlier sibling of the same (different) sex as the speaker which gives the meaning of the Burushaski cho (yas). These are examples in which the SL and the TL simply “package” relevant elements differently.

Lexical mismatches of both varieties may stand in the way of exact translation. Translators confronted with referential mismatches often opt for transcription, rather than translation, of the relevant source item (see examples in [7], p. 65). But transcriptions, while in a certain sense accurate, are likely to be entirely uninformative to the target audience, unless supplemented by glosses explaining what the source lexical item stands for. Sometimes a translator will try to remedy the mismatch by providing an explanation or choosing the nearest equivalent TL lexical item(s). The translation is usually informative but inaccurate, and often culminates in grotesque results, as can be seen from the following example of an actual translation:

Hebrew (transcribed): u-bekhen nikhnasnu la-hupa, belo qrovim u-velo qru-im, huz mi-minyan she-qa'am ha-shamash...u-khshe-amad ha-rav veqara ha-ktuba nistakalti ba-shushbinim...

English: And so our wedding took place with neither relatives nor invited guests, except for a bare quorum summoned by the sexton...And when the rabbi stood and read the marriage contract I looked at the wedding-guests...

This translation is inexact, for reasons spelled out by Menachem Dagut ([7], p. 66). Briefly, the choice of the underlined English expressions culminates in a rather bizarre description of what is, in the Hebrew, a fairly standard description of a Jewish wedding ceremony. It would be quite safe to say that the uninitiated reader of the English text would have no idea of what was supposed to be going on in the occasion described.

The kind of problem illustrated above arises in a great variety of contexts, and is not due to the specifically religious aspects of the original description. Nor is it a problem of preserving merely aesthetic qualities of the source-text. What the target reader is missing here is a certain information conveyed in the original. Conveying this information to the target reader would require a rather elaborate explanation which would hardly qualify as a translation, as it would involve metalinguistic and meta-ethnic descriptions completely absent from the original text. One can perhaps improve on the above translation. But given the nature of the information encapsulated by the underlined Hebrew designators, it is very unlikely that one could find an exact translation of that Hebrew text into English.
Linguistic mismatches pose equally difficult problems. Consider the following example of an actual translation:

Hebrew: mitgale lefanenu havay shel reshit milhemet ha-olam ha-rishona.

English: We are introduced to life as it was lived at the beginning of the First World War.

In his comments on this translation (op. cit., p. 68f), Dagut observes that the translation ‘life as it was lived’ captures only one of two crucial aspects in the meaning of the Hebrew havay. It misses the other one, which has to do not so much with the actual behavior patterns of a particular community, but more with the background setting for that behavior and for its manifestations. Thus, the translator here achieved only partial equivalence (afforded by the partial overlap in the environmental/cultural elements covered by the SL and TL expressions). But the translation has resulted in some loss of relevant content, and is, to that extent, inexact. (See also Dagut’s example on p. 69)

As a last example of lexical mismatch (of the “linguistic” variety), let us turn briefly to the often cited case of mismatches in color-vocabularies. The Navaho basic color vocabulary reportedly contains three terms (as opposed to the English six-term vocabulary—“red,” “orange,” “yellow,” “green,” “blue” and “purple”). They are (in distorted transcription): licii? (roughly: red), lico (orange + yellow) and dootl’izh (green + blue + purple). (See [6], p. 43f., and p. 51.) Now, suppose a Navaho speaker says “[I want to paint my house] dootlizh,” and seems equally content when presented with samples of (what we describe as) green, blue and purple. The English translation, “I want to paint my house green or blue or purple,” will usually be taken to suggest a certain amount of indecision on the speaker’s part, which is (we may suppose) not evidenced in the context of the Navaho utterance. To that extent, the English translation is inexact. But even brushing aside this inexactness, translation in the opposite direction, of e.g., the English “I want to paint my house green” into the Navaho language seems bound to suffer in some contexts. For, the conditions under which natural Navaho candidates (i.e., sentences containing dootlizh) would be true will likely be more inclusive than those in which the English sentence will be true.

1.32 Grammatical Mismatches: We now turn to a different set of examples illustrating what I shall refer to as “grammatical mismatches.” Consider the following example (due to Keenan, [13], pp. 177f.) of translation from English into Malagasy (I use brackets to indicate the English renderings of the Malagasy translations):

English: (i) Rabe put the basket on/under the table.
(ii) The table on top of/under which Rabe put the basket was damaged.

Malagasy: (i') (similarly) [Rabe put the basket on/under the table.]

but: (ii') [The table which was basket-put by Rabe was damaged'.]

When the Malagasi relative clause is extracted and put in the subject position, the exact locative relation which “table” bears to the verb is lost. Keenan notes that, when pressed, the Malagasy speaker can provide a good enough approximation of the English sentence by producing two sentences in his language, e.g., [Rabe put the basket under (or on top of) some table. That table was damaged]. But, he argues, the conjunction cannot qualify as an exact translation, because it asserts explicitly something which the English sentence merely presupposes. Furthermore, the Malagasi conjunction will represent two speech-acts (two assertions) as opposed to the single speech-act performed by the English sentence. At least in some cases, this difference may matter. In those cases, the translation will be inexact.

Keenan’s case is, I believe, strengthened when we consider, again, translation in the opposite direction, from Malagasi into English. For, the Malagasi sentence (ii’), as we saw, does not specify the locative relation between [table] and [put]. Such a specification, however, is obligatory in English (in this type of construction). So any natural English candidate will contain more information than the original Malagasi sentence, and, to this extent, will be an inexact translation. Note also that the Malagasi (i’) can be asserted in ignorance of whether Rabe put the basket under, on top of, next to, etc. the damaged table, but it doesn’t imply such ignorance; the sentence simply remains silent on the issue. And it does not seem reasonable to propose capturing this feature (of non-specificity) by an English sentence that read “The table under which or on top of which or next to which or...Rabe put the basket was damaged.” For such a sentence would clearly suggest that the speaker doesn’t know which is the case, and so would be at best misleading.

A somewhat different type of example comes from cases where certain distinctions are marked grammatically in the SL but not in the TL (or vice versa). In Hebrew, pronouns, verbs and adjectives are marked for gender. Thus, overhearing a second person talking to a third person (on the phone or in another room), a Hebrew listener can tell whether the third person is male or female. This feature may be important in certain contexts. Suppose the sentence At holekhet la-universita mahar? occurs in one of those contexts. The English sentence “Are you going to the university tomorrow?” would seem to be an inexact translation, as it would fail to convey the information that the addressee is female. Here, again, the case seems strength-
ened when we consider translation from the language in which the coding of a certain piece of information is obligatory (Hebrew) into the language in which such a coding is absent. We can easily conceive of a context in which the fact that the English hearer cannot tell whether the speaker is talking about a male or a female is crucial. Suppose an English speaker says: “I have just broken up with my lover” (having no intention of disclosing the nature of his love life). Or suppose a speaker is trying to have a conversation with a secret lover on the phone in the present of his or her spouse. Exact (even adequate) translation of the relevant sentences in such contexts into Hebrew would seem impossible.13

1.33 Pragmatic Mismatches: Our last example illustrates translation problems arising as a result of mismatches between the SL and TL at the level of pragmatics. Keenan [14] examines the following example. The choice of tu, as opposed to vous in French, is in many cases significant, and carries clear implications. The use of Tu est malade typically justifies the inference

It is probable that the speaker...is personally intimate with the addressee, or that he and the addressee are members of equal social status in some socially identifiable group, or...[etc.] (p. 175)

This is what an ordinary use of the French Tu est malade presupposes. Use of the English You are sick, on the other hand, carries no such presuppositions. Keenan considers several proposals for improving on the compressed English translation (e.g., by conjoining to it the above presupposed disjunction). In each case, the proposed translation fails to preserve the exact pattern of pragmatic presuppositions of the French. Even if full preservation of that pattern may not be required for exact translation in every context, we can easily imagine cases where the full pattern forms part of the tr-meaning of a source French sentence. In those cases, English translations are bound to fall short of exactness.

As before, the potential for untranslatability can be realized more easily when we consider translation in the other direction. In order to produce an exact translation of the English ‘You are sick’ into French a translator would have to avail herself of background information of which the ordinary English-speaking audience need not be aware. Where the information is not available—or where it is important that it not be conveyed—the translation is bound to be misleading, distorting, or to disclose too much information to the TL receivers.

1.4 Whether or not a translation is exact is to be determined by a contrastive analysis of the source linguistic item (in context) and its proposed translation(s). The analysis may show that the source item has features

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13 Note that examples of the kind illustrated in this paragraph share some features with certain examples of lexical mismatches (like the Burushaski example), as well as with examples of pragmatic mismatches discussed below.
which are part of its tr-meaning and which its proposed translation(s) fail(s) to share. The analysis itself could serve to explain to a target audience what the proposed translations miss, since it would detail the differences between the source item and its proposed translations. However, the explanations would not themselves qualify as exact translations, because they will typically require meta-level discussion of the source grammar, socio-culture, history, or what have you. Thus, the examples we discussed above show that, unless it trivializes the notion of translation, the Exact Translation Hypothesis fails. Notice, however, that this failure, by itself, does not support any extreme version of Whorfian 'conceptual relativism', according to which, since one's native language constrains one's conception of the world, we are barred from understanding how speakers of a sufficiently different language from ours see the world. For, as long as it is possible to explain to the target audience the relevant differences between the source item and its proposed translation(s), such understanding is secured.¹⁴

It is, in general, idiosyncratic features—features a linguistic item has in virtue of its relations to other items in the particular linguistic system to which it belongs or in virtue of the natural/social/historical background of its users—that are responsible for failures of translatability. Now, given the prevalence of linguistic idiosyncrasies, it might be thought that far from being impossible, failures of translatability would be the rule. In fact, given a sufficiently holistic view of the meaning of linguistic items (according to which an item's meaning is to a large extent a function of its relations to other items in the particular linguistic system to which it belongs), one might be even tempted to claim—as some have—that exact translation is never possible. Since such a view seems to me to be almost as unrealistic as its opposite, I would like to argue briefly that it is not forced on us by our examples.

Our examples of translatability failures have mostly traded on the fact that in some contexts idiosyncratic features were relevant to the understanding of an SL item (and thus became part of its tr-meaning). We have not ruled out the possibility that in other contexts those features would not be relevant, so that exact translation would become possible. What the extreme untranslatability view ignores is precisely this context-dependence of exact translation.

¹⁴ Some philosophers, most notably Davidson (in [8]), have argued from the possibility of understanding the relevant differences between source-items and their translations to the unintelligibility of the notion of untranslatability. In “Conceptual Relativism and Translation” (forthcoming in Protokolsociologie), I argue that this denial of untranslatability is implausible and trades on a misleading conflation of the possibility of understanding and the possibility of translating.
Thus, consider the example of gender-marking in Hebrew. In many contexts, the marking of verbs, adjectives and even pronouns for gender is redundant. The verb and the adjective (respectively) in the Hebrew utterances ani holechet letayel (translatable as ‘I am going for a walk’) and ani a-yeфа (‘I am tired’) are both marked feminine. In most contexts, the marking can be of no importance to the understanding of the utterances’ content (the audience usually knows who the speaker is). The English translations given in parentheses would, in such cases, qualify as exact translations, both by ordinary standards and by our characterization. Similarly for the Burushaski a-cho (meaning sibling of the same gender as the speaker), which, in many contexts, can be translated exactly by ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ (depending on the utterer’s gender).

Finally, we may recall the Navaho color example. Although, as we saw, the differences in the classification of the color spectrum between the Navaho language and English are likely to prevent exact translatability in some cases, in other cases they may not be relevant. I see no reason why, at least in some contexts, the English sentence “This wall is blue as the sky” should not be translatable exactly into the Navaho language using the word dooltizh, despite the fact that the latter word applies to blue, green and purple things. (Another carefully analyzed example is given in [6], p. 38f.)

Some cases of referential mismatches, however, may indeed illustrate absolute (i.e., not context-dependent) untranslatability. Whenever the semantic features of the Malagasy term (mi)kabary (see above, 1.31) are part of its tr-meaning, we could not translate utterances containing it exactly into English. Arguably, English speakers can become relatively easily familiarized with the phenomenon designated by this term. Once such familiarity is achieved, the untranslatability problem can be solved by borrowing the source term or by coining a new target term. But it still remains true that prior to the familiarization, exact translatability was barred. And when it comes to attempting to translate, say, ‘Neutrinos lack mass’ into some jungle language, or ‘The cube root of ten is not a rational number’ into an Australian language having only number terms for one, two, a few and many, it is not even clear what application there could be to the familiarization solution (the examples occur in [16], p. 76 and [13], p. 174, respectively).

2. The Practice of Translation—Indeterminacy Vs. Pretheory
2.1 On the pretheoretic picture sketched above, translations can be assessed according to whether or not they are exact. An ideal (bilingual) translator would be someone capable of determining the linguistic features possessed by a source item, and of selecting a target item(s) that preserve(s) those features deemed to be part of its tr-meaning as closely as possible. And a translator attempting to probe a completely unknown language—Quine’s “radical translator”—would be someone who strives to acquire these capa-
abilities. She assumes things are a certain way in the SL, so that, were she to master it, she would be able to associate determinate features with SL items, and either translate them exactly, or else recognize that she has failed to do so, and perhaps be able to account for her failure by reference to facts about the source-language and her own.

Pretheoretically, the linguistic features associated by translators with linguistic items are thought of in objectivist terms: these features are simply had by the items prior to any translation process. Whether or not SL and TL items share particular features is fully decided by the facts about the SL and the TL, and is in no way up to any translator. Let me identify this as the “objectivist assumption” in our pretheoretic understanding of translation.¹⁵

The objectivist assumption is fostered by the way practicing translators, as well as translation critics, justify their normative judgments regarding the quality of translations. To fix ideas, let me characterize these judgments a bit more precisely. As a first approximation (taking the relevant items for now to be sentences, and assuming a finite number of linguistic features), we can offer the following definitions: where \( ss \) is an SL-sentence and \( p \) and \( q \) are TL-sentences

\[
\begin{align*}
(i) \quad & p \text{ is an EXACT TRANSLATION of } ss \text{ iff } p \text{ achieves maximal preservation of } ss \text{'s tr-meaning—}p \text{ share with } ss \text{ all relevant linguistic features.} \\
(ii) \quad & p \text{ is the BEST AVAILABLE translation of } ss \text{ iff } p \text{ achieves optimal preservation of } ss \text{'s tr-meaning—it shares with } ss \text{ more relevant features than any other candidate.} \\
(iii) \quad & p \text{ is an EQUALLY GOOD translation of } ss \text{ as } q \text{ iff } p \text{ and } q \text{ preserve } ss \text{'s tr-meaning to the same degree—each shares with } ss \text{ the same number of relevant features.} \\
(iv) \quad & p \text{ is a BETTER translation than } q \text{ iff } p \text{ preserves more of } ss \text{'s tr-meaning than } q—p \text{ shares more relevant features with } ss \text{ than } q.
\end{align*}
\]

2.11 Clearly, (ii)–(iv) will have to be refined, to allow for the weighting of features. Also, one has to allow for the fact that target candidates must be compared also in terms of features they have which the source-sentence lacks. While we cannot perhaps expect to find a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for exact translation, we may still hope to be able to formulate some hierarchical principles for determining the relative importance of features deemed relevant in a given context. Where it is impossible

¹⁵ N.B.: the objectivist assumption by itself does not imply any particular view of the nature of linguistic facts.
to preserve all relevant features (and thus to achieve an exact translation, in accordance with (i)), the translator typically needs to trade among the features to be preserved. So where two proposed translations both preserve the same number of relevant features, it may still be possible to prefer one over the other on the basis of some hierarchical principle. Even so, we should note that definition (ii) would allow for more than one best available translation.

2.2 The features mentioned in our definitions are supposed to provide an independent standard—a tertium comparationis—that determines whether (and to what extent) a given translation preserves the tr-meaning of a source item. The objectivist assumption is that, given an item’s tr-meaning, these features provide a genuinely independent standard of evaluation of translations set by objective facts about both the SL and the TL. However, it is important to recognize that the objectivist assumption under consideration does not say or imply that it is always a wholly objective(ly determinable) matter which—if any—of competing proposed translations is the right one. For one thing, as already observed (see above, 2.11), there may be more than one best available translation: two competing translations may preserve an item’s tr-meaning to the same (but not maximal) extent. More importantly, perhaps, since ‘tr-meaning’ designates those features of an item deemed relevant to its translation in a given context, this opens the possibility that translators may disagree on an item’s tr-meaning. Such disagreements are not very likely to arise in connection with translation of straightforward, simple pieces of discourse. But take, for instance, poetry. It should not be surprising if two translators of a poem by, say, E. E. Cummings disagreed on the tr-meaning of a certain line—they may disagree on which of the line’s discernible features ought to be preserved under translation (and consequently on whether a proposed translation ‘does the job’). On the objectivist assumption, such a disagreement, should it arise, would be traceable either to a disagreement over what features, in general, poetic translation ought to preserve, or to more specific differences in the translators’ respective interpretations of the poem. It is consistent with the objectivist assumption that such disagreements may not always be objectively resolvable.

The pretheoretic conception of translation allows, I believe, for the possibility of irresoluble disagreements over translation due to divergences in all sorts of aesthetic sensibilities, or subjective preferences. I think when people say that quality judgments about translation are “non-objective,” they simply wish to indicate belief in this possibility. I do not know how widely shared this belief is among practicing translators. If it were, then we

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16 A simpler, but somewhat misleading way of putting the point is this: tr-meaning as we have characterized it is not co-extensive with so-called ‘cognitive meaning’. The farther an item’s tr-meaning is taken to be from its purely cognitive meaning, the more we may expect disagreements concerning its appropriate translation.
would have to say that practicing translators are not committed to the ob-
jectivity (or cognitive significance) of their quality judgments. But this
alone would not suffice to undermine the idea that there are objective facts
determining what features linguistic items have in the first place, and when
items from different languages share those features, regardless of whether
translators agree on which of them must be preserved in translation.  

2.3 One cannot adequately appreciate the extremity of the indeterminacy
thesis that Quine has sought to defend without recognizing that it contra-
dicts this last idea. The opposition of a proponent of Quinean indeterminacy
to the pretheoretic picture would go well beyond the claim that often
purely subjective preferences influence normative judgments about given
translations. Quine takes the thought-experiment of radical translation to
establish that the various features assigned to linguistic items themselves
represent an artifact of the (radical) translation process rather something
which it aims to discover.

To see this, let us briefly recall the indeterminacy thesis. The thesis says
that one can devise distinct translation manuals for any given language that
would fit all objective evidence and yet “specify mutually incompatible
translations of countless sentences insusceptible of independent control”
([16], p. 72). And, between two such conflicting manuals, “there is not even...an objective matter to be right or wrong about” (op. cit., p. 73). Quine
tries to convince us of the indeterminacy thesis by inviting us to reflect on
the predicament of a scientifically-minded (radical) translator who tries to
translate a completely alien language into her own language. Observing a na-
tive volunteering a sequence of sounds, say Gavagai!, the translator can no-
tice, first, that utterances of Gavagai! are systematically correlated with the
presence of rabbits and can then try to determine the conditions under which
the native assents to and dissents from Gavagai! when she utters it. On the
basis of all these data, she can form the inductive hypothesis: “Gavagai!, as a
one-word sentence, matches her ‘Rabbit!’” (and similarly for other native
utterances). To achieve a complete translation manual between Gavagaese
and English, however, one must go beyond such simple correlations of one-
word sentences. The translator must find a way to break down single utter-
ances into recurring parts—words and phrases, identify various grammatical
constructions, and correlate them with English words, phrases and construc-
tions. For instance, she must decide whether, as a term, gavagai should be
correlated with the English term ‘rabbit’, or with ‘undetached rabbit part’,
or with ‘rabbit stage’. These sorts of correlations cannot be determined sim-
ply by observing patterns of assent to/dissent from whole sentences. They
also cannot be determined on the basis of simple ostension. (Point to a rab-
bit, and you’ve pointed to an undetached rabbit part, as well as to a rabbit

17 For more on this, see below, 2.41.
Quine calls the verbal correlations (the ‘dictionary’, or ‘lexicon’), as well as the specifications of the grammatical operations of the language, “analytical hypotheses.” A complete translation manual is a set of analytical hypotheses that enable us to generate, for each of the infinitely many sentences of Gavagaense, a translation into English.

Now, Quine argues that the objective evidence that we would have to go on in radical translation—all evidence about the observable behavior of the natives—is compatible with incompatible systems of analytical hypotheses. The alternative systems would yield semantically incompatible translations of many native sentences into English that are equally compatible with all the objective evidence. No objective choice could be made among these incompatible alternatives.

What about ordinary bilingual translation? Quine points out that even a (non-radical) bilingual translator “must...[use] the method of analytical hypotheses, however unconsciously” (op. cit., p. 71). We have seen that typical justifications of quality judgments implicitly appeal to a contrastive analysis which assigns specific features to both SL- and TL- items. The contrastive analysis, in effect, relies on and presupposes a set of analytical hypotheses. Analytical hypotheses, then, are not only crucial for generating an infinite mapping of each source-sentence onto a set of target-sentences. (N.B.: the set can have one or more members, or none at all, to allow for the case where we want to say the source-sentence has no translation.) They are also crucial in providing the requisite background analysis on which translators can base their quality judgments.18 So we can now think of a translation manual as a mere correlation of source-sentences with target-sentences (never mind how it is specified). A “correlation manual” clearly could not support quality judgments. For, suppose we proposed to cash out the judgment that \( a \) is better than \( b \) as a translation of some source-sentence \( s \) by simply equating it with the judgment that \( a \), but not \( b \), is in the “translation set” of \( s \) (the set of sentences assigned to \( s \) by the manual \( M \), i.e., \( M(s) \)). Then we couldn’t make sense of the judgment that \( b \) is nevertheless a better translation than \( c \), since both \( b \) and \( c \) would be outside \( M(s) \). On the “correlation manual” model, there is no way to rank the quality of sentences that are either in the translation set or outside it (as translations of a given \( s \)). While this may be acceptable in the former case (if \( M \) correlates \( s \) with several TL-sentences, then it is plausible to think of all these translations as equally good), it does not seem acceptable in the latter case. A translator may accept that neither of two TL-sentences, \( c \) and \( d \), are acceptable translations of a given SL-sentence yet judge, counterfactually, that if \( M(s) \) were empty, so that no good translation of \( s \) were available, still \( c \) would be a better approximation than \( d \).

Now a judgment that a certain sentence \( b \) of TL is the (uniquely) best available translation of \( s \) could amount, on the “correlation manual” model, to no more than the judgment that \( M \) maps \( s \) into \( b \) (that \( M(s) = b \)). That is to say, the best available translation of a given sentence can be nothing over and above the only translation prescribed by the manual with which the translator is operating. But, now, the alternative judgment that \( b \) is an exact translation of the sentence \( s \) of SL, could also amount to no more than the judgment that \( M \) maps \( s \) into \( a \) (that \( M(s) = b \)). Notice, too, that the judgment that \( s \) has no exact translation will amount to the same thing as the judgment that there is no

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18 To see this, consider the utterly unrealistic model according to which a translation manual is thought of as a mere correlation of source-sentences with target-sentences (never mind how it is specified). A “correlation manual” clearly could not support quality judgments.
manual—a set of analytical hypotheses—as a complex generative-analytical device. It is quite clear that practicing translators implicitly rely on this sort of device in making quality judgments.

2.4 If translation is indeterminate in the way Quine envisages, then our translation pretheory with its objectivist assumption is seriously misconceived. We may then wonder how proponents of Quinean indeterminacy would account for the persistence of the assumption. More crucially, to the extent that ordinary judgments about the quality of translations betray the objectivist assumption, one would want to ask how the proponent would construe those judgments. I shall now consider a tempting proposal, inspired by some of Quine’s remarks on the issue. I will then argue that, given the indeterminacy thesis, the proposal cannot work.

Regarding our translation pretheory, Quine remarks:

Known languages are known through unique systems of analytical hypotheses established in tradition or painfully arrived at by unique skilled linguists. ([16], p. 72, my emphasis) The linguist’s [chosen set of analytical hypotheses] ... even contributes to setting, for him or the rest of us, the ends of translation. For a premium is put on structural parallels: on correspondence between the parts of the native sentence, as segmented and the parts of the English translation.... (p. 75, my emphasis)

And finally:

We are always ready to wonder about the meaning of a foreigner’s remark without reference to any one set of analytical hypotheses, indeed even in the absence of any;... [but] on the whole we may meaningfully speak of interlinguistic synonymy only within the terms of some particular system of analytical hypotheses;... yet two sets of analytical hypotheses equally compatible with all linguistic behavior can give contrary answers.... (pp. 75 & 76, edited, my emphasis)

These passages suggest a “relativist construal” of the practice of translation, which embraces Quinean indeterminacy, while attempting to explain the illusion of determinacy that informs ordinary translation vernacular. The illusion is explained by appealing to the fact that the ordinary bilingual translator is implicitly relying on an accepted translation manual which she, in some sense, holds fixed. And the judgments that betray this illusion—quality judgments—are recast as judgments made “within,” or “relative to,” the fixed manual.

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best available translation of it; both will be cashed out by the fact that M(s) is empty, which is very odd. The problem is, again, that the “correlation manual” model enables us to express quality judgments only by reference to facts about membership in the set of the translations prescribed by M.

What the “correlation model” clearly lacks is an independent standard for the evaluation of translations. In the absence of such a standard, it would have to convert comparative judgements about the relative quality of translations, which are normative judgements, into absolute judgments about membership in a translation set, which are purely descriptive.
We have said that quality judgments about translations typically appeal to a background analysis (encapsulated in a translation manual) which allows the translator to compare features of source- and target-linguistic items. The crucial point made by the relativist construal is that the background analysis itself lacks objective status; that the analytical hypotheses which afford this analysis themselves represent an artifact of (collective or individual) translation procedures, rather than discoveries of linguistic facts. The manuals ordinary translators employ have simply been inculcated through culture, tradition, history, or accidental choices. But they do not depict objective facts. To appreciate this, we need only recognize that any practicing translator could have adopted a different set of analytical hypotheses from the one she has actually adopted which set would yield different analyses of source- and target-sentences, thereby leading the translator to endorse translations and quality judgments that are incompatible from the ones she actually endorses.

The relativist construal seeks to retain as much as possible of our translation pretheory. It accepts that maximal preservation of semantically relevant features is the desideratum of ordinary translation which sets the standard for evaluating translations and gives sense to quality judgments. As far as I can see, it need not even maintain that the considerations which inform judgments about failures of translation are always (or more often than not) purely aesthetic or subjective. Where it departs from the pretheoretic picture is in claiming that, beyond a certain range, what specific features are assigned to linguistic items, and hence whether (and to what extent) given translations preserve tr-meaning, is a manual-relative matter. Features are assigned to source- and to target-linguistic items by a translation manual $M$. A target-item is the exact translation of a given source-item $ss$ if, and only if, it shares with it all the features deemed relevant in the given context. However, on the relativist model, unlike on the pretheoretic picture, there could be another manual, $M'$, which analyzed $ss$ differently (assigned to it different features) and which would therefore match with it another, incompatible translation.

On the relativist construal, two translators, one employing $M$ and the other employing $M'$ could have an irresoluble disagreement as to whether a given target sentence is an exact translation of an $ss$ even if they completely agreed on what (general) features of $ss$ must be preserved in the relevant

19 Quine allows that what he calls "stimulus-meaning" and truth-functional structure are not manual-relative. For simplicity, we shall be omitting this qualification.

20 Needless to say, this is oversimplified. We must allow, for instance, that a complete translation-manual should consist of a pair of translation functions, one from SL into TL and the other from TL into SL (the two need not be inverse of one another), and hence that we would need two different sets of analytical hypotheses. Such complications would not affect my discussion.
context. This is because they could be in irresoluble disagreement as to whether a given linguistic item even has a certain relevant feature or not. Using their respective manuals, they could produce radically different translations of a given ss, each maximally feature-preserving (and thus exact), by the respective manual’s own light. So the sentences they regard as “exact translations” would vary, even while the translators’ standards for exactness remain fixed. (We can fix the standards by simply considering a single translator who, hypothetically, is employing M’ instead of M.) This is what ordinary translators supposedly fail to appreciate, and this is what accounts for the illusion of determinacy under which they labor.

Examples of the sort given in section 1 suggest that there can be limits on intertranslatability. The relativist construal can accommodate this idea by allowing that, at least for some SL and TL, there is no manual which—by its own lights—yields exact (or even good) translations for all SL sentences. The relativist will insist, however, that the objective evidence would not let us mark a determinate class of “absolutely untranslatable” SL sentences. So, for instance, the judgment that the English sentence “The table under which Rabe put his basket was damaged” is not exactly translatable into Malagasi would make sense only relative to a non-unique English-Malagasi manual M. Given indeterminacy, a translator could very well adopt a manual M’, associating with our English sentence different features, and yielding an exact translation of it. Though both M and M’ are very likely to support judgments about failures of translatability, they will mark different sentences as untranslatable; and judgments regarding the extent and nature of specific failures will also vary, depending on which manual is employed.

2.41 The relativist construal appears able to retain some prominent aspects of translation pretheory. But we must not lose sight of the crucial element it rejects: the objectivist assumption. As pointed out earlier (2.2 above), the objectivist assumption is compatible with the possibility of disagreement over tr-meaning. Since it is by reference to an item’s tr-meaning that one determines whether a given translation is exact or not, we must allow that different translators may count different translations as exact (depending on the tr-meaning each has selected). This may seem to come close to Quinean indeterminacy, but it does not. For, on the pretheoretic picture as construed here, disagreement concerning exact translation (even when irresoluble)

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21 It might seem that the true analogue of “s is has no (correct) translation” should be the claim that there is no manual such that the features it assigns to s are fully matched by some target-sentence. But this won’t do—in general—for the relativist. For if we can quantify in this way over all manuals, and reach results concerning features that go beyond stimulus-meaning, we will have given content to the idea of objective facts regarding semantically relevant features. Results on which all manuals had to agree would have to count as objective by Quine’s lights.
will always be traceable to disagreements about standards of translation—about what features ought to be preserved in a given context. Given the normative character of the enterprise of translation, it should not be surprising that such disagreements might arise. But in all this I see no threat to semantic objectivity. Translators who adopt different norms can still be brought to agree on what semantic features a given source item has and on what (if any) of those features a given target item shares with it. Thus, the intralinguistic assignment of semantic features to linguistic items, as well as the interlinguistic semantic comparison of linguistic items, is still thought to be an objective matter.22 This is the crux of the objectivist assumption.

The relativist would explain the objectivist assumption behind our pretheory by pointing out that practicing translators take the translation manual they (tacitly) employ to specify objective linguistic facts about the SL and the TL. And the relativist would construe normative judgments about translations as judgments made relative to a manual which is implicitly but misguidedly held fixed. This would require driving a wedge between how things really are, from an objective, or theoretical point of view (i.e., there are no determinate, non-manual-relative semantic facts), and how they invariably appear to us to be, from our limited practical point of view.23 What limits the practical point of view is, supposedly, the fact that the manual a translator holds fixed is, contrary to the translator's implicit assumption, non-unique. I now wish to argue that the idea of a translator "holding a manual fixed" on which the relativist construal relies is not available to a proponent of Quinean indeterminacy.

2.5 Recall that the manual the ordinary translator is supposed to hold fixed is thought of as some kind of device for generating and analyzing sentences. Now, either it is maintained that we could in principle determine what set of analytical hypotheses a given translator is operating or it is maintained that we could not. The dilemma facing the proponent of indeterminacy is

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22 The last paragraph is designed to address the following worry (expressed by an anonymous referee). Since, on my construal of the pretheoretic conception of translation, irresolvable disagreement may arise even over exact translation, this apparently amounts to acknowledging an indeterminacy of interlinguistic translation, even if one denies that there is indeterminacy of intralinguistic meaning. It would seem that one would still have to accept that there are no objective facts regarding translation. The upshot of the present paragraph is that, on the contrary, on the pretheoretic conception, there are such objective facts: they are facts concerning which proposed translations share which features with source items. As we have observed, these facts may not always settle which of several proposed translations should be the one to adopt, since that may depend on various aesthetic and subjective considerations regarding which translators may disagree irresolubly. But once we keep these considerations fixed—as we may do in the case of a single translator—we can reach a determinate verdict on particular translations.

23 Elsewhere [2], [3], & [4], I have argued that, in his reasoning to the indeterminacy thesis, Quine must appeal to a contrast between two perspectives on language—the "user's perspective" and the "theorist's perspective."
this: on the first horn, the indeterminacy thesis itself would stand refuted, whereas on the second, the alleged explanation offered by the relativist con-
strual would be lost.

Let us begin with the first possibility. We suppose that the question which set of analytical hypotheses a translator is holding fixed is a question which can be determinately answered. If so, then sense will have been given to the notion of a linguistic agent employing a particular set of analytical hypotheses. We could then appeal to this notion in the case of radical trans-
lation, in the following way. First, we can note that it makes sense (on the present supposition) to ask what set of analytical hypotheses a given native speaker uses for his/her own language. Remember that Quine thinks radical translation begins at home: for him, language learning is in good part a pro-
cess of tacit construction of analytical hypotheses regarding the surrounding adults' language (see, e.g., [19], p. 58). It can then be argued that the task for the radical translator is to discover the analytical hypotheses alien native speakers tacitly use, as a matter of fact, in understanding their own language. But if this is so, then the question what set of analytical hypotheses a radical translator ought to choose in translating a given speaker's language would (contrary to Quine's claim) have a determinate answer. It will be the set which correctly specifies the analytical hypotheses employed by the speaker whose language is being translated.

It might be pointed out that the translator's analytical hypotheses, un-
lke the native's, connect two different languages. While this is true, I do not think it is of great importance. First, Quine himself attaches no significance to the difference between mappings correlating, say, English and French sentences, and mappings correlating English and English sentences (see, in particular, the first formulation of the indeterminacy thesis, [16], p. 27). Both types of mappings require analysis of the source sentences in terms of the target language (hence "analytical" hypotheses). And the analysis—
the set of analytical hypotheses—must in both cases be thought of as a specification, or representation, of the interpretation of the source sentences. Thus, if there is a fact of the matter about what analytical hypotheses the speaker is (actually) using, there should be a fact of the matter about whether they have been correctly specified (be it in the speaker's or in any other language). Secondly, we could, if we wanted to, bring translatee and translator closer together by characterizing the correctness of a translation manual counterfactually, in terms of the set of analytical hypotheses from the native's language into the translator's that the native would adopt, were he to master the translator's language. On the present hypothesis, it would be an empirically decidable, factual matter what set of analytical hypotheses such a native would adopt. The Quinean move against invoking bilingualism—namely, pointing out that for any bilingual who employs manual M, there could be another bilingual who employs a manual M' yielding
conflicting translations (see [16], p. 74)—would lose it force. For, on the present assumption, whether or not different bilinguals do (or would) settle on the same translation manual for two languages should also be a determinate, empirically discoverable matter. It seems a rather safe bet that they would.

Allowing that we could determine what set of analytical hypotheses anyone employs would clearly go against what the indeterminacy thesis tells us. Quine's reasons for why we could not determine how to translate the (nonobservation) sentences of a given speaker should, if persuasive, convince us that we could not determine which manual a given translator is 'holding fixed' does not have a determinate answer, either. Suppose, then, that we could not (in principle) determine which manual a given translator in fact uses. Then, by a Quinean reasoning, we should conclude that there is no fact of the matter here. Surely, Quine himself would not want to allow that we can still think of an ordinary translator as holding fixed some manual or other, even if we could not, in principle, determine which manual she is using. Quine's argument for indeterminacy itself depends on accepting that, if it is in principle impossible to justify settling on a particular set of analytical hypothesis for a speaker's language, there can be no fact of the matter about it. A true Quinean would regard the insistence that there might still be a hidden fact of the matter here as a direct manifestation of a blind commitment to the "museum myth."

But if this is so, then, on the second horn of the dilemma, the proponent of Quinean indeterminacy must abandon the relativist idea that ordinary translators tacitly hold some (arbitrarily chosen) manual fixed and misleadingly take it to provide an objective analysis of the source and target languages. However, this idea was central to the relativist attempt to account for the normative aspects of ordinary bilingual translation and to correct (and replace) our pretheoretic conception of translation. So it would seem that, on the second horn of the dilemma, the relativist construal would no longer be available to the proponent of indeterminacy.

3. The Practice of Translation—Quinean Eliminativism

3.1 Taking the indeterminacy thesis seriously, I have argued, precludes adopting the relativist construal. But the relativist construal is, I believe, the closest one can get to a rejection of our pretheoretic picture while still attempting to 'save linguistic appearances'. This means we must give up on the possibility of a theory incorporating Quinean indeterminacy which accounts for the way translators actually go about justifying their choices and evaluations of translations.

I think there is a good reason why the relativist construal cannot work. The construal represents an attempt to be anti-objectivist about translation. It is based on denying that there are objective facts which could make judg-
ments about translation right or wrong, even given an agreed upon standard of exactness of translation. Typically, anti-objectivists tell us that the facts in a given domain are not as they appear to us. They often attempt to construe the apparent facts, which they regard as problematic, in terms of other, allegedly less problematic facts. Thus, anti-objectivists about the external world have tried to construe what we take to be facts about bodies outside of us—physical facts—in terms of our sense-data—mental facts, facts about us. The emotivists have tried to construe what we take to be objective moral values in terms of our likes and dislikes—subjective facts. But the relativist about translation has tried to construe what we take to be linguistic facts in terms of...what we take to be linguistic facts! For a proponent of indeterminacy, the facts that the relativist construal adduces in its attempt to explain why we take things to be as we do (in ordinary translation) should be just as problematic as the facts to be explained away by the construal. They belong to the very same class of facts whose existence the indeterminacy thesis denies. This is why the indeterminacy proponent cannot endorse the relativist construal.

3.2 Once the full implications of Quinean indeterminacy are understood, it should become evident that there can be no fact even about how we take things to be in connection with translation (and meaning). This means that a proponent of Quinean indeterminacy must take an eliminativist position about translation, not one that (like other anti-objectivist positions) can offer to explain away our illusions.

A Quinean eliminativist would hold that nothing determinate could be said about our ordinary translation practices, except in terms of the assent/dissent dispositions of translators to sentences containing the word ‘translation’ and its kins. No one can deny that translators are disposed to assent to and dissent from sentences of the form ‘a is a better translation of s than b’, or ‘a is the best available (though not an exact) translation of s’. But the indeterminacy proponent would have to deny that such sentences express genuine judgments on the part of translators. For, we saw that this proponent could not even allow that they express judgments made relative to a manual. He would, then, have to decline to offer any explanation—behavioral or otherwise—of the dispositions to volunteer or assent to/dissent from such sentences as dispositions to make certain judgments.24 (For our purposes here, we can take judgments simply to be sentences capable of

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24 Quine concedes that a behavioristic model that made no use of mentalistic notions could not accommodate “intuitive semantics.” Language-learning seems to culminate in a rich, and, as Quine sees it, behaviorally ungrounded set of distinctions. And Quine recognizes with Chomsky that conditioning (the mechanism of “learning by induction”) is insufficient to explain language-learning. But he simply sees this recognition as being “of a piece” with his indeterminacy thesis. (See [19], p. 58.) For more discussion, see Chapter I of my [3].)
truth-value.) At most, he could propose that a future science will be able to explain—in the sense of predicting and specifying the physical causal antecedents of—the dispositions of translators to make or assent to/dissent from a certain variety of noises, though these do not represent judgments.

I submit that there is a palpable peculiarity in allowing assent to dissent from noises which do not represent judgments. After all, these notions were originally offered by Quine as the behavioral *ersatz* of the mentalistic attitudes of judging sentences to be true/false. In addition, given that Quine himself condemns the external world skeptic for attempting to undermine our common-sense understanding of the external world without offering a serious alternative for thinking about it, there would be something uncongenial about a *Quinean* eliminativism regarding our linguistic practices of the kind described above. (See [4], for a detailed discussion.)

Quine perhaps could insist that he is after all providing us with an alternative way of thinking about ordinary translation: it is the strict behavioristic way, stripped of all mentalistic elements. We are to think of translators as possessing a specific complex of brute verbal dispositions; “brute” in that they are dispositions to volunteer and to assent to/dissent from sentences which do not express judgments that can be defended, argued about, rationally arrived at. Suppose we could come, perhaps through some “gestalt shift,” to think of other translators in this way. (And let us assume we would find the attempt illuminating.) There is still a serious question as to whether we could adopt this way of thinking about ourselves, in the capacity of ordinary translators, or language-users.

In the remaining pages I would like to address this question. I would also like to argue that, even if the eliminativist position just described is internally coherent, adopting it would undermine the very reasoning which has lead Quine to the indeterminacy thesis in the first place.

### 4. Eliminativism and the Argument for Indeterminacy

#### 4.1 Our eliminativists can still concede the *practical* usefulness of everyday discourse about translation and meaning. All they need insist on is that, when translation practices are considered from a *theoretical* perspective, this pretheoretic discourse (for the most part) makes no objective sense. Elsewhere (esp. section III of [2] and chap. II of [3]), I have deployed the contrast implicit here, between the practical and the theoretical points of view in an attempt to provide a cogent understanding of the original reasoning behind Quine’s thought-experiment of radical translation. On my construal, Quine is challenging what he calls “intuitive semantics” by arguing that judgments of semantic difference made from the practical perspective of language-users cannot be supported theoretically; they are merely judgments of “apparent semantic differences,” as we might describe them, with no objective status. We can take him to be acknowledging these judgments, but
showing, by reductio, that there is no objective basis for them. However, the considerations developed earlier show that, as an eliminativist, Quine could not allow that the practical perspective is a source of semantic judgments of any kind. If this is so, then the reductio construal just offered is jeopardized. Let me explain.

Quine’s thought-experiment, recall, is supposed to establish that a truly radical translator would recognize that two translation manuals could yield as translations incompatible target-sentences for a single source-sentence, compatibly with all the evidence. To make sense of this claim, two requirements must be fulfilled. We need, (i) a way of specifying the source-sentence which is independent of the translation-manuals under consideration; and (ii) a way of judging that the two target sentences conflict. As an anti-objectivist, Quine has to meet these requirements without acknowledging any semantically relevant yet manual-independent features of sentences. But, further, as an eliminativist, he must argue against our pretheory without acknowledging even judgments of ‘apparent’ semantic differences that would be made by SL or TL speakers.

Requirement (i) can be met quite straightforwardly, by providing a purely phonetic specification of the source sentence. What about requirement (ii)? The indeterminacy claim cannot be simply that manuals may match different TL phonetic strings with a given source sentence (phonetically described). Such a claim would not pose any threat to the common-sense notion of meaning. To pose this threat, the alleged possible conflict must be semantic—a perceived conflict in what we would pretheoretically call “meaning.” On the reading offered above, it is acknowledged that the radical translator (like all TL users) would judge that the two proposed translations “don’t mean the same.” But acknowledging such judgments—even in a reductio argument—would run against the eliminativist position. This is because the reductio as presented earlier only purports to reduce to absurdity the claim that there are objective semantic facts, not the claim that speakers make judgments of ‘apparent’ semantic differences.

The problem for a Quinean eliminativist is to find a way of undermining the objectivity of our pretheoretic semantic distinctions without in any way acknowledging that there are even the appearances of such distinctions to language users, in general, and to his hypothetical radical translator, in particular. For, I have argued in effect that, from the point of view of our pretheory, (systematic) appearances of semantic distinctions to the users of a

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25 It is true that identical phonetic strings within a single language may count as different sentences (e.g., “Flying planes can be dangerous”). But Quine could maintain that all he needs for his indeterminacy claim is that the competing manuals agree in counting the source phonetic string as a non-ambiguous sentence (whatever that comes to in Quinean terms). The indeterminacy claim would be that there could be incompatible translations of a single phonetic string counted as a non-ambiguous sentence by both manuals.
language would be just as good as ‘real’ semantic distinctions. Our pretheory, I believe, can survive the philosophical discovery that what are the semantic distinctions in a language is not something which is determined in a Platonic heaven, but rather depends essentially on what the users of the language (systematically) take those semantic distinctions to be.\(^{26}\)

4.2 Quine has sometimes expressed the indeterminacy thesis in terms of the possibility of conflict in truth-value between the two (hypothetical) proposed translations. The advantage of such a formulation is, presumably, precisely that it enables him to undermine the pretheoretic notion of meaning without appealing to intuitive semantic judgments. What we are to conceive is a radical translator faced with equally good (objectively speaking) translation manuals which map a single source-sentence specified non-semantically onto two sound-sequences of English, say \([p]\) and \([q]\), with which she associates different assent value. (I.e., she would dissent from the biconditional \([p] \iff [q]\).) And that would seem threatening enough.

Quine has argued for the possibility just described in two ways. The first involves citing the thesis of underdetermination of theory by evidence. Quine has dubbed this “the argument from above.” For reasons I discuss elsewhere,\(^ {27}\) the only defensible version of the argument from above requires making use of the reductio reasoning mentioned earlier. But we have just seen that this reasoning would not be available to an eliminativist, given its acknowledgement of intuitive semantic judgments. Quine is then left with what he has called “the argument from below,” based on his thesis of inscrutability of reference. However, Quine’s argument for the inscrutability thesis must itself acknowledge intuitive semantic judgments.

To see this, we should note that Quine’s arguments for inscrutability and for indeterminacy run parallel. (See chap. II of [3]). The argument for the claim that reference is inscrutable—that there is no fact of the matter as to whether, e.g., a linguistic expression refers to rabbits or to undetached rabbit parts—consists in citing the possibility of incompatible translations of terms. Quine argues that the objective evidence does not allow a choice between ‘rabbit’ and ‘undetached rabbit part’ as English translations of the native's gavagai. Yet these translations are incompatible. But how are we to cash out this incompatibility in purely Quinean terms? Since we are dealing with terms, and not sentences, there is no sense in talking about the translator’s associating different assent values with the two proposed translations. However, the threat to the notion of “the” reference of the term gavagai depends on our taking our (English) ‘rabbit’, to refer to rabbits and our ‘undetached rabbit part’ to refer to undetached parts of rabbits.

\(^{26}\) I discuss this claim in [4a].

\(^{27}\) In my [2], see especially section II and endnotes #39 and #40 (where I mention that Quine no longer subscribes to the “argument from above”).

INDETERMINACY OF TRANSLATION—THEORY AND PRACTICE
say, to get us to appreciate what it is that makes reference inscrutable, Quine must call upon the judgment we are prone to make when “acquiescing in our mother tongue and taking its words at face value” (see [16], p. 49), namely, that the said expressions differ semantically. But this would mean that Quine’s ultimate defense of indeterminacy—via the *gavagai* example—must acknowledge that there are judgments made from what I have called “the practical perspective” of ordinary language users.28

4.3 A crucial feature of bilingual translation is its reliance on the translator’s first hand user’s knowledge of both the SL and the TL. I have suggested that Quine himself would have to make use of the user’s perspective on language in his reasoning about radical translation. It might be felt that a rebuttal of Quinean indeterminacy would not be complete without some more direct attack on the claim that incompatible translation manuals for any language are possible. A full development of the sort of attack I have in mind is beyond the scope of this paper. But I would like to conclude by sketching what I take to be a promising direction.

Judgments we make about semantic differences among expressions of a language we use can typically be justified; they are not brute pronouncements, like avowals of pain. We are typically able to point out particular semantically relevant features that distinguish the expressions under comparison. The direct attack I envisage would attempt to show how semantic judgments we make as users of our own language would constrain—and come into the justification of—our choices as radical translators.

Thus, consider two English expressions that English users would judge to differ semantically, such as ‘rabbit’ and ‘undetached rabbit part’. As has been pointed out, the question whether *gavagai* should translate as one or the other is in good part the question whether *gavagai* relates to other expressions in the language to which it belongs the way ‘rabbit’—or, on the contrary, the way ‘undetached rabbit’ part—relates to other expressions of English. It is quite possible—as our experience with non-radical translation suggests—that *gavagai* is related to other native expressions in a way which does not match the way either English expression is related to other English expressions. If so, we may conclude that *gavagai* does not translate exactly

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28 Walter Edelberg has suggested to me that perhaps Quine could cash out the judgment of semantic conflict between manuals yielding ‘rabbit’ and ‘undetached rabbit part’ as the translations of *gavagai* in the following way. He could point out that a translator surely would dissent from “All and only rabbits are undetached rabbit parts.” This will not do, however, since Quine takes quantified discourse to be indeterminate, as well. Thus, while a translator’s dissent from “p iff q” could be legitimately taken by Quine to attest to a perceived conflict between manuals, dissent from “All and only F’s are G’s” could not.

For reasons of space, I cannot here deal with another argument for inscrutability which Quine has come to favor in recent years, what he calls “the proxy function argument.” (See [20], pp. 19ff.) For some discussion, see [3], chapter II.
into English, though in certain contexts ‘rabbit’ (and perhaps in others even ‘undetached rabbit part’) will do as translations. (See [4a], section (4).)

In general, the particular ways in which one supports judgments of semantic differences in a language one uses would guide one in developing tests for establishing cross-linguistic semantic differences and similarities. This comports very well with the way linguists actually go about studying new languages, and it is as it should be. A language we use, with its semantic distinctions, provides us with a kind of grid, a matrix, for assessing the facts about another language. Our native language provides us not only with a means for talking about the world and about our experience of it; it also provides us with ways of expressing our understanding of alternative such means.

A positive theory of radical translation would seek to map out the ways semantic judgments we make about our own language would actually guide us in ruling out alternative translations of linguistic items in a language we are trying to probe. Once this is achieved, the crucial Quinean move in the attempt to undermine the objective status of our semantic judgments—the claim that we could translate any language in mutually incompatible ways—would be blocked. In addition, the proper subject-matter for a semantic theory will have been identified, namely—the systematic semantic judgments language-users make.29

References


This paper is based on the final chapter of my unpublished doctoral dissertation [3]. I wish to thank Tyler Burge and Edward Keenan for conversations which helped my thinking about the issues discussed in this paper. Thanks also to Walter Edelberg and Keith Simmons for reading a previous draft and providing useful comments.