

# Between the Proximal and the Distal: An Interpretation of Quine's Semantics

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## Abstract

The debate on internalism/externalism both in semantics and in epistemology concerns the core relations between the mind and the world. I will use this dichotomy to assess whether and how optimal coordination can be worked out between the different parts of Quine's philosophy: semantics and epistemology in his earlier development. Since Quine has emphasized that his examination of translation is epistemological and since his epistemological project is an internalist one, it should be logical to assume that his semantics proceeded in the same way. But in *Word and Object* it is possible to retrace his externalist steps by examining Davidson's thesis, according to which we can retrace two different positions in Quine's work: the proximal and the distal.

I will show that it is a fact that in *Word and Object* we can discern the two positions mentioned above. Even if we all agree that Quine is an internalist, this was not so clear when reading *Word and Object*, because the empirical semantics at that time was controversial, and not so aligned to his own internalist epistemology. My hypothesis is that the dispute with Davidson is one of the main reasons for the adjustments that Quine brought to his semantics.

*Keywords:* Semantics, Internalism, Externalism, Epistemology, Naturalism.

## 1. The Alleged Externalism of Quine's Work

*Word and Object* is one of Quine's most discussed works and the requisite premise to understanding his epistemological approach. In this work, Quine tends towards a dogma-free empirical semantics deriving from a naturalistic analysis of knowledge that springs from the abandonment of the analytic-synthetic distinction. Not only does he believe that such a distinction does not exist, but also that meanings themselves, intended as intermediary entities between words and objects in the world, have no reason to exist. Here then is Quine's unambiguous refusal of semantic Platonism and Mentalism: words are learnt by ostension and in either event, mean only as their use in sentences is conditioned to sensory stimuli, verbal and otherwise. Any realistic theory of evidence must be inseparable from the psychology of stimulus and response, applied to sentences, according to

the behaviorist's approach. Meaning, which specifically becomes stimulus-meaning, is only that which can be learnt from the speakers' visible behavior in terms of assent and dissent. Learning a language is therefore an induction on specific behavior that has been rewarded or punished through sentence volunteering.<sup>1</sup> To better clarify such an assumption, Quine develops the thought experiment of the radical translation between a native and a linguist in which a rather extreme case is witnessed, that is, the translation of one language into another without there having been any previous contact between them, hence based entirely on direct observation. The linguist concludes that, given that it is impossible to isolate and eliminate collateral information from occasion sentences, manuals for translating one language into another can be set up differently, compatible with the totality of verbal sets but mutually incompatible. This conclusion is decided upon by the indeterminacy of each translation, only possible in fact by virtue of a principle of *interpretative charity*, which requires us to choose the translation that makes the highest number of the speaker's utterances true. It is worth pointing out that the principle of indeterminacy of translation cannot be identified with the absolute impossibility of a translation for an interpreter/linguist, in as much as its aim is not translation in its strictest sense but rather interpretation. However, it leads to/gives rise to a much more serious consequence: the indeterminacy of meaning. He tries, in fact, to define what meaning is, examining above all Carnap's defining hypothesis. With that in mind, he looks for an identity criterion, according to his motto *no entity without identity*, but failing in his attempt, he concludes that such a criterion does not exist.

Semantics can be considered as the necessary premise for the search in epistemology, given that the mind represents the world as being a certain way, and so it is natural to go on and ask whether its representations amount to knowledge or justified belief regarding the features of the world. Since Quine has emphasized that his examination of translation is epistemological and that his epistemological project is an internalist one,<sup>2</sup> it should be logical to assume that his semantics proceed in the same way. In *Word and Object*, however, it seems possible to retrace some externalist steps by examining Davidson's thesis set out in the essay *Quine's externalism*. This paper was read at a mini-conference at Boston University on 21 January 1998, where Quine was the chairman and impromptu commentator.

<sup>1</sup> "'Ouch' is a one-word sentence which a man may volunteer from time to time by way of laconic comment on the passing show. The correct occasions of its use are those attended by painful stimulation. Such use of the word, like the correct use of language generally, is inculcated in the individual by training on the part of society; and society achieves this despite not sharing the individual's pain. Society's method is in principle that of rewarding the utterance of 'Ouch' when the speaker shows some further evidence of sudden discomfort, say a wince, or is actually seen to suffer violence, and of penalizing the utterance of 'Ouch' when the speaker is visibly untouched and his countenance unruffled. [...] Society, acting solely on overt manifestations, has been able to train the individual to say the socially proper thing in response even to socially undetectable stimulations" (Quine 1960: 5).

"Different persons growing up in the same language are like different bushes trimmed and trained to take the shape of identical elephants. The anatomical details of twigs and branches will fulfil the elephantine form differently from bush to bush, but the overall outward results are alike" (Quine 1960: 8).

<sup>2</sup> I will consider the internalism/externalism divide in semantics which concerns the materials needed in order for the mind to represent and conceptualize the world as it does; and in epistemology, which is generally taken to be the divide between theories about states and processes that are available to searching reflection and those that are not.

Davidson credits Quine with having implicitly held a view which he had long urged on him, but Quine remained an explicit internalist (Davidson 2003: 296). According to Davidson, Quine's perspective is a powerful form of externalism, in that it is a marriage between merely perceptual externalism and social externalism:

Quine's externalism combines a form of what I call perceptual externalism with a form of social externalism, and together they make a powerful team. The contribution of perceptual externalism to the learning and interpreting of language is obvious, as Quine points out, in the primacy of ostension. The contribution of social externalism is less obvious, though its role in ostension is clear (Davidson 2003: 294).

Quine is an externalist if we understand it in the natural way: a theory or position that entails that a person's beliefs and what they mean by what they say are not entirely determined by the physical state of the brain. Davidson attempted to persuade Quine to become an all-out externalist, and to anchor meanings of observation sentences to the objects, events, and situations they are about. Davidson's suggestion depends on two things: the role ostension plays in radical translation, and the emphasis on the fact that all there is to empirical meaning is what is picked up in such situations. Quine's account of ostension, which he defines as *direct experiential association with the object of reference* (Quine 1960: 92), as well as the insistence that what is acquired in ostensive situations as it filters through the web of language is all there can be to meaning, adds up to a form of externalism that is social: it concerns agreement, not on sounds, but on the external circumstances which prompts the sounds. Quine's focus is indeed on what matters socially, language is a social art we acquire based entirely on the speakers' visible behavior in recognizable, public circumstances:

Language is a social art. In acquiring it we must depend entirely on intersubjectively available cues as to what to say and when. Hence there is no justification for collating linguistic meanings, unless in terms of men's dispositions to respond overtly to socially observable stimulations (Quine 1960: XXIX).

He is then in search of *socially inculcated* linguistic usage, where language is controlled by society and comes from exclusively ostensive processes:

We are after socially inculcated linguistic usage, hence his responses to conditions normally subject to social assessment. Ocular irradiation *is* intersubjectively checked to some degree by society and linguist alike, by making allowances for the speaker's orientation and the relative disposition of objects (Quine 1960: 27).

There is, though, a counter-current in this alleged externalism perspective, which is his notion of stimulus-meaning. It depends, indeed, on private events, because they are in the skin and flesh of the individual. It is too much like sense data. In *Word and Object*, Quine does not see the problem and he simply assumes the notion of the *same stimulation* across individuals, a thesis that is clearly at odds with the passages quoted before. But it is Quine himself who sees a few years later that this concept should be revised. In a 1965 article, he writes:

If we construe stimulation my way, we cannot equate them without supposing homology of receptors; and this is absurd, not only because full homology is implausible, but because it surely ought not to matter (Quine 1969: 157).

## 2. The Proximal and the Distal Theories

At this point, Quine does not offer a clear solution to the problem,<sup>3</sup> and my hypothesis is that he did so only after Davidson's suggestions, some of which first appeared in *Meaning, Truth and Evidence* (Davidson 1990: 68-79), where he discerns two different positions in Quine's writings, calling them *the proximal* and *the distal* theories of meaning. Quine is not interested in finding an entity worth calling a meaning: the meaning of an observation sentence is its stimulus-meaning, which is explained and does its work by providing a criterion of sameness of meaning. But the location of a stimulus is notoriously ambiguous, and Quine offers a choice between two possible locations: at the sensory receptors, or at the objects and events our observation sentences are about. According to Davidson, it makes a vast difference whether the meaning is tied to the proximal or to the distal stimulus:

If I have labored what is obvious to any student of Quine's work, it is because I want to focus attention on the difference between the account of meaning and evidence that I have been discussing and another account that will also be found in Quine's work, [...] The difference between the two accounts may not seem important, but I shall argue that the character of Quine's empiricism depends on which account is accepted (Davidson 1990: 72).

Since the criterion used by Quine is sameness of meaning, the difference between these two approaches would show up in the answer each theory gives to the question of when two sentences may have the same meaning for two different speakers. On the proximal theory, which seems to be the official one for Quine, two sentences have the same meaning if and only if they have the same stimulus-meaning, that is if they have the same patterns of stimulation prompt to assent or dissent. The distal theory, on the other hand, focuses on the shared causes and events: two sentences have the same meaning if they are caused by the same events or objects for two different speakers. This view favors external objects and events as both the cause and the content of our utterances. Therefore, the difference between the two theories lies in the choice of the proper location of the causal factors. The distal theory of meaning removes the sense organs and their activities from central importance, and focuses on the shared causes. As Quine writes in his *distal mood*, the fixed points are just the shared stimulus and the world. What makes communication possible, Davidson claims, is after all the sharing,

<sup>3</sup> Quine would explicitly change his mind in 1996: "Stimulus meaning was what, theoretically speaking, correct translation of an observation sentence preserved. This is uncomfortable theory, however. It calls for sameness of stimulus meaning of the native sentence for the native and the English sentence for the translator, and hence a sharing of stimulations by native and translator. Well, they cannot share neuroceptors, so we must settle rather for homology of receptors. Such homology is by no means be expected [...] What we have is a pre-established *harmony* of standards of perceptual similarity, independent of intersubjective likeness of receptors or sensations. [...] This, in turn, is accounted by natural selection" (Quine 2004: 169-71).

inherited and acquired of similarity responses. Also, the proximal theory leads us to skepticism of the senses, and with no surprise:

The causal connections Quine's naturalism assumes between external situations and stimulations are, if we stick to the proximal theory, no guarantee we have an even roughly correct view of the public world. Although each speaker may be content that his view is the true one, since it squares his stimulations, once he notices how globally mistaken others are, and why, it is hard to think why he would not wonder whether *he* had it right. Then he might wonder what it could mean to get it right (Davidson 1990: 74).

In *Theories and Things*, Quine says that there is no skeptical conclusion from his perspective. The nature of reality is specified by our theories about it, there is no truth beside them. This means that our theories are our constructions, that the world actually is the way we think it is, and that this rules out the chance that we can be completely mistaken about it.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in the article *Relativism and Absolutism* (Quine 2008: 319-22), Quine tries to define what is relative and what is not in his philosophical system, and he writes that the only relativism still present is the relativity of all sensory evidence to one's neural organization that determines what different triggerings of nerve endings will favor the same response. Nevertheless, at the very end of the article he concludes:

The truth of physical world [...] had to do not with what there is and what is true about the world, but only with the evidence for what there is and what is true about the world. I was showing that scientific discourse radically unlike our own, structurally and ontologically, could claim equal evidence and that we are free to switch. Still we can treat of the world and its objects only within some scientific idiom, this or another. [...] Such, then, is my absolutism. *Or does it ring relativistic after all?* (Quine 2008: 322; my italics).

Setting the controversial features of this quote aside, what seems clear is that Quine chose evidence over truth. The form of empiricism he endorses is based indeed on two tenets: one is that whatever evidence there is for science is sensory evidence, and that all inculcation of meanings of words must rest ultimately on sensory evidence (Quine 1969: 75). The problem here is that it is not clear what plays the role of evidence in Quine's doctrine. He proposes to drop the talk of observation and to talk instead of observation sentences like 'this is red', which are closest to whatever counts as evidence for him.<sup>5</sup> Davidson thinks that Quine

<sup>4</sup> "In what sense could the world then be said to deviate from what the theory claims? Clearly in none, even if we can somehow make sense of the phrase 'every possible observation'. Our overall scientific theory demands of the world only that it be so structured as to assure the sequences of stimulation that our theory gives us to expect. More concrete demands are empty, what with the freedom of proxy functions" (Quine 1981: 22).

<sup>5</sup> The observation sentence is vital in understanding how we come to the construction of scientific theories from sensory evidence. It is in fact the wedge that a person needs to enter cognitive language. Learning is achieved through ostension, through phases that are explained in detail in *The Roots of Reference*, to arrive at the first distinguishable scientific laws arranged in the observation categoricals. The only step forward compared to Hume, lies in discovering, through psychology lab experiments, the evolution that leads us from global stimuli to observation categoricals, that are designed to be the neutral arbiter between

never really answered the question of what evidence consists of. But this is mainly, and I agree with Kemp on this (Kemp 2015: 179-88), because he was never interested in conducting an analysis of the concept of evidence, for his main concern was to understand how theories work, not in justifying them.

However, Davidson's conclusion is that choosing evidence over truth is a mistake, since basing meaning on evidence necessarily leads to truth relativized to individuals, and skepticism. Therefore, Quine should abandon his proximal theory in order to become a better empiricist:

The dependence of meaning and beliefs on patterns of stimulation is one thing that makes Quine's epistemology naturalistic, and it is what places him in the empiricist tradition. It is also an idea which, for all its attractions, I think Quine should abandon. The abandonment would not entail giving up naturalism, but it would mean relinquishing what remains of empiricism after the first two dogmas have been surrendered (Davidson 1990: 68).

Quine never thought of the problem in these terms because he did not consider himself an externalist, and there are several passages in *Word and Object* that confirm this position. When Quine describes, for example, the case of radical translation in the second chapter of *Word and Object*, he declares it is important to consider the stimulation and not the rabbit, as that which prompts the native's assent to *Gavagai*. The stimulation can actually remain identical even if the rabbit is replaced by a counterfeit. In experimentally assimilating the uses of the words *gavagai* and *rabbit*, it is the stimulations that must be equaled, not the animals:

It is important to think of what prompts the native's assent to 'Gavagai?' as stimulations and not rabbits. Stimulation can remain the same though the rabbit be supplanted by a counterfeit. Conversely, stimulation can vary in its power to prompt assent to 'Gavagai' because of variations in angle, lighting, and colour contrast, though the rabbit remains the same. In experimentally equating the uses of 'Gavagai' and 'Rabbit' it is stimulations that must be made to match, not animals (Quine 1960: 27).

This passage is clearly at odds with an externalist semantics, but also with the numerous passages that we have seen in the same work, and this is precisely why we can retrace the two different positions by reading through it. In other books and articles, we can still see Quine depend primarily on the external environment for what concerns language learning,<sup>6</sup> and not in a merely casual sense as the above-mentioned internalist passage would prefer. In *The Roots of Reference*, for example, Quine seems to take a distal line when he writes:

theories, and so the locus of evidence. From an epistemological point of view, there are also those who claim that Quine is an externalist about evidence, while Davidson is an internalist: Davidson is an internalist about justification and evidence, while Quine is an externalist. For Davidson, all the evidence you can have for a belief is internal to your system of beliefs. For Quine, much evidence is indeed internal to your system of beliefs, but there is also an external source of evidence: the triggering of your sensory receptors. Bergström (Davidson 2001: 17).

<sup>6</sup> "What is wanted for a better understanding of the mechanics of language and language learning is a continuing adherence to externals. Conjectures about internal mechanisms are laudable insofar as there is hope of their being supported by neurological findings. But the idea of our fathers will be only in the way" (Quine 1974: 37).

Ostensive learning is fundamental, and requires observability. The child and the parent must both see red when the child learns 'red', and one of them must see also that the other sees red at that time (Quine 1974: 37-38).

Even though we can read from this quote a situation of 'shared event', precisely of both the child and the parents seeing 'the red' at that time, Quine claims that we can simply do without an intersubjective likeness of stimulation: fluency of dialogue becomes the ultimate test of a successful translation manual and the firmer factual basis for translation, captured earlier with the tying of observation sentences to shared stimulus meaning, is now dropped. Nevertheless, according to Davidson, the kind of externalism tying the contents of observation sentences and perceptual beliefs directly to the situations that usually make them true is superior to those forms of empiricism which introduce intermediaries between word and object. He suggested the idea according to which Quine would have had a better answer to the question of what our scientific theories can really claim about our world, only if he had endorsed an externalist perspective, which ties content of observation sentences to their distal stimulus.

Quine's answers to Davidson's suggestions can be found in *Comment on Davidson* and in *Pursuit of Truth* (Quine 1990: 80; 1992).

*Comment on Davidson* is the direct answer to *Meaning, Truth and Evidence*. Here, Quine writes only that he agrees with Davidson when he says that the term 'evidence' is given no explanation and therefore plays no role in his theory of evidence, but this may simply mean that the term is not very clear so it cannot be part of an empirical hypothesis about human knowledge (Sinclair 2014: 350-72). The analogies he makes soon after may confirm this hypothesis;<sup>7</sup> he also claims that Davidson understands his view and that their agreement runs fairly deep. At the very end of the *Comment*, he finally affirms that it was because of these conversations that he indeed moved to an intermediate position between his old proximal and Davidson's distal view, which can be seen clearly through his article *Three indeterminacies*, printed in the same volume. He now thinks that Davidson's objections are met by this new position. In this article, Quine recalls his path from the '60s, when he adopted the concept of stimulus meaning, to the '80s, when he readjusted his definition of observation sentences, from a *shared* situation, the appeal of sameness of meaning between speakers, to the definition within the individual speaker. In *Theories and Things*, Quine in fact changes his mind concerning observation sentences and abandons the social criterion of it, which is the idea of two speakers belonging to the same speech community. He switches to the following definition:

If querying the sentence elicits assent from a given speaker on one occasion, it will elicit likewise on any other occasion when the same total set of receptors is triggered; and similarly for dissent. This and this only is what qualifies sentences as observation sentences for the speaker in question, and this is the sense in which they are the sentences most directly associated with sensory stimulation (Quine 1981: 25).

<sup>7</sup> "There is an analogy in the theory of knowledge, which, as I wrote somewhere, blushes for its name. Perhaps there is an analogy also in the theory of truth, since a language cannot contain its own full-scale truth predicate. The theories are all right even if their eponymous concepts go by the board" (Quine 1990: 80).

Then, he recounts a sentence which is observational for a whole community when it is observational for each member, and finally:

[...] my new line would be to retain my 1981 definition of observation sentence for the single speaker, and then account a sentence observational for a group if it is observational for each member *and* if each would agree in assenting to it, or dissenting, on witnessing the pertinent occasion. What counts as witnessing the occasion will be judged, as in the translation case, by projecting oneself into the witness's position (Quine 1990: 4).

The projection of oneself into another's position leads us directly to the other answer that Quine gives to Davidson, that can be found, as aforementioned, in *Pursuit of Truth*, where he claims:

Empathy dominates the learning of language, both by the child and by field linguist. In the child's case it is the parent's empathy. [...] We all have an uncanny knack for empathizing another's perceptual situation, however ignorant of the physiological or optical mechanism of his perception (Quine 1992: 42-43).

So, Quine's focus is still on what is going on inside our brain, our physiological mechanism, even if we are not aware of it. To Quine's empathy, Davidson responds with the concept of *salience*, which is defined in terms of similarity of responses that decide what we count as a relevant cause.

Nevertheless, in a note of *In Praise of Observation Sentences*, Quine writes:

Davidson calls his position a distal theory of meaning and mine a proximal one. Actually, my position in semantics is as distal as his. My observation sentences treat of the distal world, and they are rock-bottom language for the child and field linguist alike. My identification of stimulus with neural intake is irrelevant to that (Quine 2008: 416).

This quote is rather controversial. Quine is not considering Davidson's theory in Davidson's terms; his way of *treating* the distal world cannot be equated to the way observation sentences treat the external world in Davidson's theory, the Quinean treatment is only causal. This is because Quine's main concern is epistemological, as we shall now see.

### 3. The Epistemological Direction

According to Sinclair (2009), Quine and Davidson disagree only in the feasibility of an objective and scientific project of a theory of meaning: Quine claims we cannot have this kind of theoretical model, while Davidson thinks we can and we should have, for meaning is something we can actually know about. As Sinclair writes:

Quine himself responds to this suggestion by explaining that he has now moved to an intermediate point between his old proximal view and Davidson's distal view and that he thinks Davidson's objections to his proximal account can be met by his new intermediate position. This reply is surprisingly silent concerning Davidson's main worry about what determines the content of our utterances, and [...] the

further details of this new intermediate position do not explicitly address the question either (Sinclair 2009: 283).

Quine's focus was always epistemological, he was not concerned about the determination of linguistic meaning, nor the question of handling content determination. His theory reveals the scarcity of evidence available in translation and underlines that there cannot be a genuinely objective science of meaning. He explores the scientific viability of the theory of translation by examining its resources for the empirical clarification of synonymy, with the result of an argument that shows the limits of an objective science of meaning, and against a development of it. The changes Quine made, from stimulus meaning to perceptual similarity, are a consequence of his epistemology:

[...] Quine's central motives push him to readdress the issue of proximal dissimilarity, since his core epistemological concern underlies *both* translation and science, requiring an explanation of success in both activities. This results in his dropping the misleading term "stimulus meaning" completely from his epistemology and providing the description of perceptual harmony between participants (Sinclair 2009: 288).

It was the epistemological interest, Quine claims, that led him in his research in semantics:

[...] I remain unswayed in locating stimulation at the neural input, for my interest is epistemological, however naturalized. I am interested in the flow of evidence from the triggering of the senses to the pronouncements of science; also in the rationale of reification, and in the credentials, if any, of the notion of cognitive meaning. It is these epistemological concerns, and not my incidental interest in linguistic, that motivate my speculations on radical translation (Quine 1990: 3).

Therefore, for his epistemological concerns, translation does require the intersubjective harmony of sensory response, which is something Quine realized only after the publication of *Word and Object*, and only after these kinds of discussions with Davidson himself, who remains discontented about this thesis, for it is the object, and not the sensory triggering, that is observable by any interpreter. They continue to have contrasting views on the matter, which is well explained by the divergence over which empirical constraints are available for the determination of the meaning. Quine chooses the evidence, Davidson the truth.

Quine is a naturalist and an empiricist, his main focus is, as noted, epistemological, i.e. the direct study of the physical processes that should lead us to the evaluation of epistemic elements characterizing the definition of knowledge. Psychology investigates how our cognitive processes work and we should turn to it, in order to establish how we actually arrive at the construction of theories from sensory evidence. So, in the end, Quine remains an internalist and in several writings published soon after this dispute, he finally formulated the thesis of *pre-established harmony*:

Natural selection has accordingly favored innate standards of perceptual similarity which have tended to harmonize with the trends in the environment. [...] Derivatively, then, through our sharing of an ancestral gene pool, our innate standards of perceptual similarity harmonize also intersubjectively. [...] The effect of intersubjective

harmony, we see, is that what the two observers agree on is the shared distal subject matter and not the unshared proximal situations. The latter, however, are what are related by perceptual similarity, though not intersubjectively (Quine 2008: 475).

In *From Stimulus to Science* (Quine 1995), Quine explains that the relationship between global stimuli is given by this concept of perceptual similarity, which becomes a matter of the subject's reaction, whose criteria can be controlled through reward and punishment mechanisms, typical of behaviorist psychology.<sup>8</sup> The concept of primitive induction, or rather the tendency to predict that similar perceptions will be followed by other similar ones, is then based on the standard of perceptual similarity, which is something innate, even if, as he explains in *The Roots of Reference*, it changes in relation to experience.<sup>9</sup> What matters to Quine, then, is what happens inside our skin, and not outside, as a theory of reference would require. The difference between Quine and Davidson is in the importance of the relationship between the individual and the distal object, which is merely causal in Quine's theory, while fundamental in Davidson's one, since he built his method on objective reference from the start. Again, Quine does not have a theory of evidence and reference in Davidson's terms: two speakers can triangulate an object and in so doing they can be taken to refer to a counterpart of it, something Quine would clearly go on to explain in *I, You and it* (Quine 2008: 485-92). His main point is to discover how human beings acquire abstractions and conjectures that produce scientific theories, excluding ideas from our domain and focusing directly on language, in an attempt then to join epistemology, psychology and semantics successfully; the same empirical semantics that was first described in *Word and Object*, and that only after the criticisms by Davidson did he realize it needed serious adjustments.

#### 4. Conclusions

On one hand, Quine's conclusions concerning an objective theory of meaning are entirely negative. Davidson's, on the other, are much more optimistic, and he tries until the end to persuade Quine in conceiving his own thesis. According to Kemp (2012), the very reason for this inconclusive dispute is the incompatibility of Quine's naturalism with Davidson's approach, in particular it prevents Quine from accepting Davidson's commitments regarding truth and reference. The former is considered by Davidson as *transcendental*, while for Quine it is *immanent*; they both accept and use Tarski-truth scheme, but they are conceiving it in a different way. Reference, on the other hand, or rather the relativity of it, is seen by

<sup>8</sup> "An individual's standards of perceptual similarity, at any given stage of his development, are in principle objectively testable, as follows. The individual happens to make some move on the occasion of some global stimulation, and we reward the move. Later we stimulate him again in a perceptually somewhat similar way, and in view of the past reward he makes the same move again, but this time we penalize it. Finally, we stimulate him again, this time in a way intermediate between the two stimulations, in respect of receptive similarity. If he makes the move a third time, despite the recent penalty, we conclude that the third stimulation was perceptually more similar to the first than to the second" (Quine 1995: 17-18).

<sup>9</sup> In *From Stimulus to Science*, Quine specifies, moreover, that perceptual similarity is explained not only by natural selection but also by the society to which we belong or to common environments: all the members of a linguistic community are disposed to agree immediately whether an observation sentence is true or false provided that they possess normal perceptual abilities, it is therefore only partially innate.

Quine as inescapable,<sup>10</sup> for an account of reference must be indeterminate or inscrutable; while, according to Davidson, this relativity is actually harmless, accepting a substantive relation between words and objects, that, despite the title of his masterpiece, is something Quine cannot do.

There is no clear theoretical answer from Quine's perspective to Davidson's question concerning what determines the meaning of our utterances, but simply a practical concern with how our use of words facilitates linguistic communication. Quine's reply does not directly meet the semantic issue as Davidson formulates it. Their disagreement lies within a more fundamental divergence over the philosophical import of semantics. Quine's concern is primarily epistemological, but the empirical semantics at the time of the publication of *Word and Object* was controversial and a little bivalent, concerning both the proximal and the distal perspective, and so it was difficult to see it, at that time, to be aligned to his own internalist epistemology.

My hypothesis is that this dispute is one of the main reasons for the adjustments that Quine brought to his semantics. It would have been extremely interesting to read the second edition of his masterpiece, in order to have the complete version in one fell swoop.

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<sup>10</sup> "No scientifically satisfactory sense can be made of the concept meaning, and not even [...] of reference, [...]: the use of those concepts is inescapably intuitive, unpredictably interest-relative, and subject to radical indeterminacy and even paradox. They are bound with common sense in ways in which are absolutely fine for practical life" (Kemp 2012: 2).

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