Aristotle in China

Language, Categories and Translation

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The China syndrome: language, logical form, translation

The only generalisation to make about language and science is to make no generalisation.   Yuen Ren Chao

Die Sprache verkleidet den Gedanken. Und zwar so, daß man nach der äußeren Form des Kleides, nicht auf die Form des bekleideten Gedankens schließen kann; weil die äußere Form des Kleides nach ganz anderen Zwecken gebildet ist, als danach, die Form des Körpers erkennen zu lassen.[1]

Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 4.002

1 Introduction

My intention in this first chapter is to address a methodological presumption which, for better or worse, influences a great portion of the work done on Chinese philosophy, both in the West and in the East. I refer to the presumption that there is something distinctively Chinese about Chinese philosophy taken more or less in its entirety; that this feature (or these features) set(s) the path of its development; and that it (or they) must be invoked to account for whatever large and deep contrasts are perceived between it and that other strange monolith, Western philosophy.

The suggestion that we should pay attention to what is Chinese (in some very broad sense) in Chinese thought will sound rather bizarre to anyone not wedded to a radically abstract conception of argument – and will do so precisely because it is so resoundingly truistic. But of course what is characteristic of Chinese philosophical studies, not to mention the whole scientific project inspired by Joseph Needham, is not merely a proper sensitivity to some set of more or less diverse cultural factors impinging on Chinese intellectual evolution in one or another, more or less decisive fashion: what dominates is the perceived contrast with the West. Sometimes this takes the form of a trial, the

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[1] 'Language disguises thought. So much so, that from the outward form of the clothing it is impossible to infer the form of the thought beneath it, because the outward form of the clothing is not designed to reveal the form of the body, but for entirely different purposes.'

Chinese being seen to have diverged from – almost inevitably to have fallen grievously short of – some Western achievement, and the question is then, why so? But such studies, whether they plead for the defence or for the prosecution, always impose investigative patterns which Chinese material is made to fit, usually by distortion, at best by omission.

   Geoffrey Lloyd has recently subjected one large family of comparativist methodologies to blistering attack in his *Demystifying Mentalities*.[2] I shall make my beginning with a cognate group of theories, those which cast their principles in linguistic terms, and which are of particular interest both because they prevail in philosophical studies and because their evaluation presents a special, and especially philosophical, difficulty. The mentalities approach seeks to explain a host of anthropological issues by associating a distinctive set of intellectual capacities (and limitations) with a given culture. A running theme of Lloyd's book is that it is swiftly brought to grief by the insuperable difficulties which beset any attempt to specify a well-defined social unit to which a dominant mentality might be attributed without begging all the interesting questions. Lloyd's moral is that in this sphere, at least, totalising tendencies are well nigh indefensible. But the hypotheses I shall scrutinise can boast at least one especially challenging feature. For, in comparison with most mentality approaches, their basic presumption that linguistic communities are relatively homogeneous is not patently outrageous.[3]

   There is a twist, however. Their presumption will fail to be truly outrageous only if, paradoxically, it motivates interpretative strategies of a vauntingly ambitious character. We begin far beyond the range of dialectal differences, diachronic linguistics, the relation between spoken and written language, or the proprietary modes of expression of given cultural groupings. We begin with the structure of the language itself, as it were with *langue* rather than *parole*; structure must be understood as so fundamental as not to be subject to any of the enormous variations I have enumerated, on pain of losing that putative unitary theoretical entity, *the* language. So here is the first shift of comparativist linguistic hypotheses outside the narrow circle of the mentalities debate: their favoured terms of comparison are less vulnerable to the accusation of being mere figments of the theoretical imagination. Second, champions of linguistic comparativism do not always regard thought as intrinsically linguistic. But they *do* happily claim both

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[2] Lloyd 1990.

[3] Jean-Paul Reding's 'Greek and Chinese Categories: A Reexamination of the Problem of Linguistic Relativism' develops a judicious critique of what he considers over-hasty recognition of the relativistic influence exercised by particular languages on disparate philosophical traditions: 'if categories can be discovered through a language, this does not mean that they are relative to that language; it only means that the categories mirror themselves – though imperfectly – in language. It would also be wrong to say that language channels our thinking: it rather floods it, and it is the philosopher's duty to find the fordable places' (Reding 1986, pp. 355–6).

that linguistic structure is to some significant extent isomorphic with major thought-patterns and that it is necessarily language which imposes those patterns on thought, not the other way around. Third, this isomorphism is supposed to be apparent in the articulation of reason called philosophy, and philosophical development is judged to be positively guided and negatively constrained by the language in which it is done.

The hypothesis that basic linguistic structure at once encourages and constrains the development of philosophical tendencies and doctrines, whether fruitful or disastrous, has enjoyed a curiously persistent vogue amongst students of Chinese philosophy. For ease of reference I designate it 'the guidance and constraint hypothesis', and shall investigate its continuing popularity by considering the genesis of the trend both inside and outside the boundaries of Sinology proper. Quite apart from the obvious attraction it holds of affording insight into why a significant group of scholars should be wedded to a given procedure,[4] my approach has the added advantage of helping to explain an otherwise surprising feature of comparativist methodology: its ostensible conflict with dominant philosophical anthropology. Once its pedigree has been established, the various fortunes of proponents of the hypothesis will be assessed in a series of case-studies covering topics of the greatest potential interest and importance. Dubbing the Sinological vogue for the hypothesis a 'syndrome' is obviously pejorative. Yet my evaluations, even if largely negative, will not only help diagnose what I shall argue is a remarkable affliction besetting comparativist philosophy of language. They will also suggest alternative ways of understanding the all-imporant but protean concepts of linguistic and logical form.

2 Guidance and constraint

'Guidance and constraint' is easy enough to enunciate; it is far less easy to make the hypothesis usefully determinate or to work out what types of linguistic phenomena should count as evidence *pro* or *contra*. 'Guidance' takes two forms. In its first form, where the relativist perceives success, a feature of linguistic structure will be invoked which either strongly encourages or, more commonly, at least enables the discovery of philosophical truth. In its second form, where philosophy goes 'wrong', we have 'misguidance'; for example the reification of linguistic detail deemed not to correspond with reality. 'Constraint' can overlap with 'misguidance', but is usually invoked to

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[4] Some, if not all, of the scholars to be discussed critically in the sequel might very well object that I have grossly misrepresented them at the outset: since they differ so sharply over basic issues in the interpretation of Chinese philosophy and language, they can hardly constitute a real 'group'. What I shall seek to demonstrate is that adherence to 'the guidance and constraint hypothesis' constitutes a problematic methodological unity more fundamental than the level on which they part company.

explain the absence from one language, and thus from one philosophical tradition, of whole departments of enquiry energetically pursued in another.

At this juncture a cardinal principle must be introduced, one flouted regularly in the literature, just as the basic requirement of thorough knowledge of the languages in question is only partially satisfied at best. Again and again participants in these discussions adduce supposedly striking and decisive instances of what might be labelled linguistic 'dissonance' or 'shock', that is, alleged examples of baulked translation whose intractability is to be ascribed (the story goes) to structural divergence. But the fact is that much of this evidence constitutes, if anything, a set of counter-examples to 'the guidance and constraint hypothesis'. That some philosophical thesis can be formulated in ancient Chinese or ancient Greek or modern English or French only by creating or adapting terminology, by novel definition or redefinition, or even by speaking in what might be felt as an alien idiom, establishes that the philosophy *is* expressible – albeit at the expense of considerable ingenuity, prolixity or both. Sinologists impressed by the trickiness of getting certain European philosophical texts into Chinese should take note of how elaborately hedged about is, and must always be, the study of ancient Greek texts in English translation. When the complex of Chinese language and thought is set against the Western model, the linguistic explanation of their differences is supposed to be fundamental, and where, as is customary, the contrast is with ancient Greek, the foundation is taken to be whatever differentiates Indo-European from all other language groups. As a result, registering examples of 'shock' and 'dissonance' will hit home if and only if they demonstrate a real inability, in principle and as a consequence of basic structure, to get something from or into Chinese: mere occasions for ingenuity will not suffice.

In several works[5] Angus Graham took up 'the guidance and constraint hypothesis' and adapted it to the large-scale evaluation of Chinese philosophy.[6] His *Disputers of the Tao* is a text to which I shall return again and again. Since Graham's unparalleled linguistic expertise was explicitly set to philosophical work of great force and scope, both the particular form of 'guidance and constraint' he advocated and his objections to rival versions will amply repay study.

Graham's exploitation of 'dissonance' appears to hover unstably between exaggeration of its significance and willingness to moderate his own linguistic determination strategy. Citing what he sees as Plato's and Anselm's 'confusion between existence and

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[5] Most notably appendix 2 to *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (Graham 1989).
[6] Although various earlier, interesting formulations of Graham's position are easy enough to find scattered throughout his voluminous writings, which do not simply repeat themselves on this score, the fact remains that in all essentials appendix 2 is the definitive, final enunciation of his thesis.

essence', he asserts without qualification that 'such a fallacy cannot be reproduced in Chinese'.[7] So translation is impossible. But not quite, provided we are prepared to pay the cost of destructive syntactical innovation: 'one sees that philosophical translation from another language, which seems to enrich terminology, can involve a deterioration of syntax'.[8] We are reassured, however, that untranslatability does not threaten 'the extreme sort of linguistic relativism', perhaps to be glossed by Graham's phrase 'invalidity is independent of particular language structures'.[9]

Now, in this particular case, as Graham is confident that treating existence as a predicate is a philosophical error (indeed *the* error of 2,000 years of Western philosophy), and I certainly am not, then – if we must talk of East/West competition – I will certainly not want to judge this round in it as he does. But the comparative exercise in any case depends on his assumption that a Chinese word or turn of phrase whose sole function is to translate Western philosophical arguments is not a real word or phrase, that is, does not represent a legitimate translation; and I fail to see that that is any better than arbitrary stipulation. Graham's defence would presumably be that when attempts to translate foreign philosophy into Chinese cause syntactical 'deterioration', the suspicion that authentic translation has not actually been achieved is well grounded: no question has been begged. Such a response persuades only if we have access to a neutral criterion for distinguishing a species of 'deterioration' favouring 'the guidance and constraint hypothesis' from (philosophically, at least) benign linguistic innovation, whether lexical or syntactical; and such a criterion should be objective in the obvious sense that the rationale for detection of 'deterioration' must not merely be falling foul of the researcher's *philosophical* convictions. Unfortunately, as Graham fails to meet this condition, mere feelings of linguistic oddity, even on the part of the *doyen* of modern Sinologists, do not carry conviction.

Perhaps the condition *is* unsatisfiable, but for an interesting reason. It is simply impossible, even for native speakers, to draw a firm line between 'odd' sentences and ones they find truly unintelligible.[10] For him to avoid question-begging, Graham's

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[7] Graham 1989, p. 412.   [8] *Ibid*., p. 413.

[9] *Ibid*., p. 414. Reding neatly reverses Graham's procedure, detecting logical distortions *by* rather than *of* Chinese: 'the only road which can lead us to the Chinese categories is a study of how logical distinctions can be distorted by Chinese syntax . . . "Distortion", here, is not meant to be an abstract concept: it manifests itself as a kind of uneasiness or frustration felt by the philosopher, who, while using the language, stumbles against its limits and reacts against its imperfections by pointing them out or by propounding new forms of expression' (Reding 1986, pp. 361–2). The ultimate ancestry of something like Reding's linguistically hobbled philosophy is explored in section 6.2.

[10] Much as the line between sentences and non-sentences, or grammatical and ungrammatical sentences, is not there to be drawn – except, say, by someone dogmatically committed to a meta-theory of grammar which dictates that all grammars must be sets of rules generating all and only the sentences of a language.

philosophical convictions should not influence his linguistic judgements. But they do – and in fact it may be that *no-one* can make purely linguistic judgements in any case (except grammarians, and then only about their *ad hoc*, maximally decontextualised sentences).

A related point concerns what we mean by 'a language'. I have already emphasised that evaluation of 'the guidance and constraint hypothesis' is bedevilled by its proponents' failure to apply and test it at a structural level so fundamental that the tremendous linguistic variation which threatens to dissolve the terms of cultural comparison has not yet emerged. But even when that condition is respected, it remains unclear just how much is to be abstracted away. That not blindly begging questions here is vitally important finds vivid exemplification in the prevalence of the assumption that Chinese morphology – or rather the *absence* of Chinese morphology – is quite distinctive. If anything is going to count as a significant fundamental linguistic feature, then lack of morphology in Chinese will.

This, of course, is what everyone who knows anything about Chinese knows, and it is intimately bound up with the general presumption that Chinese is fantastically ambiguous[11] – a presumption which goes all the way back to primary contacts, as this quotation from Matteo Ricci confirms:

> I have recently given myself to the study of the Chinese language and I can promise you that it's something quite different from either Greek or German. In speaking it, there is so much ambiguity that there are many words that can signify more than a thousand things, and at many times the only difference between one word and another is the way you pitch them high or low in four different tones. Thus when [the Chinese] are speaking to each other they write out the words they wish to say so that they can be sure to understand – for all the written letters are different from each other. As for these written letters you would not be able to believe them had you not both seen and used them, as I have done. They have as many letters as there are words and things, so that there are more than 70,000 of them, every one quite different and complex.[12]

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[11] E.g. 'the average lexical item found in the literature (especially the basic 2500+[i.e. graphs]) is so rich in semantic content that meaning differentiation is very difficult, with the consequence that virtually every passage is ambiguous, being subject to a multiplicity of readings until and unless a specific interpretation is given to it' (Rosemont 1974, p. 83; this supposed near-universal ambiguity is cited in support of Rosemont's astounding contention that written ancient Chinese, in sharp distinction from spoken, is not a natural language).

[12] Letter to Martino de Fornari (1583), quoted from Spence 1985, pp. 136–7. Ricci takes words to be (primarily) spoken objects, and apparently fails fully to absorb the fact that written signs are signs *for words*, and are not letters, i.e. signs for units of speech. But it is his so regarding graphs which guarantees his also regarding both them and what they stand for ((spoken) words) as invariant.

In contrast, John Webb imagined that absence of morphology must constitute a sort of grand linguistic liberation, or rather the state of original freedom from which all but the Chinese have since fallen:

> the Chinese are never put to that irksome vexation of searching out a radix for the derivation of any of their words, as generally all other nations are, but the radix is the word and the word is the radix . . . Besides they are not troubled with variety of Declensions, Conjugations, Numbers, Genders, Moods, Tenses and the like grammatical niceties, but are absolutely free from all such perplexing accidents, having no other Rules in use than what the light of nature has dictated unto them; whereby their language is plain, easie and simple as NATURAL speech ought to be.[13]

But is Chinese so boundlessly ambiguous? And, if so, is this ambiguity integral to 'the guidance and constraint hypothesis'? There is and can be no single acceptable answer to the question of ancient Chinese's alleged hyper-ambiguity, for the simple reason that languages are not in themselves ambiguous. 'Ambiguity', in any precisely definable sense, and with any precisely delimitable extension, is a technical term which derives its meaning from this or that linguistic theory; given the range of theories on offer, there is not even agreement over the boundaries of the set of communicative phenomena dubbed 'ambiguous', let alone over what makes them ambiguous.[14] To put this another way, the nature and degree of ambiguity one is inclined to detect in a language will depend in large part on where one favours placing the line between semantics and pragmatics, and on whether one will concede that pragmatic determination should count as resolution of meaning within the language proper. Thus, Rosemont hardly assumes that the ambiguity he insists is rife in written ancient Chinese[15] is irresoluble, although his refusal to acknowledge the contribution of syntax is incomprehensible: 'context provides the basic setting for the interpretation of passages, aided not by syntax or phonetics but by semantic information'.[16] He does not pause to consider the possibility that, if context regularly determines or even dictates a single reading – or at least a manageable range of readings comparable to the flexibility evinced by most, perhaps all, languages – then the flat assertion that 'virtually every passage is ambiguous' is at best highly misleading. What Rosemont calls 'interpretations' are not items

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[13] Webb 1669, p. 192; cf. Webb 1678.
[14] The point is a general one: homophony, homography, equivocity, etc. are likewise dependent on difficult decisions about both the bearers and the nature of meaning. For example, the statement that 'homophones sound alike, but have different meanings' is an unacceptably lax definition: but clarifying what is meant both by 'sounding alike' and by 'different meanings' will carry us into the deepest theoretical waters.
[15] See n. 11 above.   [16] Rosemont 1974, p. 82.

extrinsic to ancient Chinese helpfully imposed on it by the reader; rather, they are there to be discovered *in* the language, so long as one is prepared to recognise that the extent and complexity of the textual surroundings required to grasp the meaning of selected passages might differ radically between linguistic cultures.

Again, neither ancient nor modern Chinese verbs are marked for tense or the subjunctive mood. In their different ways, neither ancient nor modern Chinese marks or specifies conditional relationships to quite the extent that they are explicitly indicated in modern English, let alone in ancient Greek. But if we widen our view to take in signals beyond what morphology and syntax alone clarify, then we must resist any initial inclination to discern limits to Chinese thought imposed by Chinese language. It is convenient, perhaps inevitable, for those most familiar with Western languages and the study thereof to conceive of such extra-morphological and -syntactical signals as occurring in something called 'the context'. Of course there is nothing objectionable as such in that designation, so long as all that is implied is that neglecting such signals will impair, perhaps even destroy, one's ability to retrieve whatever is being said. Yet it is both difficult, and essential, to withstand the insidious temptation further to assume that since 'context' complements 'text', and 'text' is – obviously – semantically primary, languages which rely on contextual disambiguation for the effective communication of meaning must indeed be ambiguous at the core. The rejoinder is to insist that fixing on a given type of linguistic unit as a candidate for semantic evaluation is certainly not a theoretically innocent manœuvre, at least from the perspective of the semanticist. If fixing semantic units for Chinese which are roughly comparable to what theorists have typically attributed to Western languages results in 'discovering' disproportionate ambiguity in Chinese, then the suitability of the theoretical imposition, not the communicative efficacy of the language, ought to be questioned. To take a single example, Christoph Harbsmeier displays admirable sensitivity to the importance of contextualisation in ancient Chinese (which he abbreviates to 'AC'), but draws some surprising and unwarranted conclusions:

> Aus der Kontext-Gebundenheit von AC-Sätzen ergeben sich Konsequenzen für die allgemeine pragmatische Charakterisierung dieser Sätze. Ein Satz, dessen Bedeutung sich erst aus dem Zusammenhang ergibt, ist im allgemeinen nicht primär als Abbild oder objektive Darstellung des Sachverhaltes gemeint, sondern primär als Mitteilung. Man ist versucht zu sagen, daß nur wer mitteilen will, ohne notwendigerweise auch abbilden oder objektiv darstellen zu wollen, so elliptisch reden und schreiben würde, wie das die alten Chinesen anscheinend zu tun pflegten.[17]

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[17] Harbsmeier 1979, p. 115.

I should add that I am not at all sure that I grasp what 'communication' might be which can omit 'objective representation' while ostensibly not of necessity precluding it (Harbsmeier does not elaborate on these technicalities). This reasoning betrays the theoretical bias just highlighted: if the *Satz* bereft of context is strikingly elliptical, etc., then impressive consequences for the pragmatics of ancient Chinese can be seen to flow only on the supposition that the *isolated Satz* is unquestionably the primary semantic unit to which we rightly attribute such qualities as elleipsis.[18]

When there is a job of communication to be done, which segments of what I think I have every right to call 'the language' get it done can vary considerably between languages, without affecting how well the job gets done.[19] The moral for application of 'the guidance and constraint hypothesis' to ancient Chinese philosophy is fairly obvious. Lack of morphology is a star candidate for recognition as a fundamental linguistic influence on thought, probably under the 'constraint' half of the rubric. It ought to manifest itself in the guise of indeterminacy and/or ambiguity. But we must at the same time have due regard for the resources of contextual disambiguation, which of course in the case of philosophical texts emphatically do not coincide with the types of indicator governing spoken language, ancient or modern. It then emerges that the 'ambiguity' of ancient Chinese philosophy might indeed exist, and might be a function of language (if we are flexible enough about what we mean by a 'function' of language). But it cannot be viewed as an unproblematic consequence of language on

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[18] Harbsmeier himself later provides an extremely useful characterisation of ancient Chinese grammaticality which effectively undermines the basis for his earlier inferences: 'Grammatikalität ist für ihn [meinen chinesischen Meister] nicht eine Eigenschaft von Sätzen als solchen, sondern eine Relation zwischen Satz, Interpretation und Kontext. Eine Theorie der Grammatikalität im Altchinesischen ist also in ganz elementarer Weise zugleich eine Theorie der Kommunikations-Kontexte. Dem Versuch, Grammatikalität rekursiv und pragmatisch kontextfrei im Hinblick auf das AC zu klären, geht jede Plausibilität ab' (*ibid*., p. 266). Further, his formulation of what he calls 'das Entbehrlichkeitsprinzip' might help us to shake off the blinkers imposed by too parochial a grammatical background: 'Abgesehen von idiomatischen Wendungen sind im AC alle informationstheoretisch (pragmatisch) redundanten Wörter grundsätzlich grammatisch fakultative' (*ibid*., p. 119).

[19] Roy Harris, with his customary pungency, expresses a similar attitude to 'the metalinguistic terminology a language provides or does not provide, its resources or lack of resources for talk about language [which] reflect differences – sometimes subtle and sometimes quite obvious – between the ways in which different cultures treat language-using as a form of behaviour' (Harris 1980, p. 21). He goes on to argue that 'someone who agrees that this is so may none the less feel that it is going too far to say that different cultures have different concepts of what a language is. He may not realise that this view may itself be seen as reflecting a particular cultural background. For the European is the inheritor of an intellectual tradition which is strongly biased in favour of regarding languages as superficially different but fundamentally equivalent systems of expression. This assumption reveals itself in a variety of ways, including a willingness to draw a sharp distinction between "the language" and "the culture" which the language happens to serve' (*ibid*.).

the level at which the champions of 'guidance and constraint' must operate – that is, on the only level at which they do not run the risk of all the fearsome problems of interpretation not generated and circumscribed by the Chinese 'language' (as the hypothesis must understand it).

It would be as well to remember at this juncture that generalisation over the entire range of ancient Chinese philosophy is an extremely rash undertaking. Graham claims that the later Mohist concern with both linguistic and logical accuracy impelled them to produce a form of Chinese unique in its independence from context:

> in most kinds of Chinese writing one expects a word to have a variety of meanings, distinguishable in theory by looking up a dictionary, distinguishable in practice only when we have become familiar with the sort of context to which each is confined. But the key words of Mohist dialectic are shorn of all but their basic meanings; and this semantic restriction, together with the precision of the syntax, frees them from their ordinary contextual limitations.[20]

Among many other impressive examples of both lexical and syntactic innovation undertaken for the sake of clarity, he cites the following arresting, if speculative, instance: 'the Mohist dialecticians deliberately reserved the pre-verbal 有 (*yu*)/ 無 (*wu*) ("there are"/"there are not") for quantification, and avoided the confusion which might result from their use in other constructions by choosing other graphs and particles'.[21] Certainly, the Mohist logicians were atypical in both their ruling concerns and the techniques they developed to address them; but one cannot afford to dismiss the intriguing linguistic implications of their unusual writings on that score.

We have now learnt why 'dissonance' should not impress us, and discerned some of the difficulties for 'the guidance and constraint hypothesis' thrown up by the ambiguity of 'ambiguity' and the obscure polyvalence of the theoretical term 'language'; our next step is to invoke the name of Benjamin Whorf, and investigate why its resonance has proved unusually persistent in Sinological circles. As a preliminary, I shall note that Graham began his study 'The Relation of Chinese Thought to the Chinese Language' with these words: 'Chinese thought before the introduction of Buddhism from India is the unique instance of a philosophical tradition which, as far as our information goes, is wholly independent of traditions developed in Indo-European languages . . . It therefore provides the ideal test case for Whorf's hypothesis that the thought of a culture is guided and constrained by the structure of its language.'[22]

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[20] Graham 1978, p. 162.   [21] *Ibid*., p. 134.   [22] Graham 1989, p. 389.

3 On the very idea of translation

3.1 Whorf's hypothesis

Whorf's *Language, Thought and Reality* of 1956, which, on the basis of a study of the Hopi language, propounds something quite close to what I have called 'the guidance and constraint hypothesis', has proved enormously, if indirectly, influential both on philosophy, through Quine, and on anthropology, in the relativism and rationality debate, where it interacts with the complementary sources highlighted by Geoffrey Lloyd in his *Demystifying Mentalities*. Whorf was himself deeply interested in the work of Lévy-Bruhl, and in fact believed that the viability of the mentalities scheme 'is only one of the great psychological world-questions that fall into the domain of linguistics and await the impersonal and positive type of answer that linguistic research can give'.[23]

What is infuriating about reading Whorf – and this, paradoxically, may be in no small measure responsible for the breadth of his influence – is the constant difficulty of gauging the exact import of his principle of linguistic relativity. Clearly, Whorf is wedded to the idea that linguistic structure influences thought and action; but just what he intends by 'structure', the manner and extent of its influence on human perception of and reaction to reality, and the nature and strength of the evidence for relativity, all remain far from clear, for Whorf never produced a definitive statement of his position. Indeed, there are grounds for a suspicion that at least the implications of some of his assertions might not be compatible. Thus, although he most frequently cites purported lexical data in support of his claims, he accords vocabulary less weight than 'structure and grammar', whose nature he apparently assumes to be self-evident. He claims, for example, that 'these abstractions [i.e. for which *our* language lacks adequate terms] are definitely given either explicitly in words – psychological or metaphysical terms – in the Hopi language, or, even more, are implicit in the very structure and grammar of that language, as well as being observable in Hopi culture and behavior'.[24] Whorf explicitly denies that all thinking is linguistic,[25] and once, disconcertingly, rejects even the relatively modest thesis that there is any determinate correlation between language and culture, let alone a causal one.[26] But, on the other hand, he often permits himself (quasi-) metaphorical expressions which imply strong determination of thought by

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[23] Whorf 1967, p. 80; from 'A Linguistic Consideration of Thinking in Primitive Communities' (*c*. 1936).

[24] *Ibid*., pp. 58–9; from 'An American Indian Model of the Universe' (*c*. 1936).

[25] *Ibid*., p. 66; from 'A Linguistic Consideration of Thinking in Primitive Communities'.

[26] *Ibid*., pp. 138–9; from *Language, Culture, and Personality: Essays in Memory of Edward Sapir* (1941).

language;[27] claims that 'this study [of language] shows that the forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious';[28] and goes so far as to attribute a partial linguistic genesis to Newtonian concepts: 'Newtonian space, time, and matter are no intuitions. They are recepts from culture and language. That is where Newton got them.'[29] If this oscillation in Whorf's commitments never ceases, it was the memorable turns of phrase tilting towards fairly hard 'guidance and constraint' which nevertheless lodged themselves in the public mind and established his fame,[30] such as his most celebrated pronouncement, in which he embraces pure 'guidance and constraint' without the slightest inhibition: 'thinking also follows a network of tracks laid down in the given language, an organisation which may concentrate systematically upon certain phases of reality, certain aspects of intelligence, and may systematically discard others featured by other languages. The individual is utterly unaware of this organisation and is constrained completely within its unbreakable bonds.'[31]

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[27] E.g. 'the three-tense system of . . . [European] verbs colors all our thinking about time' (1967, p. 143; from *Language, Culture, and Personality: Essays in Memory of Edward Sapir*); or 'English and similar tongues lead us to think of the universe as a collection of rather distinct objects and events corresponding to words' (1967, p. 240; from 'Language and Logic' (1941)).

[28] 1967, p. 252; from 'Language, Mind, and Reality' (1942).

[29] 1967, p. 153; from *Language, Culture, and Personality: Essays in Memory of Edward Sapir*. Lest it be imagined that it is unfair to suppose that this is a radical manifestation of 'guidance and constraint', since the passage couples 'culture' with 'language' as causal factors, one should recognise that Whorf explains that by a 'thought world' he intends 'all the give-and-take between language and the culture as a whole, wherein is a vast amount that is not linguistic but yet shows the shaping influence of language' (1967, p. 147): evocative but imprecise expressions like 'the shaping influence of language' shield Whorf from the uncomfortable obligation to articulate and defend his hypothesis.

[30] 'Which was first: the language patterns or the cultural norms? In main they have grown up together, constantly influencing each other. But in this partnership the nature of the language is the factor that limits free plasticity and rigidifies channels of development in the more autocratic way. This is so because a language is a system, not just as assemblage of norms . . . Language thus represents the mass mind; it is affected by inventions and innovations, but affected little and slowly, whereas тo inventors and innovators it legislates with the decree immediate' (1967, p. 156; from *Language, Culture, and Personality: Essays in Memory of Edward Sapir*). Note also the relatively unguarded expression of what one might label 'hard-core guidance and constraint': 'when anyone, as a natural logician ['natural logic' = 'deeply rooted ideas about talking and its relation to thinking'], is talking about reason, logic, and the laws of correct thinking, he is apt to be simply marching in step with purely grammatical facts that have somewhat of a background character in his own language or family of languages but are by no means universal in all languages and in no sense a common substratum of reason' (1967, p. 211; from 'Science and Linguistics' (1940); cf. 'We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages', p. 213).

[31] 1967, p. 256; from 'Language, Mind, and Reality'. To set the record straight, while Whorf himself *usually* argues that linguistic structure strongly encourages rather than absolutely determines the thought it expresses (creates?), many of his followers did indeed go over the top, advocating wildly extremist versions of 'guidance and constraint' (a small selection: Hall 1959; Girdansky 1963; Müller (*Anthropos* 57)).

As so often happens in cases of interdisciplinary cross-fertilisation, Whorf is no longer a name to conjure with in linguistics proper. One reason for his eclipse was the new ascendancy of transformational grammar, whose leading exponents assumed (perhaps too quickly) that their revivified universalism exploded the pretensions of Whorfian linguistic relativity. Thus, Jerrold Katz has claimed that the 'well-known doctrine of linguistic relativity, which states that cultural differences produce incommensurate conceptual frameworks, derives neither from the discovery of exceptional facts about exotic languages by linguists like Whorf nor from important breakthroughs in the study of methodology by philosophers like Quine. Rather, the doctrine derives from the empiricism common to these linguists and philosophers.'[32] Katz supposes that linguistic relativity jeopardises the universal intertranslatability he assumes to be immediately entailed by rationalist transformationalism; but aspects of this pioneering defence of universal grammar against the threat of the then popular relativism suggest that he is perhaps mistaken:

> it is commonly held that modern linguistic and anthropological investigations have conclusively refuted the doctrines of classical universal grammar, but this claim seems to me very much exaggerated. Modern work has, indeed, shown a great diversity in the surface structures of languages. However, since the study of deep structure has not been its concern, it has not attempted to show a corresponding diversity of underlying structures, and, in fact, the evidence that has been accumulated in modern study of language does not appear to suggest anything of this sort.[33]

Evidently there is nothing to preclude the peaceful co-existence of transformational grammar and some version of Whorfian relativity, so long as 'guidance and constraint' is confined to surface rather than deep structure.[34] It all depends on just how incommensurate 'incommensurate conceptual frameworks' must be.

But it is the second reason for Whorf's fall from prominence which is immediately pertinent to our present concerns. What was most startling about Whorfian relativity was that it was held to be true of particular human communities in the real world. A confusing characteristic of the chief philosophical discussions of radical translation, the inscrutability of reference, and the very idea of a conceptual scheme is that they are cast

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[32] Katz 1978, p. 220.   [33] Chomsky 1967, p. 118.

[34] I have been at pains to stress that the plausibility of 'guidance and constraint' is conditional on the location and exploitation of *fundamental* linguistic structure, but since 'depth' is a relative notion, there is nothing to preclude a structure deep enough to satisfy the needs of an advocate of 'guidance and constraint' from being shallow relative to transformationalist deep structure. Cf. 'one could say that in Whorf's time the structures of the structuralists and of Whorf's linguistic writings were surface structures' (Robins 1976, p. 103).

as thought-experiments insulated in principle from empirical verification and objection, a factor routinely ignored in anthropological borrowings from and disagreements with the philosophers. Whatever success the philosophers might or might not achieve,[35] Whorf bluntly urged as a matter of fact that Hopi language does manifest basic features entailing that Hopi thought, for example in its treatment of time, diverges markedly from the language and thus thought employed by his own audience:

> after long and careful study and analysis, the Hopi language is seen to contain no words, grammatical forms, constructions or expressions that refer directly to what we call 'time', or to past, present, or future, or to enduring or lasting . . . or that even refer to space in such a way as to exclude that element of extension or existence that we call 'time', and so by implication leave a residue that could be referred to as 'time'. Hence, the Hopi language contains no reference to 'time', either explicit or implicit.[36]

The problem is that the best current work on Amerindian languages seriously undermines Whorf's results: both his data and their interpretation are, let us say, highly questionable. Most devastating, perhaps, is Ekkehart Malotki's eloquent juxtaposition (without further comment) of part of the passage from Whorf just quoted with this Hopi quotation from Malotki's own field notes of 1980: 'then indeed, the following day, quite early in the morning at the hour when people pray to the sun, around that time then he woke up the girl again'.[37] Malotki's *magnum opus* (the very length of a book entitled *Hopi Time* (677 pages) speaks volumes) exposes Whorf's alternative 'thought world' as a complete fantasy: 'while many other contributing factors instrumental in disambiguating present and past time interpretations of Hopi nonfactive verbs cannot be detailed here, suffice it to say that Hopi speakers never consider themselves at a loss in determining whether a particular utterance refers to past, present, or future time'.[38]

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[35] I directly confront such thought-experiments, and the morals which have been drawn from them, in the next section.

[36] Whorf 1967, pp. 57–8; from 'An American Indian Model of the Universe'; and a typically unqualified assertion: 'Hopi may be called a timeless language' (1967, p. 216; from 'Science and Linguistics'). In marked contrast to the pervasive ambiguity we have detected in his various formulations of and references to the relativity hypothesis itself, Whorf never wavers in his commitment to the full-blooded reality of Hopi timelessness, at once linguistic and conceptual.

[37] Epigraph to Malotki 1983.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 625. Malotki refrains from formulating the harsh judgement his illustrious predecessor palpably deserves: 'while I do not want to contend that all of my observations are flawless, one wonders, however, why Whorf erred so drastically in many of the Hopi time issues' (p. 631); a combination of quite basic linguistic incompetence and wishful thinking springs to mind as the obvious answer. However, Malotki's project is by no means unremittingly negative: with great anthropological sophistication he develops an impressive case for the thesis that Hopi deployment of their elaborate temporal concepts diverges sharply from the Western European paradigm – if hardly for the imaginary Whorfian reasons.

Thus much of the force of a supposedly 'hard' case dissipates: if anyone is inhabiting a distinct world, it isn't the Hopi, at least not for the reasons Whorf pretended he had unearthed. If the Hopi are profoundly alienated from main-stream American society, this may have a little more to do with economic and political oppression than with their delightful tense-system.

We have seen that Whorf himself was not at all averse to taking what he called 'culture', as opposed to 'language', into consideration in his study of the Hopi. In general terms, such catholicity is, of course, all to the good; but no *consistent* advocate of 'guidance and constraint' can afford to pay 'culture' the attention it would otherwise demand, if any progress is to be made towards charting the connections between language, thought and society. As a matter of historical fact, scholars reacting to the hypothesis of linguistic relativity were acutely aware of a set of problems closely resembling this dilemma. In the immediate aftermath of Whorf's celebrity, numerous linguists and anthropologists were rightly much exercised by the puzzle of *defining* language.[39] This was because so many of them were uneasy with that Whorfian construct, the 'thought world'. For his ideas to acquire substantive content, they believed, those ideas should in principle support inferences from 'language' to 'culture' (or, say, from linguistic results to pertinent ethnographic questions); so then 'language' had better not be coterminous with 'culture', but rather be at once theoretically and empirically extricable from it. No consensus emerged, however, on how best to specify the conditions Whorfian relativity should meet to achieve legitimacy in this way; on what the chances for success were; or, finally, on what salutary lessons for directing future research might be learnt from the Whorfian problematic.

In contrast, my version of 'the guidance and constraint hypothesis' was deliberately phrased to afford some protection from the dilemma, at least initially: the intention was that investigating the relation between fundamental syntactic and semantic features of a language and the philosophy done in that language should remain *within* 'language' as such, as distinct from 'culture'. Furthermore, if Chinese philosophy is to constitute a unity 'shaped' or 'coloured' by Chinese language, the latter must form a linguistic foundation which can be perceived to vary neither synchronically nor diachronically. Unlike the field anthropologist, therefore, who works on communities inhabiting real stretches of space and time, the philosophical neo-Whorfian will be forced to dive deep below the surface phenomena and stay there, if the thesis of an integrated type of distinctively Chinese thought is to be maintained.

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[39] One can get a particularly vivid sense of the intellectual climate from Hoijer 1954, which is largely devoted to discussions of the Whorfian thesis that languages contain 'a hidden metaphysics' (pp. viii–ix).

3.2 Deflationary philosophical anthropology

In the last section we noted a significant contrast between Whorf's timeless Hopi 'thought world' and a particularly influential trend in contemporary philosophical anthropology occupied with the topics of radical translation and the inscrutability of reference. While the Hopi were supposed to constitute an actual alternative to the way we talk and think, the 'aliens' inhabiting philosophical thought-experiments are, of course, not real. One might, however, object that, so far as our understanding of language is concerned, this is a distinction without a difference. Surely such thought-experiments are designed to open our minds to the possibility that there might be alternative (even incompatible) conceptual schemes; to the extent that this is a *serious* possibility (and, in philosophy, possibility 'in principle' is serious enough), its occurring, say, on 'Mars' rather than in New Mexico makes no difference. According to Quine's famous scenario, a field linguist is plunged into the midst of an exotic tribe with whose language he is entirely unfamiliar.[40] Working exclusively on the basis of observed behaviour – the only basis available to him[41] – the linguist begins the task of ascribing meanings to samples of the native language on the charitable presumption that their beliefs resemble our own: when not true, their falsehood should at least make sense in terms of the canons of rationality which we all share (although Quine is clear that the principle of charity does not automatically outweigh other, obvious, methodological considerations).[42] The linguist's task is done when he has completed a manual of translation for 'Jungle'. But – so Quine avers – proceeding along the obligatory behaviourist lines will not necessarily produce a *unique* best manual: native behaviour, the only criterion for selection between rival manuals, might very well be equally compatible with incompatible translations. (Quine is at pains to guard against the misguided supposition that this renders translation impossible; quite the reverse: 'translation remains, and is indispensable. Indeterminacy means not that there is no acceptable translation, but that there are many.'[43]) Finally, since these translation options, being under-determined by all possible evidence, can

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[40] Radical translation receives its most celebrated formulation in Quine 1960; but from many points of view, as Quine himself acknowledges, the exposition in 'Speaking of Objects' (in Quine 1969, but actually written before *Word and Object*) is more helpful.

[41] 'In psychology one may or may not be a behaviourist, but in linguistics one has no choice' (Quine 1987, p. 5).

[42] 'He [the translator] will favour translations that ascribe beliefs to the native that stand to reason or are consonant with the native's observed way of life. But he will not cultivate these values at the cost of unduly complicating the structure to be imputed to the native's grammar and semantics, for this again would be bad psychology; the language must have been simple enough for acquisition by the natives, whose minds, failing evidence to the contrary, are presumed to be pretty much like our own' (*ibid.*, p. 7).

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

involve determining which characteristic, or sort of thing, is referred to by a 'Jungle' term, and since these possible references may be incompatible, as in Quine's own example of 'gavagai', the indeterminacy of translation apparently yields a full-blown relativistic metaphysics, mutually exclusive ontologies being relative to the alternative manuals.[44] But if that is so, surely Quinean methodology, by generating incommensurate conceptual schemes, fully matches the shattering implications of Whorf's 'thought worlds'?[45]

That this impression is profoundly mistaken is demonstrated most emphatically by Quine's constant correlation of 'Jungle' speakers with *English* learners: we are all, in real life, radical interpreters when we acquire our mother tongue in infancy.[46] But does this not just entail an even more destabilising relativity? We need not travel to New Mexico to encounter aliens: for all we know, our closest fellows subscribe to conceptual schemes different from or even incompatible with our own; when on a country walk I point out a rabbit to my wife, what 'rabbit' signifies to her is, unbeknownst (and unknowably) to me, what I would describe as 'undetached rabbit part'. The inference is fallacious because it ignores the dominant pragmatism of Quine's methodology: his thought-experiment is anti-semantic not out of despair at selecting amongst the burgeoning multiplicity of rival meanings, but rather because there is, by his principles, *no* meaning to postulate beyond what observation indicates, so that the residual indeterminacy of translation or interpretation is ineliminable: 'it makes no real difference that the linguist will turn bilingual and come to think as the natives do – whatever that means. For the arbitrariness of reading our objectifications into the heathen speech reflects not so much the inscrutability of the heathen mind, as that there is nothing to scrute.'[47] To make the semantic aspect of the issue more prominent, I have added a disjunct, 'interpretation', borrowed from Davidson: 'the term "radical interpretation" is meant to suggest strong kinship with Quine's "radical translation". Kinship is not identity,

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[44] Of course incommensurability does not *entail* incompatibility. A rainbow has colour but no weight, and there is no way to 'translate' colour vocabulary into weight vocabulary; but having a weight does not exclude having a colour, nor is the ability to notice and describe colours incompatible with the ability to notice and describe weights. However, all that is required for the argument which I have developed is that the renderings of a 'Jungle' term in alternative, level-pegging translation manuals *might* have incompatible references.

[45] Jerrold Katz evidently presumes as much when he links Quine with Whorf as advocates of linguistic relativity (see p. 13 above). Presumably he intends to refer to the behaviouristic premiss employed in the construction of the thought-experiment when he attributes the doctrine to 'empiricism', although in that case what 'important breakthroughs in the study of methodology' remain to Quine's credit is rather obscure.

[46] 'Each of us learns his language by observing other people's verbal behaviour and having his own faltering verbal behaviour observed and reinforced or corrected by others' (Quine 1987, p. 5).

[47] Quine 1969, p. 5.

however, and "interpretation" in place of "translation" marks one of the differences: a greater emphasis on the explicitly semantical in the former.'[48] Davidson is very much in deflationary accord with Quine, on my reading: 'indeterminacy of meaning or translation does not represent a failure to capture significant distinctions; it marks the fact that certain apparent distinctions are not significant'.[49] But if 'there is nothing to scrute', the moral must surely be that deciding between rival translation manuals is no *real* choice. Portraying Quine as sharing Whorf's company in championing the reality of incompatible conceptual schemes must, in consequence, be a dismal error.[50]

A second objection to a deflationary construal of philosophical anthropology would attempt to pit Davidson against Quine by focusing on the subset of strictly incompatible (not merely different) conceptual schemes or languages. Davidson not only dismisses Whorfian relativity;[51] he also accuses Quine of surreptitiously cleaving to a 'third dogma of empiricism', an untenable dualism of scheme and content.[52] In essence, the Davidsonian argument runs as follows. Breakdown of translation can speak in favour of the existence of divergent conceptual schemes only if we suppose that there is something independent of the incommensurable languages – 'experience' – for the languages' associated schemes to be schemes *of*. But, since such concept-neutral 'experience' would have, by definition, to lie beyond all schemes (since otherwise it *could* be expressed (variously) in the various languages, which would then be intertranslatable), it remains permanently inconceivable – which is an absurdity. Davidson draws a moral which

[48] 'Radical Interpretation', in Davidson 1984, p. 126, n. 1.
[49] 'Belief and the Basis of Meaning', in Davidson 1984, p. 154.
[50] Elsewhere Katz demonstrates a better understanding of the status of Quine's thought-experiment: 'he presents radical translation as the limiting case of actual translation, i.e. as the case where historical differences between the languages and cultural differences between its speakers are maximal. It is presented as the most philosophically perspicacious case of actual translation in virtue of being the one where the issue about meaning is least likely to be confused by historical and cultural similarities' (Katz 1988, p. 232). Katz contends that Quine's strictures on meaning are illegitimate because they rely on outmoded Bloomfieldian substitution criteria for semantic definitions which have been replaced by axiomatic/recursive definitional techniques in generative grammars (pp. 240–2); but his question 'is Quine to be construed as claiming that English speaking linguists and their English speaking informants do not share a language in which they can communicate?' (p. 249) bespeaks considerable persisting confusion. I have not attempted to adjudicate between Quine and the defenders of *Sinn* because a decision on the viability of intensional semantics is not necessary for comprehending what in Quine is germane to our project, namely, what is *not* implied by the indeterminacy thesis.
[51] In effect Davidson charges Whorf with having been taken in by what I have labelled linguistic 'dissonance': 'Whorf, wanting to demonstrate that Hopi incorporates a metaphysics so alien to ours that Hopi and English cannot, as he puts it, "be calibrated", uses English to convey the contents of sample Hopi sentences' (Davidson 1984, p. 184, from 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme'; the reference is to Whorf 1967, p. 55, from 'The Punctual and Segmentative Aspects of Verbs in Hopi').
[52] Davidson 1984, p. 189.

advances an extended principle of charity as the cure for the third dogma: 'we improve the clarity and bite of declarations of difference, whether of scheme or opinion, by enlarging the basis of shared (translatable) language or of shared opinion'.[53]

A decisive response to this second objection is not hard to discover. First, Quine flatly protests that Davidson's accusation is unjust:

> a triad – conceptual scheme, language, and world – is not what I envisage. I think rather, like Davidson, in terms of language and the world. I scant the *tertium quid* as a myth of a museum of labeled ideas. Where I have spoken of a conceptual scheme I could have spoken of a language. Where I have spoken of a very alien conceptual scheme I would have been content, Davidson will be glad to know, to speak of a language awkward or baffling to translate.[54]

The response seems perfectly adequate – so far as it goes. A genuine difference of opinion might nevertheless separate Quine's and Davidson's positions: perhaps Quine would be willing to contemplate translation situations 'awkward or baffling' to a degree Davidson is inclined to disallow *a priori*. But even were we to accept the validity of Davidson's critique, it would simply reinforce the general message we are most closely concerned to extract from this brief foray into one important field of contemporary semantics: that any notion that there might be languages differing to the extent of bringing incompatible conceptual schemes in their wake is to be rejected – as we have seen, only confused exaggeration of the import of linguistic 'dissonance', or allegiance to an incoherent notion of content somehow transcending linguistic/conceptual 'schemes', could tempt one into error. Thus, if we are truly to come to grips with the China syndrome, we must grapple with the conundrum of how it is that the Sinologists we are seeking to understand have fallen so strikingly out of step with the dominant movement in philosophical anthropology. We shall make some progress by exploring the distinctive genealogy of linguistic Sinology in the next section.

3.3 Von Humboldt's legacy

While in Europe the heritage of Lévy-Bruhl, positing a prelogical primitive mentality, was dominant for a long period, and to some extent remains so today,[55] American anthropology (*in primis* Whorf himself) tended pugnaciously to exalt 'the primitive' as a repository of potentially valuable alternatives to the deadening legacy of mainstream Western culture. But it would be a grotesque distortion to posit complete disparity

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[53] *Ibid*., p. 197.   [54] 'On the Very Idea of a Third Dogma', in Quine 1981, p. 41.
[55] See Lloyd 1990.