

# **Sensations, Concepts and Understanding**

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## ABSTRACT

MARIA FRANCISCA REINES: Sensations, Concepts and Understanding  
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In this paper I argue that at least some of our concepts include phenomenal content. We could not understand the temperature talk of creatures that made non-inferential temperature ascriptions on the basis of a kind of temperature-vision rather than by touch. We could not understand them because we don't share the same sensations. If this is correct then it suggests that some concepts may be partially constituted by phenomenal content. This suggests in turn, that radically different phenomenology might make for conceptual differences sufficiently significant to constitute a difference in conceptual scheme. However, this possibility poses no threat to intra-specific understanding. The kind of phenomenal difference that can make for a difference in concept is limited primarily to creatures with different sense organs. Two creatures with radically different sense organs will have different conceptual schemes.

To Peter

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Multilingual readers often report that a novel changes in translation. *Ci n A os de Soledad* is terrific in the English, but no matter how good the translation, it is different from the original Spanish. This may come as a surprise—the na ve conception of translation is that it is a thoroughgoing unadulterated transposition of meaning from one language into another. But in fact, translation is hardly ever perfect. Even in cases where it succeeds, there’s often something that it misses. The English translation of *Ci n A os de Soledad* cannot be expected to include every association, allusion, ambiguity, etc., expressed in and by the original Spanish. Even the best translation is always translation *salva* something. In the case of a novel, specifying exactly what the translation aims to preserve is particularly tricky: certainly there is the storyline to consider but there is also the whole of the subtext, not to mention elements of style like word-choice, mood, voice, tempo, and so on. I think it is safe to say that literary translation requires more than knowing two languages—it requires knowing the fine conceptual associations of each language and how those of one might be approximated in the other.

Translation *salva* something is not limited to the literary case. The French adjective ‘doux/douce’<sup>1</sup> provides a case in point. ‘Doux/douce’ is a unitary concept in French that in English can be translated, among other things, as, ‘sweet’, ‘soft’, ‘bland’, ‘tender’ and ‘gentle’. Things that can be ‘doux/douce’ include honey, wool, soup, a memory, and the

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<sup>1</sup> This example comes directly from Kuhn 1982, (679).

wind. It is not that *doux/douce* is ambiguous, as in it sometimes has one meaning and sometimes another. Rather, it takes several distinct English adjectives to express what can be said using just the one French adjective. Now, when we translate ‘La soupe est douce’ into ‘The soup is bland’, the term ‘bland’ does not capture the whole concept expressed by ‘douce’. What is meant by the French sentence is preserved in the English translation, but it would be false to claim that ‘bland’ captures everything that could be meant by ‘douce’. Suppose we want to translate, ‘Elle est douce, douce comme du soupe.’ She is ‘douce’. ‘Douce’ like soup. Although ‘bland’ did quite well as a translation for ‘douce’ in ‘La soupe est douce’, it won’t do here. Nor will ‘sweet’. We might use ‘sweet’ for the first ‘douce’ and ‘bland’ for the second. But this translation leaves none of the pun the original sentence is meant to affect. The French unitary concept can’t be preserved by any one of its possible translations. What this illustrates is that translation can’t always preserve the whole of the concept expressed.

Translation hardly ever fulfils our naïve expectations, yet its shortcomings are not a serious threat to inter-linguistic understanding. Even though English may not be able to do justice to ‘Elle est douce, douce comme du soupe.’ there is nothing about these sentences and the intended pun that are incomprehensible to non-French speakers. Even though the phrases cannot be translated into English while preserving the pun, I’m not inclined to say that this threatens the possibility that the French and we could understand each other. With a bit of explanation, I can get the pun. So, even though there is no perfect translation for the unitary French concept, still, mutual understanding is possible.

I want to discuss a case of translation that is not, I don’t think, equally innocuous with respect to mutual understanding. The case comes from the second chapter of Paul

Churchland's book, *Scientific Realism and the Plasticity of Mind*. Churchland asks us to consider how we should translate the temperature terms of creatures that are like us in every way except in their temperature sensation. We sense temperature by touch. These creatures sense temperature by sight. Despite the difference, the temperature-seer's temperature ascriptions are extensionally equivalent to our own. Everything we say is hot, they say is hot. However, our non-inferential temperature ascriptions are based on different types of sensations; for them, it's visual and for us it's tactile. After further considerations, Churchland concludes that the case shows that observation terms don't get their meaning from sensation. He thinks that we should understand these creatures' temperature terms just as we understand our own and that however that is, it does not involve sensation. Although, as we shall see, Churchland's position avoids certain difficulties, I don't think it's altogether what we want to say about the case. I think that the sensation type associated with non-inferential ascription makes a difference to what we express when we say that something is hot. I think the case suggests that sensations are part of our temperature concepts.

But there is great resistance to the idea that sensations enter into concepts. That's because allowing that concepts are partially constituted by aspects of our mental life that are potentially private seems to threaten mutual understanding. We can't really compare sensations. I can't show you mine and look at yours and decide that they are the same; there is no guarantee that phenomenology is the same between individuals. Though we may both consistently say that honey tastes sweet, for all we know, *for all we can know*, 'sweet' picks out a different sensation for each of us. It may be that if you could have the sensation I call 'sweet', you would not recognize it as sweet. The problem is not just the possibility that we may each have different sensations—that would be bizarre but tractable. Rather, it is that

there is no way to tell whether our sensations are different. The worrisome conclusion is that if we allow sensations to enter into meaning, and there is the chance that sensations are different across individuals, there is a chance that though we think there is genuine communication, insofar as phenomenal content makes a difference to concepts, we are just talking past each other.

If the Churchland case suggests that sensations enter into concepts, how do we square that with the threat to understanding traditionally associated with allowing sensation in? If sensations didn't enter into concepts, we would be forced to say that the temperature-seers' temperature concepts and our own are exactly the same. I think that a more plausible explanation is that our concepts differ. The reason sensations seem so obviously to make a difference in the Churchland case is that there, sensations make a positive semantic contribution. Across humans however, the contribution of sensations disappears into a shared background. Sensations are not as obviously relevant intra-specifically because we all share sensation types. This suggestion is not meant to be a solution to the version of other-minds skepticism associated with sensations. My purpose here is to suggest that creatures with different sense organs from ours also differ conceptually.

I begin by considering Churchland's case in more detail. Then I'll try to give some reasons for thinking that the temperature-seers and we have different temperature concepts. I'll then consider a challenge to my proposal: Davidson's argument against conceptual schemes. In closing, by way of conclusion, I'll discuss how it is that we can give evidence for conceptual schemes that different from our own.



CHAPTER II  
SENSATIONS, CONCEPTS AND UNDERSTANDING

Creatures with Different Sense Organs

In chapter two of his 1979 book, *Scientific Realism and the Plasticity of Mind*, Paul Churchland argues against the view that “the meaning of observation terms is given in sensation”. Though there are specific sensations that guide us in making non-inferential ascriptions of terms like ‘pink’, ‘warm’ and ‘spicy’, the terms don’t get their meanings from the sensations. His argument centers on a thought experiment. Suppose there were a civilization of creatures in every way just like us except that they sensed temperature not by tactile sensation but through vision. Instead of eyes like ours, these creatures have eyes that see in something like infrared. Their visual sensation is like night-vision, except that it’s *temperature-vision*. The visual field of a temperature-seer is made up of areas akin to black, white and gray, but for these differences in color are differences in temperature. Now, it is not that things that appear lighter *feel* warmer—these creatures can’t feel temperature like we do. Rather, it’s that as a matter of fact, things that are warmer look lighter, and cooler things look darker. When they direct their gaze at something that is very cold what appears in their visual field is something black.

The temperature-vision people speak a language just like English. However, because of their temperature-vision abilities, their language lacks all color vocabulary—even predicates like ‘lighter’ and ‘darker’ are missing and in their place are ‘warmer’ and ‘cooler’. As Churchland puts it, “As they see it, the visually perceivable world consists not of middle-

sized and variously coloured material objects, but rather of middle-sized and variously *heated* material objects” (pg.9). In temperature-vision, when the soup in the pot turns from black to almost white, a temperature seer *sees* that the soup is warm.

In addition to sharing our language, beings equipped with temperature-vision also share all of our background assumptions about temperature. Like us, they believe that,

‘Fires are hot’, ‘A warm thing will warm up a cooler thing, but never the reverse’, ‘If a body is warmer than a second body, and that second body is warmer than a third body, then the first body is warmer than the third body’, ‘Food keeps better in a cold place’, ‘Hot things cause painful burns’, ‘Rubbing things makes them warmer’ and so on.  
(Churchland p.9)

If all of this is correct, the temperature-vision people’s applications of temperature predicates will be extensionally impeccable; our applications and theirs will disagree as little as those of two human beings.

How should we to translate the temperature-vision people’s temperature ascriptions? Churchland’s argument against phenomenal content hangs on how we answer this question. Observation terms can’t get their meaning from sensation because as Churchland explains, if they did, we would have to translate the temperature observations made by temperature-seers according to what they experience when they make them. In other words, the translation is a translation of the relevant bit of phenomenology that enters into making a non-inferential temperature ascription. In the mouth of a temperature-seer, “The soup is hot” should be understood as “The soup is white”. This is what Churchland calls the *heterophonic* translation. On the heterophonic, sensation-guided translation, we don’t translate temperature-vision ‘hot’ as ‘hot’, but rather as ‘white’.

There are at least two reasons that recommend against the heterophonic translation. First, if observation terms get their meaning from sensation, we are forced to claim that the temperature-vision ‘hot’ and ours ‘hot’ have different meanings. The ‘hot’ of temperature-

vision creatures will mean in part something like 'white'. If we insist that the meanings of temperature-vision terms really are 'black' for 'cold', 'white' for 'hot' and some version of 'gray' for everything in between, it will turn out that these creature's temperatures beliefs are largely false. If a temperature-vision person believes that fire is hot, when we translate her belief, it will be 'Fire is white'. But, except in special cases, fire is not white. Similarly, there is no reason to think a black refrigerator keeps food better than a white one.

Second, it is not clear that we have a monopoly on correctness. If observation terms get their meaning from sensation, and we accept the heterophonic translation, it turns out that the temperature beliefs of the temperature-vision people are largely false. However, if we take seriously the possibility of a sense modality that allows those who have it to track temperature visually, it is not clear that it should be *their* temperature beliefs that are largely false. We might insist that the meaning of their 'hot' is really our 'white', but they might just as easily insist that the meaning of our 'white' is their 'hot' and now it will be our judgments and beliefs about white, black and grey things that are largely false. They'll point out that Aspirin is not hot and that it's just nonsense to claim that cold clothes are slimming. The heterophonic translation could go either way and there is no independent standard of correctness.

Our only alternative, according to Churchland, is to keep phenomenal content out of it. What is relevant to a translation of temperature terms is the property they track, (namely, temperature), not how they track it. In other words, we should accept a *homophonic* translation. When a temperature-seer says that the soup is hot, we should not understand her as saying that the soup looks white, but that the soup is hot. The conclusion is that

observation terms don't get their meaning from the sensations that guide us in their non-inferential application.

Churchland gives us two options: We can translate the temperature-vision terms heterophonically, that is, exclusively in terms of the sensation that guides their non-inferential application, or we can translate them homophonically. The heterophonic translation has negative consequences that recommend against it. In light of these we accept the homophonic translation over the heterophonic. Churchland concludes that since we are forced to accept the homophonic translation, it must be the case that observation terms don't get their meanings from sensation. I think there is a third option. Churchland's approach is all or nothing: temperature terms get their meaning wholly from phenomenology or they don't. I think we should adopt a less sweeping approach. I think we can accept the homophonic translation but deny that it commits us to completely excluding phenomenal content from temperature terms.

Churchland's discussion brings together two issues: (1) how should we translate the temperature-vision temperature terms and (2) what do we take to be relevant to understanding the temperature-seers' temperature talk. He seems to think that we can answer the second question just by answering the first: if we can figure out how to translate the temperature-vision temperature terms we'll have figured out how to understand the temperature-seer's temperature talk. This suggests that Churchland is operating under the naïve conception of translation. If translation is going to have to settle the question of what enters into the meaning of temperature-vision temperature terms, that is, what is relevant in understanding the temperature-seers' temperature talk, then it's going to have to be perfect translation. But translation does not always preserve everything that is relevant to complete

understanding. Even if we decide on an appropriate translation of the temperature-vision temperature terms we may not have thereby figured out what is relevant to complete mutual understanding. The third option I am suggesting is that translation and understanding can come apart. Since translation is almost always translation *salva* something we can accept the homophonic translation without being committed to the idea that it preserves the whole of the concepts expressed by the temperature-seers' temperature terms.

### Translation and Understanding

Before we can understand this third option we have to understand why Churchland thinks that accepting the homophonic translation is part and parcel of denying that sensation is part of the meaning of observation terms. Churchland is committed to the naïve conception of translation. He thinks that figuring out the correct translation for temperature-vision temperature terms will settle the question of what goes into their meanings. Only perfect translation could possibly settle that question. Thus he must hold that all translation is perfect translation. If we adopt a homophonic translation of the temperature-vision temperature terms then we are to understand them just like we understand our own. That's just what homophonic translation is. Without saying anything more about how we understand our own temperature terms, let's say that the sensations on the basis of which we make non-inferential temperature ascriptions are part of that understanding. But now there is a tension. We know that the temperature-seers make non-inferential temperature ascriptions on the basis of a different type of sensation. If sensation is any part of how we understand our own temperature terms and we are committed to the naïve conception of translation, then it will be impossible to understand the terms homophonically, that is, in exactly the same way that we understand our own. There are two options here. We can either exclude sensation from the

meaning of temperature terms and observation terms more generally, or we can abandon the naïve conception of translation. Churchland adopts the first approach. I opt for the second.

Translation does not always preserve the whole concept expressed by a term. Recall the *doux/douce* example. In a particular instance ‘soft’ may be the appropriate translation for ‘doux’, but this alone does not tell us everything that is relevant to understanding the unitary French concept. Churchland seems to be assuming that whatever translation we adopt for temperature-vision terms, it will include everything that is relevant to understanding the temperature-seers’ temperature talk. This is an expression of the naïve conception of translation. And it is what is behind his claim that accepting the homophonic translation commits us to excluding phenomenal content. His thought is that whatever translation we adopt, it by itself settles what’s relevant to understanding. But since translation is hardly ever perfect, i.e., hardly ever a thoroughgoing, unadulterated transposition of meaning from one language into another, we should not assume that translation settles that question.

We are now in a position to accept a homophonic translation without having to deny that sensation is at least part of the meaning of temperature terms. Churchland anticipates this kind of response. He writes,

A proponent of this view could concede that, since the [temperature-vision] people’s ‘temperature’ terms are extensionally equivalent to our temperature terms, the homophonic translation might be ‘adopted’ (with a broad wink) for practical purposes, while still insisting that our own language contains no genuine translational correlates for the alien terms at issue (since there are no terms in our language that are both prompted by the relevant sensations and figure in a set of sentences accepted by us that matches the set accepted by the [temperature-vision people]). (Pg.12)

This is the view I mean to defend. There are no temperature terms in our language that can render a perfect translation of the alien temperature terms. The best we can do at translating temperature-vision temperature terms is to say that temperature-vision ‘hot’ applies to just the same things to which ‘hot’ applies. This is a homophonic translation and it’s a fine

translation. It does not, however, settle the *meaning* of temperature-vision temperature terms. Homophonic translation cannot provide all that is relevant to understanding. This is because there is phenomenal content in temperature concepts, both theirs and ours, and it differs. We make non-inferential temperature ascriptions on the basis of different sensations and these are crucial to understanding our respective temperature talk. Given these differences, if we hope to talk about things that are hot, cold, etc., we must accept the homophonic translation (because it preserves extension) but be mindful that this translation is not a vehicle for complete mutual understanding.

Churchland offers the following response,

[T]his third alternative has nothing to recommend it over the homophonic alternative—quite the reverse. It requires us to deny that the beings with the infrared eyes can perceive the temperatures of objects, and indeed to deny that any beings, no matter what their sensory apparatus, can perceive the temperatures of objects unless they are subject to precisely the same range of bodily sensations with which we happen to respond to hot and cold objects. If they do not have these sensations, they cannot even have the concept of temperature, let alone perceive whether and to what degree it is instanced in objects; they must be perceiving something else unknown to us. (Pg.12)

Churchland's response is that if we include phenomenal content into our temperature concepts then, despite the fact that the temperature-vision people make extensionally impeccable use of 'hot', 'warm' and 'cold', they are not making *temperature* ascriptions. This is because only creatures with the same phenomenology can share concepts. Having the concept of temperature requires being the sort of creature that could make non-inferential temperature ascription on the basis of tactile sensation. The temperature-seers can't do this since they have different sense organs. Their non-inferential temperature ascriptions are elicited by sensation different from our own. If eliciting phenomenology enters into concepts, Churchland explains, then they and we have different temperature concepts.

Indeed, temperature-seers don't make temperature ascriptions, they make *temperature-vision* ascription. As it happens, our temperature concepts and theirs have the same extensions, but they are not the same concepts. Where 'temperature' is understood as the concept we have as creatures that make temperature ascription in the way that we do, given the sense organs we have, then yes, only creatures with the relevant sense organs can make temperature ascriptions. Sensation enters into meaning and since we cannot make non-inferential temperature ascriptions on the basis of the same sensation, our temperature concepts are going to be different. More generally, I think that creatures with different sense organs will have different sensations. In so far as these sensations enter into concepts differences in sense organs will make for differences in concepts.

Is there a tension in saying that the temperature-seers and we have different concepts while maintaining that we can translate their temperature terms homophonically? As we've already seen, Churchland is committed to the naïve conception of translation. We need a broad wink, or at least Churchland thinks we do, because on the naïve conception of translation we cannot both affect a homophonic translation of temperature terms and hold that the temperature-seers and we have different temperature concepts. This amounts to a contradiction. It's why he thinks that if we adopt homophonic translation, we need to call it a "translation...adopted for practical purposes". But this tension is an artifact of the naïve conception of translation. We can affect a homophonic translation of distinct concepts and we can do it with a straight face because no translation we might affect here will be a vehicle for complete mutual understanding. That's because translation does not settle the question of understanding. Translation is always translation *salva* something. In this case it's translation *salva* extension.



Once we tease apart the question of what makes an acceptable translation from that of what is required for mutual understanding we can accept a homophonic translation and nonetheless maintain that the temperature-seers and we have different temperature concepts. The aliens and we can talk about things in the extensions of temperature terms, but we cannot communicate about temperature. This is because we sense temperature differently. Without the naïve conception of translation we can accept that sensation, phenomenal content, is relevant to understanding the temperature seers' temperature talk.

### The Significance of Phenomenal Content

I think it is at least plausible to think that despite the fact we and the temperature-vision people are both capable of tracking the extensions of "hot", "warm" and "cold", we have different temperature concepts. This is because the sense modality involved in tracking the extension makes a difference to complete mutual understanding. More specifically, the sensations that elicit non-inferential temperature ascriptions make a difference because these sensation types are part of the concept expressed by each of these terms. Though the conceptual differences between the temperature-seers and us may be somewhat limited, differences in sense organs will always make a difference to concepts. With sufficiently radical differences in sense organs, we may end up having more radical conceptual differences. Even, perhaps, different conceptual schemes.

We can begin to understand how differences in sensation make a difference in concept by considering some differences between the temperature-vision people and we. Since the temperature-vision people do not track temperature by touch there are going to be significant differences in the sorts of things that they and we find pleasant and unpleasant. For example, they will be indifferent to cold showers, cold coffee or ice-cold beer on a summer afternoon.

If they count soup as a comfort food, it will be for a reason different from ours. If they like cats on their laps it won't be because cats are warm. If they move to Florida it won't be because of the weather. Our temperature concepts are connected to these preferences. But theirs are not.

These differences show not just that temperature-vision temperature concepts are not connected to these preferences, but that they cannot be. If a creature that does not sense temperature by touch likes cats it cannot be because she likes how a warm cat feels on her lap. This is because she cannot have the relevant sensation—that of a *warm* cat on her lap. If she prefers hot showers it cannot be because of the feel of the hot water on her skin. Sure, she may have a preference for bright showers, but she cannot have the sensation of hot water on her skin. These are preferences that can be had only by creatures that can tell, on the basis of touch, that something is hot. The point here is that understood as having phenomenal content, concepts make a difference to what is possible for us. These preferences are not possible for the temperature-seers.

I think the differences in what is possible will extend beyond preferences. At least, the differences will extend to possible desires. As we've just seen, phenomenal content is going to make a difference to our preferences. A temperature-seer is going to be indifferent to cold showers. She may prefer hot showers but it won't be for a reason we could have. Now, if phenomenal content makes a difference to possible preferences, then it also makes a difference to desires. For example, after a long run I usually want a very hot shower. Just as I can't prefer hot showers to cold ones for her reasons, no temperature seer can have my desire for a hot shower. Sure, she can have a desire for a temperature-vision-'hot' shower, but what she's after is very different from what I'm after. Only a shower that felt a certain way would

satisfy me. A hot shower that didn't feel hot would not satisfy me. Because we have different sense organs we have different ways of sensing temperature. This difference in sensation makes for a conceptual difference and these make a difference to which desires are possible.

It might be objected that my appeal to differences in sense organs somehow pre-judges the issue. That the only reason there seems to be a conceptual difference is because there is a difference in sense organs. Our conceptual differences are due to differences in sense organs, but they are genuine conceptual differences. Suppose that the temperature-vision people, in addition to temperature-vision, had the same sense apparatus we have. If we had the same concept, say the concept 'hot', they like me should be able to identify hot things on the basis of touch. But simply being able to feel temperature is not the same thing as being able to identify hot things on the basis of how they feel. Even with the capacity to feel warmth, the temperature-vision people shall continue to identify hot things on the basis of sight. For them, temperature is seen, not felt. Unless they acquired a different concept of 'hot', i.e., our concept of 'hot', it will be impossible for them to identify hot things on the basis of touch.

These considerations provide some reasons to think that the temperature-vision people and we have different temperature concepts. The differences in our concepts are due to differences in phenomenology. These can be traced back to differences in sense organs. What this suggests is that if two creatures have sufficiently different sense organs they may have enough conceptual differences to constitute alternative conceptual schemes. I think there are alternative conceptual schemes. I think that creatures with different sense organs, like certain non-human animals, have concepts different from our own. Concepts so different that even if these creatures could speak, we could not understand them. This is just the case of the temperature vision people. Though the extensions of their and our temperature terms are the

same, there is good reason to think that we don't really understand each other. When they speak about hot things I can know that they are talking about things that I would call hot, but I can't understand everything that they say when they make a temperature ascription.

When comparing our concepts to those of creatures with different sensations, the phenomenal content of both their and our concepts makes a difference. The phenomenal content becomes relevant to communication; it makes a positive semantic contribution. By contrast, the phenomenal content of our concepts doesn't show up in intra-specific communication. It's not that phenomenal content doesn't make a difference to our concepts—such a claim would be ontologically unscrupulous. The intra-specific case is unlike the inter-specific case because though phenomenal content makes a difference to our concepts, when we communicate intra-specifically, it is a difference that doesn't make a difference. Before I turn to considering an objection against the very idea of alternative conceptual schemes I want to briefly consider the significance of phenomenal content to intra-specific communication.

#### Phenomenal Content and Intra-Specific Understanding

I've been arguing for the idea that sensations are relevant to complete mutual understanding. Differences in sensations are an obstacle to complete mutual understanding. At this point one might naturally offer the following objection. We know that, as a matter of fact, people's sensations do vary. Artists, for one, seem to have peculiar ways of seeing. Sommeliers can taste more than the regular Joe. There are the color-blind and there is the fact that as we age our retinas yellow, changing our color sensations over time. If sensations did enter into concepts, given so much variation in sensation, communication would be

impossible. But communication is possible, so it must be that there is not phenomenal content in concepts.

I think a point of clarification is in order. Whatever individual variations we notice between persons, we are able to notice them because they contrast against a background of uniformity. There is a shared sensation type and it's the particular tokens that vary. The artist may be able to distinguish several close shades of green whereas they look the same to me. Nonetheless, we can both have the same sensation—a sensation of green. Similarly so with the sommelier, a sommelier may be capable of more nuanced olfactory experiences, but those experiences are not in principle impossible for me. Though I'm not now capable of them, I can learn to have them. The case of color blindness is somewhat different. A color-blind person cannot have a sensation of green or a sensation of red. Should we say that they differ conceptually from the color-sighted? Being unable to see red or green is different from being unable to see color altogether. There is a broader sensation type shared by the color-sighted and the color-blind—the sensation of color. Since I don't think artists who can differentiate several shade of green differ conceptually from persons who cannot, I don't think there is a principled reason to distinguish those who can see both red and green from those who cannot.

Specifying exactly what sensation types are relevant to understanding may take some work. But I think the general idea suffices to make my point. Though specific tokens may differ, so long as we share sensation types, we share concepts. This gets at what I have in mind when I say that intra-specifically, sensations don't make a positive semantic contribution. If the sensations are always of the same type, there is no need to take note of them. Sensation types are a common denominator in concepts across individuals. Because of

this, we don't have to take them into account. This is why we might think that phenomenal content does not enter into concepts—because since it is typically the same intra-specifically, we need not take notice of it.

In the case of intra-specific understanding we don't take special account of phenomenal content because it is part of our shared background. We are all creatures of the same kind and we share a repertoire of sensations like a common denominator. If we are trying to solve a simple algebraic equation both sides of which have the same denominator, we need not take any special notice of it. Similarly, phenomenal content doesn't make a positive semantic contribution to intra-specific communication, because so long as our interlocutor is of the same kind, we need not take any account of her and our sensations. When our interlocutor is a creature of a different kind, with whom we don't share sensation types, then phenomenal content becomes relevant to understanding. It becomes a difference that makes a difference. If the differences are sufficiently radical, then they may add up to a difference in conceptual schemes.

Donald Davidson has argued against there being conceptual schemes. If his arguments prove decisive against this possibility for alternative conceptual schemes then they'll constitute a sort of indirect argument against including phenomenal content into concepts. I don't think Davidson's arguments have any force against conceptual schemes based on conceptual differences based on phenomenal differences. That's because I think Davidson makes them impossible by assumption. He begs the question against their possibility.

### Davidson Against Conceptual Schemes

In his famous paper, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", Donald Davidson argues against the possibility of alternative conceptual schemes. Davidson defines conceptual

schemes as inter-translatable sets of languages: there are two schemes just in case there are two languages and we cannot translate between them. Translation failure is thus not just evidence for difference of conceptual scheme; it is the criterion of individuation for conceptual schemes. If two languages are inter-translatable then speakers of those languages share a conceptual scheme. If two languages are not inter-translatable then speakers of those languages do not share a conceptual scheme. Inter-translatability is criterion for conceptual accessibility, translation failure for difference or divergence.

Davidson thinks that in principle untranslatability is impossible. If this is correct, then not even the very idea of a conceptual scheme makes sense. For Davidson, if we can tell that some behavior is linguistic behavior then we can also interpret the behavior. If we can interpret it then we can understand it. So, the thought goes, there could never be behavior that could count as language that was in principle untranslatable. For us, any behavior that counts as language is already translatable, “Nothing...could count as evidence that some form of activity could not be interpreted in our own language that was not at the same time evidence that that form of activity was not speech behavior.” Davidson argues for this conclusion by examining purported cases of translation failure. He looks at total failure and partial failure.

There are two main metaphors that proponents of alternative conceptual schemes use to make sense of what conceptual schemes are supposed to do, and in what sense they are alternatives. A conceptual scheme either organizes, or it fits. What it organizes or fits is experience, or the world. So there is the scheme and the something else- experience, or the world. This dualism, the idea that there is content and over and above it there is the conceptual scheme is what Davidson call the third dogma of empiricism. The confused insistence that there are such things as conceptual schemes gets its genesis from this

distinction. Davidson's approach in arguing against conceptual schemes is that on either metaphor, the idea of conceptual schemes is unsustainable.

Since Davidson identifies conceptual schemes with inter-translatable sets of languages, he has to consider both of the metaphors, organizing and fitting, in light of languages. He writes,

Something is a language and associated with a conceptual scheme, whether we can translate it or not, if it stands in a certain relation (predicting, organizing, facing or fitting) experience (nature, reality, sensory promptings). (Pg. 191)

Let's consider the first metaphor. Suppose the conceptual scheme orders. Well, if it orders then whatever it is that it orders cannot be a unity. As he explains, we do not order closets, we order their contents. If a conceptual scheme orders, then it must order a collection of items, be they objects or events. But now Davidson explains, in order for us to tell that there is a conceptual scheme at work ordering something we have to have corresponding predicate extension and or event individuations across languages. The stuff has to be the same for us to tell that there is some order or other on it. If the stuff is the same then the ontology is the same and if we have the same ontology this already presupposes inter-translatability.

Consider the second metaphor: Suppose the conceptual scheme fits or accords, rather than orders. A conceptual scheme that accord with or fits reality or experience will be a description. A conceptual scheme then will be a set of sentences, most of them true, which tell us what the world is like<sup>2</sup>. Now, such a set of sentences is a theory. And now it must be noted that a true theory is one that accords not just with the evidence presently available, but one that accords or fits all of the evidence. According to proponents of conceptual schemes there are conceptual schemes different from this one. Presumably, any one of these is a true theory. That is, it too accords with all of the evidence borne by experience. Now, Davidson wonders, can we make sense of a largely true theory that is nevertheless untranslatable? He

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<sup>2</sup> Davidson's principle of charity is part of what guarantees that the sentences will be largely true.



thinks not. For Davidson a theory that is largely true can't fail to be translatable because he endorses a Tarski-style truth theory. Tarski's Convention T makes essential use of translation in a way that makes it impossible for there to be a theory that is largely true and at the same time untranslatable. T-sentences are sentences in a metalanguage that name a sentence of the object language and assign it truth-conditions. For example,

“La soupe est douce” is true if and only if the soup is bland.

This T-sentence is an English sentence that names a sentence in the object language, “La soupe est douce” and assigns it truth-conditions, “the soup is bland”. When we use this method for assigning truth conditions, the metalanguage we use must be a language that we understand. Can there be a largely true theory that is untranslatable? What it means for there to be a largely true theory is for there to be a theory whose sentences figure in T sentences where the conditions specified in the metalanguage are conditions that actually obtain. So far there is no obstacle to untranslatability. That problem arises when we consider what needs to be the case for us to be able to tell that there is such a theory and that it is untranslatable. In order to be able to tell that the given theory is largely true, we have to be able to tell that the conditions specified on the right-hand side actually obtain. This means that the specifications of the truth-conditions have to be in a language I understand. And now we have inter-translatability. If I can understand that specification of truth-condition then I can understand the sentence because the right hand side of a T sentence just is the translation of the sentence named on the left-hand side. If we can tell that the theory is largely true, then it is an element in our inter-translatable sets of language.

Davidson also argues against partial failures of translation. In that argument Davidson appeals to his principle of charity. The principle of charity is a principle about Davidsonian

interpretation. It says that in interpreting others we should take them to be truth-tellers, to utter sentences they hold true. The idea is that we can and do make sense of one-another's utterances by taking them to be true and then amending what we take them to express so that it fits the world. This is possible only against a background of shared beliefs. We have to assume shared beliefs in order to make other's utterance make sense to us. If at the outset, it was assumed that we shared no beliefs we could not even get started. This is related to the idea that a conceptual scheme fits experience. There, the possibility of an alternative conceptual scheme reduced down to being able to tell that something was a largely true theory. Here we are going from the assumption that others mostly utter true sentences. In both cases, truth is a sort of bridge to understanding. When we interpret others, we take them to have largely true beliefs. It's in virtue of this assumption that we make sense of their utterances. Similar considerations apply in this case.

Translation also requires a shared background of beliefs between speakers of two languages. Partial failures of translation, Davidson argues, are then indistinguishable from mere differences of opinion or belief. There is at least no principled reason to take a translation failure as a conceptual difference rather than a difference in belief or opinion:

When others think differently from us, no general principle, or appeal to evidence, can force us to decide that the difference lies in our beliefs rather than in our concepts. (Pg. 197)

Since we need shared belief to call something a partial failure of translation, there is no principled reason why that failure might not be a mere difference in belief as opposed to a conceptual difference. When faced with a partial translation failure there are at least two options: there is a difference of belief or a difference in concepts. Parsimony, then, seems to

be the only reason to prefer a difference of beliefs rather than a difference in conceptual scheme.

Although I have not given an account of an alternative conceptual scheme, I've suggested that if there were creatures whose sense organs were radically different from our own the differences between us might amount to a difference in conceptual scheme. My goal is only to suggest how alternative conceptual schemes might be possible. It's thus somewhat difficult to say exactly where Davidson's arguments make contact with my position. Would the ordering or the fitting metaphor best characterize the resulting conceptual scheme? The point I want to make against Davidson does not require that I engage his arguments directly. (Though if I had to say I would say that the resulting scheme would be an ordering scheme.) The point I want to make against Davidson has to do with the assumption that motivates his identification of inter-translatable languages with conceptual schemes. It's the assumption that anything that enters into meaning an understanding must be publicly available.

Objections against Davidson have come mainly in the form of counterexamples. Instances of translation failure where there is no question of conceptual divergence is one sort; difference of conceptual scheme in the absence of any failure of translation is another. Objections of this kind aim to show that conceptual schemes are not the same as inter-translatable sets of languages. This way of challenging Davidson's argument is not automatically an endorsement of alternative conceptual schemes. It is merely a rejection of the identification between concepts and meanings. Dorit Bar-On has argued, along these lines, that translation is uninformative about conceptual divergence<sup>3</sup>. The case of temperature-vision temperature terms also generates a counterexample: Davison's position is that if translation is possible, mutual understanding also has to be possible. In the case of

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<sup>3</sup> Bar-On 1994, and 2004.

temperature-vision temperature terms I suspect he would say that since there is no failure of translation there could not be a difference in concepts. But I have argued that despite being able to translate temperature-vision temperature terms we cannot fully understand them.

However, my main objection to Davidson's argument is of a different sort. As I see it, Davidson's argument begs the question against alternative conceptual schemes. The identification of conceptual schemes with inter-translatable sets of languages is connected to Davidson's linguistic behaviorism. For Davidson, behavioral evidence is all that matters in questions of meaning and communication, it's all that matters because, he thinks, it's all that we have to go on. I've argued that there is good reason to think that phenomenal content is part of at least some of our concepts. Differences in sense organs can help us track differences in phenomenology and thus conceptual differences. What this suggests, is that differences in sense organs are good way of telling that a creature has a conceptual scheme different from our own. Davidson behaviorism excludes phenomenal content from entering into concepts and this begs the question against the possibility of alternative schemes.

#### A Reply to Davidson

In "The Structure and Content of Truth" Davidson writes, "Mental phenomena in general may or may not be private, but the correct interpretation of one person's speech by another must *in principle* be possible" (Pg. 314), and "That meanings are decipherable is not a matter of luck; public availability is a constitutive aspect of language" (Pg. 314). In the first quote Davison is saying that understanding is in principle possible. In the second he says that all there is to meaning has to be publicly available. These two statements reveal a certain approach to the study of meaning and understanding. Davidson departs from the position that understanding is in principle possible and then asks, what are the necessary conditions on the

possibility of understanding? At least one necessary condition is the public availability of meanings.

But these two quotations reveal something more; At least, they suggest a prior assumption. Davidson begins with the position that understanding is possible. But what grounds that possibility? What these quotes suggest is that the possibility of understanding has to be grounded in some other fact. There is something else that insures its possibility. Now, the mere fact that for all appearances it certainly looks as if we communicate would not be the sort of thing that could underwrite these assertions. It seems to me that at the heart of Davidson's views on meaning and understanding is the idea that language is essentially for communication. It's the fact that we have language that insures the possibility of understanding. From this fundamental assumption springs a kind of behaviorism. Since having the capacity for language ensures that communication is possible, anything that is relevant to communication must be something that is in principle accessible. Nothing that could not be shared could be relevant to understanding.

It's generally been thought that phenomenal content doesn't meet these requirements. Sensations are not the sorts of things that can be shared, or in any other way verified. Making sensations relevant to communication is thus thought to immediately threaten understanding. If the possibility of communication is insured by the fact that we have language, then concepts cannot be even partially constituted by aspects of our mental life that are potentially private. Including phenomenal content in concepts brings with it a threat to understanding. Given Davidson's commitment to the success of communication, the exclusion of phenomenal content suggests itself as a necessary condition on its possibility.

Due to his own commitments Davidson cannot include phenomenal content in concepts. I've tried to offer some reasons why phenomenal content is not a threat to intra-specific understanding. Phenomenal content is, in a sense, a difference that doesn't make a difference. Accepting that at least some of our concepts have phenomenal content doesn't make a difference because we all share the relevant phenomenal content. Now, when the creatures on the other side of the equation are different from us, i.e. not con-specific, phenomenal content will make a difference to understanding. In that case phenomenal content makes a positive semantic contribution. In the intra-specific case it fades into a shared background. When Davidson rejects phenomenal content because it is inaccessible or unverifiable, he begs the question against the possibility that phenomenal differences make for conceptual differences. The identification of inter-translatable languages and conceptual schemes thus begs the question against the possibility of alternative conceptual schemes.

I think there is good reason for regarding phenomenal content as a constituent in our concepts. Including it is not a threat to intra-specific understanding. If this is correct, then alternative conceptual schemes are not an intra-species possibility. But there is an obvious reason why intra-specific alternative conceptual schemes of this sort are impossible. Though there may be differences in specific sensation tokens, sensation types are uniform across person. Vast differences in phenomenology of the sort that would make for a difference in conceptual scheme require differences in sense organs beyond what sameness of kind or species can accommodate. The kinds of conceptual schemes I've been defending are thus not and alternative *for* us, but an alternative *to* us<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> In her article "Language, Concepts and Culture: Between Philosophy and Relativism", Bar-On uses an alternative for-us/to-us distinction different from this one.

## Understanding Alternative Conceptual Schemes; Lending our Concepts

A popular strategy often used against proponents of alternative conceptual schemes is to charge that their evidence is self-undermining. When a philosopher, anthropologist, or science historian, offers evidence for the conclusion that there are alternative conceptual schemes, she offers that evidence in terms that we can understand. The anthropologist can give extensive ethnographic evidence that suggests her subjects have a conceptual scheme different from our own. The scientist describes the pre-revolutionary scientific landscape in post-revolutionary terms. And when the philosopher wants to claim that non-human creatures have an alternative conceptual scheme she uses language, a human capacity, to describe her evidence. If alternative conceptual schemes are supposed to be radically different ways of thinking, it should hardly be possible that any evidence supporting their existence could be relayed in terms that we can understand. If we can understand evidence in support of different conceptual schemes, the argument goes, then it stands to reason that we should also be able to understand, or access, the purportedly different scheme. If the evidence presented for alternative conceptual schemes is evidence we can understand, then the scheme in question cannot count as a genuine alternative. Indeed, if a conceptual scheme is accessible to us, then how can it be different from our own conceptual scheme?

The underlying assumption behind this generic version of the self-undermining strategy is that what we can understand is limited by our conceptual capacities. If we can understand something then we can think it. When this assumption is put into action against the proponent of alternative schemes it renders any comprehensible evidence for alternative schemes into evidence for sameness of scheme: If we can make sense of evidence for a purportedly alternative scheme then it is not alternative after all since what the evidence reports can be

thought by us. I think the intuition behind the self-undermining strategy gets something right. It certainly seems correct that concepts that can be rendered into terms we can understand are the sorts of concepts that we might be able to have; that the concepts in question are not impossible for us. But I don't think that the undermining strategy can do as much as it promises.

I've suggested that there may be alternative conceptual schemes where the conceptual differences are due to difference in phenomenology. As humans, we are not equipped for temperature-vision, but if the undermining strategy is correct, even though we are not now capable of identifying hot things on the basis of vision, the fact that we can understand the conceptual capacity is enough to render it accessible to us. We know what it would be like to identify hot things on the basis of vision. Since we can understand temperature-vision, temperature-vision can't be evidence for alternative-conceptual schemes. But do we really understand what it would be like to have temperature vision? I don't think we do.

All we have to go on in understanding alternative conceptual schemes is our own. When we give evidence for an alternative scheme in terms that that we can understand it's not because we've succeeded in making the other's scheme accessible. Rather, what we've done is imposed our concepts on them. We've lent them our concepts so that we could understand the differences between us. This is evident in the temperature-vision case. I've explained temperature vision in our own terms: the temperature-seers see hot things as white and cold as cold. Warmths are grey. If there really were temperature-vision it is unlikely that it would be anything like our seeing. Moreover, if seeing is just the best we can do in trying to understand temperature-vision it's unlikely that white, black and grey are anything like the sensations of temperature-seers. My point is that the apparent accessibility of alternative



conceptual schemes is just that, apparent. It might look like we can have the concepts described, but that's because we've used our own concepts. The appearance of intelligibility is an artifact of lending our concepts, because they are all we have to go on.

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