A Situational Hermeneutic: The Priority of Reference over Meaning

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Abstract: An intentional fallacy is committed when one sets the goal of getting to the author's intention. In this paper, I restore authorial authority, through proposing a situational hermeneutic. It obligates, when engaging with a text, stepping into the author's shoes. Instead of focusing only on the ideas of the author, I emphasise the importance of knowing how the text relates to the author's world through identifying the referents. This priority of reference over meaning resonates with Chad Hansen's black-box analogy in contravention of Eurocentrism, which focuses on the mentality of the author. I develop an externalism from his apparent linguistic behaviourism, by bringing out the mental element, referential intention, in my pragmatic theory. I will argue for the importance of knowledge of situation of the author in doing hermeneutics, with the *Daodejing* as an example.

Keywords: Hermeneutic, reference, meaning, textual analysis, pragmatics, epistemology, philosophy of language

A philosophy contains various ideas. The thinking that produced such ideas yields thoughts that are sometimes expressed in a language foreign to us. However much analytic philosophers presuppose a universalism, sometimes philosophers from a different culture have a different idea about the same phenomenon, and we want to learn from them. Since culture is often bounded by language, this difference in philosophy manifests itself in a difference in language. When we access the philosophy from other culture, we rely on translations, especially when our personal immersion in the culture is impossible. Although the distance from the culture the philosophy originated in gave one a scholarly advantage, how much one can access is limited by available translations of the corresponding texts, disadvantaging such scholar of the text. With handicaps such as this, some propose it a fallacy to attempt to get to the author's original intent because we could have never stepped into their shoes. However, to seriously learn from others, we do need to access, or even inhabit, the author's world. In order that one inhabited the author's world, one need to step into their shoes, and see what they encountered through their eyes. It is in acquiring their eyesight that we see our world through their lens, enriching our lives interculturally.

If, for example, the paradigmatic presupposition of Eurocentric thinking originated in the subjectivity announced in the works of the French philosopher René Descartes, then we should heed Chad Hansen's (1992) suggestion that our inability to engage with a text beyond this point of departure has grown to become a serious constraint. As a result, Hansen offers an alternative for philosophers and translators to consider when faced with the challenge of understanding Ancient Chinese philosophy texts. What lies between us and these ancient texts, he claims, is not just the distance of history, nor is it just the deeply ingrained Cartesian subjectivity of the Western mind, but also the Indo-European linguistics of the 19th century. How

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language expresses thought, along with the psychology of beliefs and desires, according to Hansen, ultimately presupposes an Indo-European view of the mind and its interaction with the world through language. This hinders any good understanding of Ancient Chinese texts. His alternative is a black-box analogy from cognitive science, which does not impose any internal constraint on the mind. Hansen's quick and ready example is the translation of '*xin*[1]' as heart-mind – it is the response of the embodied mind towards situation that makes a moral difference in Chinese philosophy. The notion of heart-mind does not utilise a belief-desire psychology, thus favouring Hansen's interpretation.

In this paper, I challenge the linguistic behaviourist flavour of Hansen's argument by bringing in W. V. O. Quine's philosophy of language. I will note that Hansen's focus on distinction in situations among states-of-affairs remain intact, with such stimulus-and-response conception being a case of an externalism, instead of mere behaviourism. I will first put forward Saul Kripke's notion of reference fixing, and correspondingly his distinction between reference and meaning. His focus on the social character of naming brings out the importance of the object being named – during the ceremony of baptism with the name – to be the salient object in the common ground. After presenting his theory of naming, I will bring out the mental element in my theory by discussing Paul Grice's notion of non-natural meaning, distinguishing the importance of pragmatics with its not always being about implicature. I will then discuss Robert Stalnaker's work on pragmatics, putting forward an epistemological conception of pragmatics that puts knowledge transfer at the centre of any pragmatic theory. Knowledge of situation thus constitutes the common ground, with which the pragmatic context is constituted, and it is thus a situational hermeneutic that obligates the readers to put themselves into the author's shoes to work out the pragmatic of the text. I will end with an illustration of the aforementioned method, using a radical example from a translation of a disputed sentence from the *Daodejing*[2].

1. Semantics: Reference and Meaning

Kripke's (1972/1980) theory of reference has been understood mostly as a causal theory of reference. It is the history of causality that determines the reference of a name. However, besides causality, he also places some importance on the speaker's intention to follow reference, and I take referential intention, or the intention to refer, as constitutive in his metasemantic theory – if he had one at all. The 'social character' of naming is something that does not only stay at the interaction of verbal behaviours of using a name, but also involves a mental element, namely, referential intention (163). In this section, I present, on top of Kripke's theory of names, a theory of naming that I would attribute to him. This shall have constituted his metasemantic theory – a theory about what semantic facts determine reference of a linguistic object.

In *Naming and Necessity* (Kripke 1972/1980), Kripke uses a naming ceremony during an initial baptism to illustrate the phenomenon of naming. The social character of naming is further explored by Kripke elsewhere (1977), in which he proposes a conventionality understanding of naming. At a naming ceremony, a given object is being pointed at. Someone proposes to use a name, such as 'Ray', to refer to that object. Through the acceptance of those present, a convention is set up in which the name 'Ray' acquired the semantic reference that it has. When speakers in that linguistic community, beyond those present at the ceremony, use the name, given their intention to follow the reference passed down, they refer to Ray with the name 'Ray'.

Here is what I propose is at work at the naming ceremony. At a given time, a given object is in salience. Consider a speaker pointing at it, signalling it to be the object under discussion. It thus constitutes, with both speakers and the listeners in view of each other, common knowledge that it is the object under discussion; that each knows of the others to know of each of them to know that it is, constituting its salience. At this point, someone might as well object to talking about the object, and thus, given common knowledge, the common ground is not achieved

because it is without mutual agreement. It is only through common knowledge that mutual agreement constitutes a common ground. In this case, the common ground established is about the reference of the novel name thus came about. Once the salient object is in the common ground, the initial baptiser proposes using a name to refer to the object. The common knowledge of the referential intention of the initial baptiser with the name is thus achieved. Shall the listeners at the naming ceremony accept the naming, a common ground would have been established, constituting a linguistic convention of the use of a name.

What, then, does it have to do with grasping the meaning of a term, when understanding a sentence? Consider, for example, the word 'bachelors.' Its meaning is given – to use a Kripkean terminology – with the description 'being an unmarried man'. The semantic meaning of a term is what one comes to know when understanding the word. However, does one thereby know the semantic reference of 'bachelors'? In a way, one does: 'bachelors' semantically refers to unmarried men. However, in another way, one does not know the exact semantic referents without knowing which individuals are an unmarried man. It is in this sense, I will propose, that reference is prior to meaning. It is semantic reference – what a term refers to – that explains its semantic meaning. 'Bachelors' and 'unmarried men' have the same semantic meaning because, within each possible world, they have the same semantic referent. Possible worlds are worlds possible of the actual world – what the actual world could have been. In a world in which an actual bachelor got married, the semantic referent is different both for 'bachelors' and 'unmarried men', leaving them to have the same semantic reference. This is how their sameness in meaning, or synonymy, is explained extensionally through semantic reference.

The notion of meaning giving is contrasted with reference fixing, as championed by Kripke (1972/1980). It is most notable in cases of the contingent *a priori.* Suppose, using Kripke's own example, that some scientists decided to name a given length, signalled by the actual length of a metal bar in Paris, a 'metre'. Given the naming ceremony, the scientists present know, without further evidence, that the Paris bar is of 1 metre. This *a priori* knowledge seems incompatible with its contingency; the Paris bar could have been heated and is thus longer than 1 metre. How is the contingent *a priori* possible? If something is known without further evidence or corroboration from the outside world, it is assumed that it is necessary and not contingent. One way of escaping this predicament is through distinguishing the reference fixing use of what is commonsensically known as definition.

Although one is tempted to say that the scientists defined 'metre' using the Paris bar, it is more faithful to the phenomenon that we use words to define words, instead of actual objects in the world. 'Unmarried men' is used to define 'bachelors', but the Paris bar is used to fix the reference of 'metre'. It is in this way that the former is an instance of meaning giving, whereas the latter reference fixing. With reference fixing, it is compatible with the possibility of the semantic referent lacking the property used in identifying it, leaving its contingency open. In contrast, even if some bachelors are possibly not unmarried because they could have been married, if someone is a bachelor, then he is an unmarried man. This material conditional is true, with its necessity differentiated from the metaphysical into the semantic. The synonymy between 'bachelors' and 'unmarried men' is understood thus with one semantically entailing another in both directions, whereas '1 metre' does not semantically entail 'the length of the Paris bar'.

It shall have been clear that, in a naming ceremony, with the salient object in the common ground, there is no need for any other identifying property for the convention to be established. One might as well utter, 'Let's name our newborn baby "Ray"', with 'our newborn baby' identifying the object with the corresponding property. Those present at the naming ceremony shall thus have some *a priori* knowledge about the newly named object in virtue of their mutual acceptance of the decision of naming, given common knowledge of what is being named. They know, without further evidence, that Ray is our newborn baby. This is different from

'being our newborn baby' defining 'Ray', for, after a few years, Ray will no longer be our newborn baby, contradicting what the name is supposed to mean. The name semantically refers to Ray, without having been given any meaning. The distinction between reference and meaning shall prove pertinent in section 4., when it is the semantic referent of '*Dao*' that we recovered, instead of merely its semantic meaning.

2. Pragmatics: Intention and Interpretation

In the previous section, I suppose that the intention to follow reference metaphysically determines a corresponding referential intention. Subsequent users of the name 'Ray', in virtue of intending to follow the reference passed down, formed the corresponding referential intention at the initial baptism - namely, the intention to refer to Ray - when they use the name nowadays. Referential intention thus plays a central role in the theory of names being developed.

Instead of focusing on the history of causality in Kripke's theory, I have brought out the mental element in his theory of names. One philosopher that stands out as a leading proponent of intention in the philosophy of language is Grice. I shall present his theory and extend it to referential intention, given my divergence with him on the relation between reference and meaning. Grice (1957) proposes meaning - non-natural meaning - to be constituted by the intention with an utterance to cause something psychological in the listener through their recognising such intention. With 'our newborn baby', the speaker intended that the listener thought about their newborn baby through recognising their intention. Non-natural meaning contrasts natural meaning in the following way. When the cloudy sky indicates that it is going to rain, per ordinary language philosophy, one gathered the linguistic datum that 'Cloudy sky means it is going to rain.' Such natural meaning is not constituted by nature's intention that something psychological be effected in the alleged listener through recognising its intention. Non-natural meaning, on the other hand, is. With regard to reference, the speaker's intention that the listener's recognition of the speaker's intention to cause in them the thought about the referent with the use of a term constitutes the reference of the term, and thus the speaker's intention constitutes a case of referential intention expressed in pragmatic context. What remains is the differentiation of pragmatic reference from semantic reference. With occasional pragmatic reference, one, except with words such as pronouns, indexicals, and demonstratives, could have effected a pragmatic reference without intending to follow the semantic reference passed down.

Notice that, although the speaker's intention is prior, it is not about Grice's other contribution to the philosophy of language, conversational implicature. (1975) Conversational implicature is sometimes detected when maxims are flouted.[3] Consider his maxim of relation. When asked of the work competence of a colleague, one replies, 'Oh quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn't been to prison yet.' (Grice 1975, 24) This description of one's colleague flouts, at the very least, the maxim prescribing relevance. Given the cooperation principle that describes the ideality of the speaker's contribution to a conversation, the listener might, given the cooperation assumption, work out the implicature of the conversation. She is probably not in the right position to speak candidly about said colleague, therefore implicitly gesturing at his incompetence, without risking the subsequent reprimand.

Referential intention's role in pragmatics is clear. Consider the Gricean theory of non-natural meaning applied to his theory of conversational implicature. Given cooperation, with maxims highlighting how cooperation is to work, the listener gets to have some psychological effect, such as in forming a belief, through recognising the speaker's intention that the listener be thus effected. The speaker intended that the listener thought about some possible worlds in which a particular fact obtained with his utterance through the listener's recognition of the speaker's intention. Although Grice's theory of meaning could have had such underlying explanation for his theory of conversational implicature, I focus on a pragmatic that is restricted with the

literal use of language. His theory, after my modification, expands my present pragmatic here to include conversational implicature.

I advocate an epistemological conception of pragmatics, such that it is knowledge transfer that is the main goal of communication. Certainly, in communication, one also expresses emotions, and it is not always the case that an emotion expression, or exchange, will constitute a case of knowledge transfer. The typical moral emotivists would have had a moral imperative being paired with an emotion expression, such as, 'boo!', with murder, and it is clear that such theorists do not intend any underlying knowledge transfer with such an emotion expression. This would have run the risk of falling into some form of moral cognitivism. Here, I set this aside, and focus on the aspect of epistemology in pragmatics.

First of all, the cooperation principle may be rephrased as one about asserting on knowledge.[4] When it is relevant, assert all one knows, and do not assert what one does not know. When someone asserts something that the listener knows the speaker not to know, the cooperation principle, or its maxims, seemed flouted, and the listener may work out what the speaker intended the listener to know. Through recognising the speaker's intention that the listener knows a given fact, the listener comes to form the corresponding belief, and, thus, through testimony, be justified to know the fact, without the fact having been literally described.

Pragmatic contexts are constituted by presuppositions, and it must be that one presupposes only what one knows. In a conversation about the actual world, the actual pragmatic context about actuality is constituted by the actual presuppositions about actuality, which is represented with possible worlds – worlds that are live options given what one knows about actuality. One may also suppose a given fact, and enter into conversation about a counterfactual world. The actual pragmatic context about such counterfactuality is thus similarly constituted by the actual presuppositions about the corresponding counterfactual world. Given listener's knowledge of the corresponding pragmatic presuppositions in contravention of the given utterance, conversational implicature, with the present notion of pragmatic contexts, may be worked out through listener's understanding of maxim flouting.

In particular, by bringing out the epistemological aspect of my pragmatic, Grice's theory may have its psychological effect clause instantiated as knowledge. With a given utterance, what its pragmatic meaning is is constituted by what the speaker intended that the listener came to know through recognising their such intention with such utterance.[5] Instead of focusing on belief, as Grice did, the present pragmatic favours the success case – knowledge –, given the asymmetry between knowledge and belief. Knowledge entails belief, but belief does not entail knowledge. A theory that starts with the success case might have suffered from idealisation, but I will set that aside here. Notably, when engaging with a text, even if one did not presuppose, one would have at least supposed knowledge of the author with regard to what they have written – that they asserted, though not verbally, on knowledge. This supposition entails the supposition of the informativeness of the text, without which – except in cases of emotion expressions – the point of engaging with it seems to have been vanquished.

If a text is a means through which one transmitted information through transferring knowledge, then the present pragmatic obligates finding out what knowledge the text is intended to transfer to the readers. This poses a problem when we want to learn form other culture. Especially with ancient texts from a foreign language, we rely first on others, typically native speakers, to have the text translated for us. What we would have been able to work out from the text about what the writer knows will thus be limited by the translations available. What the writer intended that the reader knew through recognising their intention with a given sentence shall demonstrate a linguistic relativity that is, at this point, culturally bounded because most people immersed in a given culture shared a given language, and we do not share that language with the writer. The utterance, or sentence, with which the writer, or speaker, intended some

psychological effect would not have been the means with which the reader, or listener, could have easily recognised the author's intention. Therefore, a hermeneutic that is situational is called for. Before reaching that, I will first discuss the importance of knowledge of situation in epistemology, given the ongoing discussion of the epistemological aspect of pragmatics.

3. Epistemology: Situation and Context

Knowledge of situation constitutes knowledge of context. In pragmatics, it is the pragmatic context under discussion. Without knowledge of the pragmatic context through knowing the corresponding pragmatic presuppositions, one could have misinterpreted an utterance. Consider the demonstrative 'that'. 'That is our newborn baby' could have been a true assertion by the speaker, while the listener mistook what the salient object is through being mistaken about the pragmatic context. The listener, if having been directed to an alternative newborn baby, would have misinterpreted 'That' to refer to that alternative object, constituting miscommunication. The speaker would have asserted something true, while the listener heard something false. Furthermore, besides non-factive pragmatic presuppositions, the situation also determines whether the presuppositions are true, and whether the speaker has presupposed only knowledge. What belongs to the pragmatic context depends on what information it has encoded, and the information conveyed by knowledge-constituting presuppositions is the highest, among presuppositions that are merely true, or even false. Presuppositions may be fully justified, partially justified, or not justified at all. Negative justification is when the opposite of what is presupposed is justified instead. With better justification, there are less non-identical alternatives to the original object, constituting a larger proportion of epistemic counterparts that are identical with it.[6] Justification of presupposition, therefore, through increase in informativeness, makes smaller the pragmatic context, by ruling out more live options.

Stalnaker (1978, 2014) theorises pragmatic context as set of possibilities. Given a conversation, there are some live options among which the participants of the conversation attempt to distinguish from actuality. From this set of possibilities, an utterance is interpreted one way instead of another. Consider again the newborn baby scenario. If a further newborn baby, out of sight, in another room and asleep, is also a live option, then from this possibility there is one more interpretation of the utterance. Stalnaker's pragmatics interacts content of interpretation with its context thus.

As demonstrated, the situation makes a difference to the pragmatic context. Since, with ancient texts, it is unlikely that the writer knows a lot about the present readers, I will focus on one side of the pragmatic context – the side of the recipient. A pragmatic context is constituted by epistemic contexts that are of common knowledge. When participants of a conversation interact, there are various live options they interact with each other with, and, among them, live options common to all such participants are what that constituted their common ignorance. Through common knowledge, from the opposite direction to ignorance, pragmatic context arises, collectively, out of their individual epistemic context. Epistemic contexts are, therefore, sets of epistemic possibilities. Notably, an epistemic agent's actual epistemic context about actuality is their actual set of epistemic possibilities of the actual world; what, actually, relative to them, the actual world *might* have been. If I were to recognise the newborn baby from among several newborn babies in a nursery, given my limited acquaintance with it, some of them would have been its epistemic counterparts, from among which I am to distinguish the original newborn baby. With better evidence, I would have ruled out some such epistemic possibilities – alternative to the original –, and, in the end, in the success case, be in the position to recognise it.

With a text in one's possession, we need to know the situation of the writer, such that we know of their epistemic context through knowing their epistemic situation. First of all, we need to know his or her linguistic knowledge; what do they mean with their use of a given

word? Knowledge of the epistemic situation of the writer includes knowledge of what they know about the language they write in – their linguistic situation –, given some assumptions about their relation to the language being situational. The case with demonstrative that began this section is a case a point. One may further consider the following question: was it written in a time when some sentence structure, contrary to present day use, has a different parsing? How are we to understand 'All that glitters is not gold' depends also on what we know about the author and his relation to the language he writes in. If they were in a linguistic situation similar to William Shakespeare's, then we would interpret them one way instead of another. Since something that glitters is gold, if we were to parse the sentence using present-day English, the sentence would have been false. Thus, if the variation in one's relation with one's language is situational, then knowledge of the author's epistemic situation entails knowledge of the author's linguistic knowledge, including their knowledge of semantics of its parts. It is through knowing the semantic of a part, and the speaker's epistemic situation, through their epistemic context, that the reader comes to know its pragmatic.

Given a correct understanding of a written passage, with the literal meaning thus interpreted, it is in epistemic context that we interpreted a text with the author's intended meaning correctly; given what the author knew, why would he or she have written such a sentence? This is where the hermeneutic circle functions most robustly.[7] How are we to know of the author's epistemic situation before having started reading the text? To approach the whole, we need to presuppose something about its parts; and with such presuppositions constituting knowledge, we expand our knowledge of the text from its parts. Given the semantics of the foreign text, we learn more about what the author intended that we know through the text. With false presuppositions, we would have encountered trouble when interpreting a text, outputting some incoherent interpretations. Presuppositions are distinguished with being about words and being about the world. Notably, similar to pragmatic context, we are to presuppose only what we know. As with knowledge of semantics, we hypothesise about the whole sentence, and even paragraph, given presupposition about its part, such as semantic of a word, and go on as we acquired evidence of its actual meaning through, minimally, internal coherence. As with knowledge of worldly situation, we hypothesise about the whole treatise, given presupposition about its part, and go on as we acquired evidence of its actual theory through going into the author's world. This sets the stage for stepping into the author's shoes. When we encounter evidence that disconfirms our hypotheses, we must revise our presuppositions.[8] Through interacting with the text, with prior conception about its semantics, one engages with the author's world as one reads on. Through learning the text, one learns about the author's world. Furthermore, in knowing better about the author's world, one understands the text better, producing better interpretation because one is in a better position to access the author's intent given knowledge of his situation.

A reasonable presupposition, if false, may be used in furthering some *reconstructive interpretation* of a text, shying away from having a full grasp of author's original intent.[9] When Kripke (1982) writes on Ludwig Wittgenstein, he suggests that it is the ideas of Kripke's Wittgenstein that are under discussion ('Wittgenstein's argument as it struck Kripke.' (5)); it might have been a false exegetical theory about Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, but it does not hinder his discussion of ideas on rule-following. Notably, an interpreter ought to have been wary when the author under discussion is one's own creation, instead of the actual author. By imposing one's reasonable presuppositions, and the corresponding hypotheses, about a text – the semantics of its parts and the situation of the author – onto the author, one runs the risk of doing violence to the text. However, a reconstructive interpretation engages with a text to produce a work that, although based on the author's work, does not claim faithfulness to the author's original intent. This is especially fruitful when the author expounded a false theory, whereas,

with the interpreter's false presuppositions, some knowledge about the world be produced. This enables interaction of the new work with the secondary literature, and it would be most beneficial if such reconstructive interpretation got the crucial semantic referents right.

As an interim summary, although knowledge of situation is also necessary for working out conversational implicature, my focus here is on the literal use of language. In any case, through knowledge transfer, my epistemological conception of pragmatics also explains conversational implicature. The present pragmatics puts knowledge transfer as basic for any assertoric act, such that the reader interprets the writer given the knowledge rule of assertion as a cooperation principle. Knowledge of semantics of the language aside, knowledge of the author's situation makes a difference to knowing the pragmatic meaning that constitutes knowledge transfer. Writers write in situation, with more deliberation and revision than speakers speaking in situation. Although pragmatics is brought in here in understanding a text, it is knowledge, above all, that matters through the semantics of the text. The application of pragmatics, through epistemology, in understanding a text has a missing element – the active contribution of the author as speakers do. The author is not in the position to clarify what the semantic reference is with regard to a given term, and this is where we turn to hermeneutics in the next section.

4. Hermeneutics: Phenomenon and Idea

Knowledge and referential intention, as discussed above, are both mental states, and they thus seemingly fly in the face of Hansen's philosophy of language. Instead of assuming an uncritical Eurocentric theory of mind, one that focuses on the subjectivity of the thinker, and trying to bring out the mentality of the author, constituted by their thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and desires, he treats the Chinese speaker as a black-box, quipping a computer analogy. 'A computer operates with a program. We input the program – load it into the computer. That process changes the computer's *dispositions* in complex ways.' (Hansen 1992, 19) With a slight modification of the program, the same stimulus would have been responded to radically differently. Instead of assuming a theory of ideas corresponding to a theory of language in understanding Chinese thinkers, Hansen proposes an alternative that focuses on the prescriptive role of language in Ancient China – the role of language in socialisation.

First of all, one may charge Hansen on account of linguistic behaviourism. It is through having internal workings, as proposed by Noam Chomsky (1959), that we human beings are not mere constitutions of stimulus-response pairs. Consider another philosopher susceptible to such charge, Quine. According to this latter philosopher, there is no semantic meaning nor analyticity, and what is an identity in meaning, or synonymy, is to be explained behaviourally as nothing more than stimulus-synonymy. Two words are stimulus-synonymous if and only if a speaker would assent and dissent to them identically given a similar situation. 'An individual would at any one time be prompted by the same stimulations to assent to "Bachelor" and "Unmarried man"; and similarly for dissent. Stimulus synonymy, or sameness of stimulus meaning, is as good a standard of synonymy for nonobservational occasion sentences as for observation sentences as long as we stick to one speaker.' (1960, 46) Without the mental element, and with only assent and dissent as the distinguisher, it seems Quine's alleged behaviourism runs afoul. Giving up analyticity, and even semantic meaning here, seem to come a long way.

Consider, for example, the words 'renate' and 'cordate'. Given available stimuli, would Quine categorise them as synonyms? As a matter of fact, any creature with a kidney also has a heart, and any creature with a heart has a kidney; given actuality as it is, 'renates' and 'cordates' have the same extension through having the same semantic referents. If so, how might a speaker have responded differently among them? If they are different in meaning, how does Quine's theory differentiate them? Here, I propose something that Quine would not endorse himself: modality. If there are *possible* situations in which one assented with one word but dissented with another,

then they are differentiable. As long as an animal is kept alive while having its kidney removed for sufficiently long, this situation shall have arisen. Certainly, it is being born with a kidney that something is a renate. What if, through genetic mutation, an animal is born without it? It then constitutes a metaphysical possibility in which the two words are distinguished behaviourally.

Therefore, even if Quine's philosophy of language, and later, Hansen's, together constitute a linguistic behaviourism, it is not an immediate vice. In fact, given the relation between the world and verbal behaviour, Hansen's theory of distinction permits an externalism that a philosophy of language that gives meaning priority over reference simply cannot achieve. Relative to Hansen, speakers learn a word in order to learn to distinguish among various states-of-affairs, having their desires shaped accordingly. In telling the difference and affirming one instead of another through learning some words, one is thus cultivated through such processes of socialisation.[10] If so, knowledge of semantics when dealing with Ancient Chinese text suffer some chronological distality. How do we know we are distinguishing states-of-affairs the way the Ancient Chinese did, given how much the language has evolved over the centuries?

The importance of my situational hermeneutic will be apparent given this doubt at the background. In what follows, I will bring Hansen's translations into the light of scrutiny. The original text in question is the *Daodejing*, attributed to Laozi. Hansen does not believe that an 'actual Laozi ever lived.' (1992, 210) On the authorship of the text, he writes 'The traditional biographical information about Laozi is largely either fanciful (he lived to be 160 to 200 years old), historically dubious (he taught Confucius), or contradictory (his hometown, official posts, age). So in the sense that *Laozi* refers to the single author of the *Daode Jing*, there may never have been one. There were more likely many.' (1992, 210)

I work with the assumption that the *Daodejing* is single-authored, with its compilation meticulously phrased. The chapters are arranged in a sequence with the intended connection among them. The *Dao*[11], I assume, is a spirit, and the book is the author's insights about spirits and how it relates to personal life and society. Notably, it is written in terse verses, using the Ancient Chinese language in a way that marks it not only as a text of philosophy, but literature. Therefore, putting oneself into the situation of the author here might not only enlighten one with knowledge of the author's knowledge, but also knowledge of semantics of the words they used. '*dao*', given Hansen's philosophy of language, obligates readers of the Ancient text to distinguish states-of-affairs one way instead of another, and it is thus reference that is prior to the meaning of the word. What, then, does Laozi recommend us to do with the *Dao*, given we are in the position to know what it is?

Let me now dive in with my demonstration of my situational hermeneutic. Consider my following translation of a sentence from chapter 37 of the *Daodejing*.[12]

(1) When the *Dao* is eternal, it is neither fictitious nor not fictitious.

This sentence is translated by Hansen, as:

(2) Do nothing arising from deeming and yet nothing can be done without deeming. (1992, 230)

When the word '*wei*' is translated as action, judging, or deeming, it might have overshadowed the evolution of the Chinese language. The attempted translation by Cheung (2024b) suggests an alleged word that the author of the *Daodejing* did not use. This translation adds one radical to the word, turning it into a word with a slightly different meaning.[13] However, with this sinological hypothesis, I may unify Daoism as a religion and as a philosophy. As a religion, as indicated from chapter 4, in which Laozi discusses some personal spirit whom he did not know who it was, we know that there are spirits that are personal; as a philosophy, the author proposes approaching the limit of a spirit that is impersonal. That is when the *Dao* is eternal. When the spirit is impersonal, it is neither fictitious nor not fictitious because it does not do anything artificial. In fact,

(3) When the *Dao* is eternal, it is without fictitiousness and thereby without non-fictitiousness.

It is only in imposing a personality on the eternal *Dao*, such as in naming and transferring reference to others, that one ran into trouble. Therefore the opening two famous sentences of the *Daodejing*. It is understood here as that the *dao* that can be named and had its reference passed on is a personal spirit, and thus not the eternal *Dao*. The general advice from Laozi is to not seek any *dao* to do anything artificial for you. *wuwei*[14] is achieved when one is thus without fictitiousness.

This hermeneutic exercise requires putting oneself in the author's shoes, getting into his situation of interacting with deities. Imagining with the author when he writes the prose is therefore of crucial importance. Not only did it achieve knowledge of his situation, if the attempted translation is a success, it even achieves knowledge of semantic of some words, such as '*wei*'. We, with presuppositions about parts of the text, hypothesise about the author's world, and go on engaging with the text. In chapter 25, Laozi writes about something that might have been the mother of the cosmos (*tianxia*[15]), and decides to name it '*Dao*'. With this, we hold constant the presupposition that the *Dao* is something feminine, and begets all things. We then interpret chapter 37, with the gender polarity brought in from our conception about Laozi's world – that the masculine is dominant, whereas feminine submissive. The eternal *Dao*, therefore, as the mother of the cosmos, does not do anything artificial. It is thus impossibly fictitious and impossibly not fictitious because fictitiousness is a property that does not possibly instantiate on it. How this interpretation added more presupposition into our epistemic context about Laozi's epistemic context about his world is illustrated with how it interacts with chapter 4, bringing out the personality of some spirits that are also *dao*s. The rushing *dao* in chapter 4, I hypothesise, given this spirituality understanding, is Yahweh, constituting the first recorded encounter of a Chinese-speaking person with the Judaic deity. James Legge (1891) translates it as '… How deep and unfathomable it is, as if it were the Honoured Ancestor of all things!… I do not know whose son it is. It might appear to have been before [Emperor Xiang].' Having thus accessed, epistemically, Laozi's world, we come back to our own, with the hope of seeing our world anew.

In general, the phenomenon is constituted by the object of interest being a certain way. In this case, the eternal *Dao* being without fictitiousness, and thereby also without non-fictitiousness. The priority of reference motivates readers to get a grip on what objects in the author's world the text is about, and, through describing the object via, typically, predicating of it some property, the author expresses their ideas about the object. Given knowledge of the object in question, the ideas are right ideas because they constitute true descriptions of the object. However, sometimes, even if we pretended that the author knew, the pretence stops when we discovered some false assertions in the text. The present hermeneutic enables getting right about the object – or subject matter – about a text, while being in the position to evaluate the author's ideas about it. What the author meant about the object – the referent – might have been false, but the reader should be wary that the false description, having been true of something else, does not attribute property to that alternative referent, even though if it did, it would have done so truly. Consider, on the contrary, Neo-Daoism, or *Xuanxue*[16], which entails that nothingness, *wu*[17], is the eternal *Dao*.[18] That nothingness is the semantic referent of '*Dao*' is reasonable given Neo-Daoists' reading of other parts of the *Daodejing* at the background. With the present priority of reference over meaning, I point out that they should have identified the semantic referent before evaluating Laozi's descriptions of the *Dao*. Even if Laozi's ideas about the *Dao* resonates with the Neo-Daoist conception of nothingness, it is a confusion to assign as semantic value nothingness to Laozi's '*Dao*'. However, given the reasonableness of the presuppositions of the Neo-Daoists, one may see theirs as a reconstructive interpretation of the *Daodejing*, although they themselves would have protested otherwise.

5. Conclusion

I start with distinguishing reference from meaning, the former being of priority in my situational hermeneutic. I then develop an epistemological conception of pragmatic that uses referential intention in describing knowledge transfer in assertion. Afterwards, I bring out the importance of knowledge of author's situation with the dependence of interpretation on context. Lastly, going back to the question of whether it is possible to inhabit the world of Ancient Chinese philosophers through interpreting their texts, I take issues with Hansen's translation of a sentence from the *Daodejing*, to demonstrate my situational hermeneutic. Translation helps foreign readers through language, but much is, at the same time, hampered and handicapped by translation itself. Take Daoist scholarship as an example. With many translations into English hoping to accommodate the popular view of Daoism, any original or novel breakthrough is unlikely. If most translations need to be in conformity with the popular view, it leaves only the native speaker the opportunity at achieving a genuine and deep understanding of a text, and by extension, the corresponding philosophy which it articulates. I have demonstrated the importance of a situational hermeneutic, with an externalism that is otherwise lacking in any hermeneutic that stresses meaning instead of reference. The evolution of a text, therefore, is not only idealistic, but through a historical materialism, interacting referents with the readers through the juxtaposition of the author's world with the readers'. However, to have genuinely inhabited the author's world, the reader has to step into their shoes when engaging with the text. Success is achieved not only when one saw from the reader's eyes the author's world, but through the author's lens back to the reader's world. Since we inhabit the same world, through knowing better the author's world, we also know better about the world.

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Notes

[1] 心
[2] 道德經
[3] Grice's term is 'exploitation'. Maxims are exploited while speakers observant of the cooperation principle.
[4] See, for similar construal, Williamson (2000) for his knowledge rule of assertion.
[5] In general, the recognition clause is to be dropped. With assertion, in the success case with knowledge transfer, what one meant is what one intended the listener to know. I retain the Gricean remnant here for discussion.
[6] See Cheung (forthcoming) for a counterparthood theory of epistemic possibility. Something is an epistemic possibility of an object if and only if it is indistinguishable from the object. It is thus an epistemic counterpart to the object. Better evidence better justifies the belief about the object, decreasing the amount of epistemic counterparts that are not identical with it.
[7] See Heidegger (1927/1962).
[8] Or prejudices, translated from *Vorurteil*. See Gadamer (1960/1989) which initiated this idea. He, instead of revising presuppositions, proposes something that came to be known as fusion-of-horizons.
[9] For a reasonableness that permits falsehood, see Cheung (2024a) for my safety theory of reasonableness.
[10] Hansen borrows from Mozi regarding distinctions (*bian* 辨). Note also Confucius' contribution through name rectification (*zhengming* 正名).
[11] 道
[12] '道常無為而無不為'. See Cheung (2024b).
[13] '偽' instead of '為'.

[14] 無為 (無偽)
[15] 天下
[16] 玄學
[17] 無
[18] See Chan (2009/2019).

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