Chapter 5: A Comparison between Feyerabend’s Incommensurability Thesis and That of His Contemporaries

5.1 Quine’s meaning holism

Underdetermination thesis asserts that observation is not sufficient to determine theory; whereas indeterminacy thesis contends that mutually incompatible translation manuals may compatible with all possible evidence (Rosa and Lepore 2004: 71). I shall discuss both of them for two reasons: (1) they are Quine’s theories of meaning (2) they are conceptually related, “underdetermination yields indeterminacy” (Fogelin 2004: 26).

... all observable data... underdetermine the linguist’s analytical hypotheses, and on this basis translation of all further sentences depends. (Rosa and Lepore 2004: 70)

Insofar as the truth of a physical theory is underdetermined by observables, the translation of the foreigner’s physical theory is underdetermined by translation of his observation sentences. If our physical theory can vary though all possible observations be fixed, then our translation of his physical theory can vary though our translations of all possible observation reports on his part be fixed. (RIT 179-80, cited in Kirk 2004: 169)

Both theses hence must be examined in the light of Quine’s meaning holism. Meaning holism is an idea concerning with “the meaning of theoretical sentences in the formulation of a scientific theory” (Pagin forthcoming: 1).

... the contribution of a theoretical sentence depends on the contributions of other sentences, and therefore the meaning of the sentence depends on the meaning of other sentences. (Pagin forthcoming: 2)

According to Quine, what a linguistic expression means depends on its relations to many or all other expressions within the same totality (Pagin forthcoming: 1). Quine holds that there is no isolated meaning of a sentence. “[I]t is only the theory as a whole and not any one of the hypotheses that admits of evidence and counter-evidence in observation and
experiment" (Quine PL: 5, cited in Rosa and Lepore 2004: 66). The meaning of a sentence is conferred by empirical evidence holistically.

5.1.1 Indeterminacy of translation

Quine holds that two incompatible translation manuals of a language may compatible with the observable facts. To illustrate, he imagines a linguist carries out a "radical translation" on a native's language, without aided by interpreters that are normally adopted in the translation of modern languages (Quine 1960: 28). In the absence of tool and guide in such radical translation, the linguist has to depend totally on the empirical evidence he or she exposed to. The source of empirical evidence is the ostensible object, or stimulus, like rabbit. The linguist embarks on his or her task by observing the behavior of the native towards the stimulus.

A rabbit scurries by, the native says 'Gavagai', and the linguist notes down the sentence 'Rabbit' (or 'Lo, a rabbit') as tentative translation, subject to testing in further cases. (Quine 1960: 29)

Meaning of a sentence is a property of behavior (Rosa and Lepore 2004: 68), for it can be unveiled only by observable empirical evidence. Meaning can only be acquired publicly, so the linguist is not supposed to probe into the intentional meaning of the utterance "Gavagai".

Meanings are, first and foremost, meanings of language. Language is a social art which we all acquire on the evidence solely of other people's overt behavior under publicly recognizable circumstances. Meanings, therefore, those very models of mental entities, end up as grist for the behaviorist's mill. (Quine 1969: 26)

Behaviorist approach to the radical translation makes possible the verification of a stimulus meaning through accumulated test. To conclude that "Gavagai" and "Rabbit" have the same stimulus meaning, the linguist must learn the native expression for assent and dissent¹. The linguist asks "Gavagai?" in "each of various stimulatory situations, and
noting each time whether the native assents, dissents, or neither.” (Quine 1960: 29) He or she is “in a position to accumulate inductive evidence for translating ‘Gavagai’ as the sentence ‘Rabbit’.” (Quine 1960: 30)

The general law for which he is assembling instances is roughly that the native will assent to ‘Gavagai?’ under just those stimulations under which we, if asked, would assent to ‘Rabbit?’; and correspondingly for dissent. (Quine 1960: 30)

However, though the linguist is reasonably in equating “Gavagai” with “Rabbit”, it is mistaken “if he thinks the correlation of the observation sentences ‘Gavagai’ and ‘Rabbit’ fixes the reference of the term ‘gavagai’ uniquely” (Gibson 1986: 70)

It is quite possible (i.e., consistent with all possible behavioral evidence) that ‘gavagai’, if a term at all, might be an abstract singular term referring to rabbithood, or a concrete general term true not of rabbits but, say, of undetached rabbit parts, or of rabbit stages. (Gibson 1986: 70)

This is the problem of inscrutability of reference. It is also known as ontological relativity, which is “the recognition that empiricism does not uniquely determine which objects are required as the values of our variables” (Orenstein 2002: 68). It simply means that “there is an inscrutability or indeterminacy of reference that is in keeping with empiricist strictures on deciding which ontology to accept” (Orenstein 2002: 68).

There is no way of empirically deciding whether the term... ‘gavagai’ is used to refer to rabbits, rabbit parts, rabbit stages and so on. The empirical constraints cannot determine which of these diverse ontological items is correct. (Orenstein 2002: 69)

Inscrutability of reference manifests the indeterminacy thesis from the perspective of reference (Orenstein 2002: 68). It is indeterminate to use empirical reference to construct a translation manual. Different translation manuals may be incompatible by pointing to different references in the presence of the common stimulus “Gavagai”.

The problem of indeterminacy of translation still cannot be solved if the linguist, in order to escape from the predicament of inscrutability of reference, inclines to the approach of
meaning. Quine against intentional account of meaning and synonymy, for they are lack of clarity (Gibson 2004: 185). In consistency with his behaviorism, Quine claims that intentional meaning and synonymy cannot be defined in terms of dispositions to verbal behavior, though they can be defined tautologous (Gibson 2004: 185). From the holistic point of view, meanings “depend not on any limited set of experiences but on the interconnections among words and sentences in our total theory of the world.” (Kirk 2004: 166). Hence alternative translation manuals may imply incompatible meanings yet in the presence of a common stimulus “Gavagai”.

Quine thinks it a mistake to believe that the notion of propositions as shared meanings (or objectively valid translation relations) adds any clarity to our understanding of the enterprise of translation. The truth is that in translating from scratch, all one has to go on is the observed behavior of the speakers in question... the totality of verbal dispositions is compatible with alternative sentence-to-sentence translations so different from one another that translations of standing sentences under two such systems can differ in point of truth value. (Gibson 1986: 145-146)

Quine’s indeterminacy thesis has made truth a relative concept. There is “no fact of the matter” (Quine 1979: 167, cited in Orenstein 2002: 140) in deciding which translation manual is correct (Quine 1969a: 303), for it is a pragmatic decision.

The linguist assumes that the native’s attitudes and ways of thinking are like his own, up to the point where there is contrary evidence. He accordingly imposes his own ontology and linguistic patterns on the native wherever compatible with the native’s speech and other behavior... (Quine 2003: 48-49)

A pioneer manual of translation has its utility as an aid to negotiation with the native community. Success in communication is judged by smoothness of conversation, by frequent predictability of verbal and nonverbal reactions... It is a matter of better and worse manuals rather than flatly right and wrong ones (Quine 2003: 43).
5.1.2 Underdetermination of theory

As an empiricist, Quine claims that theory is formed in relation to experience. However, he denies that experience can determine theory sufficiently. He formulates underdetermination thesis as such:

"[P]hysical theory is underdetermined even by all possible observations... Physical theories can be at odds with each other and yet compatible with all possible data even in the broadest sense. In a word, they can be logically incompatible and empirically equivalent. (Quine *RIT*: 178-179, cited in Bergström 2004: 92)"

According to Bird, there are two types of underdetermination thesis, viz., of quantitative and of qualitative (Bird *forthcoming*). The former implies that there is too little evidence to determine a single theory, whereas the latter holds that there is a qualitative difference between the observation statement and potential theoretical statement so that the observation cannot decide between theories (Bird *forthcoming*). Quine’s version of underdetermination thesis is of quantitative, since Bird asserts that the qualitative claim, which never held explicitly by Quine, implies wrong categorical match between observation statement and theoretical statement.

In underdetermination thesis, Quine stresses two different relations between observation and theory, that is, “observations can be ‘evidence’ for a theory, and observations can be ‘compatible’ with a theory” (Harman 1979: 10). Harman claims that Quine interprets the empirical equivalency of two different theories in the following ways:

1. *T* and *U* are empirically equivalent if and only if supported equally by the same observational evidence.
2. *T* and *U* are empirically equivalent if and only if compatible with the same observational evidence.

(Harman 1979: 10)

Quine does not distinguish them (Harman 1979: 10). In the consideration of empirical equivalency, the first formulation indicates that two incompatible theories can be verified
by the same observational evidence, whereas the latter implies that theories are not in conflict with observational evidence.

According to Papineau, relativism is the unfavorable consequence of underdetermination thesis (Papineau 1987: 224). However, he thinks this problem can be overcome if we are careful in choosing between incompatible theories (Papineau 1987: 224). He asserts that choice among underdetermined theories must be suspended, for they are undecided unambiguously (Papineau 1987: 224). Papineau’s strategy is to save the rationality of science while still remain the issue of methodology unsolved.

When I say that the choice between incompatible $T'$ and $T''$ is underdetermined within some intellectual system $S$, I mean that $S$’s inductive processes and accepted beliefs lend support to both $T'$ and $T''$ to the same degree. This now makes it clear why you would be wrong either to believe $T'$ or to believe $T''$ if the choice between them were underdetermined according to your intellectual system. For since they are incompatible, and since, by hypothesis, they are equally well-supported, neither can be recommended for full belief. (Papineau 1987: 224)

Comparatively, Laudan tries to defend Quine’s rationalism from the perspective of methodology by dismissing the role of observational evidence. Unlike Papineau who proposes a suspension of choice, Laudan asserts that choice can be made rationally between incompatible underdetermined theories by discarding the theory which contains a set of false auxiliary assumptions (Laudan 1988: 120). As oppose to Quine and his critics, Laudan asserts that auxiliary assumptions play a greater role than evidence in theory formulation. He claims that “no set of evidential statements entails the falsity of a theory” (Laudan 1988: 121). It is obvious that Laudan’s solution has ignored the significance of Quine’s empiricism and thus unsatisfactory.

In short, Quine’s underdetermination thesis leaves the rationality of theory choice at stake. It implies pluralism and perhaps post-modernism, for Quine asserts that “what the empirical under-determination of global science shows is that there are various defensible ways of conceiving the world.” (Quine 2003: 102). It is obvious that his empiricism is the key factor that contributes to this consequence.
content, for Quine is an adherent of the verification theory of meaning (Rosa and Lepore 2004: 66-67). However, the truth is a fact of matter for underdetermination thesis whereas not for indeterminacy thesis (Orenstein 2002: 140). For the latter, different translation manuals are compared for the purpose of usefulness. Feyerabend, on the other hand, does hold that incommensurable theories can be compared realistically. However, he opposes the approach of content comparison of theories (Feyerabend 1978: 68). He rejects the pragmatic consideration of theory comparison too. Indeed, Feyerabend is vague in mentioning a concrete method of theory comparison.

Thirdly, Quine and early Feyerabend disagree in term of the mobility of meaning. Quine implicitly implies that theory has no fixed and closed meaning. Underdetermination thesis manifests that empirical evidences cannot finitely constitute a theory. Perhaps it could be one of the plausible reasons why two logical incompatible theories can still empirically compatible, for there could be veiled empirical evidence that contributes to the difference between them$^2$. Theory is underdetermined by observation in principle because one cannot enumerate all possible evidence empirically. Empirical evidence is infinite. It is this reason that the meaning of theory is open and infinite empirically. On the contrary, early Feyerabend holds that incommensurable theories are closed systems. They are deductively disjoint. Fixed meaning of two theories thus results in the permanent incommensurability. However, later Feyerabend dismisses incommensurability by claiming that theories are open systems. Communication between theories indicates the abundant meaning of theories. As the result, deductive disjointedness can be removed in principle.

5.2 Kuhn’s incommensurability thesis

5.2.1 The development of Kuhn’s incommensurability thesis

Kuhn has proposed his version of incommensurability thesis independently from Feyerabend in 1962, in his masterpiece *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*. According
to Oberheim and Hoyningen-Huene, Kuhn conceived incommensurability while he came to study Aristotelian physics (Oberheim and Hoyningen-Huene 1997: 449). Together with other terms like "paradigm", "paradigm shift", "scientific revolution", and "normal science", "incommensurability" appears as one of the ambiguous terms in Kuhn's account of philosophy. These terms have been widely spread, to the degree as becoming household phrases and advertising slogans (Nickles 2003: 1), which incur numerous compliment and criticism. It is the ambiguity of these inter-related terms that appears as the cause of most of the debate centered on Kuhn. It is not clear if "they belong to epistemology, to philosophy or to sociology or to history of science, or to a philosophy of history or even to a philosophy of historiography." (Hoyningen-Huene 1989: 393; Hoyningen-Huene 1990: 481)

It is a consensus among scholars that Kuhn's philosophy is divided into early and later stage. Sankey, agreeing this supposition implicitly, goes in depth by claiming that Kuhn's incommensurability concept has three phases of transformation. In his opinion, Kuhn's incommensurability entailed conceptual disparity between paradigms, initially (Sankey 1993). In the transitional phase, Kuhn restricted incommensurability to the semantic aspect (Sankey 1993). In his endeavor to improve his thought under commentators' criticism, Kuhn came to his later stage of the notion by probing into the concept of localized translation failure (Sankey 1993).

In Kuhn's early position, revolutionary transition between paradigms is the point at which incommensurability enters (Sankey 1993). According to Sankey, Kuhn's account of incommensurability constitutes an impediment to choice of paradigm (Sankey 1993). It is because Kuhn likens the process of choice to a "gestalt switch" (Kuhn 1970a: 150, cited in Sankey 1993). The proponents of competing paradigms cannot communicate because world changes subsequent to paradigm changes.

Hoyningen-Huene claims that there are three different aspects of incommensurability in The Structure of Scientific Revolution, viz., change of problem, concept and world (Hoyningen-Huene 1990: 483-484). Through a scientific revolution, the field of
problems changes and it results in the change of the significance of a solution. Problems whose solution was vital to the older tradition may disappear; problem whose solution was once deemed trivial, may gain significance in the new tradition (Hoyningen-Huene 1990: 483). In addition to the change of problem, older concepts are used in a modified ways after a scientific revolution (Hoyningen-Huene 1990: 483). The change of concepts has an extensional and an intensional aspect (Hoyningen-Huene 1990: 483). The former implies the change of ostension, where two concepts being mutually exclusive in the sense that they do not share a common reference (Hoyningen-Huene 1990: 483). The latter implies the "change of meaning of the respective concepts" (Hoyningen-Huene 1990: 483). However, Hoyningen-Huene deems the third aspect of incommensurability, viz., change of world, most fundamental. It is because the concept of world bridge up Kuhn's early and later position of incommensurability (Hoyningen-Huene 1990). In short, these three aspects of changes altogether make competing paradigms incommensurable.

The transitional phase of Kuhn's incommensurability thesis deals with the issue of translatability (Sankey 1993). Kuhn holds that it is impossible to translate one theory into the language of another (Kuhn 1976, cited in Sankey 1993). For "the point-by-point comparison of two successive theories demands a language into which at least the empirical consequences of both can be translated without loss or change" (Kuhn 1970b: 266, cited in Sankey 1993). However, Kuhn denies the availability of any neutral observational language. Thus, two competing paradigms are incommensurable. Nonetheless, Kuhn has made the connection between meaning change and incommensurability too direct, claimed Sankey (Sankey 1993). He fails to elucidate the detailed semantical aspect of translation failure (Sankey 1993). Sankey holds that mere change in meaning is insufficient for incommensurability, for such change may involve a switch of a fixed stock of synonyms (Sankey 1993).

In his later phase, Kuhn has gradually abandoned the term "paradigm" and adopting the notion of "taxonomy", "lexicon", and "categories" instead in his philosophical discussions (Sankey 1993; Chen 2000; Fu 1995; Barker, Chen, and Andersen 2003). His
later account of incommensurability is characterized by a localized translation failure between different categories (Sankey 1993). He has proposed a restricted notion of “local incommensurability”, which admits that most of the shared terms of two incommensurable theories are translatable (Sankey 1993). This implies that inter-translatability of theories is due to their shared taxonomic structure (Sankey 1993). However, there is always a small portion of an inter-defined subgroup of terms that could not be translated (Sankey 1993) in a theory. It is because different theories impose different taxonomic structure on the world (Sankey 1993). There is no common taxonomic structure on the untranslatable inter-defined terms. Hence, Kuhn asserts that theories are incommensurable.

5.2.2 Comparison between Kuhn’s incommensurability and that of Feyerabend

Hoyningen-Huene has studied and elaborated four common characteristics of Kuhn’s and Feyerabend’s incommensurability thesis (Hoyningen-Huene 2000). Firstly, he states that their conception of incommensurability is the incompatibility of theories (Hoyningen-Huene 2000: 104). It is because of the absence of logical contradiction between incommensurable theories (Hoyningen-Huene 2000: 104-105). Secondly, incommensurability implies the difference of worlds, as “the world changes with a scientific revolution” (Hoyningen-Huene 2000: 105). Thirdly, incommensurability leads to the untranslatability of competing theories (Hoyningen-Huene 2000: 105). Hoyningen-Huene explains this by equating language to theory. Lastly, it is complicated to compare incommensurable theories with respect to their merits (Hoyningen-Huene 2000: 105). This problem ensues from the issue of untranslatability and concept difference (Hoyningen-Huene 2000: 105).

Despite of the shared characteristics of their conception of incommensurability, Hoyningen-Huene holds that the main difference between Kuhn’s and Feyerabend’s incommensurability is the issue of scope (Hoyningen-Huene 2000: 105). He claims that “Kuhn’s conception of incommensurability has a larger scope than Feyerabend’s”
(Hoyningen-Huene 2000: 105). It is because “for Feyerabend only comprehensive theories can be incommensurable” (Hoyningen-Huene 2000: 106). As a result, “there are some theory-pairs that are incommensurable for Kuhn but not for Feyerabend⁸.” (Hoyningen-Huene 2000: 106).

Sankey claims that the discrepancies between Kuhn’s and Feyerabend’s incommensurability are minor (Sankey 1999a: 17). Firstly, semantic account of incommensurability is persistently held by Feyerabend throughout his philosophical career; whereas Kuhn came to adopt this view only in his later years (Sankey 1999a: 17). Secondly, Feyerabend’s conception of incommensurability is holistic, that is, it affects “the entirety of a theory’s terms” (Sankey 1999a: 17); whereas Kuhn inclines to hold “local incommensurability” (Sankey 1999a: 17). Lastly, Kuhn’s incommensurability is more common than that of Feyerabend, for the former’s concept occurs in scientific revolutions while the latter’s is restricted only to non-instantial theories (Sankey 1999a: 17). This view of Sankey is exactly same as Hoyningen-Huene’s claim, as described above.

In addition to the views of Sankey and Hoyningen-Huene, it is worth noting that Feyerabend and Kuhn do not share a view on the openness of theories. It leads to the difference of their general existential attitude of incommensurability. Later Feyerabend, as contrary to his early thought, swerves to hold that communication between theories is possible. This is amount to asserting that theories are open. It results in Feyerabend’s abandonment of incommensurability thesis⁹.

Nonetheless, Kuhn’s emphasis of untranslatability and incompatibility of theories and worlds yields the incommunicability of theories. He never gives up incommensurability, for he thinks implicitly that the incommunicability of theories has its cause in the closeness of theories. This justifies the existential reason of incommensurable theory in Kuhn’s account.
This divergence of existential claim of incommensurability between Kuhn and Feyerabend can be further explained by their different emphasis on theory appraisal. For Kuhn, he conceives incommensurability inevitable and only one paradigm will prevail. It is because all other alternatives will be ruled out by the dominant one. This monistic view had been sharply raised by Feyerabend in one of his letters to Kuhn (Hoyningen-Huene 1995: 365). It is obvious that communication between theories or paradigms is impossible in Kuhn’s account, for the scientific ecosystem is oligarchy in nature. Hence, this justifies the existence of incommensurability. However, Feyerabend’s pluralistic view on the theories does not favor any theory a priori. His principle of proliferation provides a platform for the communicability of theories. Thus, it appears natural to later Feyerabend when he sees the openness of theories does not necessary result in the incommensurable theories.

5.3 Donald Davidson’s view of conceptual scheme

Davidson does not contribute directly to the major full-blooded discussion on incommensurability thesis in the field of philosophy of science. It is merely his view on the interpretation of languages, more specifically the issue of untranslatability, draws him into the horizon of incommensurability thesis¹⁰. Nevertheless, his elucidation is undertaken from the point of philosophy of language, which intersects with his philosophy of mind.

As pointed out by Ramberg, Davidson presupposes that there is equivalence between conceptual scheme and language (Ramberg 1989: 119). Davidson interprets incommensurability as an issue of the untranslatability of languages, which he supposes the proponents of incommensurability are holding fast to the untranslatability of conceptual schemes. Such critical elucidation is expressed in the celebrated “On the very idea of a conceptual scheme”, which was written in 1974. However, it is worth noting that the main objective of this masterpiece is not to refute incommensurability. Indeed, it
is to relinquish the clear-cut division between language and reality\(^{11}\), without falling to epistemological relativism.

Given the dogma of a dualism of scheme and reality, we get conceptual relativity, and truth relative to a scheme. Without the dogma, this kind of relativity goes by the board (Davidson 2001: 198).

Davidson further develops this point of view at length in his 1977 paper “The method of truth in metaphysics” (Davidson 2001). He contends that to interpret a language is to interpret a world. They are to be interpreted in the context of truth, not meaning\(^{12}\) (Davidson 2001: 199).

In sharing a language, in whatever sense this is required for communication, we share a picture of the world that must, in its large features, be true. It follows that in making manifest the large features of our language, we make manifest the large features of reality (Davidson 2001: 199).

However, Davidson does not place his focus on the study of the trueness of a concrete sentence. He attributes this practice to the respective sciences (Davidson 2001: 201). His actual concern is of semantic, that is, to scrutinize the truth conditions of sentence (Davidson 2001: 201). The underlying truth condition of sentence is legitimated by the pragmatic characteristic of language.

Successful communication proves the existence of a shared, and largely true, view of the world (Davidson 2001: 201)

What we must attend to in language, if we want to bring into relief general features of the world, is what it is in general for a sentence in the language to be true. The suggestion is that if the truth conditions of sentences are placed in the context of a comprehensive theory, the linguistic structure that emerges will reflect large features of reality (Davidson 2001: 201).

The recognition of the truth condition of sentences is “the linguistic representatives of belief” that “determine the meanings of the words they contain” (Davidson 2001: 201). In Davidson’s account of interpretation, which he names it “radical interpretation”, the
meaning of the uttered sentences and the intentions of speakers must be known. It is because both of them determine interpretation.

Beliefs and meanings conspire to account for utterances. A speaker who holds a sentence to be true on an occasion does so in part because of what he means, or would mean, by an utterance of that sentence, and in part because of what he believes. If all we have to go on is the fact of honest utterance, we cannot infer the belief without knowing the meaning, and have no chance of inferring the meaning without the belief (Davidson 1974b: 142, cited in Evnine 1991: 102).

If it is so construed, as raised by Ramberg, we are trapped in a vicious circle of interpretation (Ramberg 1989: 68). For to interpret a language, one has to believe that “the speakers both intend to utter something true and believe what they utter to be true when they utter it” (Ramberg 1989: 68). However, Ramberg asserts that the interpreter “does not know the content of belief, what it is the speaker intends to asserts, or, precisely, means to say” (Ramberg 1989: 68). Davidson solves this problem by asserting that the process of radical interpretation is “a rationalization of the practice of interpreting speech, not as a description of an actual procedure such as the methods of translators” (Ramberg 1989: 66). In short, for an interpretation to be taken place, the interpreter must assume that the speaker is true in his utterance and has a good will to be rightly interpreted. This is a rational condition of radical interpretation, and such assumption on the part of the speaker “tells us nothing of intentions and beliefs of a kind useful in determining meaning.” (Ramberg 1989: 69) Hence, we are free from the vicious circle of interpretation as stated above.

Davidson proposes the principle of charity to lay a rational account for his theory of radical interpretation. It is “a condition of the possibility of interpretation” (Ramberg 1989: 74). It regulates “the ways in which beliefs, desires and actions rationally connect with each other” (Evnine 1991: 110). The interpreter must make assumption on the intentionality of the speaker bases on common sense. However, the role of such assumption in the theory of meaning requires no specific but general features of belief (Evnine 1991: 102).
When we want to interpret, we work on one or another assumption about the general pattern of agreement. We suppose that much of what we take to be common is true, but we cannot, of course, assume we know where the truth lies. We cannot interpret on the basis of known truths, not because we know none, but because we do not always know which they are. We do not need to be omniscient to interpret, but there is nothing absurd in the idea of an omniscient interpreter; he attributes beliefs to others, and interprets their speech on the basis of his own beliefs... (Davidson 2001: 200-201)

Davidson's arguments in "On the very idea of a conceptual scheme" imply the principle of charity. Sankey argues that in Davidson's account, "interpretation of a speaker requires charity and charity implies translation, so interpretation entails translation" (Sankey 1999a: 117). However, Davidson differentiates interpretation from translation. He claims that interpretation of a speaker "is inconsistent with translation failure" (Sankey 1999a: 118). Thus, untranslatability of a theory does not lead to the failure of interpretation.

The adherents of incommensurability, or of conceptual relativism in general, hold that impossibility of interpretation is the consequence of untranslatability. It is a "heady and exotic doctrine" (Davidson 2001: 183). Davidson against this doctrine by casting an attack on the idea of conceptual scheme. He formulates his strategy as such:

The idea is then that 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). The problem is to say what the relation is, and to be clearer about the entities related (Davidson 2001: 191)

Davidson lays his discussion on two roles of conceptual scheme, viz. conceptual scheme as either organizing something, or fitting the empirical evidence (Davidson 2001: 191). The former systematizes experience; whereas the latter predicts and accounts for "the tribunal of experience" (Davidson 2001: 191).

The organizing idea identifies language with its classificatory function (Sankey 1999a: 123). Davidson notes that this idea is applicable to either reality or experience (Davidson
2001: 192). To apply the organizing idea to the reality or experience, the difficulties arise because "the notion of organization applies only to pluralities"15 (Davidson 2001: 192). A language is said organizing things differently if it can be translated on the whole (Sankey 1999a: 123), that is, the existence of a common ontology "with concepts that individuate the same objects" (Davidson 2001: 192) among pluralities. Davidson denies the existence of such ontology. In the absence of a common ontology to individuate, or in another word to interpret, the object, Davidson seeks for the availability of translation-independent feature to languagehood16. However, he does not find any (Davidson 2001: 192). Similarly, it is difficult to comprehend how to organize the object of experience, for one has to individuate the object among pluralities17. It is impossible. Furthermore, Davidson asserts that experience cannot be studied independently from reality. It is because the nature of languages entails both reality and experience. Hence it is a misconception to hold that conceptual scheme can merely either organize experience or reality, separately.

… how could something count as a language that organized only experiences, sensations, surface irritations, or sense-data? Surely knives and forks, railroads and mountains, cabbages and kingdoms also need organizing (Davidson 2001: 192).

Apart from criticizing the organizing idea, Davidson also disagrees with the fitting idea. This idea asserts that sentences are conceived as to "fit our sensory promptings" (Davidson 2001: 193). It sounds as the correspondence theory of truth which depicts the mirror relation between language and reality.

The general position is that sensory experience provides all the evidence for the acceptance of sentences (where sentences may include whole theories). A sentence or theory fits our sensory promptings, successfully faces the tribunal of experience, predicts future experience, or copes with the pattern of our surface irritations, provided it is borne out by the evidence. (Davidson 2001: 193)

However, Davidson finds it dubious. For it makes an unneeded clear distinction between language and reality18 (Sankey 1999a: 127).
The trouble is that the notion of fitting the totality of experience, like the notion of fitting the facts, or of being true to the facts, adds nothing intelligible to the simple concept of being true. ...sensory experience... does not add a new entity to the universe against which to test conceptual schemes. (Davidson 2001: 193-194)

From the perspective of Davidson’s conceptual scheme, Feyerabend’s incommensurability thesis has appeared as going astray. Incommensurable theories are conceptual schemes in Davidson’s account. He has abolished the concept of conceptual scheme, as it is an unnecessary concept that carves up language and reality. Incommensurability thesis is not a matter of true or false issue, for it is simply not an issue at all. Thus, the assumption of a mirror relationship between theory and reality marks the main difference between Feyerabend and Davidson. It is the same reason that saves Davidson from trapping into the predicament of epistemological relativism that troubles Feyerabend.

Neither a fixed stock of meanings, nor a theory-neutral reality, can provide, then, a ground for comparison of conceptual schemes. (Davidson 2001: 195)

... no intelligible basis on which it can be said that schemes are different. It would be equally wrong to announce the glorious news that all mankind... share a common scheme and ontology. For if we cannot intelligibly say that schemes are different, neither can we intelligibly say that they are one. (Davidson 2001: 198)
End note

(1) Hintikka doubts about indeterminacy thesis pertaining to Quine’s assumption of the learnable native expression for assent and dissent. “If we assume that a jungle linguist can come to recognize assentive behavior, I do not see any reason to suggest that he could not in principle learn to recognize other modes of activity which are closely related to our use of language” (Hintikka 1969: 71).

(2) I suppose Quine never recognizes and asserts so in his writings.

(3) *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* is influential to the extent of outshining Kuhn’s later works. (Hoeningen-Huene and Sankey 2002: 137)


(5) However, Kuhn emphasized that “he did not intend incommensurability to mean non-comparability nor even incommunicability” (Bird 2002: 453). Similar point of view can be found in Kuhn’s *The Road Since Structure* (Kuhn 2000: 35, 60, cited in Bird 2002: 453)

(6) Many have argued that world change is equivalent to worldview change. However, Grandy proclaims that they are not exactly identical. In his opinion, the former implies an impossibility of communication, whereas the latter “leaves open the possibility of relatively full communication between adherents of different worldviews” (Grandy 2003: 247)

(7) Hoeningen-Huene formulates Kuhn’s concept of world in the late sixties as “the theory of world constitution” (Hoeningen-Huene 1990: 484). The core element of world constitution “consists in similarity relations that hold in the respective world between objects or situations that are classified as similar.” (Hoeningen-Huene 1990: 485-486). These similarity relations are acquired by ostension (Hoeningen-Huene 1990: 486). Some scholars, who assert that Kuhn’s incommensurability originated as a thesis about concepts, have studied the influence of Wittgenstein’s “family resemblance” on Kuhn’s theory of concepts and categories (Barker, Chen, and Andersen 2003: 212-219). They claim implicitly that this concept serves as the foundation for both early and later development of Kuhn’s incommensurability (Barker, Chen, and Andersen 2003).
It is worth noting that there is a resemblance between their expositions with that of Hoyningen-Huene on the transitional phase of Kuhn, for both account emphasizing on the similarity relations of different worlds or concepts.

(8) Hoyningen-Huene asserts that the Ptolemaic and Copernican theories of planets which are the typical examples of incommensurability for Kuhn, are not for Feyerabend (Hoyningen-Huene 2000: 106).

(9) The detailed elaboration is provided in chapter 4 of this thesis.

(10) Sankey, in his The Incommensurability Thesis, devotes his discussion on Davidson under the topic of “In defence of untranslatability” (Sankey 1999a: 102-137). He elaborates the criticism of the concept of untranslatability which Davidson has raised against the incommensurability thesis (Sankey 1999a: 102). Ramberg, on the other hand, discusses Davidson’s view of incommensurability as the ramification of his thesis of radical interpretation (Ramberg 1989).

(11) The second edition of Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation disposes “On the very idea of a conceptual scheme” under the category of “Language and Reality” (Davidson 2001)

(12) According to Evnine, Davidson uses “a theory of truth as a theory of meaning or, in other words, to use the concept of truth to elucidate that of meaning.” (Evnine 1991: 116). Similarly, Lepore and Ludwig claim that Davidson’s truth theory was introduced as “the vehicle of a compositional meaning theory” (Lepore and Ludwig 2003: 35), that is, “to match... a mentioned object language sentence with a metalanguage sentence in use that means the same” (Lepore and Ludwig 2003: 43). In his exposition on Davidson’s thesis of radical interpretation, Rawling also stresses that the knowledge of meaning must be expressible as a theory of truth (Rawling 2003: 91).

(13) Sankey contends that Davidson applies the principle of charity against partial translation failure. From here, Davidson “concludes that no sharp distinction between difference of language and of belief can be drawn” (Sankey 1999a: 137).

(14) Davidson holds implicitly that the proponent of conceptual scheme is inevitably inclining to holding scheme-content dualism. It is a division between language and reality. Davidson attacks both monist and pluralist of conceptual scheme, for he thinks that “even those thinkers who are certain there is only one conceptual scheme are in the sway of the scheme concept” (Davidson 2001: 183)

(15) The object in the reality should be “understood to contain or consist in other objects” (Davidson 2001: 192).

(16) After all, Davidson implies that to interpret a language one has no way to appeal to translation.
(17) "... whatever plurality we take experience to consist in—events like losing a button or stubbing a toe, having a sensation of warmth or hearing an oboe—we will have to individuate according to familiar principles" (Davidson 2001: 192)

(18) The original remarks of Sankey is: "There is no need to maintain a dichotomy between fitting all the evidence and being true" (Sankey 1999a: 127)

(19) The objection of language-reality dualism does not lead to the abandonment of world (Davidson 2001: 198). Davidson's objective is to "re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false". (Davidson 2001: 198)

(20) Davidson aware of the significance of the abandonment of language-reality dualism. "Given the dogma of a dualism of scheme and reality, we get conceptual relativity, and truth relative to a scheme. Without the dogma, this kind of relativity goes by the board" (Davidson 2001: 198). However, he admits that "truth of sentences remains relative to language" (Davidson 2001: 198). At any rate, Davidson adds that "that is as objective as can be" (Davidson 2001: 198)