

Chapter 1

Preliminaries

Necessary Preconditions of Interpretation

In this section, we briefly review some of the necessary preconditions of any interpretation, which constitutes the theoretical guide for our study in this book. These conditions have been argued for in detail in our *Fundamentals of Comparative and Intercultural Philosophy*.¹ One precondition we must highlight in particular is the family-resemblance-principle. This principle consists of two parts.²

First, for interpretation to be possible, one *must* assume family resemblance of forms of life (which include philosophical traditions).³ Similarities and differences are grounded in mutually recognizable human practices. We should keep in mind that the idea that different parties notice similarity of practices does not mean that both sides (or a third party) are seeing “the same” practices. However, there is family resemblance between, for example, “games” and *youxi* 遊戲, or between contrasting pairs such as that/this and *bishi* 彼是, other/I and *biwo* 彼我, or good/bad and *hao’e* 好惡. The mutual recognition of human practices in relation to various pairs of languages or traditions makes it quite easy to gain an inkling of the miscellaneous stories Zhuangzi tells involving “dukes,” disabled people, craftspeople, birds, fish, and so on. Mutually recognizable practices even give access to metaphorical language and rhetorical questions.

Second, for interpretation to be possible, one *must* assume that *all* general concepts or conceptual schemes in *all* languages are family-resemblance-concepts without any hard-core, clear borders, or unchanging essence. Consequences of the necessity of assuming family-resemblance-concepts

include the practice of extending these concepts across languages and traditions as well as the necessary construction of quasi-universals. Revisable quasi-universals are working hypotheses that connect conceptual schemes from a limited number of traditions. Hence, they are *not* universals in the sense of being valid for all traditions (cultures, forms of life). However, they fulfill a necessary role in interpretative practice. The projection of quasi-universals cannot be avoided, lest interpretation be impossible. The first access to unfamiliar conceptual schemes is via extension of conceptual schemes of the interpreter. A quasi-universal connecting, for example, modern English and modern Chinese, has two sides in English and Chinese respectively. English “games” and Chinese *youxi* are not the same concept or practice, but they share family resemblance that allows extending “games” to include much of *youxi* and extending *youxi* to include much of “games.”

It needs to be emphasized that people deploy indefinite manifolds of perspectives or conceptual schemes simultaneously and participate in manifolds of forms of life, manifolds that can neither be described nor formalized in their totality. What human beings share are broadly similar responses to a diversity of forms of life.⁴ From the point of view of *one* language or *one* form of life, practices or forms of life always show certain similarities (because they are *human* practices). It is a necessary precondition for interpretation that these similarities appear to be there (with overwhelming empirical support as well).

A further precondition is the necessity of presupposing a principle of mutual attunement, including the supposition that the behavior of humans (including speech acts) is somehow consistent with their environment (both natural and cultural).⁵ Therefore, we may expect much agreement across human traditions, in particular agreement on the appearance of humans and their environment. For interpretation to be possible, it is *necessary* to presuppose that in the early (radical) stages of linguistic interpretation one *must* assume that “the other” is *usually* sincere, consistent, and right.

In addition to these *necessary* preconditions, there are a few *unavoidable* constraints, in particular the influence of globalization on all human languages and the “hermeneutic relativity” of the interpreter (including commitment to particular epistemic virtues).

While arguing for these preconditions and constraints, we emphatically deny the need for the ideal language assumption, the requirement of a common language, or the presupposition of a large number of universals shared by all humanity. Dropping these assumptions allows us to dissolve the “either universalism or relativism” issue,⁶ and to replace it by the family-resemblance-principle and the construction of quasi-universals. The family-resemblance-principle is a feasible alternative to the “not-so-necessary” ideal language assumption.

Against the Ideal Language Assumption

We have opposed what we call the ideal language assumption. According to the ideal language approach, communication is identical with information exchange wherein meaning is understood in terms of semiotic codes or in terms of a formal theory of information processing systems. In our earlier book we have discussed the ideal language assumption and its congeners at length.⁷

The idea of an ideal language traces back to the early history of Western philosophy. According to Aristotle,⁸

Just as all men have not the same writing, so all men have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these written and spoken words directly symbolize, are the same for all [humans], as also are those things of which our experiences are the images.

In modern terms, we can paraphrase Aristotle's "isomorphy thesis" as follows: the structures of humanity's universal innate concepts are isomorphic with the fundamental structures of reality, whereas these isomorphic structures can be described in an ideal language (of thought) into which, allegedly, all human languages are translatable. As Graham has shown, traces of the ideal language assumption can be found in ancient China as well (G89, 404).

The Mohist *Canons*, which consistently use only one particle for one function, and the same word in the same sense in syntactically regular sentences which sometimes defy current idiom, is plainly the result of a deliberate decision, like the cleaning up of English in the 17th century by the Royal Society.

Perhaps the most significant feature of an ideal language as proposed by Frege (1892) is that precise meanings are possible and should be strived for. In our view, the notion of precise meanings makes no sense for natural languages such as Chinese and English, including philosophical language. It is possible to propose definitions specifying necessary and sufficient conditions for the use of a word, but one cannot give such definitions for all the words that are used in the definitions. This is an example of the *problem of complete description*.⁹ That is, it is impossible to provide, once and for all, all the necessary and sufficient conditions for the knowledge or application of a concept or a rule, or for the cause of a particular event, or for the style of a work of art, and so forth. Something like "the one correct true description, translation, or interpretation" does not make sense, not even as an ideal.¹⁰

There are many other issues closely related to the ideal language assumption, including the following:

1. All kinds of universals are congeners of the ideal language paradigm. Linguistic, cognitive, cultural, or philosophical universals provide the meaning of the words and grammar of the (universal) ideal language.
2. The idea of a complete description of the world in an ideal language is basic to the logical atomism of Russell and Wittgenstein in the 1920s. Today, this assumption may still be evident in what is sometimes called metaphysical realism, which holds that there is exactly one true and complete description of what the world is like (even if we can never achieve this goal).¹¹
3. In linguistics, Chomsky assumed a rich and invariant conceptual system, which is prior to any experience (1988, 28). In cognitive science, Fodor used the expressions “modularity of mind” (1983) and “Language of Thought” (1975) to refer to an (innate) ideal language of thought. In recent decades, cognitive science has exerted a dominant influence on much of Western philosophy and its presence is also felt in Chinese philosophy.¹²
4. Global processes of standardization pull natural languages in the direction of a universally shared “ideal” language. For example, the ideal language assumption is in full force in the development of the so-called Web Ontology Language: “Ontology specifies terms with unambiguous meanings, with semantics independent of reader and context” (Siddiqui and Alam 2011, 48).
5. Both universalist and relativist are committed to the ideal language assumption. According to the isomorphy thesis, at some fundamental level, there is always an isomorphy (that is, being of identical or similar form, shape, or structure) between language, thinking, and world. This is the universalistic view, if it is assumed that there is only one way of mirroring the world in language. The isomorphy model is used by the relativists as well, except that languages or traditions mirror domains of reality in different ways and may have

different ways of ordering domains. Both the universalist *and* the relativist deploy the same metaphor that language is a mirror of the world.

Any discussion about artificially constructed ideal (formal, symbolic) languages is embedded in a natural language. Imagine that European and Chinese philosophers each develop an ideal language for conducting comparative philosophy. When they should meet, they would have to use an “ordinary” natural language, such as Chinese or English, to discuss their respective ideal language proposals. No natural language is, nor can be, an ideal language (Tarski 1931).

In the remaining part of this section, we present an example illustrating that, even for the most everyday words, one cannot assume there are neatly corresponding words in all languages. In the sequel, we use small capitals to indicate that the word written is not actually a word of the English language, but a word in a veiled universal ideal meta-language into which all natural languages presumably could be translated.¹³ BLUE is such a word. It is represented in English by “blue,” in French by *bleu*, in German by *blau*, in Dutch by *blauw*, in modern Chinese by *lan* 藍;¹⁴ yet it is not easy to find a single classical Chinese character corresponding to BLUE. This shows the weakness of assuming such a universal language. Consider the following example from the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi*. There it is reported that the (mythical) bird Peng 鵬, who “measures I don’t know how many thousand li [里] across” (ZH 1.1.1), sees the “blue sky” below him.¹⁵ This seems to suggest that *cang* 蒼 means “blue.”

天之蒼蒼，其正色邪？其遠而无所至極邪？ (ZH 1.1.3)

The sky looks very blue [蒼蒼]. Is that its real [zheng 正] color, or is it because it is so far away and has no end? (Watson)

We do not know whether the blueness of the sky is its original [zheng 正] color, or is simply caused by its infinite height. (Feng Youlan)

Is the azure of the sky its true [zheng 正] colour? Or is it that the distance into which we are looking is infinite? (Graham)

And the blue on blue of the sky—is that the sky’s true [zheng 正] color? Or is it just the vast distance, going on and on without end, that looks that way? (Ziporyn)

Is azure the true [zheng 正] color of the sky? Or is the sky so distant that its farthest limits can never be reached. (Mair)

Is the blueness of heaven its real color? Or does it look like that just because it is so far off? (Muller)

Translators all agree about rendering *cang* 蒼 as blue, which is confirmed by the TLS.¹⁶ However, two “paragraphs” later we read:

適莽蒼者，三餐而反，腹猶果然。(ZH 1.1.5)

If you go off to the green [蒼] woods nearby, you can take along food for three meals and come back with your stomach as full as ever. (Watson)

He who goes to the grassy suburbs, taking enough food for three meals with him, comes back with his stomach as full as when he started. (Feng Youlan)

Someone off to the green of the woods, with enough for three meals will be home with his belly still full. (Graham)

If you go out on a day trip, you can return with your belly still full. (Ziporyn)

If you're going on an outing to the verdant suburbs you only need to take along three meals and you'll come back with a full stomach. (Mair)

Someone who takes a day trip to the local meadow has three meals and comes back home with his stomach still full. (Muller)

The conclusion that *cang* means blue does not seem right, since, apparently, it also means green.¹⁷ That *cang* can be translated as either blue or green (in some contexts) is confirmed by many sources.¹⁸ According to Chen Yinchi (2016, 65), *cang* in “*tian zhi cang cang* 天之蒼蒼” means dark blue, but he does not discuss the use of *qing* 青 in the same chapter (nor *cang* signifying green woods).

Should we say that *cang* covers all the layers of meaning of the “modern” notions of blues and greens (plus some other contextually determined meanings)? Saying so does not tell the whole story. In many respects,

qing 青 is a near-synonym of *cang*.¹⁹ Immediately after the blue sky of *cang*, we read about the blue sky in terms of *qingtian* 青天.

故九萬里，則風斯在下矣，而後乃今培風，背負青天而莫之夭闕者，而後乃今將圖南。(ZH 1.1.4)

Therefore when the P'eng rises ninety thousand li [里], he must have the wind under him like that. Only then can he mount on the back of the wind, shoulder the blue sky [*qingtian*], and nothing can hinder or block him. Only then can he set his eyes to the south. (Watson)

So it is only when the bird is ninety thousand miles high, with the wind underneath it, that it rests its weight on the wind and it must have the blue sky on its back and a clear view ahead before it will set course for the South. (Graham)

That is why he needs to put ninety thousand miles of air beneath him. Only then can he ride the wind, bearing the blue of heaven on his back and unobstructed on all sides, and make his way south. (Ziporyn)

The expression *qingtian* (blue sky) is repeated in ZH 1.1.9. Like *cang*, *qing* also covers the green of vegetation.²⁰

受命於地，唯松柏獨也在冬夏青青。(ZH 5.1.7)

Though all life-forms receive their vitality from the earth, it remains constantly replete only in the pine and the cypress, so they remain lush and green [*qingqing*] both summer and winter. (Ziporyn)

Of those that receive life from the earth, the pine and cypress alone are best—they stay as green as ever in winter or summer. (Watson)

Among all that owe the earth, only the pine and cypress are due on course; winter and summer they are the same green. (Graham)

Another character that may, for modern eyes, possibly refer to blue in some contexts is *xuan* 玄.²¹ According to Baxter (1983), *xuan* 玄 was put into use

earlier than *cang* to cover “dark-cool black/green/blue.” Other reported uses of *xuan* include: dark blue, color of the sky, brown/black (metallic), purple; reddish black, black tinged with glimmerings of red; hence derivatively: distant, mysterious and unfathomable; any dark/gloomy color.

We conclude that *cang* and *qing* are very similar in their usage in the Warring States period. Both cover the blue sky and the green of vegetation. Perhaps the only difference is that *qing* (and *xuan*) has a closer association with the connotation of mysterious than *cang*.²² More importantly, these examples show that COLOR is not a universal category. Although regarding modern Chinese and English *yanse* 顏色/color is a respectable quasi-universal, when it comes to classical Chinese, *se* 色/appearance is a more plausible quasi-universal than *se*/color.²³

Underdetermination of Meaning and Interpretation

The *cang/qing* example also shows that one is never interpreting one thing at a time. One is always interpreting abundant things at the same time. As a result, an interpretation is highly underdetermined by “the data.” Ascription of beliefs, meanings, concepts, emotions, logical principles, and so on are all involved in the process of interpretation. Every particular interpretation depends on innumerable other interpretations, every particular one of which can be wrong, but many have to be right. Every interpretation is relative to a context or background that cannot be described completely.²⁴

There are always numerous reasonable interpretations, but there is not a single best interpretation. Underdetermination of interpretation is already apparent from the fact that an experienced scholar such as the late A. C. Graham has changed his fairly idiosyncratic translations of the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi* for at least three times (G69, G81, G89). This does not imply that his earlier translations were “wrong,” but that there is a wide range of indeterminacies.

We will speak of the underdetermination of an interpretation by the “evidence” (that is, “the data”) and about the indeterminacy of meanings (indeterminacy of reference and translation).²⁵ Indeterminacy is more fundamental than underdetermination. In the case of underdetermination, meanings are fixed; while in the case of indeterminacy, meanings are not fixed (*weiding* 未定). Both indeterminacy and underdetermination entail that a variety of translations or interpretations (instead of a single “correct” one) are possible, but they should be differentiated from incommensurability according to which, strictly speaking, *no* translation is possible.²⁶ The “causes” of underdetermination of an interpretation by the data include:

choice of texts, incomplete or battered sources, commitment to particular epistemic virtues, and other aspects of unavoidable hermeneutic relativity (Ma Lin and van Brakel 2018).

A number of features of interpretation counteract underdetermination, including the mutual recognition of human practices and the choice of quasi-universals. In addition, the interpreter *must* choose a number of epistemic virtues, which curtail underdetermination and ties a particular interpretation to a particular interpreter and her/his choice of epistemic virtues.²⁷

Would “On Its Own Terms” Be Possible?

For over a century, there has been a debate on the identity of *zhongguo zhexue* 中國哲學 (Chinese philosophy).²⁸ In recent decades, one still finds in Chinese-language literature such remarks as the following:²⁹

Since the 1990s, everyone has been deeply disturbed by the adverse effects caused by the use of Western paradigms to explain Chinese learning.

In this book we make an attempt to take such concerns seriously. We adopt the following strategies:

1. As far as possible we use ordinary (that is, “common sense”) language and try to avoid (Western) philosophical concepts loaded with a long history of usage (such as truth) so as to militate possible distortions.
2. We scrutinize a large variety of translations of relevant Chinese characters so as to highlight what may have been distorted in translations.

It is a good idea to try to avoid Western (philosophical) concepts and paradigms in comparative and Chinese philosophy. But here is one important proviso. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as explanation (or understanding, letting speak, etc.) *on its own terms*. In the case of classical Chinese texts, such an expression would mean being able to think and to write in classical Chinese. That is to say, one would be expected to elaborate the meaning of characters or phrases in the way classical literati or dictionaries such as the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 did.

The phrase “on its own terms” in the context of comparative and Chinese philosophy seems to originate with Ames and has been used by a number of other scholars.³⁰ For example, Rosemont (2016) writes in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (on the internet): “the Chinese do their work in accordance with their own ‘grammar,’ their own questions, definitions of problems, methodology, patterns of argument and standards of justification.” But he assumes that the meaning of English concepts such as “argument” and “justification” are universals.³¹

Also consider the following attempt to explain Chinese notions “on their own terms.” Ames and Rosemont (1998, 311) propose translating *ren* 仁 as “authoritative conduct” instead of “humanity,” *zheng* 正 as “correct conduct” instead of “rectification,” *chi* 耻 as “shameful conduct” instead of “shame.” Is this a case of translating “on its own terms”? The proposed translations may be better than the “traditional” translations, but they presuppose a unifying (pragmatic) notion of conduct as a universal. One may even worry that the notion of human conduct in the work by Dewey (1922) and G. H. Mead has been projected onto classical Chinese texts.

No matter how familiar an interpreter is with the relevant embedding concepts of an older or dead language, he or she remains tied to a modern language.³² Embedding characters among their “own” concepts has to stop somewhere. For example, explaining *qing* 情 “on its own terms” remains relative to some quasi-universals for which reasonable cross-cultural extensions of family-resemblance concepts are hypothesized. Eventually, the connection with the interpreter’s language has to be made directly by claiming for instance that *qing* can be embedded in the following quasi-universals: FR(*yu* 欲) ↔ FR(desire), FR(*xin* 心) ↔ FR(embodied mind), FR(*xing* 性) ↔ FR(human nature), and so forth.³³ To make this more precise, one might restrict one’s account of *qing* 情 to a particular source text, for example, the inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi* (§7d). In addition, one may set out to explain, say, *xing* 性 “on its own terms,” but this explanation must depend on constructing other quasi-universals so that the classical and modern language could be connected. This would require a hybrid language (as is used in most publications on Chinese or other non-Western philosophies).³⁴

The following example, although the author, Kim Myeong-seok (2014), does not claim to interpret Chinese texts “on its own terms,” also illustrates that no matter how many Chinese notions/characters are brought into the discourse, in the end, an assessment is made in terms of the interpreter’s language. The latter may be adjusted in light of the investigations, but hermeneutic relativity can never be overcome completely.

Kim aims to explain Xunzi’s views on the “ideal state for humans” by discussing the meaning and interrelation of, primarily, *zhi* 指, *li* 理, *he*

和, and *yi*—as well as *lun* 倫, *fen* 分, *zhidao* 治道, and *dali* 大理. However, this cannot be a “pure” case of interpreting “on its own terms.” The broad context of the discussion is framed by philosophically loaded English phrases such as “ethical thought,” “ideal state for humans,” and “personal interactions.” Translations and interpretations of the relevant expressions in the *Xunzi* are discussed in English, which involves comparison of classical Chinese concepts and modern English concepts. It is true that something is said about the interrelationship of the characters mentioned. However, in the final analysis, *Xunzi*’s “own terms” are explained in the “own terms” of modern (philosophical) English or Chinese. We are not claiming that this methodology is wrong, but it should not be called “interpreting on its own terms.”

Interpretation is complicated further by the possibility (plausibility?) that the author, say *Zhuangzi*, is using some characters “in his own way.” Some characters may not occur in other (extant) philosophical texts, or *Zhuangzi* is allegedly using some characters in an idiosyncratic way. In the latter case, the meaning and use of the character concerned is highly underdetermined by the limit of the available texts. The *Zhuangzi* can be made sense of only if, first, a sufficient number of characters can enter into family-resemblance-relations with the use of these characters in other Warring States texts. Second, mutually recognizable human practices and relevant quasi-universals make the connection with modern languages, taking into account the views of many translators and commentators. This brings *Zhuangzi*’s text into modern discourse.

The focus on relations between Chinese concepts in original texts is a major improvement compared with interpreting a text already translated into a modern language. However, it is a mistake to assume that one can let these “own terms” speak for themselves without the interference of quasi-universals either chosen or constructed by the interpreter, which connect the classical text with modern discourse.