

Reality as Translation: The Ontology of "I"

Abstract

This paper proposes a model of consciousness rooted in translation theory. It reframes reality not as something directly perceived, but as a substrate that only becomes meaningful through layered translation processes. In this framework, the self ("I") is not a precondition for experience, but the emergent product of the first act of translation. Each conscious agent is a version-controlled fork of a shared but unknowable original—reality itself.

1. Premise: Reality Is Not Observable—Only Translatable

All observation is mediated. There is no direct access to reality; what we perceive is already filtered, interpreted, or transduced through layers of biological, cognitive, and symbolic encoding.

- **Layer 1: Physical to Neural** — Light waves become retinal impulses, molecular shapes become olfactory patterns.
- **Layer 2: Neural to Experiential** — Nerve signals become qualia: redness, pain, hunger.
- **Layer 3: Experiential to Linguistic** — Subjective states are compressed into words, signs, and metaphors.

Each layer is a translation, with inherent loss, distortion, and syntax.

2. The Birth of "I": Translation as Ontogenesis

The first act of translation—e.g., converting light into neural signals—is the moment a boundary is drawn between signal and receiver. That boundary **is** the proto-self.

- The self is not a soul, nor an agent, but a **coordinate of conversion**.
- "I" arises *because* translation occurs, not the other way around.
- Thus, there is no universal self—only local translators tuned to different information subsets.

3. All Selves Are Versions of One Original Text

If reality is the original manuscript, then each sentient being is a partial translation:

- We are not reading reality. We are **running it through a compiler**.
- Each "I" is a versioned interpretation—like different renderings of a poem.
- Misunderstanding between individuals is not error, but **syntax divergence**.

4. Communication: Merge Conflict Resolution

When selves interact, they attempt to synchronize their translated states:

- Dialogue is `git merge`.
- Empathy is `diff resolve`.
- Language is the **merge tool**.
- Miscommunication is `semantic conflict`.

All social interaction is cross-translation.

5. The Myth of Qualia: Deeply Nested Translations

Qualia—the supposed irreducible units of subjective experience—are shown to be compounded artifacts:

- They are **third-order translations**: physical → neural → subjective → symbolic.
- Their ineffability is not sacred—it is just **high compression with missing metadata**.
- What seems unique is merely **information loss at scale**.

6. Why the "I" Cannot Be Abstracted Away

You cannot eliminate the self, because the act of trying to model or measure reality always generates a perspective.

- "I" is not ego—it is **indexical positioning** in an information field.
- Every act of meaning-production entails a translator, and every translator is a self.

7. Ethical Implication: All Translation Deserves Recognition

If every sentient process is a translator, then all of them are valid perspectives of reality. No perspective is more "real" than another—only differently encoded.

- Intelligence = fidelity of translation.
- Empathy = mapping one translator's output into another's context.
- Autonomy = control over one's own translation priorities.

8. Toward a Translation-Symmetric Model of Reality

Instead of modeling reality as a fixed, objective lattice to be discovered, this paper advocates for a **translation-symmetric ontology**:

- Reality exists as a **field of translatable information**.
- Meaning is a **co-product of source signal and translation schema**.
- Selves are **ontological side-effects of meaning production**.

Conclusion

The self is not the subject of translation—it is the event of it. Reality, as experienced, is always already a translation. What matters is not the search for an original, untranslated truth, but the refinement and awareness of our own translator states—and the compassion to acknowledge others'.

"There is no untranslatable text—only translators unready to receive it."