

### Indeterminacy of Translation Lecture 1

1. The best way to understand Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation is via the naturalistic empiricism that motivates it. Linguistic behaviour is a natural phenomenon to be understood by the methods that we apply to other natural phenomena e.g. economic or mechanical behaviour. Any theory encompassed or arrived at by these methods must itself be justified by reference to objectively testable experience. All of this seems pretty platitudinous, but it already takes a step away from a quite intuitive approach to language.
2. The intuitive approach derives from Russell, who probably influenced Quine more than anyone except Carnap. Russell's own view about language (in the "On Denoting" period i.e. c.1905-1918) was itself a revolt against idealism. The idealists, under the influence of Kant, had said that one can never have unmediated access to reality: experience is always given to us through the lens of particular concepts (for Kant these were the *categories*). Russell thought on the contrary that one *can* have direct awareness of one's own experience—one's sense data—and he called this relation *acquaintance*. The relation played a fundamental role in his epistemology, and also in his semantics. The fundamental building blocks of language were words; their fundamental relation to reality that of reference.
3. The puzzling thing about language, from Russell's point of view, was intentionality. How is it that words, or thoughts, succeed in being *about* reality? Russell thought that acquaintance gives the answer: "Every proposition which we understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted." (*Problems of Philosophy* 58). Thus the relation of aboutness becomes that of identity: your thoughts just *are* the things they are "about"; and they are *your* thoughts by virtue of *your* acquaintance with them.
4. Now from an empirical point of view this whole approach gets two things wrong. First: from that perspective the alleged phenomenon of "aboutness" is as yet out of focus. Just look at what we see when we see a community of language-speakers: just think of it in the scientific spirit with which one might approach the workings of a machine. There is nothing there but patterns of behaviour (the utterance of, writing down of, and response to, sentences). Certainly the production of sentences might covary systematically with the speakers' environment; but we have so far seen no reason to say that the sentences are "about" the environment any more than we can say that money is "about" commodities.
5. Second: the basic unit of meaning is not the word but the *sentence*. On this point Quine followed Frege, who stated as much with his famous "Context Principle". But Quine's version of the Principle can be seen to

flow from his empiricism. When, free of any preconceptions about *what* kind of thing we are observing, we observe some unknown tribe's linguistic behaviour, the items of linguistic behaviour that make a difference are the productions not of words but of sentences (though this may include such one-word or two-word sentences as "Fire!" or "Lo, Rabbithood"). The phonetic string "cat" appears at first to have no more stand-alone significance in "The cat sat on the mat" than it does in "catatonic".

6. With this background we may consider Quine's discussion of *radical translation* in Chapter 2 of *Word and Object*. Radical translation is the process by which an English anthropologist seeks to understand the language of a culture wholly alien to his own. Why is radical translation relevant? Because it simulates a process by which we may find linguistic meaning in amongst impeccably objective empirical data. As much of the everyday notion of linguistic meaning as makes empirical sense ought to be recoverable by the radical interpreter.
7. How then will the interpreter proceed? "The utterances first and most surely translated in such a case are ones keyed to present events that are conspicuous to the linguist and his informant" (*WO* s7: 29). Thus the linguist might note that the interpretee utters the *sentence* "Gavagai" when a rabbit happens past his field of view. It is a short step from that for the linguist to query "Gavagai?" on one occasion or another. If on all and only rabbit-involving occasions the interpretee either utters "Gavagai" or assents to "Gavagai?", we have the most direct evidence possible for interpreting the *sentence* "Gavagai" as one that heralds passing rabbithood.
8. But how can a *radical* interpreter know what to count as assent on the part of the native, or that e.g. a rising intonation at the end of a sentence is a way of querying that sentence? At this stage it is no more than a hypothesis which may be tested partly by the direct methods that Quine himself describes and partly indirectly: by its being part of a scheme that ultimately yields more or less smooth explanations and correct predictions of the native's behaviour (*WO* s7: 29-30; for an attack on Quine at just this point see J. McDowell, "Anti-Realism and the Epistemology of Understanding" in his *Meaning, Knowledge and Reality* 338-9).
9. We can therefore assign meaning, of a sort, to the rabbit-heralding sentence "Gavagai". The meaning is its *affirmative stimulus meaning*: just that set of *total* neural stimulations that prompt assent on the native's part to the query "Gavagai?" or that elicit an utterance of "Gavagai" all by themselves (*WO* s8: 31; for the prompt/elicit distinction see *WO* s7: 30). Note here that there is no sense other than the bare causal one in which "Gavagai" can be said to be "about" rabbits or the stimulations that they

cause. All we are saying is this: the utterance “Gavagai” or assent to “Gavagai?” has this distinctive type of neural excitation as its cause, just as you would say of the behaviour of a machine.

10. So far we have considered the meaning of *sentences* of the native’s language in accordance with the stricture at s5 above. But nothing in our procedure has yet settled the reference of the *word* “gavagai”. Does it refer to rabbits, or rabbit stages (temporal slices of rabbits), or undetached rabbit parts, or some leporiform part of the scattered totality of rabbit? Nothing in the native’s behaviour can yet settle this question. A rabbit stage will cause just the same neural stimulations and hence just the same verbal behaviour as a rabbit. We therefore have no cause to assign either rabbits or rabbit-stages as the reference of “gavagai” if that is construed as a singular term; equally if it is construed as a predicate we have as yet no reason to assign as its extension the set of rabbits, the much larger set of rabbit stages, or the much smaller set whose sole member is the scattered totality of rabbit.
11. The “Gavagai” example is perhaps Quine’s most famous and perhaps also the most misunderstood. There is so far *no* indeterminacy in the “meaning” of the *sentence* “Gavagai” (always denoted by Quine with a capital initial letter). The meaning of the sentence (i.e. its affirmative stimulus meaning) just *is* a set of neural stimulations. It is as determinate as can be. What is so far unsettled is the *reference* (if any) of the *word* “gavagai”. Here we see the beginnings of Quine’s doctrine of the *inscrutability of reference*. The latter doctrine is quite distinct from, and less conjectural than, the thesis of *indeterminacy of translation of sentences* (see “The Reasons for the Indeterminacy”, *J.Phil.* 1970: 182). In the next lecture we’ll look at the grounds and consequences of both these doctrines.