

Indeterminacy of Translation Lecture 2

1. At the end of the last lecture I insisted on making a sharp distinction between what I called the *inscrutability of reference* and the *indeterminacy of translation*. Let us first consider the first of these, which Quine also sometimes calls the *inscrutability of terms* (“On the Reasons...”: 182).
2. Quine discusses the point in *WO* 12. We had got to the point where the radical interpreter is able to identify stimulus meanings for sentences of the native language: “Gavagai” is thus stimulus-synonymous with e.g. “Rabbit!” (and with many other English sentences). Now you might think that this gives us a clue as to the *reference* of the term “rabbit”. Can we not infer that it is a general term referring to (containing in its extension just) rabbits?
3. The burden of *WO* 12 is that this is not so. For consider: when you point to a rabbit you point to a temporal stage of a rabbit, and when you point to a rabbit you point to a component part of the scattered mass of rabbit. So the *stimulus meaning* of “Gavagai” is the same as that of “Rabbit-stage!” or “Leporiform part of the scattered totality of rabbit!” Hence nothing in the stimulus meaning of the sentence “Gavagai” by itself gives us any more reason to think that “gavagai” refers to rabbits than that it refers to rabbit stages (in which case its extension is quite a different set: why?)
4. Now you might say that we can settle this matter by asking the native such questions as “Is this gavagai the same as that one?” in appropriate circumstances. But asking him that question will not do: we need to ask him the *translation* of that sentence. But therein lies the difficulty: we need already to have mastered the native’s term for numerical (why not qualitative?) identity before we can even ask this: let us suppose we have settled on: “Ig hoc gavagai blub hic gavagai?”. Suppose then that when two rabbits pass by the native replies “yok” (no); but when one rabbit happens by twice he replies “evet” (yes).
5. But now the difficulty should be evident, for it looks as if we can do one of two things: *either* we can translate “blub” as identity and say that “gavagai” refers to rabbits, *or* we can say that “blub” holds between two objects if they are both stages of the same rabbit, and we can say that “gavagai” refers to rabbit stages. Both strategies are compatible with the data that we have: and it is Quine’s view that there is nothing to choose between them. There is also an example from Japanese (*OR* 35-7).
6. Quine’s point here is not that we have to stop short at stimulus meanings. Any translation manual that purports to be finitely graspable must assign some translation to the component words. The point is that *what* objects the natives are talking about is in a sense not intrinsic to their language. It is *imposed* upon them by *us*: and in that sense their conceptual scheme, if that is what you want to call it, is not something that we *find* in their language: it is something that *we* put there (“Speaking of Objects” in *OR* 2-4).

7. It is worth reflecting also on a second and rather simpler argument for inscrutability of reference. This is the argument from *proxy functions*. This is a one-to-one function taking each of the things that the natives refer to on one scheme to things that they refer to on another, for instance a function taking everything to its shadow (assuming that everything both has and is a shadow). Then we can reinterpret the native's term 'gavagai' as denoting proxies of rabbits, and 'Derek' as denoting the proxy of Derek; and we can compensate by reinterpreting every predicate and relation F to mean 'proxy of an F'. Thus where once we translated 'Derek Bongo Clive' to mean 'Derek loves Clive' we now translate it to mean 'Derek's shadow is the shadow of something that loves what Clive's shadow is the shadow of'. Clearly this says just the same; but the ontology has been permuted (TPT: 19).
8. Let us move on now to the indeterminacy of translation. This is quite a different issue, relating as it does to *sentences* of the native language. The argument for this follows from the underdetermination of theory by data. This is the point, familiar from Quine's earlier writings, that two theories might be incompatible and yet yield the same observational consequences and thus be empirically indistinguishable (*RIR* 178-9). Note that we are *not* making this claim about translation manuals. We are only saying it about physical theory. The indeterminacy might only be at a very theoretical level, or it might be at the level of talk of tables and chairs. It doesn't matter, so long as you agree that it is there.
9. Now suppose that we are trying to translate some in fact theoretical sentence of the native's language. So it is not an observation statement, though of course it is assented to or dissented from in response to experience. The point is that if observations underdetermine the theory, then stimulus meanings of observation sentences underdetermine the translation of theoretical sentences. Thus if you and the native are looking at some complex measuring device, and the native says in response to its readings, "Das Neutrino hat keine Masse", this might be explained in two ways. It might be that the translation of the sentence is "Neutrinos have mass", because the native accepts one theory; or it might be "Neutrinos do *not* have mass", because the native accepts *another* theory (cf. *WOs*15: 76).
10. The fact that these two theories are empirically indistinguishable means that no amount of translation of observation statements is going to help to settle this matter. There are two lines that one might take in response to this. You might say (like Brentano: cf. *WO* s45) that meanings are forever hidden beneath the surface of all forms of linguistic behaviour. Or you might say like Quine that there is *nothing* there at all. The empiricist approach described in the last lecture strongly favours the second line.
11. Another way to see what is going on is to compare fluctuations in translation manuals to intertemporal fluctuations in currency values. On Tuesday a Franc is equivalent to 10p; on Wednesday it is equivalent to 5p. Is there a *true* value of a franc, which we get right on Tuesday and wrong on Wednesday? Surely not; there is just a changing exchange rate. Similarly there is no such thing as *the* meaning of a native sentence, at

least if it is theoretical. “Containment in the Low German idiom facilitated translation of Frisian into English, and containment in a continuum of cultural evolution facilitated translation of Hungarian into English. In facilitating translation these continuities encourage an illusion of subject matter: an illusion that our so readily intertranslatable sentences are diverse embodiments of some intercultural proposition or meaning, when they are better seen as the merest variants of one and the same intracultural verbalism.”