

Indeterminacy of Translation lecture 4

1. In order to understand Evans' discussion of Quine it is necessary to grasp a distinction that he gestures at in the introduction to his paper ("Identity and Predication": 25-7). This is the distinction between a *translation manual* and a *theory of meaning*. Evans likens the distinction (IP 43n12) to that between building model houses with cardboard and glue and building real houses. A translation manual seeks only to provide *some* method of getting from sentences of the native language to sentences of English; there is no attempt to recover the structure of the *ability* possession of which constitutes the native's competence. A theory of meaning on the other hand is an attempt to do the latter thing too: in so doing it is essential that we use semantic notions like reference or denotation ("gavagai" refers to rabbits) or truth ("Gavagai" is true-in-jungle iff there is a rabbit in the vicinity of the speaker). An adequate theory of meaning will show how the native *speaker's* grasp of sentences depends upon his grasp of its component words. Evans agrees with Quine that correctness of a translation manual is indeterminate; but he does not think that this implies the same about theories of meaning (IP 28). Throughout, the focus is on the inscrutability of reference, in particular the extension of the predicate "gavagai".
2. We saw in lecture 2 that Quine saw the inscrutability as arising from the need to make hypotheses concerning the individuating beliefs of the native in order to assign one extension (or "divided reference" as Evans calls it) rather than another to "gavagai". Thus in order to know whether "gavagai" refers to rabbits or rabbit stages we need to settle his answer to the question that we'd partially translate as "Is this gavagai the same as that one?" asked in the presence of distinct appearances of the same rabbit. I imagined it to be: "Hic gavagai blub hoc gavagai?" But it is indeterminate what to count as the native's identity relation. If he says "Evet" (yes) to our question then that could be accounted for in a translation scheme where "gavagai" refers to rabbits and "blub" is the identity relation, but one might *instead* and equally plausibly have a scheme in which "gavagai" refers to rabbit-stages and "blub" is some other equivalence relation. Evans thinks that the indeterminacy can be settled in another way; he thinks that the apparent importance of identity in settling the reference of a predicate is a side-effect of a more basic feature of language that by itself can determine the reference of "gavagai".
3. We saw there also that there were many different alternative referents for "gavagai": rabbits, rabbit stages, rabbit parts, the rabbit fusion, and the universal rabbithood; alternatively "gavagai" might refer to nothing but instead function as a feature-placing predicate: "Rabbiteth" (like "foggy"). We can divide the non-standard alternatives into three classes: (i) those that divide the reference too coarsely (the fusion, the universal), (ii) those that divide it too thinly (the rabbit stages and parts); (iii) the sole member of the last class is the feature-placing interpretation. Evans brings different points against (i) and (iii) on the

one hand and (ii) on the other hand (summarized at IP 47-8).

4. To deal first with (i) and (iii). Consider a language that contains *compound* sentences *not* involving identity e.g. “Blanco gavagai!” or “Sango gavagai!”. We know that “Blanco” has the stimulus meaning of “White!” and “Sango” that of “Bloodstained!” But we find that for the utterance of “Blanco gavagai!” it does *not* suffice that there be a rabbit *and* something white in the vicinity. Nor does it suffice even that there is white leporiform rabbit-stuff (as the white heads of black rabbits might be squashed together). There has to be a white *rabbit*. We cannot *account* for this, as we need to in a theory of meaning, simply by supposing that “gavagai” refers to the rabbit fusion. That doesn’t work because it leaves it unexplained why they assent to “Blanco gavagai?” when the *rabbit* is white but not when some *other* leporiform bit of the fusion is white (IP 35). Again, consider the fact that the natives will sometimes, but *only* sometimes, infer “Blanco sango gavagai” from “Blanco gavagai” and “Sango gavagai”. If “gavagai” referred only to the universal rabbithood then this would be inexplicable. However we *can* account for it if we suppose that “gavagai” refers to certain *objects*, namely rabbits, and that they will make the inference when the presented instance of “gavagai” that satisfies “blanco” is the *same* as the one that satisfies “sango” (IP 37-8, 41; PS that is how our language embodies a non-Berkeleyian metaphysics). That is why the attribution of identity judgments is a side effect of that more fundamental fact (compound predication) in virtue of which we can be said to be speaking of *objects* at all. The same points can be made for “rabbiteth”: the relation between “warm fog” and “red fog” is quite unlike that between “white rabbit” and “bloodstained rabbit”.
5. Consider now class (ii): rabbit stages and rabbit parts. The existence of brown rabbits with white feet shows that we can only say that “gavagai” refers to rabbit parts if we interpret “blanco” as referring to parts of white rabbits. The trouble with this (IP 43-4) is that now any two parts of the same rabbit will be indistinguishable within the native’s language: exactly the same predicates will apply to both. Similarly for rabbit stages (IP 44-5). The existence of once-bloody rabbits shows that we can only say that “gavagai” refers to rabbit stages if “sango” refers to stages of bloody rabbits. But then any two stages of the same rabbit will be indistinguishable in the language. On Quine’s own criterion, this means that they satisfy the natives’ identity-relation. But even waiving that point (IP 43-4) we have the following problem: we have introduced a complexity (i.e. a diversity of referents) into the *meaning* theory that is empirically otiose.
6. Now this can all be finessed if all we want is a translation manual. There is nothing to stop us *translating* “gavagai” as “rabbit stage”. But if we want an *explanation* of the natives’ competence, then we want a theory that attributes abilities, in effect tacit *knowledge*, to them. And otiose elements of an explanation—e.g. the attribution to them of a

belief in two rabbit parts when they see a rabbit—can reasonably be dropped. The whole issue therefore turns on whether it is reasonable to explain competence in terms of tacit grasp of the principles of a meaning theory. If it is, then the inscrutability of reference is not a consequence of the translational choices that seem to underlie it. Of course Quine would reject that idea: that sort of psychological explanation is ultimately a place-holder for a genuine physical explanation. From that perspective there is no reason to suppose that these considerations would weed any alternatives from our “final theory”. Stepping back, we can at least say that Quine has shown the inscrutability to arise from certain natural physicalistic presuppositions, and that is surely something of an achievement.