

Relativism and Indeterminacy of Meaning (Quine) Indeterminacy of Translation

Owen Griffiths
oeg21@cam.ac.uk

Churchill and Newnham, Cambridge

9/10/18

Talk outline

Quine

Radical Translation

Indeterminacy of translation

Conclusion

Quine

- ▶ Willard Van Orman Quine (1908 – 2000) was one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century.
- ▶ He received his PhD from Harvard, supervised by Alfred North Whitehead.
- ▶ He worked in Harvard for almost all of his career.
- ▶ His students included David Lewis, Gilbert Harman, Charles Parsons, Donald Davidson and Daniel Dennett.
- ▶ This course will focus on his 1960 book *Word and Object* (*WO*), and some related papers, most notably 'Ontological Relativity' (1968).

Word and Object

- ▶ We will consider Quine's arguments for the following theses:
 - Indeterminacy of translation** There is no fact of the matter about how to translate the sentences of one language into another. (Lecture 1)
 - Inscrutability of reference** There is no fact of the matter about the reference of our words. (Lecture 2)
 - Ontological relativity** What exists is relative to a conceptual scheme. (Lecture 3)
- ▶ In Lecture 4, we will consider objections to Quine's project.
- ▶ Let's begin by considering some of his central views that will inform this course.

Naturalism

- ▶ Naturalism is, roughly, the view that philosophy should take the findings of science seriously.
- ▶ Quine thought that the methods and resources of science and philosophy were not radically different.
- ▶ In *Theories and Things* (1981) he defines naturalism as
the recognition that it is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described (p. 21)
- ▶ Naturalism is assumed throughout *Word and Object*.
- ▶ Quine's naturalism leads him to be *eliminativist* about many abstract objects.

Philosophical lexicon

- ▶ From Daniel Dennett's *Philosophical Lexicon* (www.philosophicallexicon.com):

quine, v. (1) *To deny resolutely the existence or importance of something real or significant. "Some philosophers have quined classes, and some have even quined physical objects." Occasionally used intr., e.g., "You think I quine, sir, I assure you I do not!"* (2) n. *The total aggregate sensory surface of the world; hence quinitis, irritation of the quine.*

Behaviourism

- ▶ *Word and Object* is a work in the philosophy of language.
- ▶ Applied here, what does naturalism amount to?
- ▶ Quine thinks that linguistic phenomena are, like anything, *natural* phenomena.
- ▶ So the methods and resources available to the linguistic philosopher are not radically different to those of the scientist studying e.g. mountains, rivers or goats.
- ▶ In the case of language, we must focus on *behaviour*: the way language is used.
- ▶ This is *semantic* behaviourism.
- ▶ It stops short of full-blown behaviourism about the mental.

The Context Principle

- ▶ At the start of his *Grundlagen* (1884) Frege commits himself to the principle:

*never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation,
but only in the context of a proposition*

- ▶ Quine also accepts this *context principle*.
- ▶ This is an expected commitment for a naturalist like Quine.
- ▶ If all we observe is *behaviour*, this will be at the level of sentences.
- ▶ Of course, this includes one-word sentences like 'Tune!'.

Confirmational holism

- ▶ In 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' (1951) Quine writes that *our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body*
- ▶ This is a statement of *confirmational holism*: it is whole *theories* that are confirmed or falsified by observation, not individual hypotheses.

Summary

- ▶ Quine, then, is writing *Word and Object* with the following working assumptions:
 1. Naturalism
 2. Semantic behaviourism
 3. The context principle
 4. Confirmational holism
- ▶ These views will all play a role in what follows.

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Radical translator

- ▶ Quine imagines the character of the *radical translator* in ch. 2 of *WO*.
- ▶ She is a monoglot English speaker who seeks to understand the language of a wholly alien culture, one with no links to existing languages.
- ▶ Think Amy Adams in *Arrival*. For that reason, let's call our radical interpreter Amy.
- ▶ Amy seeks to construct a *manual* setting up equivalences between every sentence of this language and English sentences.

Translation manuals

- ▶ A translation manual is a function from foreign sentences to English sentences:

$Tr(\text{'Schnee ist weiss'}) = \text{'Snow is white'}$

- ▶ A translation manual is adequate just if the arguments and values are semantically equivalent.
- ▶ What evidence does she have to begin her task? Only the behaviour of native speakers.
- ▶ And if behaviourism is true, this is all the meaning she can hope to understand.

Occasion and standing sentences

- ▶ To build her manual, which sentences should Amy consider first?
- ▶ The most helpful will be those with some context-sensitivity, such as:
 - ▶ It is snowing
 - ▶ There is a rabbit
 - ▶ This lecture is mindblowing
- ▶ Other sentences seem to be uttered in all manner of contexts:
 - ▶ $2 + 2 = 4$
 - ▶ Snow is white
 - ▶ Owen's lectures are mindblowing
- ▶ The former Quine calls *occasion* and the latter *standing* sentences. The distinction is a matter of degree.

'Gavagai!'

- ▶ Quine writes:

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, p. 29)

- ▶ His most famous example of a native occasion sentence is 'Gavagai!', a one-word sentence that seems to be uttered only when a rabbit is in view.
- ▶ Amy now forms a hypothesis:
H $Tr('Gavagai!')$ = 'There is a rabbit'
- ▶ H can now be tested. Amy asks the natives 'Gavagai?' and their assent or dissent can be compared with the presence of rabbits.

Objection

- ▶ John McDowell in 'Anti-Realism and the Epistemology of Understanding' argues that the radical interpreter would not know what was assent or dissent in the native language.
- ▶ Quine's response is to lean on his confirmational holism.
- ▶ H can only be tested as part of a whole theory.
- ▶ If it is part of theory that seems to provide decent explanations and predictions, that is confirmation enough.
- ▶ There's nothing special here about linguistic theories.

Stimulus meaning

- ▶ In this way, Amy is able to assign meanings to native sentences.
- ▶ This sort of meaning Quine calls *affirmative stimulus meaning*.
- ▶ The affirmative stimulus meaning of sentence S for speaker A is the class of all stimulations that would prompt A to assent to S .
- ▶ One wrinkle: this ought to be indexed to a time to accommodate speakers' changing dispositions over time (WO, p. 33).
- ▶ Similarly, the *negative stimulus meaning* of S for A is the class of all stimulations that would prompt A to dissent from S .
- ▶ The *stimulus meaning* of S is the pair ⟨affirmative stimulus meaning of S , negative stimulus meaning of S ⟩.

Other definitions

- ▶ Two sentences are *stimulus synonymous* for *A* just if they have the same stimulus meaning.
- ▶ A sentence is *stimulus-analytic* for *A* just if *A* would assent to it, or nothing, after every stimulation.
- ▶ When Amy translates 'Gavagai!' as 'There is a rabbit', she is claiming stimulus synonymy between those sentences.
- ▶ Note that this is more refined than the ordinary notion of analyticity, which Quine hates.
- ▶ Note that these definitions are subjunctive/ dispositional: what *would* the speaker assent to/ dissent from?
- ▶ Talk of *prompting* is understood causally.

Stimulus meaning

- ▶ When Amy puts forward her manual, therefore, she is only claiming that utterances of 'Gavagai!' have a distinctive kind of neural excitation as their cause, namely the stimulation of seeing a rabbit.
- ▶ This is all very behavioural.
- ▶ The notion of stimulus meaning seems closer to the intuitive meaning of occasion than standing sentences.
- ▶ In the case of standing sentences, the stimulus meaning of '2+2=4' or 'Snow is white' are likely to be similar, but they obviously don't mean the same.
- ▶ Even in the case of occasion sentences, things aren't perfect: if e.g. a speaker knows that a certain fly always accompanies rabbits, they may assent to 'Gavagai?' when only the flies are visible.

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Indeterminacy of translation

- ▶ Our radical interpreter Amy has the following clause in her manual:

H $Tr('Gavagai!') = 'There is a rabbit.'$

- ▶ However, Quine notes that there will be many sentences that are stimulus synonymous as 'Gavagai!':
 1. It is rabbitty over there.
 2. There is an undetached rabbit part.
 3. There is a time slice of a rabbit.
 4. Rabbithood is instantiated over there.
 5. Part of the mereological fusion of all rabbits is over there.
 6. That spot is a meter to the left of an area of space one meter to the right of a rabbit.

Indeterminacy of translation

- ▶ There is therefore an *indeterminacy* in the translation of 'Gavagai!'.
- ▶ There are many sentences to which our translation manual could equally well map 'Gavagai!'.
- ▶ This is another instance of Quine's underdetermination of theory by data.
- ▶ It's important to note that there is no indeterminacy in the *meaning* of 'Gavagai!'.
- ▶ When our concern is stimulus meaning, its meaning is determinate.
- ▶ But many other sentences are stimulus synonymous, hence the indeterminacy of *translation*.

Indeterminacy of translation

- ▶ Quine now claims:

Manuals for translating one language into another can be set up in divergent ways, all compatible with the totality of speech dispositions, yet incompatible with each other. (WO, p. 27)

- ▶ In 'Facts of the matter' (1979) he writes that two translators *might develop independent manuals of translation, both of them compatible with all speech behaviour, and yet one manual would offer translations that the other manual would reject. My position was that either manual could be useful, but as to which was right and which wrong there was no fact of the matter. (p. 167)*

Facts of the matter

- ▶ Observations of the natives, in other words, will rule out some manuals.
- ▶ But many will remain and only utility can choose between them.
- ▶ There is no fact of the matter. There is no good sense in which one is 'right', 'correct' or 'true'.
- ▶ This is a radically different way of thinking about meaning. Ordinarily, we would think that there are *correct* ways of translating between languages.

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- ▶ Where have we got to?
- ▶ We're considering Amy, the radical interpreter, who is attempting to build a translation manual, starting with the occasion sentences of the alien language.
- ▶ Since we are assuming behaviourism, she is attempting to pin down only the stimulus meaning of these sentences.
- ▶ But then there seems to be an indeterminacy in translation, since many sentences will elicit the same responses in the natives.
- ▶ In particular, 'Gavagai!' could be stimulus-synonymous with all sorts of English sentences.
- ▶ This has all been at the level of *sentences*. Next week, we consider *words*.