

Quine lecture 4

1. **Indeterminacy of translation: Chomsky's objections:** Quine's argument for the indeterminacy of translation seems open to two 'parity' objections. The first one is a natural misunderstanding due to Chomsky ('Quine's Empirical Assumptions' in Davidson and Hintikka, eds., *Words and Objections*: 61). Radical interpreters face uncertainty not just at the 'theoretical' level but also at the level of observation statements (WO 68). After all, the assignment of stimulus meanings to the observation statements is itself subject to normal inductive uncertainty: for every hypothesis aligning the native's "Ug" with our 'Green rabbit!' there will be another—just as well-confirmed—aligning it with our 'Grue rabbog!' If Quine thinks there is no problem with assigning a definite stimulus meaning to 'ug', why does he think that there is any more problem with assigning a correct translation to "Das neutrino hat keine masse"?
2. The answer is that translational indeterminacy is not *just* inductive uncertainty, because neither is the underdetermination from which it arises. Inductive certainty is the fact that we cannot rationally extrapolate from cases that we have experienced to cases that we *might* experience or *might have* experienced but in fact did not. But translational indeterminacy, unlike inductive uncertainty, survives even idealization to the case where we observe all that *can* be observed. If we tested the responses of all natives under all situations, if we could *see inside their brains*, the inductive uncertainty of stimulus meanings would be eliminated but translational indeterminacy would persist.
3. It might also be said that the way in which the translation manual is underdetermined by the native's verbal dispositions (observed and unobserved) is no more troubling than the way the physical theory is underdetermined by the observational data (observed and unobserved). Quine does not in the latter case infer that there is no fact of the matter as to which one is the right physical theory. So why he infer that there is no fact of the matter as to which manual gives the right translation?
4. Quine holds that an asymmetry arises because the translational, but not (trivially) the physical, indeterminacy, survives settling all the physical facts; but it is plausible that these are all the facts that there are. In reply to *this* I think the following is fair: whilst it is true all events are physical events, it might still be true that your best explanatory theory *has* to appeal to propositional attitudes etc. e.g. beliefs and desires. That is, it has to appeal to physical events under mental descriptions. And it may be that once we admit facts of *this* sort into the picture, the indeterminacy vanishes (cf. Quine's Reply to Davidson in *Words and Objections*).
5. **Inscrutability of reference: Evans's objections:** A translation manual seeks 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* whose possession constitutes native competence (IP 25-7). But a theory of meaning tries to do the latter 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-L iff there is a rabbit in the vicinity of the speaker) rather than just the pairing up of sentences that is all that the radical translator needs.

6. We saw that there were many different alternative referents: 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: (A) those that divide the reference too coarsely (the fusion, the universal), (B) those that divide it too thinly (the rabbit stages and parts); (C) the feature-placing interpretation. Evans ('Identity and Predication' (IP), *Collected Papers*: 25-48) brings different points against each, summarized at IP 47-8.
7. To deal first with (A) and (C). Consider a language that contains *compound* sentences *not* involving identity e.g. 'Blanco gavagai!' or 'Sango gavagai!' 'Blanco' has the stimulus meaning of 'White!' and 'Sango' that of 'Bloodstained!' But we find that for utterance of 'Blanco gavagai!' it does *not* suffice that there be a rabbit *and* something white. Nor does it suffice even that there is white leporiform rabbit-stuff. There has to be a white *rabbit*.
8. We cannot *account* for this, as a theory of meaning must, by supposing that 'gavagai' denotes the rabbit fusion. That leaves 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 natives *only* sometimes assert 'Blanco sango gavagai' as well as '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 'gavagai' refers to rabbits, and they 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).
9. Consider now class (B). The existence of brown rabbits with white feet shows that we can only make 'gavagai' refer to rabbit parts if we interpret 'blanco' as referring to parts of white rabbits. But now (IP 43-4) any two parts of the same rabbit are indistinguishable in the native 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 sometime bloody rabbits. But then any two parts / stages of the same rabbit will be indistinguishable in the language. So we have introduced a complexity (i.e. a diversity of referents) into the *meaning* theory that is empirically otiose.

10. Evans's argument does, from a certain perspective, rule out a certain kind of referential indeterminacy. But even from that perspective, it does nothing to stop the Proxy Function argument (lecture 3 no. 1).
11. And in any case Q. can avoid the whole difficulty if he drops the perspective i.e. goes only for a translation manual. Nothing stops us *translating* 'gavagai' as 'rabbit stage'. But *explanation* of the natives' competence demands 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 issue 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.
12. Quine rejects that idea: psychological explanation is ultimately a placeholder for genuine physical explanation (see e.g. 'Mind and Verbal Dispositions' in S. Guttenplan (ed.), *Mind and Language*, OUP 1975). 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 an achievement.