

QUINE LECTURE 3

1. Quine's point on the inscrutability of reference is not that we must stop short at stimulus meanings of *sentences*. 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 (OR: 2-4).
2. 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 'cosmic complement'. Then we can e.g. reinterpret the native's term 'gavagai' as denoting proxies of rabbits, and 'Derek' as denoting the proxy of Derek etc.; and we can compensate by reinterpreting every predicate F to mean 'proxy of an F' and every relation xRy to mean 'What x is the proxy of bears R to what y is the proxy of'. Thus where once we translated 'Derek Bongo Clive' to mean 'Derek loves Clive' we now translate it to mean 'What Derek's shadow is the shadow of loves what Clive's shadow is the shadow of'. Clearly this says just the same; but the ontology has been permuted (TPT: 19).
3. In 'Ontological Relativity' Quine turns the point *on ourselves*: there is no fact of the matter as to whether our term 'rabbit' refers to rabbits or their proxies – or any of many other things that it might denote compatibly with the entirety of our linguistic behaviour. Pointing doesn't help (why not?), saying 'But I really mean *rabbits*' doesn't help (why not?) 'Ontological Relativity' is an important but rather tortuous paper and he sums up the moral of it better elsewhere by saying that reference is like truth *simply* a device of disquotation: 'rabbits' refers to rabbits, whatever *they* are. But then it has only domestic application.
4. Let us move on now to the indeterminacy of translation. This is quite a different issue relating to *sentences* of the native language. The claim is that two translation manuals might be incompatible and yet each is unimprovable. 'Unimprovable': we'd do as well as possible using either; 'Incompatible': we'd do terribly if we used both. For instance it might be that manual 1 translates a sentence of the native language into a true one of English, whereas manual 2 translates it into a false sentence of English. Note that alternative schemes of *reference* could belong to translation manuals that were *compatible* in this sense: so e.g. the proxy function argument does *not* establish indeterminacy of translation.
5. The argument is from underdetermination of theory by data. This is the point, familiar from Quine's earlier writings, that two theories might be

QUINE LECTURE 3

incompatible and yet yield the same observational consequences and thus be empirically indistinguishable (*RI* 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.

6. 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).
7. In the following unrealistic example S is the *source* language (the one being translated). The first two sentences are observation sentences and so get the same translations in the two manuals M and M*: the essential difference between M and M* is that M takes 'F' to 'frightened' whereas M* takes 'F' to 'happy'.

| Source language | Manual M | Manual M* |
|-----------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| LS! | Lion struck by spear! | Lion struck by spear! |
| LA! | Attacking lion! | Attacking lion! |
| S → F | Anything struck by a spear is frightened | Anything struck by a spear is happy |
| LF → LA | Frightened lions attack | Happy lions attack |
| LS → LA | Lions struck by spears attack | Lions struck by spears attack |

The theories consisting of the last three sentences in M and the last three in M* are empirically equivalent since they can only be tested via tests of the last sentence. M and M* are equally accurate translations of the corresponding source theory.

8. 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.

QUINE LECTURE 3

9. The moral is that there is no such thing as *the* meaning of a native sentence, at least if that means a proposition which translation must preserve. For Quine's examples show not that translation is impossible but that it is all *too* possible: we can unimprovably translate a native's sentence into either of two English ones that are not themselves synonymous on any intuitive conception of the latter. Preservation of meaning is therefore beside the point when it comes to translation. "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."