

Phil/Ling 375: *Meaning and Mind*
[Handout #7]

W. V. Quine: Translation and Meaning

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§ Key Ideas

1. **radical translation**
2. **principle of indeterminacy of translation**
3. **principle of charity in interpretation**
4. **analyticity**
5. **synonymy**
6. **meaning holism**

Theses:

1. Two men could be just alike in all their dispositions to verbal behavior under all possible sensory stimulations, and yet the meanings or ideas expressed in their identically triggered and identically sounded utterances could diverge radically.
2. 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 one another.
3. The theory deals primarily with sentences (or even system of sentences), and not with words.

Part I. Translation

§ Radical Translation

= Translation of the language of a hitherto untouched people with no help from interpreters.



A rabbit scurries by, the native says ‘Gavagai,’ and the linguist notes down the sentence ‘Rabbit’ or ‘Lo, a rabbit’ as tentative translation, subject to testing in future cases.

What the linguist must do is guess from observation and then see how well his guesses work.

He has elicited the responses ‘Evet’ and ‘Yok’ often enough to surmise that they may correspond to ‘Yes’ and ‘No.’

However inconclusive these methods, they generate a

working hypothesis.

He is thereupon in a position to accumulate inductive evidence for translating 'Gavagai' as the sentence 'Rabbit.'

§ Stimulus Meaning and Collateral Information

= {affirmative stimulus meaning + negative stimulus meaning}

___ The stimulus meaning of a sentence for a subject sums up his disposition to assent to or dissent from the sentence in response to present stimulation.

* **[affirmative stimulus meaning]**: A stimulation σ belongs to the affirmative stimulus meaning of a sentence S for a given speaker if and only if there is a stimulation σ' such that if the speaker were given σ' , then were asked S, then were given σ , and then were asked S again, he would dissent the first time and assent the second.

* **[negative stimulus meaning]**: In all cases when the relevant stimulation is not present, the subject would respond negatively to the query.

Stimulus meaning may be looked upon as the objective reality that the linguistic has to probe when he undertakes radical translation. The linguist translates not by identity of stimulus meaning, but by significant approximation of stimulus meanings.

* The problem of collateral information

[collateral information] = supplementary matters about the objects concerned

___ Suppose that

- (i) A particular class Σ comprises just those stimulations each of which suffices to prompt assent to a sentence.
- (ii) Another class Σ' likewise sufficient to prompt assent to S, owe their efficacy rather to certain widely disseminated *collateral information C*. [e.g. local rabbit-fly]

___ Either Σ or Σ' could be called the *meaning* of S.

* The problem of background association

___ In cases when a word (such as 'bachelor') is inculcated through connections with other sentences, linking up indirectly with past stimulations of other sorts, the stimulus meaning of the present sentence will vary with the speakers' pasts, and the sentence will count as very unobservational.

§ Indeterminacy of Translation

- ❖ One set of hypotheses could fit the speaker just as well as any other set of hypotheses.
- ❖ *There is no fact of the matter what a speaker means.*

- ❖ What we objectively have is an evolving set of dispositions to be prompted by stimulations to assent to or dissent from sentences.
- ❖ For each language there are alternative systems of translations of words that are compatible with the given utterance and all speech dispositions.
- ❖ One has only to reflect on the nature of the possible data and methods to appreciate the indeterminacy.

Q: Do all human beings have the same conceptual scheme of terms and references, with articles and pronouns, singular and plural terms, copula, predicates, etc.?

Q: Are there conceptual schemes that are incommensurable?

§ The Principle of Charity

- ❖ When someone espouses a logic whose laws are ostensibly contrary to our own, we are ready to speculate that he is just giving some familiar old words new meanings (rather than making him seem illogical or stupid).
 ___ e.g. When an English speaker answers 'Yes and no', we assume that the queried sentence is meant differently in the affirmation and negation since otherwise *he would be silly as to affirm and deny the same thing.*
- ❖ **The maxim of translation:** Assertions startlingly false on the face of them are likely to turn on hidden differences of language.
- ❖ The commonsense behind the maxim is that one's interlocutor's silliness, beyond a certain point, is less likely than bad translation or linguist divergence.

Part II. Meaning

§ Coextensiveness versus Synonymy of Terms

[coextensiveness] = being true of the same things

[synonymy] = having the same meaning.

1. Two terms can in fact be coextensive, or true of the same things, without being *intra-subjectively* stimulus-synonymous.
2. Two sentences may be stimulus synonymy, without the two terms being coextensive.

Consider 'gavagai.' Who knows but what the objects to which the term applies are not rabbits after all, but mere stages, or brief temporal segments, of rabbits? In either event the stimulus situations that prompt assent to 'Gavagai' would be the same as for 'Rabbit'. Or perhaps the objects to which 'gavagai' applies are all and sundry undetached parts of rabbits; again the stimulus meaning would register no difference. When from the sameness of stimulus meanings of 'Gavagai' and 'Rabbit' the linguist leaps to the conclusion that a gavagai is a whole enduring rabbit, he is just taking for granted that the native is **enough like us** to have a brief general term for rabbits and no brief general term for rabbit stages or parts.

§ Synonymous and Analytic Statements

[synonymy for sentences]:

___ The two sentences commanding assent concomitantly is due strictly to word usage rather than to how things happen in the world.

___ Two sentences are synonymous when they elicit the same verbal behavior (in point of assent and dissent), especially as socialized.

* The problem:

___ the interconnectedness of sentences

___ the theory involved

___ the possibility of alternative interpretations

Any of various systematic changes can accommodate the recalcitrant datum, and all the sentences affected by any of those possible alternative readjustments would evidently have to count as disconfirmed by that datum indiscriminately or not at all. Yet the sentences can be quite unlike with respect to content or role in the containing theory.

[analytic statements]:

___ an analytic sentence is a sentence made true purely by meaning and independently of collateral information; e.g. 'pigs are pigs,' 'no bachelor is married,' '2+2=4', etc.

___ Sentences that are stimulus-analytic for almost everyone are socially stimulus-analytic.

Quine's thesis:

___ It is a mistake to make a sweeping epistemological dichotomy between analytic truths as by-products of language and synthetic truths as reports on the world.

___ The notion of such a dichotomy only encourages confused impressions of how language relates to the world.

§ The Linguist's "Analytical Hypotheses"

___ Sentences of a foreign language can be segmented into conveniently short recurrent parts (their "words"), and the list of native words can be equated to English words and phrases. E.g. 'gavagai' = 'rabbit', or '*benti*' = 'substance'

* Quine's Criticisms of the Analytical Hypotheses:

1. There is no need to insist that the native word be equated outright to any one English word or phrase. Certain contexts may be specified in which the word is to be translated one way and others in which the word is to be translated in another way.
2. Sometimes auxiliary terms are needed to translate native words and phrases.

3. The linguist's task is not translation of words or constructions but *translation of coherent discourse*. Single words and constructions come up for attention only as means to that end.
4. It is only by outright projection of prior linguistic habits that the linguist can find general terms in the native language and match them with his own. Stimulus meanings never suffice to determine even what words are terms, and much less what terms are coextensive.
5. With regard to analytic hypotheses themselves, there is no verification that the linguist can possibly have.
6. The point is not that we cannot be sure whether the analytic hypothesis is right, but that there is not even an objective matter to be right or wrong about.
7. Furthermore, rival systems of analytical hypotheses can conform to all speech dispositions within each of the languages concerned and yet dictate utterly disparate translations—translations each of which would be excluded by the other system of translations.

[But we often fail to see this problem.]

§ Quine's Meaning Holism

- ❖ Individual words or phrases do not have any determinate meaning. Sentences are primary; words are learned only by abstraction from their roles in learned sentences.
- ❖ Even individual sentences themselves do not have meaning.
- ❖ Only large sets of sentences, or even the entire network of sentences, have meaning.
- ❖ Just as we may meaningfully speak of the truth of a sentence only within the terms of some theory or conceptual scheme, so we may meaningfully speak of interlinguistic synonymy only within the terms of some particular system of analytical hypotheses.
- ❖ In language learning there is the multiplicity of individual histories capable of issuing in identical verbal behavior. Therefore, it is possible that two speakers matching all dispositions to verbal behavior could have semantic differences between them.
- ❖ Two sets of analytical hypotheses equally compatible with all linguistic behavior can give contrary answers. → **indeterminacy of interpretation**

§ Quine's Conclusion: Indeterminacy of Theories

To the same degree that the radical translation of sentences is under-determined by the totality of dispositions to verbal behavior, our own theories and beliefs in general are under-determined by the totality of possible sensory evidence time without end.

e.g. Are both Newtonian physics and Einstein's theory of relativity supported by the same sensory evidence?