

Quine 1960, *Word and Object*, Ch. 1

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The Third Dogma

Propositionalism. The idea, roughly, that there are abstract objects which are the common objects of our attitudes and thoughts, which explain how we are able to communicate, and which play the role of “meanings.”

Quine’s claim: Propositionalism is false. There is no fact of the matter about what sentences in our language “mean,” at least as this is commonly conceived.

The case study of radical translation is a colorful way to illustrate this; indeterminacy of translation is an upshot, but it is a corollary, not the main thesis.

Here Quine is carrying through his skepticism from “Two Dogmas” about the notion of “meaning.”

The Argument

The story of **radical translation:** start with *just* the observable linguistic behavior¹ and see how far we can get toward meanings proper.

¹ I.e. linguistic reactions to stimuli.

Crucially, we *don’t* demand a foundationalist, Cartesian-proof derivation from our base data; it is an abductive process that starts “in the middle.”

“Analyze theory-building how we will, we all must start in the middle.” (4).

What we have to go on, says Quine, is the *stimulus meaning* of an expression α – an ordered pair of the sets of stimuli (within the length of the modulus) that would prompt assent and dissent to α .

Worry about the internalism here? Crucially, the stimuli are things like patterns of ocular irradiation.

The claim is that stimulus-meanings are all we have to go on, but they are inadequate to reach a determinate translation.

Even taking an easy case, like ‘Gavagai,’ there are a host of problems with going from the the stimulus meaning to the meaning proper:

- (1) Stimulus meanings encode the speaker’s disposition to be “shocked” by a stimulus.
- (2) Theory-dependence/background info.
- (3) Assent-conditions are not truth-conditions:

The rabbit-fly; whether you’ve seen one in the area, whether you have informants, etc.

Pragmatics: perhaps dissent from ‘Gavagai?’ because there is no clear shot.

(4) Interpersonal variance brought in by all these factors, in addition to idiosyncratic dispositions of the agent that cover up the “meaning.”

Move to *synonymy*, and work our way out?

(5) Stimulus synonymy is neither necessary nor sufficient even for *extensional* equivalence, let alone synonymy.

Not necessary: ‘Buffalo nickel’ and ‘Indian nickel’ have the same extension, but they have different stimulus meanings since a novice could be confounded by a counterfeit.

Not sufficient: ‘rabbit’, ‘un-detached rabbit-parts’, ‘rabbit-stage’, and ‘The Rabbit Fusion’ all have the same stimulus meaning.

(6) All these difficulties are compounded when we move from “occasion sentences” like ‘Lo, a rabbit!’ to “standing sentence” like ‘Venus has an atmosphere.’

Most of our strategies only work for occasion sentences. We can try to expand the modulus to account for standing sentences, but if we let it grow too long then we allow time for theory/meaning-change.

Try to get around ‘rabbit-stage’ worry by asking logical questions? This brings us to the question of whether we can translate the **logical particles**.

Truth-functions? Yep!

“Categoricals” (‘all’; ‘some’), and ‘=?’ Nope.

Can’t do this in terms of subset or superset relations amongst stimulus meanings. All Buffalo nickels are Indian nickels, even though their stimulus meanings diverge. Similarly, the stimulus meaning of ‘rabbit-stage’ is the same as ‘rabbit’ (supposedly), but it is not the case that all rabbit-stages are rabbits, or vice versa.

“The difficulty is fundamental. The categoricals depend for their truth on the objects, however external and however inferential, of which the component terms are true; and what those objects are is not uniquely determined by stimulus meanings. Indeed the categoricals... are part of our own special apparatus of objective reference, whereas stimulus meaning is... common coin.” (61)

More generally, the putative problem is that categoricals, because they rely on reference to objects, can be interpreted variously depending on how we interpret other parts of the system.

Special (controversial) example for synonymy: ‘Everest’ and ‘Guarisanker’ – same stimulus meaning (after realization), but different meanings.

Side-note on principle of charity. “one’s interlocutor’s silliness, beyond a certain point, is less likely than bad translation – or, in the domestic case, linguistic divergence” (59)

Taking ‘blarg’ to mean ‘=’, we can pull apart ‘rabbit’ and ‘rabbit-stage’; but if we take ‘blarg’ to be ‘are stages of the same animal’, then we cannot.

Upshot

Starting purely from the stimulus-meanings, the linguist can pin down the following constraints (68):

- (i) Observation sentences.
- (ii) Truth functions.
- (iii) Stimulus-analytic sentences.
- (iv) Intrasubjective stimulus synonymy of occasion sentences.

If the linguist becomes bilingual, she can grab *all* the occasion sentences.

But these constraints aren't enough to pin down a unique interpretation. The way forward is the **method of analytical hypotheses**. These can be better or worse, but there is no guarantee that there will be a uniquely best set of such hypotheses. So these are closer to *decisions* than genuine hypotheses, since there is no fact of the matter about whether they are correct.

And here is where our case study of translation becomes important: *the same dynamic applies to ourselves*. Our translator had all the tools that "the world" has for fixing the meanings of the natives language, and she is unable to do so. Which is just to say that all the facts about us fail to determine any unique meanings for *our* language.

So Propositionalism is false.

Worries/Questions

Why does Quine dismiss the analogy with physics? Why is this not merely a case of underdetermination, but instead one of indeterminacy? (75-77)

Objection: Quine has not followed his own methodology. He has not started "in the middle," for here in the middle we know much more than facts about people's stimulus-meanings – we know facts about their *actual* meanings.

Why exactly are the categoricals specially problematic? It can't simply be that we can never be *certain* what objects are picked out by a term. And clearly we *do* have justified confidence in ruling out various alternative referents, e.g. the fusion of the rabbit and a space-time bubble in Alpha Centauri. But if that's right, why aren't we *also* justified in assuming that they aren't talking about the fusion of all rabbits? Quine is fine with saying, "That would be silly for them to talk that way, so they probably don't." Why can't we pull that here? (It would be less discriminatory to have a word for the rabbit-fusion; it would be unnecessarily so to have one for rabbit-stages; and – as far as I can tell – a collection of un-detached rabbit-parts *just is* a rabbit.)