

Quine, “Translation and Meaning”

The Background Story about Acquisition: “One is taught so to associate words with words and other stimulations that there emerges something recognizable as talk of things...it is to such stimulation that we must look for whatever empirical content there may be” (p. 26).

The Project: Redescribe, as far as possible, semantic facts in terms of behavioral dispositions (stimulus-response pairs). Quine will then argue:

The Underdetermination Thesis: “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” (p. 27)

...*From this, he will conclude...*

The Indeterminacy Thesis: “The point is not that we cannot be sure whether the analytical hypothesis is right, but that there is not even...an objective matter to be right or wrong about” (p. 73).

The Problem: The Radical Translator

“The recovery of a man’s current language from his currently observed responses is the task of the linguist who, unaided by an interpreter, is out to penetrate and translate a language hitherto unknown. All the objective data he has to go on are the forces that he sees impinging on the native’s surfaces and the observable behavior” (p. 28)

The Behaviorist Gambit:

Stimulation: “a visual stimulation is perhaps best identified, for present purposes, with the pattern of chromatic irradiation of the eye,” relative to some modulus (p. 31) Thus, the stimulus for declaring ‘Lo, a Rabbit’ is not a rabbit—but a certain pattern of chromatic irradiation, which can be caused by rabbits and fake rabbits alike.

Stimulus Meaning of an expression is the ordered pair consisting of the *affirmative* and the *negative* stimulus meaning—“the class of all the stimulations (hence evolving ocular irradiation patterns between properly timed blindfoldings) that would prompt his assent [/dissent],” where ‘*would* prompt his assent’ is understood in terms of *dispositions* (p. 33)

Disposition: “The disposition may be presumed to be some subtle structural condition, like an allergy and like solubility.” (pp. 33-4)

Occasion Sentences (vs. standing sentences): “an occasion sentence commands assent or dissent only as prompted all over again by current stimulation” Examples: ‘Lo, a rabbit’, ‘Red’, ‘It hurts’. Non-example: ‘There is ether drift’

Thus: “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...a stimulation must be conceived for these purposes not as a dated particular event but as a universal” (p. 34).

PROBLEM: “sameness of stimulus meaning has its shortcomings as a synonymy relation. The difficulty is that an informant’s assent or dissent from ‘Gavagai?’ can depend excessively on prior collateral information” (p. 37) Rabbit-flies. Kibitzer.

“Yet stimulus meaning... may be properly looked upon still as the objective reality that the linguist has to probe when he undertakes radical translation” (p. 40)

Observation Sentences: “Occasion sentences whose stimulus meanings vary none under the influence of collateral information may naturally be called *observation sentences*, and their stimulus meanings may without fear of contradiction be said to do full justice to their meanings” (p. 42) Example: ‘Red’.

Still, ‘Rabbit’ is *more observational* than ‘Bachelor’. Thus: “an occasion sentence may be said to be the more observational the more nearly its stimulus meanings for different speakers tend to co-incide” (p. 43).

“the notion of stimulus meaning itself, as defined, depends on no multiplicity of speakers...the notion of observability, in contrast, is social. The behavioral definition...turns on similarities of stimulus meanings over the community”(p. 45)

Stimulus synonymy: “sameness of stimulus meaning, [which] is as good a standard of synonymy for non-observational occasion sentences as for observation sentences as long as we stick to one speaker” (p. 46)

PROBLEMS: Everest/Gaurisanker example. ‘Indian nickel’ vs. ‘Buffalo nickel’ p. 49-50

“Stimulus synonymy of the occasion sentences ‘Gavagai’ and ‘Rabbit’ does not even guarantee that [they] are coextensive terms” (p. 51)

Stimulus-synonymous translations of ‘Gavagai’:

- (a) stages or brief temporal segments of rabbits
- (b) all and sundry undetached parts of rabbits
- (c) that single though discontinuous portion of the spatiotemporal world that consists of rabbits.
- (d) the property of rabbithood.

(c) shows that the distinction between general and singular terms is independent of stimulus meaning, whereas (d) shows this of the distinction between [terms for] concrete and abstract objects.

“When from the sameness of stimulus meanings...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” (p. 52).

“Nothing not distinguished in stimulus meaning itself is to be distinguished by pointing, unless the pointing is accompanied by questions of identity and diversity: ‘Is this the same gavagai as that?’ ‘Do we have here one gavagai or two?’ Such questioning requires of the linguist a command of the native language far beyond anything that we have as yet seen how to account for...our articles and pronouns, our singular and plural, our copula, our identity predicate...is interdependent, and the very notion of term is as provincial to our culture as are those associated devices. The native may achieve the same net effects through linguistic structures so different that any eventual construing of our devices in the native language and vice versa can prove unnatural and largely arbitrary” (p. 53)

Socializing synonymy: ‘Bachelor’ and ‘unmarried man’ are synonyms; ‘buffalo nickel’ and ‘indian nickel’ are not. p. 56-7.

“The broad [sense of synonymy] may be formulated in intuitive terms thus: the two sentences command assent concomitantly and dissent concomitantly, and this concomitance is due strictly to word usage rather than to how things happen in the world. One usually hears the matter described in terms of truth values than of assent and dissent; but I warp it over to the latter terms in order to maximize changes of making sense of the relation on the basis of verbal behavior” (p. 62)

“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” (p. 64)

Response to Grice & Strawson, p. 64.

Summary of the Results:

- (1) Observation sentences can be translated. There is uncertainty, but the situation is the normal inductive one.
- (2) Truth functions can be translated.
- (3) Stimulus-analytic sentences can be recognized. So can the sentences of the opposite type, the “stimulus-contradictory” sentences, which command irreversible dissent.
- (4) Questions of intrasubjective stimulus synonymy of native occasion sentences even of the non-observational kind can be settled if raised, *but the sentences cannot be translated* (p. 68, italics mine).

Objections and Replies. §16.