

Remark 1. In this handout I refer both to *Ontological relativity* and *Things and their place in theories*.

INDETERMINACY OF MEANING AND REFERENCE. Quine begins the discussion with the naturalistic premiss: there are no meaning *entities* out there. To believe there are is to believe in the myth of a museum. More specifically: meanings are not to be identified with mental ideas. Instead, we have to endorse a naturalistic method in discovering meaning. This results in a behaviourist premiss: meaning should be gleaned from behaviour, from the various speech acts that people make.

Once this premiss is granted, indeterminacy follows. There can be no identity between meanings of the different expressions. The problem is not that we cannot know what *real* meaning is associated with each expression. The problem is that the sameness of meaning is bogus.

This thesis of meaning sameness is clearest in the procedure of translation. Quine in fact distinguishes between two kinds of cases, those that require a grasp of the principle of individuation, and those that do not. In the latter case, such as the predicate ‘red’, there is the procedure of ‘simple ostension’. We point repeatedly at red objects (cars, pools of blood, nail varnish) and describe them as ‘red’. It is not trivial for the trainee to understand that we are describing exactly the colour of the object, rather than, say, its shape. But this can be done given sufficient number of trials. In addition, we should postulate the availability of innate capacities for privileging some features of the environment at the expense of others (the trainee may be uncertain whether ‘red’ describes shape or colour or length, but not just any possible feature of the object). In any event, Quine argues, there is no more involved here beside the general problems of inductive learning.

In the former case, where individuation is required, the ostension procedures are much more involved (Quine calls them ‘individuating words’). Thus suppose we wish to translate the term ‘tavşan’ from Turkish into English (this is our patriotic rendering of ‘gavagai’). We record our observations of the native Turkish speakers, and we see that they utter ‘... tavşan...’ in the presence of a rabbit. We manage to isolate the correlation of ‘tavşan’ with ‘rabbit’, thus forming a hypothesis that ‘tavşan’ is to be translated as ‘rabbit’. The problem now is that the same set of behaviours can be correlated with more than one expression in the native language (English), thus with more than one meaning. Let us look at the specific arguments Quine gives for this conclusion.

DIVIDED REFERENCE. Why should sameness of meaning be bogus? Could we not say together: ‘By “tavşan” I mean rabbit’ and point to the rabbit in front of us?

Quine’s objection may be put thus:

Ostension cannot settle the sameness of meaning of the terms requiring individuation. (7-1)

Thus ‘tavşan’ can stand for ‘undetached rabbit part’ or ‘rabbit stage’. Suppose we move a rabbit (or should I say, ‘some object’?) in the presence of the native speaker, point at that rabbit (or rather, at *that*), and ask the speaker, ‘Bu ve bu aynı mı?’ The native speaker responds, ‘Evet.’ Then presumably this test will rule out the translation of ‘tavşan’ as ‘rabbit stage’. But this depends on our translation of ‘aynı’. If it is translated not as ‘same as’, but as ‘same stage as’, then the alternative translation is not ruled out. Thus ostension, for it to be successful in excluding indeterminacy of reference, has to presuppose translation of auxiliary terms—which would be viciously circular.

Remark 2 (Deferred ostension). A special case is mentioned for the alternative translation ‘rabbithood’. This is an abstract term. Thus ostension might be thought to work well there, since a native would not be tempted to point to rabbithoods. But this ignores the possibility that the native points to rabbits as we point to the inscription ‘2’ to refer to the natural number 2.

PROXY FUNCTIONS. Let the sentence ‘Harry is tall’ be true. Suppose we introduce a function that maps every object to the world minus that object. So the image of Harry under this function will be the global complement of Harry, i.e. the world excluding Harry. Properties are identified with the extensions of predicates. So let the same function map the predicate ‘is tall’ to each of the complements of tall objects. Then clearly ‘Harry is tall’, under this interpretation, will still come out true.

Remark 3 (Rough explanation). Let the terms ‘ a ’ and ‘ F ’ be such that ‘ a ’ refers to a and ‘ F ’ is the set $\{a, b, c\}$. Then let $f(x) = W - \{x\}$, and $g(F) = \{W - \{a\}, W - \{b\}, W - \{c\}\}$. Assume that $V(Fa) = 1$. Then also $V(g(F)f(a)) = 1$.

Generally, suppose a theory T is committed to the truth of a sentence S . There is no way to say which ontology the theory is committed to, so far as the referring expressions and predicates of S can be uniformly reinterpreted with the aid of a proxy function preserving the truth of the sentence (*salva veritate*).

ONTOLOGICAL RELATIVITY. One might think that the situation is different when only my mother tongue is in play. Of course, you say, I don’t know what a foreign speaker really means by his words. But I know what my fellow speakers mean.

The contrast is illusory. Permutation by proxy functions could be performed on the mother tongue just as they were on the foreign language. Secondly, in order to *interpret* my fellow speakers I should use the same kind of behavioural data as I used in translating the Turkish expressions into English. There is no reason to think I fare better in interpreting my mother tongue than I am in translating a foreign language. Equally, some other speaker may be interpreting me as speaking the proxified language, rather than the original language.

Now, however, let us talk about *me*. Cannot I know what I myself refer to by using the term ‘rabbit’? Surely I can tell the difference between thinking about rabbits and rabbit parts. Hence, by using ‘rabbit’, I think and talk exactly about rabbits. The critic here perhaps goes along with the Quinean argument, but aims to show that its ultimate conclusion should be the rejection of behaviourism. But this response can be challenged in two ways. We can insist that the first-person perspective is generally inadmissible. Or we can say that my self-interpretation relies on my interpretation of my own past practices. Those practices are as much subject to indeterminacy as the practices of other English speakers or Turkish speakers.

What follows is that reference to objects can only be intelligible within a background language. Without any such language, reference is ‘meaningless’ and ‘nonsensical’. How to understand this claim if we go past Quine’s metaphors of physical relativity? Perhaps as follows: If truth is preserved under different permutations instituted by proxy functions, then so are all the inferential links among the sentences. Thus no change in our theorizing about the world. The original language and the proxified language, with those alethic connections unchanged, would appear to be the same language (or the same theory). But the ontology is different. How different it is, however, I cannot understand without using some further language. The ontology of *that* language can be made sense of by using one further language.

In short, it seems that for ontological questions arise to arise an attempt must be made to translate (or what I think is the same here, to interpret) certain expressions in a language. Without such an interpretation no question would arise in the first place.

IMPLICATIONS. Here are two possible morals. One is that the regress is stopped when I get by with certain behavioural responses to your utterances *without* attempting to find the real meaning of your words. Communication is possible without translation, if by that we mean assigning definitive clauses to your expressions. This perhaps what Quine means by taking the words of our mother tongue ‘at face value’.

Second, there is, I think, a curious nod to Carnap. Ontological questions, worthy of the qualifier ‘really’, are suspect and unsettled (and unsettling). I cannot say what ‘really exists’ in the world without immediately providing a linguistic background against which to evaluate these claims. No linguistic background (i.e. no language) can claim absolute authority. And no ontological question—*weird* anyway—can be asked without any such background. The Carnapian themes of analyticity, if they were brought in with justice in the first place, have dropped away, but the upshot appears to be the same.