QUINE AND ONTOLOGICAL RELATIVITY

CHAPTER 2
QUINE AND ONTOLOGICAL RELATIVITY

Indeterminacy Of Translation

W.V.O. Quine takes language as a social art. According to him, an enquiry into the various aspects of language as a social art may depend entirely on intersubjectively available cues. Hence men’s dispositions to respond overtly to socially observable stimulations play a major role. The theme of indeterminacy of translation comes from this problem. Recognizing this limitation Quine traces out a systematic indeterminacy involved in the enterprise of translation.

Quine talks about the paradoxical situation language put its users into. He says that we knew physical things only through their effect on our sensory surfaces. But the primordial conceptual schemes are things glimpsed, not glimpses. The conceptual scheme of commonsense is not much different from that of primordial conceptual scheme. But at the same time language is learned not by observing things of the world, but it is learned intersubjectively, learning through observing what and how other people talk. Things referred to do not come to direct reference, instead what is being referred to is just what is agreed upon publicly about it. To study the immediate data about sensation, the point of reference should be sensory data. Sensory data without brain’s manipulation of the same is different from men’s belief of things. But the paradox is that the language being used to study immediate data of experience is that of the same old conceptual scheme in which the posits are things of the world, not the perceptual data.29

Quine says:

No enquiry being possible without some conceptual scheme, we may as well retain and use the best one we know – right down to the latest detail of quantum mechanics, if we know it and it matters.

However, according to Quine, it is possible to recognize the conceptual trappings retrospectively and thereby revise the theory while saving the data. One can see traces of relativist thinking in Quine while he calls science as “the last arbiter of truth”. According to him, scientific method produces theory whose connection with all possible surface irritation consists solely in scientific method itself, unsupported by ulterior controls.

Quine is critical of Peirce’s notion of truth, his belief in “nearer than”, his belief in scientific method. “Nearer than” is all right with numbers, not with theories. Quine never entertained the thought that science can offer the ultimate and unchangeable truth. Quite the contrary, Quine thinks,

“Scientific method is the way to truth, but it affords even in principle no unique definition of truth. Any so-called pragmatic definition of truth is doomed to failure equally.”

Here it is clear that Quine takes science as the best way to truth, but only as the current option available, but doomed to failure if taken in comparison with possible alternative theories. This also shows that at least indirectly Quine does not support the notion of incommensurability. In incommensurability comparison between alternative theories is not possible. But Quine has talked about better theories, alternative theories, etc. That

---

30 Ibid. p.4
31 Ibid. p. 23.
32 Ibid. p. 23.
means he never takes incommensurability seriously, though his notion of indeterminacy of translation is very close to incommensurability.

According to Quine, a sentence is meaningless except relative to its own theories or pretty firmly conditioned to sensory stimulation. That is, intertheoretically a sentence is meaningless. Here meaningfulness is dependent on being within a theory. Here meaningfulness is being relativized to a theory. This is a relativist position indeed. In his own words:

It is rather when we turn back into the midst of an actually present theory, at least hypothetically accepted, that we can and do speak sensibly of this and that sentence as true.33

But just after saying so Quine turns self-reflective. He asks whether he is just giving a relativistic doctrine of truth and remain content. He adds an account of how even philosophy is done. Unlike Descartes, philosophers see truth earnestly within the total evolving doctrines. A process of evolving involves correction.

Enquiring about the place of meaning in translation, Quine sees a correlation in totality in spite of the variance between sentences and its corresponding non-verbal stimulation. To examine the problem, in a less abstract way, Quine proposes to take the case of translation: radical translation. By radical translation he means translation of the language of a hitherto untouched people.

Quine’s thought experiment goes like this: A linguist tries to translate a remote tribal language. When a rabbit scurries, the native says ‘gavagai.’ It could be anything like ‘it is rabbitting here’, ‘a white animal’, etc. The jungle linguist has to learn a few more native words to confirm his hypothesis that

33 ibid. p.24
'gavagai' means 'rabbit'. First of all he has to learn the equivalents of 'ye' or 'no'. To exact such words the linguist talks to the tribal. He hears 'Evet' and 'Yok' as answers to several questions that will follow 'yes' and 'no' in his language. Then he comes to believe that 'Evet' is 'Yes'. Native's face expression too is counted. Anyway he takes it as a working hypothesis because he can correct if further experience compels him to do so. Whatever it may be, it is important to note that here stimulation is native's assent or dissent to 'gavagai' and not the rabbit.

Quine uses this thought experiment to introduce the notion of stimulus meaning. This is his proposed remedy of the relativist position he himself pointed out when he said about the interdependence of sentences. Stimulus meaning resolves the problem, since there are stimulation patterns that would prompt assent to a sentence than others. Nevertheless, Quine holds that even for such simple sentences as "Gavagai" and "Rabbit", sameness of stimulus meaning has its shortcomings as a synonymy relation. The difficulty is that the native's assent to or dissent from "Gavagai?" depends upon his collateral information. He may give his assent on the occasion of an ill-glimpsed movement in the grass because he expects a rabbit there and which is unknown to the linguist. Not only this, many possibilities of difference in stimulus meaning can be imagined.

The task of the linguist in radical translation is to understand the stimulus meaning of "Gavagai" objectively. In order to have an objective understanding, the linguist has to strip away all sorts of collateral information that influence the native's understanding of "Gavagai", and also other sorts of interferences. But there is no evident criterion to judge when can the stimulus meaning be called ideal. Synonymy requires sameness of stimulus meaning. But collateral information and other interferences will always cause discrepancies in stimulus meaning. If it is a color word, for example: red,
even if there is a word for red in native language, equating it with “Red” would be troublesome, just because of the vagueness of color boundaries in both languages. The stimulus meaning of “Red” tends to vary from person to person, occasions to occasions. In this regard Quine observes:

Color words are notoriously ill matched between remote languages, because of differences in customary grouping of shades. But this is no present problem; it means merely that there may well be no native occasion sentence, at least no reasonably simple one, with approximately the stimulus meaning of ‘Red’. Again, even if there is one, there may well be a kind of trouble in equating it to ‘Red’, just because of the vagueness of color boundaries in both languages.\(^{34}\)

The stimulus meaning of “Gavagai” and “Rabbit” could be the same. But even then it cannot be said what object is being applied to by “Gavagai.” The native may be meaning brief temporal segments of rabbits. The linguist is just taking for granted that the native is enough like him.

Quine finds that the distinction between concrete and abstract object, as well as that between general and singular term, is independent of stimulus meaning and so he asks himself whether it is because of some fault in the formulation of stimulus meaning. As a corrective measure he tests some devices like supplementary pointing and questioning. But pointing to a rabbit could be pointing at a stage of a rabbit, to an integral part of a rabbit, to the rabbit fusion, to where rabbithood is manifested, and so on. To try supplementary questioning, the linguist has to have enough command in native language. According to Quine, even the term-to-term equivalence is illusory because the whole apparatus of a particular language is independent

\(^{34}\) ibid. p. 41
and the very notion of term is as provincial to one's culture as are those associated devices. Quine concludes the discussion of the problem of term-to-term translation by saying that terms and reference are local to one's conceptual scheme.\textsuperscript{35}

Quine sees intrasubjective stimulus synonymy a better option than a two-speaker situation. But it too is not problem-free. His example of a Martian visitor understanding the synonymy of "Bachelor" and "Unmarried man" faces the same problem the native and the linguist faced, that the Martian can very well apply the term not to men but to their stages or parts or an abstract attribute.

"Bachelor" and "Unmarried man" have social acceptance as synonymous, but "Indian nickel" and "Buffalo nickel" do not enjoy that status, though both are the same. Quine says this difference is part and parcel of the way a native English speaker learns these words. The word "bachelor" is learned through associative words whereas "Nickel" is learned through familiarizing the sample. That means, the first is knowledge by description and the other is by acquaintance. Here the "Nickel" has stimulus meaning whereas "Bachelor" has no socially constant stimulus meaning. 'Bachelor', 'brother', 'sister', etc are non-observational. Hence their stimulus meanings vary over society. These words get the fixity needed for communication from verbal links, not by stimulus synonymy. Quine says many terms of systematic theoretical science are of these types.\textsuperscript{36}

Translation of logical connectives too is problematic because the linguist would translate the equivalent words in the native's language into English as 'not', 'and', or 'or' as the case may be. But it is well known that

\textsuperscript{35} ibid. p. 53

\textsuperscript{36} ibid. 56.
these three English words do not represent negation, conjunction, and alternation, argues Quine.\footnote{Ibid. p. 58} Suppose, says Quine, certain natives are said to accept as true certain sentences translatable in the form ‘\( p \) and not \( p \)’. Under semantic criteria this claim is absurd. A dogmatic translation can make the natives sound queer. A better a translation would impose translator’s logic on them, and would beg the question of prelogicality. Quine provides a footnote in this regard in which he tells that Malinowski had spared his islanders the imputation of prelogicality by translating certain terms so carefully as to sidestep contradiction, and as a result of this, Levy-Bruhl gave up his original doctrine of prelogical mentality.\footnote{ibid. p. 58-59}

Here one can observe Quine brooding over the problem of relativity involved in translation. Though a logician, Quine is ready to imagine a society who cherishes semantically absurd sentences without being prelogical and queer. Yet Quine’s own remarks are available which are careful to not to draw a relativist conclusion. He softens his argument by saying that the correspondence is rather poor, and only that one has to give full weight to the word ‘approximation’, as the translator’s semantic criterion makes demands beyond extension.

Rather than being relativistic, Quine is advocating a sort of holism, a sort of relativity of the parts to the whole. This is evident from the way Quine argues. According to him, the etymology of ‘synonymous’ applies to names. But in use the term is intended to mean simply sameness of meaning. Quine says he intends the word ‘synonymous’ to carry the full generality of ‘same in meaning’. He has distinguished synonymy between a broad and a narrow type of synonymy. This is to say that synonymy of parts is defined by appeal
to analogy of roles in synonymous wholes; then synonymy in the narrower sense is defined for the wholes by appeal to synonymy of the homologous parts.

While translating, the translator employs analytical hypotheses. It needs thinking up. The translator may think up a parallelism, which leads to translating a native’s sentence to English, be it a plural ending or an identity predicate. Here it is to be noted that the thinking up is just the projection of translator’s habits to the native. This shows that stimulus meanings never suffice to determine what words are terms. The question of what terms are coextensive comes only later. To explain this, Quine observes:

Since there is no general positional correspondence between the words and the phrases of one language and their translations in another, some analytical hypothesis will be needed also to explain syntactical constructions. These are usually described with the help of auxiliary terms for various classes of native words and phrases. Taken together, the analytical hypotheses and auxiliary definitions constitute the linguist’s jungle-to-English dictionary and grammar. The form they are given is immaterial because their purpose 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.39

Quine is aware of the controversy his “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” has made. That must be why he foresees accusing indeterminacy of translation as trivial and stalls possible claims of solving indeterminacy of translation by using analytical hypotheses, or by scientific method. The point

39 ibid. p. 70
of Quine’s argument is not whether analytical hypotheses are provable or not. His point is that analytical hypotheses have nothing to speak of as objectivity. Stimulus meaning has better anchorage on objectivity than analytical hypotheses, though two speakers would have different stimulus meaning. In equating "Gavagai" to "there is a rabbit", roughly there is, in a sense, sameness. Indeterminacy of translation is quite radical because it exposes the sameness brought about by analytical hypotheses. Such sameness, linguistic synonymy, can be made sense ‘only within the terms of some particular system of analytical hypotheses’  

The point of Quine’s thought-experiment in radical translation was to provide a critique to the uncritical notion of meanings, and his concern was to expose the empirical limit of it.

By questioning meaning and analyticity, Quine rejects the classical definition of knowledge, and thus naturalizes epistemology. As the name of one of his works shows (From Stimulus to Science), he tries to connect knowledge and its stimulus. The main points in his philosophy can be summarized as: no entity without identity, to be is to be the value of a variable; there is no first philosophy.

In paraphrasing synonymy is not something that is aimed for. What is aimed for could be a better informative account in order to avoid alternative interpretation.

According to Quine, even in a case of an attempt to paraphrase, synonymy cannot be claimed for. Actually synonymy is not aimed for; rather a better informative account is aimed for, and also with an aim to avoid alternative interpretation.  

---

40 ibid. p. 75

41 ibid. p. 159
even full knowledge of the stimulus meaning would not suffice for translating an observation statement, or even to spot a term.\textsuperscript{42} At the end of the book “Word and Object”, Quine is making it clear that no vantage point is available for anyone. Even philosophers are not free from conceptual scheme, but they “can scrutinize and improve the system from within, appealing to coherence and simplicity...”\textsuperscript{43} This position can have relativist consequence, but it is not outright relativism. Anyhow, this position is far from absolutism.

The linguist in Quine’s thought-experiment is trapped in a circle. He has to know other words first to translate “gavagai”, but it is an endless process because there is no initial point on which to base a uniquely correct translation.

\textbf{The Genesis of Indeterminacy of Translation}

Quine’s notion of indeterminacy of translation is the product his critique and rejection of the analytic-synthetic division of Kant. David Hume’s ‘relations of ideas and relations of truth’ is a division similar to this. Leibniz spoke of the distinction between truths of reason and truths of fact. Analytic-synthetic division makes denying analytic truth a self-contradiction. According to Quine, this definition has no explanatory value because the notion of self-contradiction needs clarification as analytic truth is in need of. “The two notions are the two sides of a single dubious coin”:\textsuperscript{44} Quine contends that the notion of analytic truth has two shortcomings. One is that it

\textsuperscript{42} ibid. p. 236

\textsuperscript{43} ibid. pp. 275-76

limit itself to subject-predicate form. The second is that it appeals to a metaphorical notion of containment.

According to Quine, analytic statements fall into two categories. The statement “No unmarried man is married” belongs to the first category. This statement does not lean on synonymy. On the contrary, a statement such as “No bachelor is unmarried”, which belongs to the second category, leans on synonymy. Here the notion of synonymy is used for clarifying the notion of analyticity. However, the notion of synonymy is also equally in need of clarification.

In Two Dogmas of Empiricism Quine is rigorously analyzing the concept of synonymy. “Bachelor” can be defined as “unmarried man.” Here Quine asks on what ground this is done. It is clear that by resorting to dictionary is this done. But a lexicographer only takes for granted antecedent facts. A lexicographer is just reporting an observed synonymy. Quine says this is no enough ground for synonymy. The interconnections, which are held as ground for synonymy, are grounded in usage. Hence this definition comes as reports upon usage. Quine rejects the claim that synonymy of two linguistic forms consists simply in their interchangeability in all contexts without change of truth-value. For the synonyms “bachelor” and “unmarried man” are not interchangeable everywhere. Quine says, “... Synonym so conceived need not be free from vagueness, as long as the vagueness matches.”45 Quine gives two examples where interchangeability does not work: ‘bachelor’ in ‘bachelor of arts’, and the ‘bachelor’ in the statement, “Bachelor has less than ten letters.” The ‘bachelor’ in these examples is not rightly interchangeable with “unmarried man.” However these counter

---

45 Ibid.
instances can be tackled. "Bachelor of arts" can be treated as one word. But then the notion of synonymy would rest on the notion of wordhood.

When Quine says 'synonymy' he means cognitive synonymy, not poetic or psychological, which according to him is impossible. If interchangeability is a sufficient condition of synonymy, then the particular language must contain a word that can express the meaning of 'sufficient condition.' Here analyticity is presupposed. Definition of Analyticity is conceivable by an appeal to a realm of meaning, but the appeal to meaning gives way to an appeal to synonymy, and synonymy depends on a prior appeal to analyticity itself.

Quine has shown that better understanding of the meaning of words would not help distinguish synthetic statements from analytic. For example, one cannot say whether "Everything green is extended" analytic or not, even if one is quite clear about the meaning of the words, because the trouble is with analyticity. If analyticity is explained by means of artificial language, it explains only as 'analytic for' this statement. In such cases 'analytic for' and 'semantical rule of' are relative terms, which require further clarification.

According to verification theory of meaning, the meaning of a statement is the method of empirically confirming or infirming it. If this can be accepted, statement synonymy is said to be likeness of method of empirical confirmation or infirmation. The question then arise is what the nature of the relationship between a statement and experience is. Empiricism takes individual statements for verification. Quine rejects this. According to him, total field of science is undetermined by its boundary conditions, experience. According to this view, whole determines its individual parts. That is, "Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough
adjustments elsewhere in the system." In science theoretical statements are far removed from experience than certain peripheral statements. Physical objects are rather imported into the situation as useful intermediaries. Quine finds no epistemological difference between these irreducible posits and the gods of Homer. He says physical objects and the gods differ only in degree, not in kind, and both entities are cultural posits. In Quine's view, even rationality is a myth. Rational numbers get its prominence only by gerrymandering.

Quine's thesis of the inscrutability of reference and its attendant notions of indeterminacy of translation and ontological relativity have relativist consequences because it implies that ontology is relative to languages or frameworks. His theses undercut many forms of relativism. His notion of inscrutability of reference implies that it make no sense in absolutely saying what objects a speaker is talking about. His own example makes his thesis clear. Pointing towards a rabbit and calling it 'gavagai' cannot make sure what the other person thinks about it. It could be anything, an enduring object called rabbit or an event, a temporal stage called rabbit.

46 ibid.