Quine's Semantic Relativity

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Philosophers sometimes approach meaning metaphorically, for example, by speaking of "grasping" meanings, as if understanding consists in getting mental hands around something.[1] Philosophers say that a theory of meaning should be a theory about the meanings that people assign to expressions in their language, that to understand other people requires identifying the meanings they associate with what they are saying, and that to translate an expression of another language into your own is to find an expression in your language with the same meaning as the expression in the other language.

One difficulty with taking seriously such metaphors of grasping, assigning, and attaching meanings is that people are not aware of doing these things in the way that they are aware of grasping doorknobs, attaching post-it notes, and assigning tasks to employees.

In any event, Quine did not find such metaphors to be useful. In his view, to understand someone else is to *interpret* them—that is, to find a way to translate from their outlook into one's own. Interpretation is translation. And translation is indeterminate.

Part of Quine's argument for indeterminacy of translation involves an

appeal to ontological relativity.[2] He argues that there is no fact of the matter as to whether another person's word 'gavagai' refers to rabbits, rabbit-stages, undetached rabbit parts, rabbithood, or various other possibilities.

Given any reasonable interpretation of a language, consider the total universe of entities in the extension of predicates or referred to by singular terms in that language so interpreted, and then consider any one-one mapping of that universe onto itself. Then define new relations of reference and extension, using this mapping, so that a term that originally referred to something now refers to what that thing is mapped to and a predicate with an extension originally containing various things now has an extension containing what those things are mapped to. Since, the sentences that are true with respect to the original interpretation are also true with respect to the new one, it would seem that the new interpretation satisfies the same reasonable constraints as the original.

Quine argues that reference is a relative matter, like position and velocity. Non-relative absolute reference is, he says, like "absolute position, or absolute velocity, rather than position or velocity relative to a given frame of reference" (201).

Furthermore in Quine's view,

> radical translation begins at home ... It is meaningless to ask whether, in general, our terms 'rabbit', 'rabbit part', 'number', etc., really refer respectively to rabbits, rabbit parts, numbers, etc., rather than to some ingeniously permuted denotations. It is meaningless to ask this absolutely; we can meaningfully ask

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it only relative to some background language. ... Querying reference in any more absolute way would be like asking [about] absolute position, or absolute velocity, rather than position or velocity relative to a given frame of reference. When we ask, "Does 'rabbit' really refer to rabbits?" someone can counter with the question: "Refer to rabbits in what sense of 'rabbits'?" thus launching a regress; and we need the background language to regress into. The background language gives the query sense, if only relative sense; sense relative in turn to it, this background language (200-201).

Now, shortly after this passage there is a sentence that puzzles some readers:

In practice, of course, we end the regress of background languages, in discussions of reference, by acquiescing in our mother tongue and taking its words at face value.

What is it to acquiesce in a mother tongue by "taking its words at face value"? And how does that end the referential regress?

Quine's answer to the first question is that one acquiesces in one's mother tongue simply by using it as one's language.

It is useful to expand on Quine's answer to the second question (about ending the referential regress) by distinguishing two reference relations: a non-relative "immanent" reference relation, for which there is no referential regress, and a relative "transcendent" reference relation, for which there is a referential regress.

Quine distinguishes immanent from transcendent linguistic predicates in his *Philosophy of Logic*.[3] An immanent linguistic predicate is defined only for a particular language; a transcendent predicate is defined for languages in general. The predicate *word* is transcendent, because it is defined for many languages. Tarski's truth predicate *true-in-L* is immanent, because it is defined only for the particular language L.

Within one's own language, one can specify a non-relative immanent notion of reference that satisfies the schema:

Singular term 'E' refers to E

Predicate 'F' refers to Fs

where 'E' and 'F' are replaced by appropriate referring expressions of one's language. In this non-relative immanent sense of 'refers' one's word 'rabbit' really does refer to rabbits. 'Refers' in this sense is an immanent relational predicate, because it is defined only for expressions in one's language.

One might try to use this immanent notion of reference to introduce a transcendent notion of reference that applies to referring expressions in any language. One might say for example that an expression transcendently refers to something iff its translation into one's language immanently refers to that thing. But according to Quine, since there is no determinate non-relative translation relation, there is no transcendent non-relative reference relation.

In fact, Quine suggests that there may be equally adequate (and reasonable) translation schemes from another language into one's own language that provide incompatible translations of certain sentences of the other lan-

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guage. The translation of a particular sentence in the other language is S according to the first scheme of translation and T according to the second scheme, even though S is incompatible with T.[4]

Some think that such indeterminacy is incoherent on the grounds that it implies the sentence in the other language is both true and false. But there is no such implication. All that follows is that transcendent truth is a relative matter.

The point is that one can distinguish an immanent nonrelative truth predicate from a transcendent but relative truth predicate. An immanent truth predicate for one's language endorses all relevant instances of

‘S’ is true if and only if S

This yields an immanent truth predicate because the scheme only makes sense if S is replaced by a sentence in our language.

If translation were not indeterminate, one would be able to define a non-relative transcendent truth predicate in terms of the nonrelative immanent truth predicate:

p is transcendently true iff its translation into into one's language

is immanently true.

But, if Quine is right about indeterminacy of translation, there will also be indeterminacy of transcendent truth so defined.

To be sure, one can define a relativized transcendent notion of truth:

Given an acceptable translation scheme M between L and one's

language, p in L is transcendently true-relative-to M iff M maps

p into something in one's language that is immanently true.

This would allow there to be two acceptable translation schemes such that some sentence in L is transcendently true in relation to one of these schemes and transcendently false in relation to the other. There is no inconsistency in this aspect of Quine's thesis of indeterminacy of translation.

Notes

[1]Frege, G., "Sense and Reference," *Philosophical Writings*, ed., M. Black and P. T. Geach. Blackwell, Oxford (1962), 56-78; Dummett, M., *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* (London: Duckworth, 1991); Peacocke, C., *Being Known* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).; Fodor, J., "Having Concepts: A Brief Refutation of the 20th century," *Mind and Language*, 19 (2004), pp. 29-47.

[2]W. V. Quine, "Ontological Relativity," *Journal of Philosophy* 65 (1968), 185-212. Quotations in the text are from this paper.

[3]W. V. Quine, *Philosophy of Logic*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 19.

[4]W. V. Quine, *Word and Object*, Cambridge, MA, and New York: MIT Press and Wiley, 1960, pp. 73-74.