

Logic and Language: Question 5

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Word count: 4690

“Can we claim that ‘hard’ as applied to chairs ever is denied of hard questions, or vice versa? If not, why not claim that chairs and questions, however unlike, are hard in a single inclusive sense of the word?” (W. V. Quine, *Word and Object*, p. 130). Discuss.

It is natural to think that the word ‘hard’ is ambiguous, and that it is so because it stands for two distinct properties. When used in a sentence like ‘this chair is hard’ it stands for one property, call it the property hard_c (‘c’ for ‘chairs’). When used in a sentence like ‘this question is hard’ it stands for another property, call it the property hard_q (‘q’ for ‘questions’). They are distinct properties because chairs can have the property hard_c but they cannot have the property hard_q , and questions can have the property hard_q but they cannot have the property hard_c . To put it another way, ‘hard’ as predicated of chairs cannot be predicated of questions, in the sense that if ‘hard’ is understood as standing for the property hard_c and if x is a question then ‘ x is hard’ is not a meaningful sentence; nor is it a meaningful sentence if ‘hard’ is understood as standing for the property hard_q and x is a chair. To put it one more way, to say of a chair that it is hard in the sense in which questions are hard, or to say of a question that it is hard in the sense in which chairs are hard, is to make what Ryle would call a *category mistake*.

Quine’s question, I take it, is this: If there is no x such that ‘ x is hard’ is true when ‘hard’ is understood as standing for the property hard_c , but false when ‘hard’ is understood as standing for the property hard_q , and no x such that ‘ x is hard’ is false when ‘hard’ is understood as standing for the property hard_c , but true when ‘hard’ is understood as standing for the property hard_q , then why not claim that the property hard_c and the property hard_q are identical, and thereby take it that ‘hard’ stands for just one property and so is not ambiguous?

I can see at least two interesting issues to discuss. The first is whether or not it is possible (in a sense to be clarified) that the property hard_c and the property hard_q are identical. If they are, then at least some of what we currently believe about them is false - for example, that chairs can have the property hard_c but not the property hard_q , and that questions can have the property hard_q but not the property hard_c . This may be a reason for thinking that the property hard_c and the property hard_q *cannot* be identical. For example, if it is part of what we *mean* by ‘the property hard_c ’ that the property hard_c is a physical property, and part of what we mean by ‘the property hard_q ’ that the property hard_q is *not* a physical property, then we cannot truly say that the property hard_c is identical to the property hard_q , without changing what we mean by ‘the property hard_c ’ or ‘the property hard_q ’. In that case it is not possible that the property hard_c and the property hard_q are identical, in the sense that their being identical is not consistent with certain facts about what our words mean.

The second issue is about ambiguity. The wording of Quine’s question suggests that he thinks that for a word to be ambiguous is for it to stand for more than one thing, so that if we were to take it that the property hard_c is identical to the property hard_q , and hence that ‘hard’ does not stand for more than one thing, then we must *thereby* take it that ‘hard’ is not ambiguous. I think that is wrong. For a word to be ambiguous is not for it to stand for more than one thing, but for it to have more than one meaning, and a word can have more than one meaning even if it stands for just one thing. Moreover, ‘hard’ *does* have more than one meaning (and hence is ambiguous), even if it turns out that the property hard_c is identical to the property hard_q so that ‘hard’ stands for just one thing. This is the issue that I want to discuss.¹

¹ Throughout this essay I will take the identity conditions of a word to be such that ‘hard’ in ‘this chair is hard’ and ‘hard’ in ‘this question is hard’ are identical words, regardless of whether or not they stand for different things or have different meanings. And I will make no distinction between what a word or sentence stands for, or means, or says (etc.), and what a person uses it to stand for, or mean, or say.

I

It is generally agreed, and I will take it to be so, that some words stand for things - names and other singular terms for objects, predicates for properties, relational expressions for relations, and so on. It also generally agreed, and I will also take it to be so, that some words have meanings. What is *not* so generally agreed, and what I will not assume without argument, is that there is a difference between what a word stands for and what it means. Some say that there is, and that two words may stand for the same thing and yet have different meanings. Others say that there is not, and that if two words stand for the same thing then it follows that they have the same meaning.

Whether or not there is a difference between what a word stands for and what the word means, an *ambiguous* word is a word that has more than one meaning. Anyone who claims that a certain word is ambiguous and yet has only one meaning, or that it is not ambiguous and yet has two distinct meanings, would naturally be taken to *misunderstand* either what it is to be ambiguous or what it is to have more than one meaning. To illustrate another way, it would be inconsistent of me to claim that 'light', for example, means 'little in weight' and nothing else but that it is nevertheless an ambiguous word, because to claim that it is ambiguous is to claim that it has more than one meaning. Conversely, it would be inconsistent of me to claim that 'light' means 'little in weight' and also 'pale in colour' where these are distinct meanings but that it is nevertheless not an ambiguous word, because to claim that it is not an ambiguous word is to claim that it does not have more than one distinct meaning.

If the meaning of a word is what the word stands for - that is, if they are identical - then an ambiguous word is a word that stands for more than one thing. Then if it turns out, contrary to what we currently believe, that the property $hard_c$ is identical to the property $hard_q$, then it turns out, contrary to what we currently believe, that the word 'hard' stands for just one property and is not, after all, ambiguous. Then Quine is right, and I am wrong.

II

But whatever the meaning of a word is, it is *not* what the word stands for. For there are certain phenomena such that it is part of the meaning of 'meaning' that we can explain those phenomena by appeal to the meanings of words; we cannot explain those phenomena by appeal to what words stand for; so the meaning of a word is not what the word stands for.

There is a difference, for example, between the thoughts expressed by these two sentences:

- (1) Hesperus rises in the east,
- (2) Phosphorus rises in the east.

Why is there is this difference? Not because the words 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' are different words, because if Peter is often called just 'Pete' then there is no difference between the thoughts expressed by 'Peter is a man' and 'Pete is a man' even though 'Peter' and 'Pete' are different words. And it is not because 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' stand for different things, because they do not - they stand for the same planet. The natural explanation is that 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' have different meanings. In fact, it is part of the meaning of 'meaning' that (1) and (2) express different thoughts because 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' have different meanings: anyone who claims that (1) and (2) express different thoughts but not because 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' have different meanings, or that (1) and (2) express the same thought even though 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' have different meanings, would be taken to misunderstand what we mean by 'meaning'. So, (1) and (2) express different thoughts because 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' have different meanings; 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus'

stand for the same thing; so it is not the case that the meaning of a word is what the word stands for.

To argue against this, one might try denying that (1) and (2) express different thoughts. I am happy to allow that the difference between (1) and (2) that I am pointing to ought not to be described as a difference between the thoughts that they express - perhaps I should describe it as a difference between the concepts that they employ, or between the modes of presentation that they present. I'm not too concerned about what the difference should be called. I am just concerned with the fact that there is one. There *is* a difference there between (1) and (2), and *that* is the difference that I am pointing to.

One might try denying that there is such a difference. But anyone who does so faces two problems. First, think about what (1) says, and then think about what (2) says. You ought to be immediately aware of some cognitive difference. In fact, if you claim that you are not then you will naturally be taken to not understand at least one of (1) or (2). There *is* a difference there, and if you understand (1) and (2) then you are in a position to be aware of it. *That* is the difference to which I am pointing. Anyone who denies that there is this difference is denying a fact that many of us are just *aware* of.

Second, and this is for anyone who feels uneasy about my appealing to differences that are not *publicly* observable: if we deny that there is any difference between the thoughts expressed by (1) and (2) then we are left unable to adequately explain various other phenomena that *are* publicly observable. Someone might, for example, assent to (1) by uttering '(1) is true', but dissent from (2) by uttering '(2) is false'. Why might she do that?

The natural explanation is that she believes that (1) is true and that (2) is false. Of course, this might be wrong - she might, for example, believe that (1) and (2) are both true and be lying or trying to confuse us; but we can add to the story that she is not. Or perhaps she believes that (1) and (2) are both true but some man with a big stick has promised to beat her unless she assents to (1) and dissents from (2); but we can add to the story that no such man has done so. We could go on, adding to the story as much as is required to leave us with nothing to explain her assent to (1) and dissent from (2) except that she believes that (1) is true and that (2) is false. But then, why the difference in attitude?

The natural explanation is that she believes that 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' stand for different things, the first of which rises in the east and the second of which does not. Of course, this might be wrong - she might, for example, believe that 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' stand for the same thing but that 'rises in the east' stands for one thing in (1) and for a distinct thing in (2); but we can add to the story that she does not. Then why does she believe that 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' stand for different things?

It might be because she sees that they are different words. But we can add to the story that she believes that the names 'Peter' and 'Pete' stand for the same person, even though they are different words, and that she acknowledges that different words can stand for the same thing; then it is no good explaining her belief that 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' stand for different things by appealing to the fact that she sees that they are different words, for then why does she not believe that 'Peter' and 'Pete' stand for different things? It cannot be that she believes that 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' stand for different things because 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' do in fact stand for different things, because they do not. It seems that we are unable to explain her belief that 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' stand for different things unless we can appeal to some difference between the words, apart from their being distinct, and apart from their standing for different things. If that difference is not a difference between what they *mean*, then I cannot see what else it is. And if there is nothing else, then we are left unable to adequately explain the publicly observable phenomenon that we began with: that someone utters '(1) is true' and '(2) is false'.

This is just the beginning of a more thorough argument. But I think that it is enough of a beginning to give a sense of how that argument will go. Whatever meanings are, the meanings of 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' are whatever they must be in order to account for certain phenomena; in order to account for certain phenomena to do with sentences (1) and (2) the meanings of 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' must be different; so they are.

III

The meaning of a word is not what the word stands for. Moreover, 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' have different meanings even though they stand for the same thing. So if two words stand for the same thing then it does *not* follow that they have the same meaning.

But what if one word stands for just one thing? Does it follow that that word has just one meaning? In my opening remarks I claimed that it does not. But the stated fact about 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' does not show that I am right, because 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' are distinct words. What I need is an example of one word that has more than one meaning even though it stands for just one thing. Either that, or an argument for why such words are possible. For if there is such a word, or at least possibly such a word, then it does not follow that if a word stands for just one thing then it has only one meaning.

It *is* possible for a word to have more than one meaning even if it stands for just one thing. Suppose that when the Babylonians were naming Hesperus and Phosphorus they used the same name for each, say 'Hesperus'. Given that they believed that they were naming different things, it may not have been a wise idea for them to do so, because it would have increased their possibility of misunderstanding. But they could have. After all, we often give the same name to people that we know to be distinct, even when we know that it will cause some confusion (some people even name their children after themselves). Had the Babylonians used 'Hesperus' and 'Hesperus' instead of 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus', then my arguments in the previous section would still hold good, only instead of showing that 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' have different meanings and yet stand for the same thing they would show that 'Hesperus' and 'Hesperus' have different meanings and yet stand for the same thing. That is, they would show that 'Hesperus' has more than one meaning and yet stands for just one thing. So it is possible for a word to have more than one meaning even if it stands for just one thing.

It is possible, then, for a word to be ambiguous even if it stands for just one thing. So it does not follow, as Quine suggests that it does, that if 'hard' stands for just one property then 'hard' is not ambiguous. 'Hard' might be ambiguous, even if the property hard_c is the property hard_q .

IV

'Hard' *is* ambiguous, even if the property hard_c is the property hard_q , because 'hard' has more than one meaning. In this final section I am going to give two arguments for why.

First argument. 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' have different meanings and I know that they do. I knew that as soon as I came to understand them; I came to understand them by being taught what they mean; so whoever taught me what 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' mean gave me the knowledge that they have different meanings.

I don't remember who did or exactly what I was told. I doubt that I was explicitly told that 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' have different meanings. I might have been told that the Babylonians used 'Hesperus' to refer to the evening star and 'Phosphorus' to refer to the morning star. But by itself that would not have been enough to give me the knowledge that 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' have different meanings. For it would not have told me whether or not they knew that the evening star is the morning star, and if they did then they might well have

been using the two words with the same meaning. But if I was told that the Babylonians did not know that the evening star is the morning star, then that *would* have given me the knowledge that ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ have different meanings.

I might have been told that some Babylonian at some time pointed to a bright object in the evening sky and declared that it be called ‘Hesperus’, and then at same later time he pointed to a bright object in the morning sky and declared that it be called ‘Phosphorus’. But by itself that would not have been enough to let me know that ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ have different meanings. For it would not have told me whether or not that Babylonian knew on the second occasion that he was pointing to the same object, and if he did then he might well have been introducing ‘Phosphorus’ as another word with the same meaning as ‘Hesperus’. But if I was told that that Babylonian did not know on the second occasion that he was pointing to the same object, then that *would* have given me the knowledge that ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ have different meanings.

Whatever I was told, I was given, I claim, three crucial facts: (i) that some Babylonian B knew what ‘Hesperus’ means, (ii) that B knew what ‘Phosphorus’ means, and (iii) that B did not know that Hesperus is Phosphorus. Being told those three facts is what gave me the knowledge that ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ have different meanings.

I don’t think that it *follows* from those three facts that ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ have different meanings. For suppose that I have a friend named ‘Peter’ that I usually just call ‘Pete’, so that ‘Peter’ and ‘Pete’ have the same meaning. Someone might argue against the claim that the identity relation holds between Peter and himself, so well, in fact, that he takes away my present belief that Peter is Pete. He would thereby take away my present knowledge that Peter is Pete. Then I would know what ‘Peter’ means, I would know what ‘Pete’ means, I would not know that Peter is Pete, but ‘Peter’ and ‘Pete’ would still have the same meaning.

But being told those three facts is, nevertheless, and for some reason, enough to give me the knowledge that ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ have different meanings. That is not an absurd claim: suppose that I ask you what Mary is like as a philosopher and you tell me that she has very neat handwriting. Then what you said does not *entail* that Mary is not a good philosopher, but it nevertheless gives me, in appropriate circumstances, the knowledge that she is not.

Now suppose that Mary does not know the word ‘hard’. Then I can tell her a story about ‘hard’ that will give her the knowledge that ‘hard’ has more than one meaning. I can tell her that sometimes I use the word ‘hard’ to stand for *this* property, using ‘this’ to demonstrate the property hard_c , perhaps by asking her to sit on a hard chair. This will tell her that I know what ‘hard’ means when I use it in this way. Then I can tell her that sometimes I use the word ‘hard’ to stand for *that* property, using ‘that’ to demonstrate the property hard_q , perhaps by asking her to answer a hard question. This will tell her that I know what ‘hard’ means when I use it in that way. Then I can tell her that I believe that the two properties are distinct. This will tell her that I do not believe and hence do not know that hard is hard. Then I will have told her the three facts about ‘hard’ that correspond to the facts (i), (ii) and (iii) about ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’. Those second three facts were sufficient to give me the knowledge that ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ have different meanings, so the first three facts are sufficient to give Mary the knowledge that ‘hard’ has more than one meaning. Mary can only be given knowledge of something that is true. So ‘hard’ has more than one meaning. That is, ‘hard’ is ambiguous.

Second argument. For this argument I want to consider a phenomenon that Quine himself draws attention to.² Suppose that upon leaving an examination I utter the sentence:

- (3) The chair and questions were hard.

² See Quine (1960), p. 130.

There is something *strange* about (3) (Quine calls it “an air of zeugma”). What is it for a sentence to be strange in this way? That is, what is this strangeness?

Strangeness is not meaninglessness, because (3) is strange even though it is not meaningless. If (3) were meaningless, then I would not be able to use it to say something. But you and I might well agree that by uttering (3) I have said something, and you might well take yourself to understand what I have said. In fact, you might well take it that I have said something *true*. So (3) is not meaningless, and strangeness is not meaninglessness.

Quine asks of the strangeness of (3), “... is it not due merely to the dissimilarity of chairs and questions?”, suggesting that for a sentence to be strange is for it to say, when uttered, something about two very unlike kinds of things - chairs and questions in the case of (3). But the following sentence is *not* strange:

(4) The chair and questions were concrete objects.

If Quine’s suggestion is right, then why is (4) not strange, given that when uttered it also says something about chairs and questions?

Moreover, we can change the example to get a strange sentence, even though when uttered it does *not* say something about very unlike kinds of things. Suppose that my mother and my sister both married men named ‘Harry’. Then the following sentence is strange:

(5) My mother and my sister both married Harry.

But my mother and my sister are *not* very unlike.

Perhaps, though, my mother and my sister *do* count as very unlike things. If so, we can change the example again to get a sentence that is strange, even though by uttering it I would be saying something about *identical* things, and identical things surely do not count as very unlike, no matter what one’s standards of likeness. Suppose that Hesperus was named ‘Hesperus’ by a man named ‘Harry’, and that Phosphorus was named ‘Phosphorus’ by another (distinct) man named ‘Harry’. Then the following sentence is strange:

(6) Hesperus and Phosphorus were named by Harry.

Hesperus and Phosphorus are surely not unlike things, because Hesperus *is* Phosphorus. To be a strange sentence is *not* to say, when uttered, something about very unlike things.

One natural thought is that for a sentence to be strange is for it to contain a word such that in order for the sentence to be understood as saying something true that word must be understood as standing for more than one thing in a single use. The idea comes from noticing that in order to understand (3) as saying something true we must understand the single use of ‘hard’ as standing for both the property $hard_c$ and the property $hard_q$; if ‘hard’ is understood as standing just for the property $hard_c$ then it cannot be truly predicated of the questions, and if it is understood as just standing for the property $hard_q$ then it cannot be truly predicated of the chair; in order for (3) to be understood as saying something true we must understand ‘hard’ as standing for the property $hard_q$ when it is predicated of the questions *and* as standing for the property $hard_c$ when it is predicated of the chair. Similar remarks apply to (5) and (6).

But suppose that my two sisters, Jill and Jane, go away for a holiday. My brother Jack and I, back at home, hear all about the marriage of one sister to a man named ‘Harry’. Later, we hear all about the marriage of our other sister to a man named ‘Harry’, and we think that it’s very funny that they should both fall in love with and marry men with the same name, taking it that

Harry and Harry are different men. My brother now goes away for a holiday somewhere else, and while he is away my two sisters return, at which time I discover, to my great surprise, that Harry and Harry are the same person - that is, that my sisters married the same man. My brother does not yet know this. Now consider the sentence:

(7) Jack believes that Jill and Jane married Harry.

In the circumstances described, (7) is a strange sentence. But it can be understood as saying something true, when uttered, without any of its words having to be understood as standing for more than one thing in a single use: I, for example, can understand it as saying something true, even though I know that 'Jack', 'Jill', 'Jane' and, most importantly, 'Harry' all stand for just one person. And yet when I do so I still find it strange. So the proposed account of strangeness cannot be right.

This leaves us, I believe, with no account of strangeness, unless we appeal to *meaning*. My claim is this: for a sentence to be strange is for it to contain a word (or other expression) such that in order for the sentence to be understood as saying something true that word must be understood as being used with more than one meaning in a single use (rather than as standing for more than one thing). This is similar to, but importantly different from, the previous proposal, because a word can be used with more than one meaning even though it stands for just one thing, as 'Hesperus' would be if it were used to name both Hesperus and Phosphorus, and as 'Harry' is in the story just told.

I have no knock-down argument for why this is the correct account of strangeness. But it is intuitively plausible, it explains the data presented by sentences (3) - (7), and no other account that I know of does. We should, then, take this as our working account. Then, according to it, (1) is strange because in order to understand it as saying something true, which we can do, we must understand 'hard' as being used with more than one meaning in a single use. But 'hard' cannot be understood as being used with more than one meaning unless it *has* more than one meaning. So 'hard' has more than one meaning. That is, 'hard' is ambiguous.

REFERENCES

Quine, W. V. (1960), *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press).