

PHIL 332: Philosophy of Language
Class 18: Quine on Radical Translation

1. Quine's question: how should we properly (i.e. scientifically) engage in radical translation?
2. In short: by matching up our dispositions to verbal behaviour – our dispositions to utter certain expressions under certain conditions of sensory stimulation.
3. Start by observing the natives' linguistic behaviour. 'Gavagai'.
4. Then start to prompt assent and dissent (or neither): 'Gavagai?'
5. Should think that what does the prompting is not things such as rabbits, but stimulations, which we can take to be patterns of chromatic irradiation of the eye.
6. In some cases the stimulations will be what prompts the response, in other cases not (someone is away tracking a giraffe). We have ways of telling which (e.g. looks of recognition).
7. Better to use stimulations that have duration up to some *modulus*, which should not be too long or too short. Can use of a blindfold. Should also take them to be whole scenes. So a stimulation is "an evolving ocular irradiation pattern between properly timed blindfoldings".
8. *Affirmative stimulus meaning* of a sentence for a speaker: the class of all stimulations that would prompt his assent. A stimulation σ belongs to the affirmative stimulus meaning of a sentence S for a given speaker iff there is a stimulation σ' such that if the speaker were given σ' , then were asked S , then were given σ , and then were asked S again, he would dissent the first time and assent the second.

Negative stimulus meaning of a sentence for a speaker: the class of all stimulations that would prompt his dissent. (Assent followed by dissent.)

Stimulus meaning of a sentence for a speaker: the ordered pair of its affirmative and negative stimulus meanings.

9. Note: the stimulus meaning of a sentence is relative not only to a speaker but also to a time and a modulus. It is the stimulus meaning modulo n seconds of sentence S for speaker a at time t .

The positive and negative stimulus meanings are mutually exclusive but not exhaustive.

Could talk about dispositions to assent, rather than what the speaker would do.

10. *Occasion* sentences ('Gavagai', 'Red', 'It hurts', 'His face is dirty') command assent or dissent only if queried after an appropriate prompting stimulation. Not so for *standing* sentences ('There is ether drift', 'The crocuses are out', 'The *Times* has come').
11. Problem for stimulus meaning: depends on collateral information – rabbit fly, movement in the grass, mimicking others. Would be better to rule out assent and dissent elicited by anything but understanding of the sentence. But how do we do that?
12. *Observation sentences*: occasion sentences whose stimulus meanings vary none under the influence of collateral information. Comes in degrees: 'Red' at one extreme, 'Bachelor' at the other. This is a social notion, unlike stimulus meaning.
13. The more observational a sentence, the more nearly its stimulus meanings for different speakers coincide. E.g. 'Red' versus 'Gavagai'. Could use this as a definition of 'observational'. In fact Quine does.
14. Stimulus meaning does a poor job of capturing our intuitive notion of meaning for non-observational sentences. But the stimulus meanings of 'Bachelor' and 'Unmarried man' are identical *for a speaker*. *Stimulus synonymy* serves well for synonymy when we stick to one speaker, even if stimulus meaning does not serve well for meaning.
15. Stimulus meaning is what the radical translator should take as the objective reality. Must do our best with that.
16. What about meanings of words? Stimulus synonymy of 'Rabbit' and 'Gavagai' does not guarantee that 'rabbit' and 'gavagai' have the same meaning, nor even that they have the same extension: rabbit stage, undetached rabbit part, the rabbit fusion, rabbithood.
17. Not only can we not be sure whether they have the same meaning, but there is not even an objective matter to be right or wrong about (unlike whether or not 'Gavagai' and 'Rabbit' have the same stimulus meaning). Individual words or phrases do not have any determinate meaning.
18. This is his principle of the indeterminacy of translation.