

Quine, Structure, and Ontology

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5

Inscrutability of Reference as a Result of Quine's Structuralism

Jaroslav Peregrin

5.1 Introduction

In a short paper published in the early nineties, Quine (1992) writes:

The point I now want to make is one that over the years I have repeatedly made in terms of what I call proxy functions. The point is that if we transform the range of objects of our science in any one-to-one fashion, by reinterpreting our terms and predicates as applying to the new objects instead of the old ones, the entire evidential support of our science will remain undisturbed. The reason is twofold. First, implication hinges only on logical structure and is independent of what the objects, the values of the variables, may be. Second, the association of observation sentences with ranges of neural input is holophrastic. It is independent of reifications, independent of whatever objects the observation sentences or their parts may be taken to refer to as terms. The conclusion is that there can be no evidence for one ontology as over against another, so long anyway as we can express a one-to-one correlation between them. Save the structure and you save all. (1992: 8)

The last sentence in particular indicates that it may not be far-fetched, as I indicated in my book (Peregrin 2001) to call Quine a structuralist. (Well, perhaps a structuralist *of sorts*.) Of course, this is no surprising discovery: Quine had already expressed similar views earlier (only possibly not in this succinct way). Thus in *Things and their Places in Theories* Quine (1981) writes:

Structure is what matters to a theory, and not the choice of its objects. F. P. Ramsey urged this point fifty years ago, arguing along other lines, and in a vague way it had been a persistent theme also in Russell's *Analysis of Matter*. But Ramsey and Russell were talking only of what they called theoretical objects, as opposed to observable objects. I extend the doctrine to objects generally, for I see all objects as theoretical. This is a consequence of taking seriously the insight that I traced from Bentham—namely, the semantic primacy of sentences. It is occasion sentences, not terms, that are to be seen as conditioned to stimulations. Even our primordial objects, bodies, are already theoretical—most conspicuously so when we look to their individuation over time.

Whether we encounter the same apple the next time around, or only another one like it, is settled if at all by inference from a network of hypotheses that we have internalized little by little in the course of acquiring the non-observational superstructure of our language.

(1981: 20)

What is the precise sense in which Quine may be said to be a structuralist?

5.2 The Structural Nature of Reference

I suggest that we should see Quine's structuralism as operating on two relatively independent levels, which are not clearly differentiated either in Quine's writings, or in the writings of his interpreters. On the lower level there is the structuralism directly concerning reference. This is a structuralism in the relatively shallow sense, unfolding from the observation that models of logical theories are always determined only *up to isomorphism*¹—i.e. if some domain of objects is a model of the theory (and hence can be said to comprise the objects the theory is *about*), then any other domain of objects isomorphic with it is also its model (and hence also *its* objects are what can be said the theory is about).² Hence whoever takes a theory to be fully regimentable in a logical language (especially as a formalized theory within first-order predicate calculus) is a structuralist, in this sense, with respect to the (domain of objects of the) theory. It is clear that in such a case it comes naturally to say that what the theory is *really* about is a matter of the structure shared by all the isomorphic domains, not about the peculiar objects of this or that domain.³ Take, for instance, arithmetic. If we agree that there is nothing more to it than the Peano axioms, then *any* countable domain of objects, of course equipped with the appropriate relations and functions, can serve as its model. Mathematical structuralism is thus forthcoming.⁴

Of course, not everybody is a mathematical structuralist. But those who are not are bound to maintain that there *is* something more to arithmetic than the axioms. They may hold that the axioms spell out a structure, but that arithmetic deals with

¹ Given a domain of objects D plus a collection of relations $\langle R_i \rangle_{i \in I}$ over the domain (i.e. every R_i is included in a Cartesian power D^n for some n) and/or a collection of operations $\langle O_j \rangle_{j \in J}$ on the domain (i.e. every O_j maps a Cartesian power D^m , for some m , on D), then a mapping f of D on a domain D' with a collection of relations $\langle R'_i \rangle_{i \in I}$ and a collection of operations $\langle O'_j \rangle_{j \in J}$ is an isomorphism iff the following holds: for every $a_1, \dots, a_n \in D$ and every $i \in I$, $R_i(a_1, \dots, a_n)$ iff $R'_i(f(a_1), \dots, f(a_n))$, and for every $a_1, \dots, a_m \in D$ and every $j \in J$, $f(O_j(a_1, \dots, a_m)) = O'_j(f(a_1), \dots, f(a_m))$. An isomorphism is called an *automorphism* if D' coincides with D and all the R'_i 's and O'_j 's coincide with the respective R_i 's and O_j 's.

² Insofar as we see our universe as all-encompassing, all the isomorphisms we consider are bound to be its automorphisms.

³ This leads Quine to conclude that in principle every first-order theory could be construed as being about natural numbers, the construal he calls 'Pythagorean ontology'. See Quine (1969: 59).

⁴ Quine summarizes this by saying that 'there is no saying absolutely what numbers are, there is only arithmetic' (1969: 45).

this structure as displayed by some specific kind of objects: ‘numbers.’⁵ But even those who do accept mathematical structuralism may hold that the situation is very different when it comes to *empirical* theories. In this case the terms of the theory *refer to* some *concrete* objects—hence in *this* case, it would seem, the theory is about *particular* objects, *particular* substances, not a mere structure.

But what is reference and does it tie empirical theories to their objects really this firmly and unequivocally? It may seem that to establish this we need not go into an analysis of reference (a concept that is far from transparent), that it is enough to realize that stating an empirical theory we have one more powerful tool over and above those we may use when formulating a non-empirical one—namely *ostension*. We can say ‘A rabbit is *this*’ and thereby we preclude the possibility of interpreting our theory as being about cats. Thus it seems that while in the case of non-empirical theories, some amount of structuralism may be inevitable (unless we hold that even in their case there is some analogue of ostension, perhaps a purely mental act), in the case of empirical theories we can evade it quite straightforwardly.

However, one of the important lessons Quine tried to teach us was that this is an illusion. True, as a matter of empirical fact, sentences like ‘A rabbit is *this*’ are tied to certain situations, which makes it possible to to exclude many hypotheses about reference, but it can never pinpoint a *unique* one. (Once we see that among the situations to which a sentence is tied are not only those in which rabbits graze in a meadow, but also those where they are in a forest, we are sure it cannot be the equivalent of our ‘A meadow is *this*.’) A concrete object has spatial and temporal boundaries, and pointing cannot determine such boundaries, hence there are always many (overlapping) objects we are pointing at, differing precisely in these boundaries. True, most of such possibilities are usually excluded on pragmatic grounds (normally we do not consider possibilities that are too bizarre); Quine, however, argued, in effect, that this in no way cancels the fact that there *is* this multiplicity.

Hence if we accept Quine’s argument, a certain amount of structuralism concerning reference is inevitable even in the case of empirical theories. Quine’s diagnosis is that this simply follows from the fact that what we are getting from the world are merely stimulations, which we reconstruct as manifestations of a world of objects, where the reconstruction is not uniquely determined by the stimulations; it leaves us a certain leeway.

5.3 The Structural Nature of Meaning

In section 5.2 we pointed out that the nature of reference, according to Quine, is essentially structural. This, we can say, is for the following reason: whenever one gives

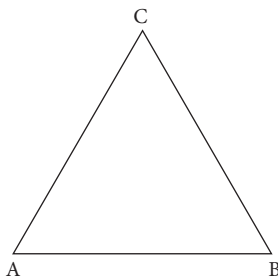
⁵ Frege (1976: 73), for example, famously claims that axioms of geometry are not enough, for they do not let one decide whether one’s pocket watch is a point or not.

a specification of the reference relation, I can come up with a *different* relation, which, however, leaves all the relevant properties of this relation in place (viz. is isomorphic to it). Now there is one more wholly parallel consideration, pointed out by Quine, which, however, does not concern directly reference, but rather meaning: whenever one gives a specification of a translation of a language, i.e. a relation between two languages, I can come up with a different relation, which, however, leaves all the relevant properties of this relation in place (and hence, again, is in this sense isomorphic to it).

What, in this latter case, are 'the relevant properties'? They are those which can be determined by a translator as facts concerning the meanings of the expressions of the language, viz. the ways they are employed by their speakers. They are properties such that a sentence is tied to a situation (in the sense that the speakers tend to agree with the sentence in the situation), or to other sentences (that the speakers tend to agree with it whenever they tend to agree with the other sentences) etc. (Personally, I would call these properties 'inferential' in a broad sense of the word,⁶ but this is not Quine's preferred idiom.) And Quine's radical translation experiment indicated that these properties indeed allow for certain non-trivial automorphisms; meaning is thus bound to be structural in the sense that it is the invariant of these automorphisms.

Thus, it is important to see that aside the level structuralism discussed in section 5.2, there is also a higher level which does not concern directly reference, but rather meanings (or, if we want to follow Quine in avoiding the reification of meanings, meaningful expressions). This, I suggest, is the crucial level and we will concentrate on it in the rest of the chapter. While the lower level had to do with the isomorphisms of universes ('proxy functions'), this upper one concerns the automorphisms of language, as they come to the fore when we consider the Quinean experiments with the indeterminacy of translation. These experiments document that if we map, for example, *rabbit* on *undetached rabbit part* (while mapping certain other words on suitable alternatives), the properties of expressions that are substantial from the viewpoint of their translation (and hence their semantics) remain untouched.

I think that the nature of meanings, which emerge from these considerations, can be elucidated by their comparison to the objects of geometry. Imagine, for this purpose, an equilateral triangle with the vertices *A*, *B*, and *C*:



⁶ I tend to think that these properties are essentially *normative*, viz. that meanings are essentially roles conferred on expressions by *rules*, especially *inferential* rules. See Peregrin (2014).

Is its vertex *A* ‘the same’ as the vertex *B*? The obvious answer is no—if the two vertices were identical, *ABC* would not be a triangle, but rather a line (or a point, in the extreme case when even *C* would coincide with *A* and *B*). However, we can construe the question also in a different way, so that the answer to it is yes. From the viewpoint of geometry, *A* and *B* are both vertices of an equilateral triangle with sides of the same length and hence, from this viewpoint, they are indistinguishable. Should someone take ‘*A*’ to be the name of the vertex *B* (taking ‘*B*’ to be the name of *C* and ‘*C*’ to be the name of *A*), from the viewpoint of geometry (in contrast to the viewpoint of talking about a particular figure at a particular region of space-time) it could not be classified as misunderstanding.

In this sense, geometry is structuralist—its subject matter is a pure structure. This is, of course, no surprise. But what we suggest is that semantics, according to Quine, is structuralist in a very similar sense: we must take meanings not as links between words and specific referents, but rather as nodes in a certain structure. The point is that just like reference, for all we care, is invariant to certain isomorphisms or automorphisms, meaning is also invariant to certain automorphisms and thus is, in this sense, structural. But here the structure that is the basis of the relevant automorphisms is very different—it is the structure of the language itself. It follows that there may always be two different answers to the question whether two nodes of the structure—viz. two meanings or two expressions taken from the viewpoint of their semantics—are the same: the nodes may be different in the sense that they do not coincide in the particular structure, but at the same time they may be the same in the sense that they may be mapped one on another by a suitable automorphism of the structure. And what Quine claims can, in effect, be expressed so that the semantic structure of any language allows for some nontrivial automorphisms that leave any detectable semantic properties intact.

This is reminiscent of the primal structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure (1931), which is characterized by his conviction that the ‘vertical’ relations between the signifiers and the signifieds (expressions and their meanings) are underlain (rather than underlying) the ‘horizontal’ relation among signs (meaningful expressions). It follows that to be a sign is to occupy a peculiar place within the network of ‘horizontal’ relations (though while according to de Saussure, these are merely relations among signs, Quine acknowledges that there are also certain relations between sentences—or theories—and the extralinguistic world that co-constitute meanings).⁷

Of course, if meaning is to determine reference, it is not only the previous lower level of structuralism (concerning reference directly) that affects reference, this higher level affects it too, and though it does so indirectly, it does it with a more devastating effect. In fact, its manifestation in the realm of reference is the *inscrutability* of reference. Thus while the lower level entailed merely that referents are not concrete

⁷ See Peregrin (2001) for a more detailed discussion

objects, but rather nodes in a structure, this higher level implies that referents are not really determined even as such structural entities, for even meanings that are supposed to determine them are structural, which prevents them from determining reference even in this structurally unique way. Thus, in the end reference is not only structural, but it is completely dissipated: the only use of the term 'reference' that is available to Quine here is a deflationary one: 'rabbit' refers to rabbits, 'undetached rabbit part' refers to undetached rabbit parts; and in particular any expression refers to what it refers to.⁸

Note also that to say that the nature of semantic entities is structural in no way means that they could not be construed as objects. This is very well known from the philosophy of mathematics: even those who maintain that arithmetic is not about particular objects, but rather about a certain structure do not doubt that it is possible, and it may be sometimes useful, to construe the nodes of the structure as objects⁹.

5.4 Quine's Structuralism

In view of what comes it may be useful to summarize Quine's structuralist approach to semantics in a few main points:

1. A rabbit and an undetached part of the rabbit—and hence, more generally, rabbits and undetached rabbit parts—are certainly different things. (In the sense in which the vertices *A* and *B* of the triangle we discussed above are different points.)

2. There is, however, an automorphism of the structure constituting the semantics of our language which maps the meaning of *rabbit* on that of *undetached rabbit part* (and *vice versa*), hence a word can be seen as meaning the former just as well as it can be seen as meaning the latter, hence *meaning rabbit* and *meaning undetached rabbit parts* are, in this sense, not two different things. (In the sense, that is, in which *A* and *B* of the triangle are *not* different points.)

3. In so far as there is a sense in which *meaning rabbit* and *meaning undetached rabbit part* are *not* different things, there is, in force of the fact that reference is determined by meaning, also a sense in which *referring to rabbits* and *referring to undetached rabbit part* are not different things.

4. Insofar as there is a sense in which *referring to rabbits* and *referring to undetached rabbit part* are *not* different things, whatever is seen as referred to by *rabbit* under one interpretation of language can be seen as referring to by *undetached rabbit part* on another interpretation. A restriction is, however, that when *rabbit* is made to refer to

⁸ As Davidson (1979: 233–4) puts it, 'any claim about reference, however, many times relativized, will be as meaningless as "Socrates is taller than"'.
⁹ They are then, as Shapiro (1997: 104) puts it 'places-as-objects'.

the referent of *undetached rabbit part*, the latter must, at the same time, be made to refer to something else. This means that though there is nothing that could be referred to by *rabbit*, but not by *undetached rabbit part*, the two expressions can never, at the same time, refer to the same thing. (Hence if someone wants to gloss the former point so that there is a sense in which *rabbit* and *undetached rabbit part* are not different things, then the latter point shows why this does not contradict 1.)

Finally, let me stress that Quine makes it clear that the structuralism he is aiming at must stop short before sweeping conclusions of the kind of ‘everything is structure’. At the end of his article, Quine (1992) writes:

My global structuralism should not, therefore, be seen as a structuralist ontology. To see it thus would be to rise above naturalism and revert to the sin of transcendental metaphysics. My tentative ontology continues to consist of quarks and their compounds, also classes of such things, classes of such classes, and so on, pending evidence to the contrary. My global structuralism is a naturalistic thesis about the mundane human activity, within our world of quarks, of devising theories of quarks and the like in the light of physical impacts on our physical surfaces. (1992: 9)

Hence it is clear that Quine’s structuralist ambitions are limited. What he is after is not ‘a structuralist ontology’, a reduction of everything there is to some kind of structure. This, he knows, would be self-stultifying. As I understand him, the thing is that as we are always situated within a coordinate system of a language, we have no problem with reference and ontology: ‘rabbit’ refers to rabbits, the furry animals with long ears; and of course these animals are not structures, but tangible living organisms. The structuralism of semantics surfaces only when we release ourselves from the coordinate system and compare it with other ones.¹⁰

Hence, Quine’s ‘global structuralism’, as he puts it, ‘is a naturalistic thesis about the mundane human activity’. Which human activity? Well, though Quine does not put it quite explicitly here, obviously it concerns the activities we call *linguistic*, our ‘language games’. And it follows that there is one kind of objects the nature of which is revealed as entirely ‘structural’, namely meanings. At least, this is what I am arguing for.

5.5 Language as a Lego

While the most distinguished semanticists of the first half of the twentieth century concurred in basing their theories of meaning on variants of the representational paradigm, the second half witnessed the rise of what has later come to be called *use-theories of meaning* and which came to serve as a viable alternative to

¹⁰ Just like when we lock ourselves to a single coordinate system in our physical space, no Einsteinian relativity is in view—it may come into view only when we come to contemplate multiple coordinate systems and relationships between them.

representationalism.¹¹ The pioneer of this novel view of language was the later Wittgenstein (though the view was surely not unprecedented). Thus Wittgenstein (1969), writes:

Language is like a collection of very various tools. In the tool box there is a hammer, a saw, a rule, a lead, a glue pot, and glue. Many of the tools are akin to each other in form and use, and the tools can be roughly divided into groups according to their relationships; but the boundaries between these groups will often be more or less arbitrary and there are various types of relationship that cut across one another. (1969: §31)

Also Quine's approach to meaning is basically use-theoretic.¹² According to him, to learn the meaning of an expression, it is necessary and sufficient to learn how the competent speakers of the corresponding language use the expression—hence meaning consists in use (at least insofar as we are willing to accept the concept of meaning at all, which Quine is constantly on the verge of rejecting). But I would like to point out one important peculiarity of Quine's version of use-theory: Quine realizes that what can be used to achieve something is not a word and sometimes not even a sentence, but only a bunch of sentences.

This, of course, is nothing too surprising—it is simply Quine's notorious holism. But consider what kind of toolbox language is from this holistic viewpoint. What corresponds to tools like the hammer or the saw are surely not individual words—an individual word, unlike a hammer or a saw, is not something that can, by itself, be put to use to accomplish anything useful. Quine's holism is about the fact that if any elements of language are like tools, then they are theories, or, as he puts it (Quine 1991: 268), 'clusters of sentences that have critical semantic mass'. But language, ultimately, consist of *words*—so if something like the toolbox simile is to be used, it would need to accommodate the words.

What I would like to propose is that to understand Quine's picture of language, the best simile to use is a *lego-like tool-constructing set*. What I mean by this is the following: nowadays you can buy all kinds of specialized construction sets for your kids, a set for constructing houses, another for constructing farm animals, or for constructing spaceships—so imagine a set for constructing tools, like a hammer, a saw, or pliers. The set contains lots of tiny pieces, none of which is useful by itself; but all of them are usable, in variable ways, for constructing the tools. And my proposal is that according to Quine, words are just like pieces of such a set—none of them is useful by itself, but it is designed to conspire with other pieces of the set to produce something which does have a use.

Some consequences follow. First, while in the case of a tool such as a hammer or saw it is possible (though perhaps not always quite easy) to specify what is its use, the use of a piece of a tool-constructing set is something much more elusive. The use of such a piece can be specified only relatively to uses of other pieces of the set,

¹¹ See Peregrin (2011).

¹² See Quine (1978).

and such specification is far from unequivocal. (If certain pieces together can be used to make up a hammer, what is the contribution of one of the pieces? And what is its use if it can *also* be used to construct a saw and pliers?) It is like specifying the contribution of a person who plays football, volleyball, or some other collective sport, to the performance of her team—it is perhaps not utterly impossible, but there is no *one right* way to do it. (Who is to be credited for the wonderful pass? The guy who sent it, or the one who assumed the right place to be able to receive it?)

The meaning of an individual word is always the product of a decomposition of the uses of various sentences and theories of which it is a part, and as such it can be individuated in various competing ways. And, moreover, given that the contribution can be specified only relatively to those of other words, the meaning of a word is in this sense incurably internal to the language. And the consequence of this fact, viz. the fact that there is no saying what the meaning of a word is without mentioning meanings of other words, also means that there is an inevitable ambiguity regarding *sameness of meaning*—though two expressions may have different meanings in the sense that their roles in language do not coincide, the roles may be the same in the sense that one of the expressions can assume the role of the other without disturbing any semantic facts.

The lego of language is used to ultimately achieve various things, to play various language games; and some of the pieces of the lego may, from the viewpoint of all these things and games, be interchanged with certain other pieces without causing any significant change. Let us say that two expressions have *the same*₁ meanings if they are interchangeable without a restriction; and let us say that have *the same*₂ meanings if they are interchangeable only provided some other expressions are also interchanged. In the first case, the functioning of the expressions is identical without any qualification; in the second case their respective functionings are interlinked via an automorphism. Thus, the English *rabbit* and *undetached rabbit part* have the same₂ meanings, but they do not have the same₁ meanings.

5.6 Horwich

Let us now turn our attention to a helpful discussion of the Quinean indeterminacy as given by Horwich (1998). He reconstructs the Quinean predicament in the following way:

To begin, then, at Quine's final step, let us imagine that we have established an 'indeterminacy' thesis (I):

(I) There are two adequate manuals of translation between language *J* and English such that according to one of them the translation of foreign word *v* is '*e*' and according to the other the translation is '*e**'—where '*e*' and '*e**' are not regarded as coreferential by English speakers (i.e. we do not accept 'Something is *e* if and only if it is *e**').

And let us also assume thesis (M):

(M) If a word has a meaning then an adequate translation of that word must have the same meaning,

and thesis (S):

(S) If two English (context-insensitive) referring expressions have the same meaning then they are regarded as coreferential by speakers of English.

It follows from these theses that v does not have a meaning. For if it did then, given (M), any adequate translation of v would have the same meaning. Therefore, given (I), both ' e ' and ' e^* ' would have that meaning, hence the same meaning as one another. And therefore, given (S), ' e ' and ' e^* ' would be regarded as coreferential, which, given (I), they are not. Therefore v does not have a meaning; so, given (M) and (I), neither does ' e ' or ' e^* '. Thus if premises (I), (M), and (S) can be shown to be typically correct, then Quine's renunciation of meanings will be quite justified. (1989: 198–9)

Horwich then argues that to escape the skeptical conclusion one would have to give up one of the three theses; and Quine, who would want to hold (I) and can hardly reject (S), would have to give up (M). I think this is basically correct, but to understand Quine's structuralist position, we have to analyse what such a rejection of (M) amounts to in greater detail.

Horwich's employment of the terms of *reference* may give the impression that the difference in meaning between the English *rabbit* and *undetached rabbit part* is 'absolute', in that each of the expressions is connected, by the relation of reference, with a different kind of object. However, this is what Quine denies; he argues that the difference is merely 'relative'—the meanings and consequently the references of the two expressions is co-constituted by their opposition, by the fact that they are not freely interchangeable in English. (They can be interchanged only when we also interchange many other words.) Reference is not a fibre that would bind expressions firmly to reality, one expression to a unique kind of object and another one to another unique kind. Reference connects an expression to whatever its meaning directs it at, and meaning is a matter of the position of the expression within language. As we pointed out above, the only use of the term 'reference' that is available to a translator of an unknown language is a deflationary one.

It is only sentences, or clusters of sentences with 'critical semantic mass', for which there is an unambiguous link to the world, in particular they are linked to situations in which they are true (correctly assertible). Any other links, especially links between words and things are distilled out of these 'superlinks', and this cannot be done unambiguously.

Thus, *rabbit* and *undetached rabbit part* mean different things, but not because each of them would mean some thing independently of the other, where the two things would be different. Their meanings are different *relatively to each other*. As a result, the question about the sameness of meanings of the two terms admits the two kinds of answers we have sketched above: one is that the meanings are different in that they differ from one another; while the other is that they are the same in the sense that as

they are part of the same cluster of sentences which is bound to reality, each of them can get its share of this bond, where there is no share that could be assigned to only one of them.

Using the disambiguation introduced in section 5.5, we can say that the principle (M) reads as: ‘If a word has a meaning then an adequate translation of that word must have the same₂ (not necessarily the same₁) meaning’, while the principle (S) reads: ‘If two English (context-insensitive) referring expressions have the same₁ meaning then they are regarded as co-referential by speakers of English.’ In this way, the skeptical conclusion is not really forthcoming.

This, as a matter of fact, agrees with the conclusion Horwich draws from his considerations:

[A]lthough the basis of Quine’s treatment of meaning may be perfectly reasonable—specifically, his insistence that our conception of meaning be extracted from the pragmatic function of translation, and his insistence that the correctness of a translation manual be evaluated solely on behavioural grounds—the surprising, meaning-sceptical conclusion which he draws does not follow. (1989: 211)

However, Horwich’s reasons for this conclusion are not the same as the ones exposed above:

The best translations, from the point of view of prediction, are those that preserve the theoretical roles, the basic use regularities, of words. Such an adequacy condition will not normally be satisfiable by two nonequivalent translation manuals; hence it provides no grounds for the rejection of meanings. On the contrary, what it suggests is a reduction of meaning properties to basic regularities of use. (1989: 211)

Thus, Horwich, in effect, rejects the indeterminacy of translation, hence his thesis (I) and thus the reason he can avoid the ‘meaning-sceptical conclusion’ is that though the inference from (I), (M) plus (S) to the conclusion, according to him, is valid, the first of the premises does not hold. In contrast to this, I do not think we should reject (I), but I think that the inference is not valid.

5.7 Searle

Now let us discuss a sample of a dismissive criticism of Quine. In his paper devoted to the Quinean notion of meaning, John Searle (1987) presents several reasons why he holds Quine’s views to be absurd. Thus, he writes:

[W]e all know that, when a speaker utters an expression, there is a distinction between his meaning rabbit and his meaning rabbit stage or undetached rabbit part. But, if we actually applied the assumptions of behaviorism to interpreting the language of an alien tribe, we would find there was no way of making these distinctions as plain facts of the matter about the language used by the native speakers. (1987: 124)

In view of what has been stated above, this is simply misguided. That meaning a rabbit and meaning a rabbit stage is not one and the same thing—in the sense in which two vertices of a given triangle are not one and the same thing—is a plain fact Quine would not deny. What he insists is rather that there is the structural sense in which they are indistinguishable. They are indistinguishable, that is, not in the sense that they could coincide for a speaker, but in the sense that the role played in language by one of them is, *mutatis mutandis*, indistinguishable from that played by the latter—their meanings are the same₂, though not the same₁.

Note also, that this has little to do with behaviorism (unless we agree that geometry is also a product of behaviourism and that it vanishes once we realize that behaviourism is misguided). True, I can base a difference between *rabbit* and *undetached rabbit part* on the fact that there is a mental content I have associated with one of them, but not with the other. But can we say that *meaning rabbit* is having the particular mental content I have when I use the word *rabbit*? Not unless we want to waste the lesson Frege taught us about the essential distinction between meanings and mental representations.

Searle continues:

If my English-speaking neighbor, having read Quine, decides that he can't tell whether by 'rabbit' I mean rabbit, undetached rabbit part, or rabbit stage, then so much the worse for him. When I saw a rabbit recently, as I did in fact, and I called it a rabbit, I meant rabbit. In all discussions in the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mind, it is absolutely essential at some point to remind oneself of the first-person case. No one, for example, can convince us by argument, however ingenious, that pains do not exist if in fact we have them, and similar considerations apply to Quine's example. (1987: 126)

I do not think that Quine wants to convince anybody that pains do not exist (in any case I do not want to). Moreover, I do not think that Quine wants to convince anybody that Searle, when he used the word *rabbit*, did not mean rabbit. But suppose that I speak a foreign language, which is similar to English, but such that the translation of the English word *rabbit* is *undetached rabbit part* and vice versa. If I use this language, then I may be substantiated in asserting: 'Searle, when he used the word *rabbit* meant undetached rabbit part.' Now what Quine stresses is that there exists a language with this property (call it Quenglish) such that there is no distinguishing between speakers of English and speakers of Quenglish. Moreover, there is no saying which of them is the 'real' English. Thus, though we would not expect that somebody would admit that he himself uses *rabbit* to mean *undetached rabbit part* (for this would mean that he speaks about his usage of language using *another* language, which seems to be weird), if somebody *else* says that he means *undetached rabbit part*, it is impossible to convict him of being wrong.

Moreover, what does it mean, from the first-person perspective, to *mean rabbit*? Obviously Searle takes it to be a peculiar mental act that is different from meaning *undetached rabbit part*. But whatever is the nature of such a mental act, how do we

know that it is *meaning rabbit*? It is just a mental act that I have come to associate with the word *rabbit* when I learned English. I may say for sure that this act is different from the act I have come to associate with *undetached rabbit part*, but this is the nominal difference between rabbits and undetached rabbit parts Quine would not deny. What if the act I have come to associate with *rabbit* were the one that I really had to associate with *undetached rabbit part*, or *vice versa*? How could I have found out that this is wrong? And *is it wrong*?

In the second part of his article, Searle comes to attribute to Quine conclusions that are in direct contradiction to what we have concluded Quine really meant. Thus, he writes:

If the argument is valid, then it must have the result that there isn't any difference for me between meaning rabbit or rabbit stage, and that has the further result that there isn't any difference for me between referring to a rabbit and referring to a rabbit stage, and there isn't any difference for me between something's being a rabbit and its being a rabbit stage. And all of this is a consequence of the behaviorist assumption that there isn't any meaning beyond behaviorist meaning. (1987: 130)

There *is*, we saw, certainly a difference between something's being a rabbit and its being a rabbit stage. And we saw that when Quine says that *rabbit* and *undetached rabbit part* are in a certain sense interchangeable, it is not the consequence of his behaviourism, but rather his belief that semantics cannot but be a structural matter.

Then Searle claims:

If the indeterminacy thesis were really true, we would not even be able to understand its formulation; for when we were told there was no 'fact of the matter' about the correctness of the translation between rabbit and rabbit stage, we would not have been able to hear any (objectively real) difference between the two English expressions to start with. (1987: 131)

But this is already *completely* off the mark: every English speaker uses the expressions *rabbit* and *undetached rabbit parts* in a different way; it is certainly one thing to claim *This rabbit is a rabbit* and quite another to claim *This rabbit is a rabbit part*. However, the difference is a matter of the expressions' relationships to other expressions, including to each other, and its nature is such that the words can be swapped without any net effect on our linguistic communication.

5.8 Conclusion

Traditional theories of meaning assume that semantics, in contrast to geometry, is *not* a structural matter, because our words eventually hinge on the concrete things of our world. The assumption is that the ultimate interconnection of language and the world can be established in terms of ostension, by means of which we establish links between words and not structures, but concrete things. This is the assumption behind the representational theory of meaning.

However, Quine pointed out that this is an illusion. As anything in the world is partly identified by its boundaries, ostension does not identify anything unequivocally. Thus, though pointing may reduce the possibilities of linking words of a language to the world, it can never reduce it to the point of unambiguity—ostension can never link a world to one and only one thing. Therefore, Quine urges in effect, semantics remains structural; and the representational theory of meaning is compromised.¹³

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