



Quine and the Indeterminacy of Translation

Michael Gagnon



Myth of the Museum

Language provides labels for meanings. These labels can be swapped out and the meaning remains unchanged.

“Dinosaur Skeleton” and
“Squelette de Dinosaur”

The words specifically mean that dinosaur ^ . No matter what language I speak, the meaning remains the same.



Quine's Rebuttal

- When we switch languages, we do indeed switch meanings.
- This is because we can never fully translate the entire meaning of something.
- This leads to Indeterminacy of Translation.

Indeterminacy of Translation

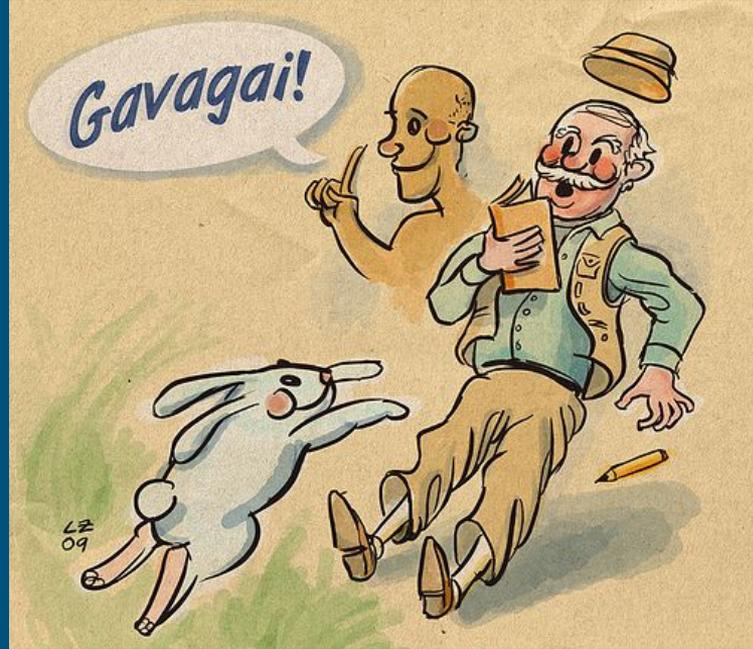
-One can never perfectly translate a word or phrase

-**Inscrutability of Reference:** Parts of the sentence may change in what they reference, but they will nonetheless maintain the meaning of the sentence as a whole.

-**Holophrastic Indeterminacy:** A sentence may be correctly translated in multiple ways with different meanings.

The Gavagai

- A foreign linguist is staying with a group of natives so he may learn their language.
- A rabbit leaps in front of him. The natives point and say “Gavagai!”
- What then does Gavagai mean?
- The linguistic asks many questions and narrows it down to four definitions, but cannot go any farther.



Possible Meanings

A Rabbit



A Gavagai

Undetached
Rabbit Parts



Not a Gavagai

The Rabbit's
Temporal State



An Ex-Gavagai

Rabbitness



A group of Gavagai

Inscrutability of Reference

Inscrutability of Reference: Parts of the sentence may change in what they reference, but they will nonetheless maintain the meaning of the sentence as a whole.

1. Look, a rabbit!
2. Look, undetached rabbit parts!
3. Look, a pictorial representation of a rabbit!
4. Look, an example of rabbittness!

All of these ultimately refer to this guy ----->



How do you know what I mean?

-This is not exclusively between languages, but also in our own.

-Say we have two people. When one says “Rabbit”, she means “Undetached Rabbit Parts”. When the other says “Rabbit”, he means anything embodying Rabbitness.

-She says “I saw a rabbit”. He does not know, or need to know, how she defines “Rabbit”.

-He may assume she uses “Rabbit” as he does, and since there is no pragmatic difference for reference between those uses in this instance, he will still understand her larger sentence. Her actual definition of rabbit is unimportant to him.

Holophrastic Indeterminacy

-Holophrastic Indeterminacy: A sentence may be correctly translated in multiple ways with different meanings.

- “He’s a square.”

- “Il est un carré.” or

“Il est une personne maladroit.”

-This is a simplified example. Quine says that a true, perfect example is impossible without knowing the whole of a language.



Quine's Point

- Attempting to nail down concrete meanings of words is ultimately fruitless.
- Furthermore, there is no “incorrect” meaning for a word. Questions of “correct” and “incorrect” are unimportant.
- If I can grasp enough of your meaning to function, language has served its purpose.
- The pragmatic transmission of information is all that matters.

