# The Philosophy of Language
## Lecture Six

# Quine versus Meaning

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# Quine versus Meaning

## Re-Cap: How Names Work

- Over the last few weeks, we've focussed on **names**

- We've considered four different views of how names work:

  - Frege's view that names have a *sense* as well as a reference

  - Russell's *descriptivism*, which states that ordinary proper names are really definite descriptions in disguise

  - Kripke's *Causal Picture of Naming*, according to which names are introduced via baptisms and then spread around by causal chains of communication

  - Evan's *hybrid* view, which took the idea that names are associated with descriptions from descriptivism, but then insisted that a name refers to the *causal source* of the majority of that information

- But now it is time to turn away from names, and start looking at how **sentences** work

## The Difference between Sentences and Names

- Names are used to **refer** to things in the world

- Sentences are used to **say** how things in the world are

  - 'Bertrand Russell' **refers to** Bertrand Russell

  - 'Bertrand Russell was a philosopher' **says that** Bertrand Russell was a philosopher

- As a result, sentences are the sorts of thing that can be **true** or **false**

  - A sentence is true iff things are as the sentence says that they are

  - 'Bertrand Russell was a philosopher' is true iff Bertrand Russell was a philosopher

- The meaning of a sentence is usually called a **proposition**

## This Week: Verificationism and Quine

- In this lecture, we will start at looking at one famous theory of sentence meaning, called **verificationism**

- However, our *main* focus will be Quine's attack on verificationism in his paper 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism'

- This attack is fascinating in its own right, and it has consequences for everyone, not just verificationists

  - In 'Two Dogmas', Quine denies that there is any distinction between **analytic** and **synthetic** statements

  - In later work (e.g. *Word & Object*), Quine altogether denies that there is really any such thing as *meaning*!

# Quine versus Meaning

## Logical Positivsm: The Roots of Verificationism

- In the early 20th Century, a new philosophical and political movement came to the fore, called **logical positivism**

  - Many of the most influential logical positivists belonged to a group known as the Vienna Circle

- The logical positivists believed that the proper way of coming to know about the world is via *empirical, scientific* investigation

- These positivists were very suspicious of the claims of moral philosophers, metaphysicians and theologians

- They were suspicious because they could not see how these claims could be established via scientific investigation

    (It is not hard to see the influence of positivism on our society today!)

## Introducing Verificationism

- Many positivists based their positivism on a theory of meaning, known as **verificationism**

- The guiding idea is that if a sentence is to be meaningful, then we must have some way of actually figuring out whether it is true or false

- There are some statements, the **analytic statements**, which we can tell are true just by understanding them

    - e.g. 'All vixens are foxes'

- There are other statements whose truth-values can only be determined by empirical investigation

    - e.g. 'All vixens have kidneys'

- But if there is **no way** of finding out whether a sentence is true or false, then it simply isn't meaningful

# The Verificationist Criterion of Meaning

- **Verificationism:** A sentence is meaningful **only if** it is either *analytic*, or *empirically verifiable*

- There has been plenty of disagreement about how to spell out the details of verificationism, but here are two points on which everyone is agreed:

  (1) When we say that 'analytic' sentences are meaningful, we do not just mean analytically *true* sentences

  Analytically *false* sentences, like '2+2=5', are meaningful too

  (2) When we say that a sentence is 'empirically verifiable', we do not mean that there is any way of **conclusively** verifying it

  All we mean is that there are some experiences which would raise or lower the **likelihood** that the sentence is true

## Learning More About Verificationism

- If you want to learn more about verificationism, read A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*

    (Ayer is not the most sophisticated verificationist there has ever been, but his book is **very** readable)

- We can get a sense of how impactful verficiationism is by looking at what Ayer said about morality



Alfred Jules Ayer

## Ayer on the Morality of Murder

- According to Ayer, the following is meaningless:
  - (1) Killing people is wrong

- According to the verificationist criterion, (1) is meaningful iff it is either analytic, or empirically verifiable

- (1) is not analytic
  - You can't tell just by looking at the meanings of the words that (1) is true

- (1) is not empirically verifiable
  - You can tell empirically that most people *don't like it* when people are killed, but you cannot tell that it is really *wrong*
  - You might try to dodge this by saying that (1) just means that people don't like it when people are killed, but that would make 'I don't like doing wrong things' analytic, which it isn't

## Ayer on the Morality of Murder

- Ayer thinks that when we say

  (1) Killing people is wrong

  we are really just *expressing* our dislike for murder

- To repeat, we are not **saying** that we dislike murder

- Rather, we are expressing our dislike, in the same way that when we *smile*, we are expressing that we are happy

- So (1) can't be true or false; really, it is just the same as shouting:

  (2) Boo to killing people!

# Quine versus Meaning

Introduction

Verificationism

## The Self-Undermining Problem

The First Dogma of Empiricism

The Second Dogma of Empiricism

Scepticism about Meaning

Summary

## Turning Verificationism On Itself

- **The Verificationist Criterion**: A sentence is meaningful only
  if it is either analytic, or empirically verifiable

- Is the Verificationist Criterion analytic?

  - It doesn't *seem* to be

  - It doesn't seem right to say that people were **contradicting**
    themselves when they said that there were meaningful
    sentences which could not be verified

- Is the Verificationist Criterion empirically verifiable?

  - It doesn't *seem* to be

  - It is not as though the positivists convinced themselves of
    verificationism by ordinary scientific means

- So it seems that according to the Verificationist Criterion, the
  Verificationist Criterion is not meaningful...

## The Verificationist Criterion as Analytic

- If the verificationists wanted to say that their criterion was analytic, then they need to offer some analysis of the criterion which reveals this fact

  – I can show that 'All vixens are foxes' is analytic by giving it the following analysis: 'All female foxes are foxes'

- But if the verificationists are using the ordinary concept of being meaningful, it is not clear that such an analysis will be possible

- Alternatively, the verificationists might claim that they are using the word 'meaningful' in a new sense, and just stipulate that their criterion is analytic in this sense

- That's fine, but now why should we care if 'Killing people is wrong' is not meaningful *in this new sense*?

## The Verificationist Criterion as Verifiable

- If the verificationists want to say that their criterion is verifiable, then we will need some independent standard for assessing whether a sentence is meaningful

  - We will need to look through lots of sentences which have been independently certified as meaningful, and check whether they are all verifiable

- But how will a verificationist ever come up with an independent standard that we can all agree on, but which doesn't include any unverifiable sentences?

  - Moral philosophers are bound to insist that any independent standard which didn't count 'Killing people is wrong' as meaningful is just a bad standard

## The Verificationist Criterion as Meaningless

- Maybe the verificationists can accept that their criterion is meaningless, in the sense that it cannot be true or false, but still insist that it has some other role to play

- They might say something similar to what Ayer said about morality
  - Boo to unverifiable sentences!
  - Don't use unverifiable sentences!

- But why should we be moved by a verificationist's expression of their feelings, or by their orders?

# Quine versus Meaning

## The Two Dogmas of Empiricism

- Quine was one of the most influential philosophers in the 20th Century

- His most famous paper is 'The Two Dogmas of Empiricism', in which he attacked verificationism

- This paper is an absolute classic, but it is **hard**

    (It is made even harder by the fact that a fair chunk of the paper is spent criticising the work of Rudolf Carnap, and you haven't read any Carnap!)



W.V.O. Quine

## The First Dogma

- Quine takes aim at two 'dogmas':

  (1) The analytic/synthetic distinction
  (2) Reductionism

- In this part of the lecture we are going to focus on Quine's attack on the first dogma; we'll come back to the second later

## What is the Analytic/Synthetic Distinction?

- **Analytic** truths are meant to be sentences which are true just by virtue of what they mean

  - All bachelors are unmarried
  - All vixens are foxes

- These sentences are contrasted with **synthetic** truths, which are true in part because of what they mean, but also in part because of how the world is

  - All bachelors are mortal
  - All vixens live on Earth

- This distinction between analytic and synthetic truths has been taken for granted by lots of philosophers

- But Quine thinks that this is all a big confusion: there is no real difference between analytic and synthetic truths!

# Two Classes of Analytic Truths

- **Narrow Analytic Truths (i.e. Logical Truths)**
  - **Example:** All vixens are vixens
  - This sentence would be true no matter what the word 'vixen' meant
  - **Generally:** A sentence is a logical truth iff it would be true no matter how you interpreted the non-logical words in that sentence

- **Broad Analytic Truths**
  - **Example:** All vixens are foxes
  - This sentence is not a logical truth, but you would get a logical truth if you substituted in a synonym for 'vixen': All female foxes are foxes
  - **Generally:** A sentence is a broad analytic truth iff you can turn it into a logical truth by substituting synonyms for synonyms

## An Attack on Synonymy

- Officially, Quine's attack is just on the concept of a **broad** analytic truth

  - He hasn't got any argument against logical truths
  - Interestingly, however, the positive picture Quine proposes at the end of the paper clearly presupposes that there are no logical truths!

- Quine attacks this concept by attacking the concept of *synonymy*

  - A broad analytic truth is any sentence which can be turned into a logical truth by substituting synonyms for synonyms

- Quine thinks that the idea of synonymy is fundamentally confused

## Synonymous by Definition

- At first you might think that it is easy to explain the concept of *synonymy* via the concept of *definition*

    - 'Vixen' is **defined as** 'female fox'

    - 'Bachelor' is **defined as** 'man who has never been married but is eligible to be'

- But now Quine asks: what is a definition, and where does it come from?

## Dictionary Definition

- You might answer that if you want to find a definition, then you just need to consult a dictionary

- But of course, it is not enough to consult *any* old dictionary; you need to consult a *good* one

- What is a good dictionary? One which accurately records the synonymy relations within a language

  - The job of a lexicographer is to study a language, figure out which expressions are synonymous with other expressions, and use that information in their dictionary

- But now we have used the concept of synonymy to explain what makes a dictionary good, and so we cannot go on to explain the concept of synonymy via the concept of a dictionary definition!

## Stipulative Definitions

- Sometimes, people explicitly introduce a definition via stipulation:

  – $x$ is a triangle $=_{df}$ $x$ is a polygon with three angles

- Quine is willing to accept that this kind of stipulative definition makes 'triangle' synonymous with 'polygon with three angles'

- However, very few words are introduced this way

  – No one ever actually stipulated: $x$ is a vixen $=_{df}$ $x$ is a female fox

- So Quine thinks that this kind of definition has too little application to explain what it is in general for two expressions to be synonymous with each other

## Explicative Definitions

- Carnap, Quine's teacher, had introduced another kind of definition, called an **explication**

- Sometimes we have a vague concept that we want to make more precise; the process of making it more precise is an explication

  - From now on, two events, $e_1$ and $e_2$, will count as simultaneous iff a light ray emitted from both events would reach a midpoint between them at the same moment

- However, this kind of definition cannot be used to explain the concept of *synonymy*

  - In an explication, we do not replace one word with another synonymous one; we replace a vague concept with a different, more precise one

## Where Are We?

- An analytic truth (in the broad sense) is a sentence which can be converted into a logical truth by substituting synonyms for synonyms

- Quine thinks that the idea of synonymy is fundamentally confused

- A natural proposal is that we can explain the concept of synonymy via the concept of definition

- But there are three versions of this idea, and none of them work

## Where Are We?

- **Dictionary Definitions**

  - **PROBLEM:** A good dictionary is just a dictionary which records the pre-existing synonymy relations!

- **Stipulative Definitions**

  - **PROBLEM:** There have been hardly any stipulative definitions in real life

- **Explicative Definitions**

  - **PROBLEM:** They don't even attempt to preserve synonymy in the first place!

## A Different Approach: Substitution

- Throughout this module, we have noticed a certain connection between substitution and synonymy
    - If two expressions are synonymous, then substituting the one for the other should never change the meaning of a sentence

- For example, these two sentences mean the same thing:
    (1) All vixens live on Earth
    (2) All female foxes live on Earth

- Unfortunately, we cannot use this relation between synonymy and substitution to explain what synonymy is:
    - To say that (1) and (2) mean the same thing is just to say that they are synonymous, which is the concept we are trying to explain!

- But we might try to find some other way of using substitution to explain what synonymy is

## Substitution *Salva Veritate*

- If two expressions are synonymous, then you should be able to substitute the one for the other without ever changing the truth-value of a sentence

  - All vixens live on Earth ⇒ TRUE
  - All female foxes live on Earth ⇒ TRUE

  - Some vixen is 20m tall ⇒ FALSE
  - Some female fox is 20m tall ⇒ FALSE

- **Proposal:** a pair of expressions are synonymous iff they are always intersubstitutable *salva veritate*

    (That is fancy Latin-talk for: a pair of expressions are synonymous iff substituting the one for the other never changes the truth-value of a sentence)

## A Problem for the Proposal

- There seem to be expressions which are always intersubstitutable *salva veritate*, but which do not mean the same thing

  - Every human lives on Earth ⇒ TRUE
  - Everyone who belongs to a species that invented smart phones lives on Earth ⇒ TRUE

  - Some human is 20m tall ⇒ FALSE
  - Someone who belongs to a species that invented smartphones is 20m tall ⇒ FALSE

- It looks like we can swap 'belongs to a species that invented smartphones' for 'human' without changing the truth-value of any sentence

- But these expressions clearly mean different things!

## Necessarily...

- We might try to get around this by insisting that we can **sometimes** change the truth-value of a sentence by swapping 'belongs to a species that invented smartphones' for 'human'

  (1) Necessarily, all humans are human ⇒ TRUE
  (2) Necessarily, all humans belong to a species which invented smartphones ⇒ FALSE

- However, Quine objected that unless you cannot understand what 'necessarily' means without *already* understanding analyticity

  - According to Quine, when we assert (1), we are just saying that 'All humans are human' is analytic

- But the whole point of trying to understand synonymy via substitution is to find a way of explaining what analyticity is!

## Where Are We?

- An analytic truth (in the broad sense) is a sentence which can be converted into a logical truth by substituting synonyms for synonyms

- Quine thinks that the idea of synonymy is fundamentally confused

- A natural proposal is that we can explain the concept of synonymy via the concept of definition, but that didn't work out

- Another good idea is that we can explain synonymy in terms of substitution

- There are two versions of this idea, and Quine thinks neither works

## Where Are We?

- **Two expressions are synonymous if substituting the one for the other never changes the meaning of a sentence**

  - **PROBLEM:** This presupposes that we know what it is for two sentences to mean the same thing, i.e. for them to be *synonymous*

- **Two expressions are synonymous if substituting the one for the other never changes the truth-value of a sentence**

  - **PROBLEM:** This proposal won't work if we don't use sentences starting 'Necessarily...', but it isn't clear that we can understand what sentences like that mean unless we *already* have a grip on analyticity

## One Last Approach: Semantic Rules

- Carnap, Quine's teacher, thought of languages as coming with **semantic rules**

- These were meant to be rules that told you how the meanings of the words in the language related to each other

- **One natural suggestion:** Two expressions are synonymous iff these rules tell you that they are

- **Alternatively:** A sentence is analytic iff the semantic rules tell you that it is analytic

- **Alternatively:** A sentence is analytic iff the semantic rules tell you that it is true

## The Problem with this Approach (Simplified!)

- This is the most complex part of Quine's paper, but here is his objection to this approach in a nutshell

- Carnap never really tells us what makes something a semantic rule

- We can of course write down any rules we like, call them semantic rules, and then say that according to those rules, a given sentence is analytic

- But until we are told more about what it takes for a collection of rules to count as semantic rules, then that gets us nowhere

- And of course, it will not do to say that a collection of rules are semantic rules just in case they give us the right analytic truths!

## The Shape of the Argument: A Circle of Concepts

- An analytic truth (in the broad sense) is a sentence which can be converted into a logical truth by substituting synonyms for synonyms

- To understand this definition of 'analytic', we need to understand synonymy, but how can we explain that?

- We can try to explain it in terms of dictionary definitions, but the concept of a (good) dictionary definition presupposes the concept of synonymy

- We can try to explain it in terms of substitution, but that ends up presupposing the idea of analyticity

- We can try to explain it in terms of semantic rules, but we also have no grip on that without a grip on the concept of analyticity

## The Shape of the Argument: A Circle of Concepts

- We have a circle of concepts which are all tightly linked together: analyticity, synonymy, definitions, necessity, semantic rules

- We could use any of these concepts to define any of the others

- But we have no way of breaking into this circle, and defining these concepts without presupposing the others

- So Quine concludes that this whole circle of concepts is foundationless, and should be rejected as a whole

# Quine versus Meaning

## Back to Verificationism

- Quine admits there is one last way you could try to explain what it is for a sentence to be analytic

- If you were a **verificationist**, you might explain what it is for two sentences to be synonymous like this:

  - A pair of sentences are synonymous iff they would be verified (or falsified) to exactly the same degree by exactly the same experiences

- You could then define what it is for a sentence to be broadly analytic like this:

  - A sentence is broadly analytic iff it is synonymous with a logical truth

  - A sentence is broadly analytic iff it would be verified by every possible experience

## The Second Dogma

- This leads Quine to what his second dogma of empiricism, which he calls **reductionism**

- According to reductionism, each sentence is associated with a unique range of experiences which would increase the likelihood that the sentence is true

- For example, the sentence 'Barry Lee has a moustache' would be verified by the following experiences:
    - Looking at Barry's face, and seeing hair above his top lip
    - Looking at a recent photo of Barry's face, and seeing hair above his top lip
    - Touching Barry's face, and feeling hair above his top lip
    - ...

## Anti-Reductionism

- Quine insists that when we consider a sentence in isolation, there are no experiences which would increase the likelihood that it is true (or false)

- Imagine that you look at Barry and see hair on his top lip; doesn't that increase the likelihood that 'Barry Lee has a moustache' is true?

- Only if you make lots of background assumptions:
    - Your eyes are working properly
    - There isn't an object somewhere casting a moustache-shaped shadow on Barry's top lip
    - Barry isn't wearing a fake moustache to trick you
    - ...

## Anti-Reductionism

- Some philosophers might be driven to some kind of scepticism by this observation:

    - We can never really know whether Barry has a moustache!

- But this was not Quine's reaction

- Quine thought that all this really shows is that we cannot use experiences confirm (or disconfirm) sentences one-by-one

- Rather, we use experiences to confirm **whole theories**, which build in all our background assumptions

- Quine's position is often known as **confirmational holism**

## Against the Verificationist Theory of Meaning

- Confirmational holism forces us to reject the verificationist theory of meaning

  – We cannot ask whether a sentence in isolation is verifiable: only whole theories are verifiable

- And we cannot offer the verificationist's definition of analyticity

  – We cannot say that a sentence, taken in isolation, will (or will not) be confirmed by every experience

- But Quine does not just stop at this negative point; he offers his own positive picture

## The Web of Belief

- Quine imagines all our beliefs as forming a web

- Each belief in the web is connected to others by various logical relations

- If we revise one belief, then we also need to appropriately revise the beliefs linked to it

  - Suppose that $P$ logically implies $Q$

  - If we come to believe $P$, then we also need to believe $Q$

  - If we later become convinced that $Q$ is false, then we must revise our initial belief, and conclude that not-$P$

## The Structure of the Web

- On the outside of the web are all the beliefs which most directly relate to experience

  – There is a red light in front of me

  – It feels hot here

- As we go further in, we get more and more theoretical beliefs

  – No object can be in two places at once

  – $E = mc^2$

- At the very centre, there are the logical and mathematical beliefs

  – All vixens are vixens

  – $10 + 3 = 13$

## Updating the Web

- Our entire web of beliefs can sometimes turn out to be inconsistent with experience

  – Experience shows that not every belief in our web can be true

- When this happens, we need to revise one or more beliefs in our web

- We can choose **any** way of restoring consistency between our web and experience

- No belief is immune from revision, not even the logical or mathematical beliefs

## An Example

- Suppose we are counting children in a class; we count 10 girls and 3 boys, but when we count the whole class, we end up with 12, not 13

- There are several ways we could make our web of belief consistent with this:
    - We could say that we miscounted
    - We could say that one of the children left between counts
    - We could say that actually, $10 + 3 = 12$

- That last option is silly, but according to Quine, it is still an option!

## Conservative Revisions

- The reason we would never choose it is that when we are revising our web, we try to do so in a maximally conservative way

  – We want to make the smallest number of changes to the web as possible

- The reason that we do not want to revise our mathematical belief that $10 + 3 = 13$ is that doing so would have huge repercussions for the rest of the web

  – Mathematics is used in lots of different areas of inquiry, and so a revision in our mathematical beliefs would ripple out through the web

- According to Quine, we mistakenly think that logic and mathematics is immune to revision, but really, we are just very reluctant to revise it

## Pragmatism

- Quine emphasises that this picture is a version of **pragmatism**
- According to Quine, the test for whether you should believe in a type of entity is just this:
    - Adding a belief in that kind of entity makes my web of beliefs *as a whole* fit with experience more easily
- A belief in physical objects is good because adding that belief to our web of beliefs makes it fit better with experience
- The same goes for a belief in electrons, even though they are unobservable (by human senses)
- But a belief in the ancient Greek gods is bad, because adding it to the web doesn't seem to help it fit with experience at all
- As Quine puts it, physical objects, electrons and Greek gods are all myths, but some are more expedient than others

# Quine versus Meaning

## There must be *some* Distinction!

- In a paper called 'In Defense of a Dogma', Grice and Strawson try to defend the analytic/synthetic distinction from Quine's attack

- They make a number of good points, but we will look at just three

- First, they point out that it is hard to deny that there is **any** distinction between analytic and synthetic truths

  - Students quickly cotton on to the distinction, and once you have given students a few examples, they can give you lots more back

- However, this is not too powerful a criticism

- Presumably Quine's point is just that we are confused about what this distinction really amounts to

## Indefinable Concepts

- Next, recall that Quine's attack on the distinction worked by pointing out that there is a circle of concepts:

  - Analyticity, synonymy, definition, necessity, semantic rules

- Each of these concepts can be defined in terms of the others, but none of which can be defined independently

- Grice and Strawson point out that this does not automatically show that the circle of concepts should be abandoned

- It might just show that we can't hope to explain these concepts to people by giving them a definition; instead, we have to explain them by showing people how to **use** them

- This is now a familiar point about lots of philosophical concepts (e.g. knowledge, morality, consciousness)

## Meaning Scepticism

- Lastly, Grice and Strawson point out that Quine's attack on synonymy is really an all out attack on the whole idea of meaning

  - To say that one expression is synonymous with another is just to say that they mean the same thing

  - So if you deny that it makes sense to say that one expression is synonymous with another, you are denying that it makes sense to say that they mean the same thing

  - But in that case, it surely doesn't make any sense to say that these expressions mean anything at all!

- Grice and Strawson took this to show that Quine's position was absurd

- Little did they know that a few years later, Quine would offer an independent argument against the very idea of meaning...

## Word & Object

- In his **brilliant** (but difficult!) book, *Word & Object* (ch.2), Quine argues that there is something fundamentally wrong with the ordinary notion of meaning

- I will give a brief sketch of Quine's argument now, but unfortunately we do not have time to go through it in full

- Happily, Kemp (§§9.2–3) is very good on this, so look there for more detail

## Radical Translation

- Imagine you are a linguist who discovers a long lost civilisation in a remote part of the world

- You decides to try to translate their language, LongLostish, into English

- Unfortunately, the language is totally unrelated to any language that you know and so you have to work totally from scratch

- This is known as **radical translation**

  (Radical translation never really happens, but this is just meant to be a philosophically significant thought experiment)

## Gavagai

- One day, you notice a rabbit run past, and one of the people from the lost civilisation shouts, 'Gavagai!'

- You notice this happens often: *whenever* someone sees a rabbit, they shout 'Gavagai!'

- You note the following conjecture in your LongLostish to English dictionary

  – Gavagai ⇒ Rabbit

- However, that is not the only conjecture you might have made

  – Gavagai ⇒ Undetached rabbit part

- How would you tell which of these 'Gavagai' meant?

## A Way to Choose

- It would be easy if you knew some more of the language, for exampe:
  - Yo ⇒ that
  - Ipso ⇒ is identical to
- Then you could point to two different parts of the same rabbit and ask:
  - Yo gavagai ipso yo gavagai?
  - Is that rabbit identical to that rabbit?
  - Is that undetached rabbit part identical to that undetached rabbit part?
- If the answer is Yes, then 'Gavagai' cannot be translated as 'Undetached rabbit part'
- If the answer is No, then 'Gavagai' cannot be translated as 'Rabbit'

## But the Problem Re-emerges

- But now we have to ask, How can you tell what these other
  LongLostish words mean?

  – Ipso $\Rightarrow$ is identical to
  – Ipso $\Rightarrow$ is a part of the same rabbit as

- If we translated it in the second way, then we could still
  translate 'Gavagai' as 'Undetached rabbit part' even if the
  answer to the following question is Yes:

  – Yo gavagai ipso yo gavagai?
  – Is that undetached rabbit part a part of the same rabbit as
    that undetached rabbit part?

## Compensating Changes

- The point here is that we can come up with two translation-manuals
    - According to one, 'Gavagai' is translated as 'Rabbit'
    - According to the other, 'Gavagai' is translated as 'Undetached rabbit part'

- Both of these translation-manuals can be made to fit with all of the behaviour of the people who speak LongLostish, so long as we make compensating changes in the rest of the manual
    - Ipso ⇒ is identical to
    - Ipso ⇒ is a part of the same rabbit as

## The Indeterminacy of Translation

- Quine claims that neither one of these translation-manuals is objectively better than the other

- We would obviously prefer the one which translates 'Gavagai' as 'Rabbit', because we talk about rabbits much more than we talk about undetached rabbit parts

- But that is just our preference, and doesn't reflect a deep fact about what 'Gavagai' really means

- What is more, Quine thinks that we are always in this situation:

  - When we are translating one language into another, there will always be multiple translation-manuals which fit with all of the behaviour of the people involved

  - No one of these translation-manuals is objectively better than the other

## Scepticism about Meaning

- It is a short step from here to an all out scepticism about meaning

- According to the ordinary conception of meaning, there **should** be an objective fact of the matter about whether 'Gavagai' is best translated as 'Rabbit' or 'Undetached rabbit part'

- So if there is no objective fact of the matter about that, then the ordinary idea of meaning should be abandoned

# Quine versus Meaning

## Verificationism

- **Verificationism:** A sentence is meaningful **only if** it is either *analytic*, or *empirically verifiable*

- Verificationism appealed to positivists, who thought that the only way to discover any truths was via scientific investigation

- Positivists used verificationism to argue that talk about objective morality, or God, or souls, or... was meaningless

## Two Dogmas

- Quine argued that this whole positivistic approach relied on two dogmas:
    - The analytic/synthetic distinction
    - Reductionism

- Quine then argued that both dogmas were unsupported
    - There are no analytic truths which are immune to revision
    - We cannot empirically verify (or falsify) any of our beliefs in isolation
    - It is our entire web of beliefs that is verified (or falsified)
    - A belief in God would be justified so long as it helped our whole web of beliefs fit well with experience

## Meaning under Attack

- Quine focussed his attack on verificationism, but really it is an all out attack on the very idea of meaning

  - Quine's argument against analyticity quickly generalises into an argument against meaning

  - Quine later backed this up with an independent argument against meaning

- If you want to hold onto anything like our ordinary idea of meaning, then you need to find some way of blocking Quine's argument

## Meaning as Irreducible

- As Grice and Strawson pointed out, all that Quine really showed in his argument against analyticity is that you cannot define the concept of meaning in terms which do not presuppose the concept of meaning

- In other words, he has shown that you cannot reduce meaning-concepts to any other kind of concept

- That is also what his translation argument shows:
    - You cannot reduce *meaning* to mere behaviour

- But it is one thing to say that we cannot reduce meaning to anything more basic, quite another to say that there is no such thing as meaning

- Maybe we can accept meaning as something irreducible?

## Where to go from here

- In the next two lectures we will look at two very different attempts to accept meaning as irreducible

- Next week we will look at Grice's attempt to define meaning in terms of intentions and beliefs

- In the week after, we will look at Davidson's attempt to rehabilitate meaning without departing so far from Quine's basic outlook

## Tomorrow's Seminar

- The reading for tomorrow's seminar is:
    - Quine, 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism'

- Access to this paper can be found on the VLE Reading List

## Next Week's Lecture and Seminar

- For next week's lecture, read:
    - Lycan, *Philosophy of Language*, Chapter 7

- For next week's seminar, read:
    - Grice, 'Meaning'

- Access to the textbook chapter and the seminar reading can be found on the VLE Reading List