

# Ontological Relativity

by W.V. Quine

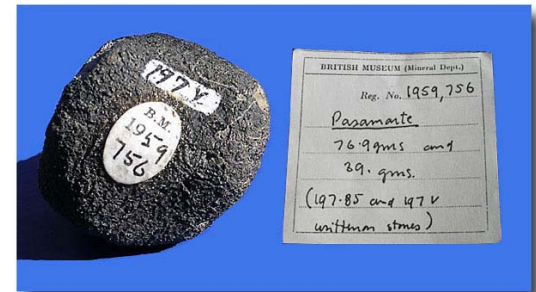
# Myth of the Museum

*“Uncritical semantics is the myth of a museum in which the exhibits are meanings and the words are labels. To switch languages is to change the labels (“Ontological Relativity” 27)*

Frege believed that there are meanings in addition to sentences/utterances. In the museum, the objects are the meaning, and the labels are the words/language. When we switch languages, the labels change, but the meanings are independent.

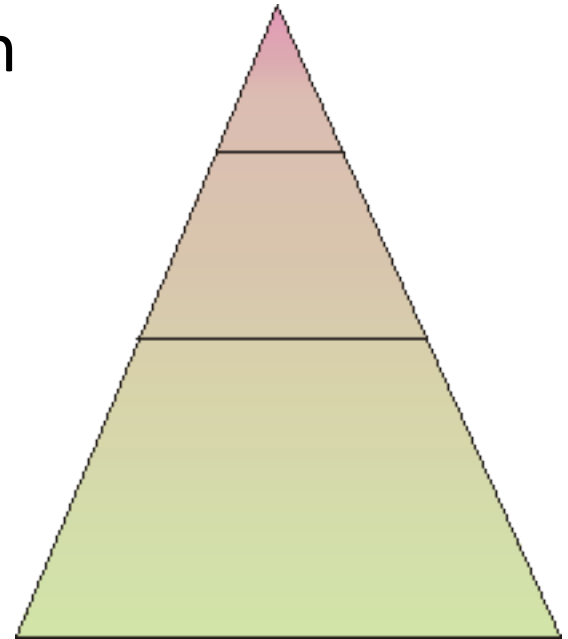
Quine argues against this epistemically:

- If there were meanings, how would we know/learn them?
- Translation is not merely the switching of labels – rather a manual to fit all the overt behavior of the native speaker.



# Indeterminacy

- 3 levels:
  - Underdetermination of scientific theory
  - Indeterminacy of translation
  - Inscrutability of reference



# Underdetermination of Scientific Theory

This occurs when there is not enough evidence to settle a scientific question.

Blood type example:

We do not know Socrates' blood type. Thus, we can not come up with some grand theory on the bloody types of all humans who ever lived, because we don't have enough information to come up with a determinate theory.

Under-determined by the evidence.



# Indeterminacy of Translation

Language is ... “[A] social art which we all acquire on the evidence solely of other people’s overt behavior under publicly recognizable circumstances” (“Ontological Relativity” 26).

Imagine a field linguist attempting to create a translation for a native, unfamiliar language. The only clues she has are the overt behaviors of the native speakers. So, she can only begin to translate with the help of pointing and speaking of the native.

Conclusion: Behavioral evidence is all the evidence she has to translate language.

This helps show Quine’s theory of Indeterminacy of Translation. Quine believes that since observable evidence is all we have to rely on, in the absence of it, we must assume a translation is indeterminate.



# Inscrutability of Reference

Occurs at the sub-sentential level

There are always multiple equally correct hypotheses to a referential object referred to in any sentence and language.

This makes the reference inscrutable because it is subject to the speaker's background languages and personal experience with language.

Quine presents a number of examples including:

- The French “ne...rien” construction
  - -not...anything/nothing
- ‘Gavagai’
- Japanese Classifiers



# 'Gavagai'



Possible translations:

- Rabbit
- Undetached proper rabbit parts
- Three dimensional temporal slice of a four-dimensional rabbit

It is indeterminate as to which translation the native is referring to when using the word 'gavagai'. Because of this, the reference is lost.

*"The only difference is how you slice it. And how to slice it is what ostension or simple conditioning, however persistently repeated, cannot teach" ("Ontological Relativity" 32)*

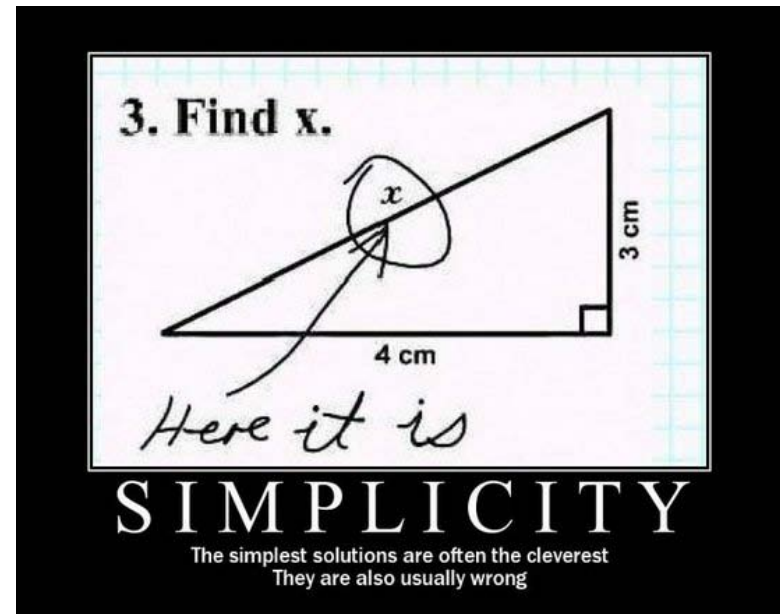
# Response to 'gavagai'

We should use simplicity as our guide when translating.

In other words, when 'gavagai' is used, the listener should decide which translation is most simplistic and makes the most sense.

Quine retorts that, while we should try to use simplicity as our guide it is linguistically chauvinistic to assume that simplicity in our language is the same as simplicity in another language.

One person's simplicity may not be another's simplicity. It is relative.





# Simplicity

Consider a people who call pelicans their half brothers.

If they want to refer to their human half brother they have to use a word which means 'my half brother but not a pelican'

They have a short term for our more complex 'half brother or pelican'.

Simplicity will not eliminate the claim of inscrutability.

# Ontological Relativity

It now seems that both meaning and reference are indeterminate.

Due to the relativity of individuals and hypotheses, references are arbitrarily interpreted in a series of background languages specific to the individual.

But, the background language/theory itself is subject to these same issues. Thus we are stuck in infinite regress.

Quine thus defends a relational theory of reference.

*“What makes sense is to say not what the objects of a theory are, absolutely speaking, but how one theory of objects is interpretable, or re-interpretable in another” (“Ontological Relativity” 50).*

We can never fully interpret a theory due to relativism.

