

Gavagai!



What's the connection between Ferdinand de Saussure, W V O Quine and rabbits?
Structuralism, says **Jaroslav Peregrin**

What is structuralism? The stock answer is that it is the brain-child of Ferdinand de Saussure, later fostered by Levi-Strauss, Foucault, Derrida and their allies. But I think we have only to confront the austere scientific style of Saussure's *Course de linguistique générale* with that of the writings of the French structuralists to recognise an essential discontinuity. The French philosophers have developed only certain consequences of Saussure's teaching; and, moreover, in a rather non-Saussurean way.

In my recent book I put forward the alternative thesis that the kind of structuralism advanced by Saussure is in fact present implicitly in the writings of people not normally associated with the term, namely the (post)analytic philosophers such as Willard Van Orman Quine, Donald Davidson and Robert Brandom. Indeed I think that it is possible to detect many structuralist features already in the writings of their analytic predecessors, such as Russell or the early Wittgenstein, though their structuralism was severely limited by their programmatic adherence to linguistic atomism. It was only when Quine abandoned atomism in favor of holism – with his spectacular attack on the “two dogmas of empiricism” – that the door opened for his followers to see language in a truly Saussurean vein (and I would therefore recommend using the term *postanalytic* philosophers for them).

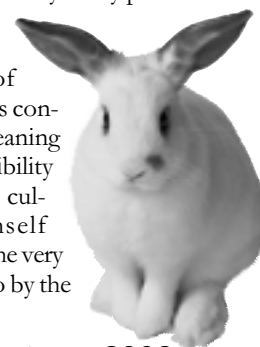
To explain why we should see Quine as a structuralist, I would like to revive his widely discussed thought experiment, featuring a field linguist deciphering an unknown language spoken by natives somewhere in the middle of nowhere. On hearing the natives exclaiming “Gavagai!” whenever they see a rabbit, the linguist records in his notebook the tentative translation hypothesis *gavagai* = *rabbit*. Next, Quine asks us to imagine another linguist, who, observing the same behaviour of the same natives, proposes the hypothesis *gavagai* = *undetached rabbit's part*. Quine then considers ways of deciding which of the two linguists is correct, and concludes, to the astonishment of many readers, that there is *no* feasible way to decide; and hence that both linguists are correct. This is his famous doctrine of the “indeterminacy of translation”. My proposal is that this doctrine can be read as indicative of the structural nature of language.

This is not, of course, how the doctrine is usually interpreted. Quine's conclusion may appear to suggest a form of cultural relativism: we can never find out what the natives really mean by their words and hence never really understand an alien culture. However, Quine goes on to claim that from the viewpoint of his considerations, the linguist is in no better position with respect to the members of his own linguistic community (including his closest friends and relatives) than he is to the natives: just as he

can translate the natives' *gavagai* either as *rabbit* or as *undetached rabbit's part*, so he can translate his peers' *rabbit* either as *rabbit* or as *undetached rabbit's part*. Hence the cultural relativism appears to mutate into an “individual relativism”, a kind of solipsistic skepticism in which we can be certain neither that we understand the natives, nor even that we understand each other!

However this is not a conclusion Quine would be willing to draw. He does not say that we cannot understand each other (nor even that we cannot understand the natives): that we can is continually testified to by the indubitable successes of our communication. For Quine, there is no other measure of understanding, save the smoothness and fruitfulness of linguistic interaction, the success of which shows that indeed we *do* understand our peers and, with some effort, also aliens. Hence the conclusion is that we can understand other people without needing to know what they mean by their words (rabbit? undetached rabbit part?) – at least if we construe *means* and *meaning* in the way many pre-Quinean philosophers did.

Thus, the moral of Quine's considerations concerns the nature of meaning rather than the accessibility of alien tongues and cultures. Quine himself would be happy to let the very concept of meaning go by the



board – it would be, as he put it, “a stumbling block cleared away”. However, given that we accept his stance, what exactly, are we figuring out when we master the alien language? It is quite natural, *pace* Quine, to continue talking about mastering meaning; but then the usual concept of meaning seems to require some readjusting.

Let us notice that it would not be possible to take the first linguist’s translation manual, make the single change of striking *gavagai* = *rabbit* and replace it with *gavagai* = *undetached rabbit’s part*. Such a hybrid manual would *not* work. Why not? Suppose that the natives utter the word *gavagai* with a qualification, say, *waga gavagai*, which the first linguist translates, if the utterances of the whole phrase appeared to be prompted by the occurrence of a single rabbit, as *a single rabbit*. If we then change the translation of *gavagai* to *undetached rabbit’s part*, we thereby change the translation of *waga gavagai* to *a single undetached rabbit’s part*, which is, however, falsified by the natives’ using it pointing at a rabbit (= several undetached rabbit’s parts). Hence if we do not want to contradict the evidence, we can change the translation of *gavagai* to *undetached rabbit’s part* only if we simultaneously change that of *waga* to something like *several*.

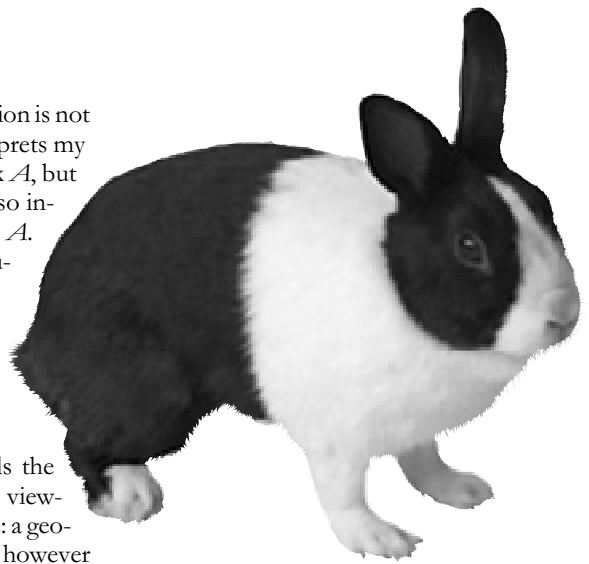
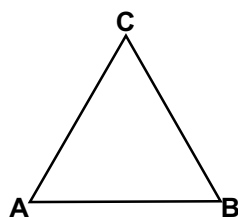
Here we come to see the point of Quine’s linguistic holism: we cannot speak of the meaning of one word independently of those of other words – for words in a language lean on each other in a way that makes them inseparable. Talking about the meaning of a word in isolation is as futile as explaining how one plays football without mentioning that one is part of a team playing against another team. Hence Quinean indeterminacy of translation entails neither that we could not translate an alien language, nor that we could translate it however we wish. It does, however, entail that what makes a translation correct are not specific translations of isolated words, but rather the rendering of a certain *structure*.

To illustrate this situation further, consider the equilateral triangle below right. Is vertex *A* different from vertex *B*? Yes, indeed: if they coincided, we would have no triangle, but a mere line. However, there is also another sense of *different*, in which *A* and *B* are *not* different: from the viewpoint of geometry, they are both vertices of an equilateral triangle with the same side length, and thus whatever holds of one of them holds equally well of the other. If I am explaining some geometrical thesis with the help of

this triangle, then my explanation is not impeded if my audience interprets my “*A*” as the name not of vertex *A*, but rather of *B* – provided she also interprets “*B*” as *C* and “*C*” as *A*. And in the same way communication is not impeded if somebody interprets my “*rabbit*” as *undetached rabbit’s part* – provided he also interprets certain other words of mine accordingly.

The explanation, as regards the triangle, is that the geometric viewpoint is a purely structural one: a geometric figure keeps its identity however we arrange its elements, as long as we retain the relevant structure. And similarly the Quinean experiments show, I suggest, that the semantics of language is a matter of a certain *structure*. This, therefore, leads us to the very kind of linguistic structuralism that I claim was urged by Saussure. Quine’s considerations can be seen as indicating what Saussure condensed into his often quoted dictum: “language is a form, not a substance”.

Moreover, the congeniality is not restricted to the general, programmatic aspect, but extends to more specific features of the two views. Consider Donald Davidson’s development of the Quinean program in the direction of the analysis of meaning as anchored in truth. Saussure saw the structure of language – which he held as constitutive of everything we perceive as “linguistic reality” – as ultimately grounded in *oppositions*; and Davidson’s proposal can be read as pointing out that the principal opposition underlying semantics is that between truth and falsity. Using a visual analogy, meaning is to be seen as a “projection” of this very opposition, as the contribution an expression brings to the truth values of sentences in which it occurs. (Thus, the meaningfulness of an expression is not due to its being a name or a picture of a piece of reality, and this necessitates the abandonment of atomism in favour of holism.)



In my book I also develop the idea that Davidson’s connecting of meaning to truth helps us see that this kind of structuralism may be much more down to earth than it sometimes appears in Saussurean conceptual guise (and that this increases the viability of the abstract structuralist claims). We must notice that it is not truth in its entirety which would be constitutive of meanings – the meaning of an empirical sentence such as *It is raining outside* does not depend on its momentary truth value. It is, again, *structural* properties of truth which are semantically relevant. Thus it is a matter of semantics that the truth of *It is raining* brings about the falsity of *It is not raining* or perhaps of *The sky is cloudless*. (It is part and parcel of the Quine-Davidsonian view of language that the boundary between structural properties and others is not sharp; so taking it as such is an idealization. But this is no more problematic – and no less useful – than reconstructing various aspects of the real world in terms of Euclidean geometry or Newtonian physics.) Hence the upshot, I suggest, is that the structure constitutive of meaning is the *inferential*

structure of language. This not only leads to the kind of *inferentialism* advocated recently by Robert Brandom, but also vindicates the long tradition of attempts to base semantics on logic – the science of inference – and on mathematical accounts of inference. **PM**

Suggested reading

Meaning and Structure, Jaroslav Peregrin (Ashgate)
Course in General Linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure (Duckworth)
Word and Object, WVO Quine (MIT Press)

