

words &
object

WILLARD VAN ORMAN QUINE

Word and Object

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To
RUDOLF CARNAP
Teacher and Friend

Wie Schiffer sind wir, die ihr Schiff auf offener See umbauen
müssen, ohne es jemals in einem Dock zerlegen und aus
besten Bestandteilen neu errichten zu können.

—OTTO NEURATH

Ontology recapitulates philology.

—JAMES GRIER MILLER

Preface

Language is a social art. In acquiring it we have to depend entirely on intersubjectively available cues as to what to say and when. Hence there is no justification for collating linguistic meanings, unless in terms of men's dispositions to respond overtly to socially observable stimulations. An effect of recognizing this limitation is that the enterprise of translation is found to be involved in a certain systematic indeterminacy; and this is the main theme of Chapter II.

The indeterminacy of translation invests even the question what objects to construe a term as true of. Studies of the semantics of reference consequently turn out to make sense only when directed upon substantially our language, from within. But we do remain free to reflect, thus parochially, on the development and structure of our own referential apparatus; and this I do in ensuing chapters. In so doing one encounters various anomalies and conflicts that are implicit in this apparatus (Chapter IV), and is moved to adopt remedies in the spirit of modern logic (Chapters V and VI). Clarity also is perhaps gained on what we do when we impute existence, and what considerations may best guide such decisions; thus Chapter VII.

My six Gavin David Young Lectures in Philosophy at the University of Adelaide, June 1959, will have consisted of portions of this book. Similarly for various of my lectures at the University of Tokyo in July and August. An abridgment of the last chapter figured as the Howison Lecture in Philosophy at the University of California in Berkeley, May 1959, and parts of Chapters II through

VI went to make up five lectures that I gave at Stanford University in April.

A year earlier I drew on the work in progress for my paper at the fourth Colloque Philosophique de Royaumont and for my presidential address to the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association. The year before that, 1956–57, I presented portions of interim versions of Chapter II as single lectures at four institutions: Princeton University, the Institute for Advanced Study, Columbia University, and the University of Pennsylvania. My course in the philosophy of language, which I have given ten times at Harvard since VJ-day, has represented ten phases in the development of the book; and a further intervening phase was represented by courses that I gave at Oxford as George Eastman Visiting Professor in 1953–54 and by my A. T. Shearman Lectures at University College, London, in 1954.

Three publications overlap the present text of the book, having stemmed from the work in progress. Two of them are indicated at the beginnings of §§ 7 and 19. The third is “Le mythe de la signification,” presumed forthcoming in the acts of the Royaumont colloquium. Three further recent papers bear mention as having conveyed some of the developing notions of the book in other phrasing. One is “The scope and language of science,” which formed part of the Columbia Bicentennial program in 1954 and appeared in the *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* in 1957. The others are “Quantifiers and propositional attitudes,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 1956, and “Logical truth,” in Hook’s *American Philosophers at Work*.

The benefits of a Harvard sabbatical, combined with a generous grant in aid from the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, enabled me to devote the year 1956–57 to the book as a member of that Institute. Similar generosity on the part of the Ford Foundation enabled me to devote the year 1958–59 to the same effort, as a Fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. I gratefully acknowledge all this support. In addition I have the Rockefeller Foundation to thank for a grant which provided secretarial help in keeping up the flow of typescript during years when the secretarial services of the Institute and the Center were not at my disposal.

Last winter I enjoyed the close collaboration of Donald Davidson, who studied drafts of the book and gave me the benefit of his able criticism and his knowledge of the literature. The book has gained

much from his help, and much also, in its first half, from the wise scrutiny of my colleague Burton Dreben. At various points in the book I have been helped also by advice and criticism from many other friends, including J. L. Austin, C. A. Baylis, L. J. Binkley, Alonzo Church, J. C. Cooley, Raymond Firth, Nelson Goodman, Joseph Greenberg, H. P. Grice, C. G. Hempel, Roman Jakobson, J. A. Jenkins, Georg Kreisel, T. S. Kuhn, C. E. Osgood, Hilary Putnam, P. F. Strawson, Morton White, Oscar Zariski, and Paul Ziff. I am grateful further to Jakobson for frequent encouragement and varied helpfulness in his capacity of editor of this series.

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Language and Truth

§ 1. BEGINNING WITH ORDINARY THINGS

This familiar desk manifests its presence by resisting my pressures and by deflecting light to my eyes. Physical things generally, however remote, become known to us only through the effects which they help to induce at our sensory surfaces. Yet our common-sense talk of physical things goes forward without benefit of explanations in more intimately sensory terms. Entification begins at arm's length; the points of condensation in the primordial conceptual scheme are things glimpsed, not glimpses. In this there is little cause for wonder. Each of us learns his language from other people, through the observable mouthing of words under conspicuously intersubjective circumstances. Linguistically, and hence conceptually, the things in sharpest focus are the things that are public enough to be talked of publicly, common and conspicuous enough to be talked of often, and near enough to sense to be quickly identified and learned by name; it is to these that words apply first and foremost.

Talk of subjective sense qualities comes mainly as a derivative idiom. When one tries to describe a particular sensory quality, he typically resorts to reference to public things—describing a color as orange or heliotrope, a smell as like that of rotten eggs. Just as one sees his nose best in a mirror, removed to half the optimum focal distance, so also he best identifies his sense data by reflecting them in external objects.

Impressed with the fact that we know external things only mediately through our senses, philosophers from Berkeley onward have

undertaken to strip away the physicalistic conjectures and bare the sense data. Yet even as we try to recapture the data, in all their innocence of interpretation, we find ourselves depending upon sidelong glances into natural science. We may hold, with Berkeley, that the momentary data of vision consist of colors disposed in a spatial manifold of two dimensions; but we come to this conclusion by reasoning from the bidimensionality of the ocular surface, or by noting the illusions which can be engendered by two-dimensional artifacts such as paintings and mirrors, or, more abstractly, simply by noting that the interception of light in space must necessarily take place along a surface. Again we may hold that the momentary data of audition are clusters of components each of which is a function of just two variables, pitch and loudness; but not without knowledge of the physical variables of frequency and amplitude in the stimulating string.

The motivating insight, viz. that we can know external things only through impacts at our nerve endings, is itself based on our general knowledge of the ways of physical objects—illuminated desks, reflected light, activated retinas. Small wonder that the quest for sense data should be guided by the same sort of knowledge that prompts it.

Aware of the points thus far set forth, our philosopher may still try, in a spirit of rational reconstruction, to abstract out a pure stream of sense experience and then depict physical doctrine as a means of systematizing the regularities discernible in the stream. He may imagine an ideal "protocol language" which, even if in fact learned after common-sense talk of physical things or not at all, is evidentially prior: a fancifully fancyless medium of unvarnished news. Talk of ordinary physical things he would then see as, in principle, a device for simplifying that disorderly account of the passing show.

But this is a misleading way of depicting matters, even when the idea of a sense-datum "language" is counted frankly as metaphor. For the trouble is that immediate experience simply will not, of itself, cohere as an autonomous domain. References to physical things are largely what hold it together. These references are not just inessential vestiges of the initially intersubjective character of language, capable of being weeded out by devising an artificially subjective language for sense data. Rather they give us our main continuing access to past sense data themselves; for past sense

data are mostly gone for good except as commemorated in physical posits. All we would have apart from posits and speculation are present sense data and present memories of past ones; and a memory trace of a sense datum is too meager an affair to do much good. Actual memories mostly are traces not of past sensations but of past conceptualization or verbalization.¹

There is every reason to inquire into the sensory or stimulatory background of ordinary talk of physical things. The mistake comes only in seeking an implicit sub-basement of conceptualization, or of language. Conceptualization on any considerable scale is inseparable from language, and our ordinary language of physical things is about as basic as language gets.

Neurath has likened science to a boat which, if we are to rebuild it, we must rebuild plank by plank while staying afloat in it. The philosopher and the scientist are in the same boat. If we improve our understanding of ordinary talk of physical things, it will not be by reducing that talk to a more familiar idiom; there is none. It will be by clarifying the connections, causal or otherwise, between ordinary talk of physical things and various further matters which in turn we grasp with help of ordinary talk of physical things.

On the face of it there is a certain verbal perversity in the idea that ordinary talk of familiar physical things is not in large part understood as it stands, or that the familiar physical things are not real, or that evidence for their reality needs to be uncovered. For surely the key words 'understood', 'real', and 'evidence' here are too ill-defined to stand up under such punishment. We should only be depriving them of the very denotations to which they mainly owe such sense as they make to us. It was a lexicographer, Dr. Johnson, who demonstrated the reality of a stone by kicking it; and to begin with, at least, we have little better to go on than Johnsonian usage. The familiar material objects may not be all that is real, but they are admirable examples.

There are, however, philosophers who overdo this line of thought, treating ordinary language as sacrosanct. They exalt ordinary language to the exclusion of one of its own traits: its disposition to keep on evolving. Scientific neologism is itself just linguistic evolution gone self-conscious, as science is self-conscious common sense. And philosophy in turn, as an effort to get clearer on things, is not

¹ See Chisholm, *Perceiving*, p. 160.

to be distinguished in essential points of purpose and method from good and bad science.

In particular we shall find, as we get on with organizing and adjusting various of the turns of phrase that participate in what pass for affirmations of existence, that certain of these take on key significance in the increasingly systematic structure; and then, reacting in a manner typical of scientific behavior, we shall come to favor these idioms as the existence affirmations "strictly so-called." One could even end up, though we ourselves shall not, by finding that the smoothest and most adequate overall account of the world does not after all accord existence to ordinary physical things, in that refined sense of existence. *Such* eventual departures from Johnsonian usage could partake of the spirit of science and even of the evolutionary spirit of ordinary language itself.

Our boat stays afloat because at each alteration we keep the bulk of it intact as a going concern. Our words continue to make passable sense because of continuity of change of theory: we warp usage gradually enough to avoid rupture. And such, in the beginning, is the case for Johnsonian usage itself, since our questioning of objects can coherently begin only in relation to a system of theory which is itself predicated on our interim acceptances of objects. We are limited in how we can start even if not in where we may end up. To vary Neurath's figure with Wittgenstein's, we may kick away our ladder only after we have climbed it.

So the proposition that external things are ultimately to be known only through their action on our bodies should be taken as one among various coordinate truths, in physics and elsewhere, about initially unquestioned physical things. It qualifies the empirical meaning of our talk of physical things, while not questioning the reference. There remains abundant reason to inquire more closely into the empirical meaning or stimulatory conditions of our talk of physical things, for we learn in this way about the scope of creative imagination in science; and such inquiry is none the worse for being conducted within the framework of those same physical acceptations. No inquiry being possible without some conceptual scheme, we may as well retain and use the best one we know—right down to the latest detail of quantum mechanics, if we know it and it matters.

Analyze theory-building how we will, we all must start in the middle. Our conceptual firsts are middle-sized, middle-distanced

objects, and our introduction to them and to everything comes mid-way in the cultural evolution of the race. In assimilating this cultural fare we are little more aware of a distinction between report and invention, substance and style, cues and conceptualization, than we are of a distinction between the proteins and the carbohydrates of our material intake. Retrospectively we may distinguish the components of theory-building, as we distinguish the proteins and carbohydrates while subsisting on them. We cannot strip away the conceptual trappings sentence by sentence and leave a description of the objective world; but we can investigate the world, and man as a part of it, and thus find out what cues he could have of what goes on around him. Subtracting his cues from his world view, we get man's net contribution as the difference. This difference marks the extent of man's conceptual sovereignty—the domain within which he can revise theory while saving the data.

In a general way, therefore, I propose in this introductory chapter to ponder our talk of physical phenomena as a physical phenomenon, and our scientific imaginings as activities within the world that we imagine. Later chapters will treat more closely of details.

§ 2. THE OBJECTIVE PULL; OR,
E PLURIBUS UNUM

'Ouch' is a one-word sentence which a man may volunteer from time to time by way of laconic comment on the passing show. The correct occasions of its use are those attended by painful stimulation. Such use of the word, like the correct use of language generally, is inculcated in the individual by training on the part of society; and society achieves this despite not sharing the individual's pain. Society's method is in principle that of rewarding the utterance of 'Ouch' when the speaker shows some further evidence of sudden discomfort, say a wince, or is actually seen to suffer violence, and of penalizing the utterance of 'Ouch' when the speaker is visibly untouched and his countenance unruffled.

For the man who has learned his language lesson, some of the stimuli evocative of 'Ouch' may be publicly visible blows and slashes, while others are hidden from the public eye in the depths of his bowels. Society, acting solely on overt manifestations, has been able to train the individual to say the socially proper thing in response even to socially undetectable stimulations. The trick has

depended on prior concomitances between covert stimulation and overt behavior, notably the wincing instinct.

We can imagine a primitive use of 'Red' as a one-word sentence somewhat on a par with 'Ouch'. Just as 'Ouch' is the appropriate remark on the occasion of painful stimulation, so 'Red', under the usage which I am now imagining, is the appropriate remark on the occasion of those distinctive photochemical effects which are wrought in one's retina by the impact of red light. This time society's method of training consists in rewarding the utterance of 'Red' when the individual is seen looking at something red, and penalizing it when he is seen looking at something else.

Actually the uses of 'Red' are less simple. Commonly 'red', unlike 'ouch', turns up as a fragment of longer sentences. Moreover, even when 'Red' is used by itself as a one-word sentence, what evokes it is usually not the mere apprehension of something red; more commonly there has been a verbal stimulus, in the form of a question. But let us keep for a moment to the fictitious usage described in the preceding paragraph; for it, by its similarity to 'Ouch', will help to bring out also a certain contrast.

The critic, society's agent, approves the subject's utterance of 'Red' by observing the subject and his viewed object and finding the latter red. In part, therefore, the critic's cue is red irradiation of his own retina. A partial symmetry obtains between the subject's cue for utterance and the critic's cue for approval in the case of 'Red', which, happily for the critic, was lacking in the case of 'Ouch'. The partial symmetry in the one case, and the lack of it in the other, suggest a certain superficial sense in which 'Ouch' may be spoken of as more subjective in reference than 'Red'; 'Red' more objective than 'Ouch'.

Exceptions are possible on either side. If the critic and the subject are fighting a fire and are scorched by the same sudden gust, then the critic's approval of the subject's 'Ouch' does not differ significantly from the imagined case of 'Red'. Conversely, a critic may approve a subject's 'Red' on indirect evidence, failing to glimpse the object himself. If we call 'Ouch' more subjective than 'Red', we must be taken as alluding thereby only to the most characteristic learning situations. In the case of 'Red', typically one's mentor or critic sees red; in the case of 'Ouch', typically he does not get hurt.

'Ouch' is not independent of social training. One has only to