

## **Synonymity**

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Intuitively, two expressions are synonymous if and only if (hereafter, iff) they have the same meaning. Despite the apparently straightforward nature of this definition, the notion of synonymy has been hard pressed in contemporary philosophy of language. Difficulties arise in two directions: (i) general skepticism about intensional semantics and (ii) specific concerns involving substitution into intensional contexts.

## **Quinean Anti-intensionalism**

In 'Two dogmas of empiricism,' W. V. O. Quine (1951) leveled an influential attack on the class of intensional semantic concepts which express meaning relations (e.g., analyticity, synonymy, and antinomy). While Quine acknowledges that such concepts are as a group interdefinable, he argues that no members of the class can be made philosophically respectable on empiricist principles.

We can state the argument as follows. In order to be acceptable, these concepts must be definable in either formal (i.e., purely logical or linguistic) or observational terms. Quine first argues that there is no non-circular, non-arbitrary formal definition of the relevant semantic concepts. Thus, any definition will have to be stated in observational terms. Now the semantic concepts under consideration presuppose that sentences have meanings individually. However, except at the theoretical periphery, observation does not bear on sentences one-by-one (holism). Consequently, there is no way to assign observational meanings to sentences individually. It follows that no acceptable definition of the relevant class of concepts is possible.

## **Mates' Puzzle**

In 'Two Dogmas', Quine notes the possibility of defining an analytic statement as one which may be turned into a logical truth by replacing synonyms with synonyms. He then considers the possibility of defining synonymy in terms of substitution *salve veritate* (i.e., without changing the truth value) in all non-quotational contexts. The suggestion is a natural one since substitution of synonymous expressions ought to preserve compositional meaning, which in turn ought to preserve truth. Nor were Quine's reasons for rejecting this proposal particularly forceful.

However, Benson Mates (1952) soon formulated a powerful and independently puzzling argument against substitution *salve veritate* as an adequate basis on which to define synonymy. Take any two

purportedly synonymous expressions. For definiteness, suppose that the expressions are 'chew' and 'masticate'. Now consider the truism that

- (1) Nobody doubts that whoever believes that  $x$  chews, believes that  $x$  chews.

According to the proposed definition of synonymy it follows from (1) that

- (2) Nobody doubts that whoever believes that  $x$  chews, believes that  $x$  masticates.

But clearly (2) may be false even though (1) is true, say, if I am unsure whether or not 'chew' and 'masticate' are synonymous. Consequently, 'chews' and 'masticates' are not synonymous. It seems clear, moreover, that the same argument will work for *any* pair of purportedly synonymous expressions.

Mates' Puzzle is philosophically interesting apart from the question of whether or not substitution *salve veritate* underwrites an adequate definition of synonymy. For, assuming a compositional semantics for the language, substitution *salve veritate* appears to be at least a necessary condition for the synonymy of any pair of words.

### Responses

*Metalinguistic Responses.* A natural first response to Mates' Puzzle is to treat sentences like (1) and (2) as in some way covertly involving direct quotation. According to Wilfrid Sellars (1955), for instance, sentences (1) and (2) should be reinterpreted as (1\*) and (2\*):

- (1\*) Nobody doubts that whoever believes "x chews", believes "x chews".

- (2\*) Nobody doubts that whoever believes "x chews", believes "x masticates".

Church (1954) offers a slightly more complex variant of this approach.

Despite its initial appeal, however, such metalinguistic responses do not appear to do justice the issue. For instance, while (1\*) and (2\*) explicitly involve English expressions, the original sentences do not; there is not even a presumption that every person who makes (2) false must speak English. On this point, Tyler Burge (1978) seems quite right to note that while linguistic considerations may well be involved in such claims, this does not show that these considerations enter into the content of the attitude report.

*NeoQuineanism.* A second approach to synonymy derives from the work of Quine himself. Despite his attack on intensional semantics, Quine (1960) was able to preserve a vestigial concept of synonymy. Call two sentences *stimulus synonymous* (for a speaker at a time) iff they would be accepted or

rejected by that speaker under the same range of observational conditions (Quine 1960). (A similar, but more tenuous definition can be given for words.) However, since for many sentences our assent or dissent is not in this way dependent upon observation, the concept of stimulus synonymy is highly attenuated.

Peter Pagin (2001) attempted to extend this general sort of definitional strategy. According to Quinean holism, sentences may be partially ordered by how closely tied they are to observation. Observation sentences are either accepted or rejected on the basis of current observation. Most of the remaining sentences of the language, however, are assigned truth values that are more or less likely to be revised in light of further observation. Given this, Pagin defines the following equirevisability relation ( $=_r$ ) on statements:  $A =_r B$  iff for any statement  $C$ ,  $A <_r C$  [ $C <_r A$ ] iff  $B <_r C$  [ $C <_r B$ ], where  $<_r$  is the relation of being less revisable than (for a speaker at a time). Pagin then offers the following definition:

(S) Expressions  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  are synonymous iff for any statement  $A$ ,  $A =_r A(\alpha/\beta)$

where  $A(\alpha/\beta)$  is any statement that results from substituting  $\alpha$  for  $\beta$  in  $A$ , not necessarily uniformly.

Pagin's definition runs into problems at the level of statement synonymy. Let  $A$  and  $B$  be two distinct sentences that happen to be equally prone to revision. Then, setting  $\alpha = B$  and  $\beta = A$ , we have it that any two statements that are equirevisable are synonymous. But surely it is possible to have two non-synonymous statements that are equally prone to revision in light of recalcitrant data. In addition, Pagin's definition appears to flounder on a variant of Mates' argument. For let  $\alpha =$  "masticates" and  $\beta =$  "chews" and let  $A =$  sentence (1) above. Then (2) will arise by substitution of  $\alpha$  for  $\beta$  in  $A$ . But (1) and (2) plainly differ with respect to revisability, and so fail to qualify as synonyms on the proposed definition. And this result will clearly generalize to any pair of distinct expressions. This result is not surprising, for if substitution of synonyms cannot preserve truth, it can hardly be expected to preserve revisability.

*Neo-intensionalism.* A final approach involves rejecting the Quinean demand for a reductive definition altogether. Over the years, Jerrold Katz has developed a distinctive non-Fregean version of this approach. Katz's (2004) neointensionalism consists of two major theses: (i) expressions of the language have a mereologically specified sense structure, and (ii) the sense structure of an expression is specified independently of its referential properties. Thus, senses are not modes-of-presentation; rather they constitute an *autonomous* semantic level posited (on the basis of the judgments of competent speakers of the language) in order to account for the sense properties of expressions (e.g., meaningfulness, synonymy).

On such a view, it is straightforward to define synonymy in terms of sameness of meaning (sense), since there is no further requirement to analyze meaning in terms of nonintensional concepts.

But clearly it won't do to allow the two semantic levels (sense and reference) to come apart completely. We can't, for instance, have an expression which is synonymous with the definite description "the first celestial body visible in the evening" but which refers to, say, Margaret Thatcher. Consequently, Katz proposes that while sense doesn't *determine* reference, it does *mediate* it; that is, sense is necessary (though it may not be sufficient) for reference. The result is a picture on which we develop an autonomous sense theory on the evidence of competent speakers use of the language and then use that theory to constrain our theory of reference.

However, Katz's semantic theory does not appear to avoid many of the objections that were the downfall of its Fregean predecessors. Consider, for example, the fact that ordinary, competent speakers of a language are occasionally radically mistaken about the nature of the entities about which they are speaking. Jonathan Cohen (2000), for instance, notes that at one point the best evidence from competent native speakers of English would have supported the hypothesis that the kind term "whale" included as a component of its sense the semantic marker FISH. Intuitively, however, those speakers were still referring to the same natural kind (the whale) as us. But this judgment is inconsistent with Katz's proposal.

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