QUINE AND THE PROBLEM OF SYNONYMY

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Summary
On what seems to be the best interpretation, what Quine calls ‘the problem of synonymy’ in Two Dogmas is the problem of approximating the extension of our pretheoretic concept of synonymy by clear and respectable means. Quine thereby identified a problem which he himself did not think had any solution, and so far he has not been proven wrong. Some difficulties for providing a solution are discussed in this paper.

1. Synonymy in the Two Dogmas framework

At the end of section three of Two Dogmas, Quine decides to turn his back on what he calls ‘the problem of synonymy’. By then he has spent two sections on discussing what synonymy might amount to, dismissing first definition and then interchangeability salva veritate as candidates for explaining it. In a sense, he does the right thing, for the discussion of synonymy in Two Dogmas is really a digression. Quine’s main target, or one of his two main targets, is analyticity. But, as Tyler Burge (Burge 1992, 4–10) and Paul Boghossian (Boghossian 1997, 335–7), among others, have pointed out, there are several notions of analyticity in Two Dogmas. The first notion (1951, 20) of an analytic truth is that of a truth grounded in meaning independently of matters of fact. The second (1951, 23), is that of a truth that can be turned into a logical truth by putting synonyms for synonyms. The third and last notion (1951, 43) is that of a truth that holds come what may, as opposed to a synthetic truth that holds contingently on experience. At no point does Quine comment on the relations between these different notions, and it is not easy to know what he thought.

The first and the third of these are different but closely related, the one concerning independence from facts and the other independence
from experience. These notions are directly relevant to the holism Quine proposes in section six. They are relevant to his discussion of the nature of science, of the relation between theory and experience, and of that between theory and the world. The second analyticity notion, however, does not really belong in this framework. By the definition of the second notion, logical truths are unproblematically analytic. But Quine is explicit about rejecting the analytic/synthetic distinction, or the existence of analytic truths, when talking of the first notion—indeed, independence from facts—and of the third notion—independence from experience. So logical truths wouldn’t qualify as analytic in any of those two senses. From Quine’s own point of view, the second notion is not really compatible with the other two.¹

But if that is so, what is, after all, the problem of synonymy? If Quine is right about analyticity in the first and third sense, then a logical truth like

(1) All unmarried men are unmarried

is not true independently of matters of fact, nor true independently of experience. But then we will not get any such sentence either by interchanging synonyms in a logical truth. Specifically, on the assumption that ‘unmarried man’ is synonymous with ‘bachelor’, this will hold of

(2) All bachelors are unmarried.

(2) is hardly more independent of facts or experience than (1) is, and hence it isn’t analytic in any of the two central senses. Because of this, it does not really matter to Quine’s rejection of analyticity, in the first or third sense, whether we have an adequate definition of synonymy or not. Even if a definition can be devised that is respectable from a Quinean point of view, Quine’s criticism of the first and third notion remains intact. The literature has not always been clear on this point.

¹. More precisely, the following four sentences are jointly inconsistent: ‘all analytic sentences are true independently of matters of fact’, ‘no sentence is true independently of matters of fact’, ‘all logical truths are analytic sentences’, and ‘there are logical truths’. Analogously with ‘unrevisable’ instead of ‘true independently of matters of fact’.