Quine on Observation Sentences: A Case Study of the Method of Explication

Gary Ebbs

The central thesis of this talk is that the naturalistic explication of “observation sentence” that Quine proposed in *Word and Object* is unsuccessful by his own standards. To explicate a linguistic expression that we find unclear but useful, according to Quine, “We fix on the particular functions of [the] unclear expression [an *explicandum*] that make it worth troubling about, and then devise a substitute [an *explicans*], clear and couched in terms to our liking, that fills those functions” (*Word and Object*, 258–259). The point of introducing an explicans is to use it (in some contexts) *in place of* its explicandum. For this purpose, an explicansmust satisfy the *Independence Requirement*, according to which an expression *e'* is an explicans for an explicandum *e* only if the criteria for applying *e'* are independent of the criteria for applying *e*. What Quine comes to see, but only late in his career, I shall argue, is that the explicans for “observation sentence” that he proposed in *Word and Object* fails to satisfy the Independence Requirement. At the end of the talk I shall also suggest that many other influential philosophical analyses are unsuccessful for the same reason.