

THE MEANING OF INDEXICALS. We have seen that there are promising attempts—e.g., in Dummett and Kripke—to explain the referring role of proper names by appeal to the facts of linguistic use. When we turn to indexicals, such as ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘now’, ‘here’, it becomes clear that their referring role should be explained in semantic terms. They denote only relative to the context of utterance. But the meaning of a sentence containing an indexical determines truth conditions. So, while the meaning of indexicals remains fixed, they can be used to refer to different individuals.

THE CASE OF ‘I’. The suggestion just mentioned is not that *the speaker* can use the sentences containing indexicals to refer to different individuals. If reference is determined semantically, it cannot be made dependent on speakers’ intentions.

The suggestion seems to apply in the case of the indexical ‘I’. One *must* use ‘I’ to refer to oneself. This is a key fact about its meaning. And the identity of the speaker is a key fact about the context of its utterance. No description can capture the meaning of ‘I’. For instance, ‘the utterer of these words’ will not do, since I can use the description to refer to the person whom I am now quoting.

DIRECT REFERENCE. Kaplan explains that directly referential are those referring expressions that are directly referential. Rules of use for such expressions specify that their referents are same in every circumstance. Of course a given expression may have been used differently. That is, the *context* of its use may have been different. But given how the context is, the content—the semantic value of the expression, such as the truth value of a sentence, or the object referred to by a proper name—has been fixed in each possible circumstance.

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RIGID DESIGNATION RECONSIDERED. Kaplan draws a contrast between rigid designation (as used by Kripke) and direct reference. The definite description:

The number n such that either snow is slight and $n^2 = 9$ or snow is not slight and $2^2 = n + 1$ (11-1)

designates the same number in every possible world, hence a rigid designator. It is not, however, directly referential. What is said, the content of that description, is not the object itself—it is rather, well, a description. This content, together with the circumstance of evaluation, yields an object.

Consider now the case of ‘I’. Here there is a rule of this kind:

In every possible context of use, the term ‘I’ refers to the agent (speaker) of the context. (11-2)

The rule fixes the content of ‘I’ in a given context. In one context, the content will be Lenin, in another, Stalin. But the rule does not assign object in each circumstance of evaluation, i.e. in each possible world. For if it did, then, e.g., the proposition:

I do not exist (11-3)

would be a logical impossibility.

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CONTENT. The suggestion, then, is that the semantics of indexicals consists in a rule specifying how reference is a function of the context of utterance. In the case of ‘I’ such a rule would specify that ‘I’ is to be used to refer to oneself. So a sentence involving indexicals (‘indexical sentence’) will have a semantically determined, yet context-dependent truth conditions.

Kaplan’s proposal is to assign two semantic properties to an indexical sentence. It may be assigned a semantic property just as it stands, and it can be assigned a semantic property relative to a context. One property is what is said by a sentence, labelled by Kaplan as its ‘content’. When Lenin utters the sentence:

I am hot, (11-4)

the content of this utterance is that Lenin is hot. When Stalin utters the sentence (11-4), the content of his utterance is that Stalin is hot.

CHARACTER. The second property assigned to indexical sentences is their ‘bare’ lexical meaning set by the linguistic conventions of their use. Kaplan labels it ‘character’. The character of an indexical sentence is supposed to determine its content in varying contexts.

Only contents are semantically evaluated. What Lenin said with his use of the sentence (11-4) may or may not be true. Similarly, the expression ‘I’ may or may not refer to Lenin. That is, the character of ‘I’ remains the same for different speakers and different occasions of utterance (contexts). But its content varies.

Therefore, characters are regarded as functions from contexts to contents, whereas contents are functions from circumstances of valuation to semantic values. In the case of sentences those semantic values will be their truth conditions. Generally, also non-indexical sentences possess character. But their character is not context-sensitive, being represented by a constant function. An eternal sentence would be a good instance of sentences with constant character.

Example 1. When Lenin utters:

I am hot now, (11-5)

the context of his utterance contains the speaker, Lenin himself, and the moment of time, 22 April 1922 (say). So the character, interpreted as in (11-2), takes that context and delivers the content, such as:

Lenin is hot on 22 April 1922. (11-6)

The circumstances of evaluation include facts about Lenin on 22 April 1922. Supposing that Lenin is indeed hot on that day, (11-6) received the semantic value True.

So we get the functional determinations:

Character(Context) = Content (11-7)

Content(Circumstances) = Semantic value. (11-8)

Question 2. Rework Example 1 for the case of indexical terms (rather than indexical sentences).



DTHAT. A further device introduced by Kaplan is the special demonstrative ‘dthat’. Its purpose is to fix the reference of the expression occurring within its scope. The idea here is to regard descriptions as a demonstration. The expression ‘dthat[α]’ will then refer ‘directly’, without the interference of the sense of ‘ α ’. In other words, ‘dthat’ is a demonstrative ‘that’ with the completing singular term (normally, a description) functioning as its demonstration. For example, we shall have analytical equivalence:

‘I’ means the same as ‘dthat[the person who makes this utterance]’. (11-9)

DOUBTS ABOUT KAPLAN’S VIEW. Do other indexicals behave in a way analogous to ‘I’? Consider the indexical ‘now’. The sentence:

I am hot now (11-10)

has no absolute truth conditions. They must vary with context. The relevant contextual parameters will include the speaker and the time of utterance. The context is fully specifiable. Consider the indexical ‘he’ and the sentence:

He was hot then. (11-11)

The sentences (11-10) and (11-11) are structurally analogous. A speaker can also use one of them to express what is being said by the other. But there is no clearly and unambiguously specifiable context. The reference of ‘he’ may depend on the speaker’s intentions. (We shall return to this point in our discussion of Stalnaker’s views.) Similar problems arise with the indexical ‘you’.