

Indexicals*

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Suppose that Natasha says “I am right and you are wrong” to Joey. Natasha’s utterance of “I” designates Natasha and her utterance of “you” designates Joey. The truth-conditions of her statement are that Natasha is right and Joey is wrong.

Now suppose that Joey responds by uttering the exact same words back to Natasha: “I am right and you are wrong”. He has said the same words, with the same meaning, but he has not said the same thing. Joey’s utterance of “I” designates Joey and his utterance of “you” designates Natasha. The truth-conditions of his statement are that Joey is right and Natasha is wrong. Joey has directly disagreed with Natasha.

I will use “meaning” for the rules or conventions that are associated by a language with the expressions in it, the rules that one learns when one learns the language. Given this understanding of “meaning,” the meaning of Natasha’s words and of Joey’s is the same. What differs is the objects the particular expressions designate and the truth-conditions of the statements. I’ll call this aspect of utterances “content”.

The crucial differences between the first and second utterances were the speakers and the addressees. Let’s call such facts about an utterance its “context.” It is the differences in the contexts of the utterances that accounts for the differences in their contents.

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[The role of context in this case differs from that in a case of homonymy or ambiguity. With homonymy the context helps us to figure out which word is being used. With ambiguity, the context helps us to determine which meaning of a word or phrase is being used. But in the Natasha/Joey case context still has a role to play after the question of the words and meanings have been settled. The meanings of “I” and “you” direct us to features of the context, to determine who is designated.]

The content of an utterance using “I” or “you” is determined by contextual facts about the utterance in accord with their meaning. Such expressions we call *indexicals*.

In addition to “I” and “you”, the standard list of indexicals includes the personal pronouns “my”, “he”, “his”, “she”, “it”, the demonstrative pronouns “that” and “this”, the adverbs “here”, “now”, “today”, “yesterday” and “tomorrow” and the adjectives “actual” and “present” (Kaplan, 1989). The words and aspects of words that indicate tense are also indexicals. And many other words, like “local”, seem to have an indexical element.

According to Kaplan’s account, each indexical, and each sentence containing an indexical, has a meaning or *character* that is a function from contexts to content. The character of “I” is a function whose value, for each context, is the speaker or agent of that context. The character of “now” is a function whose value, for each context, is the time of that context. The character of “you” is a function whose value, for each context, is the person addressed by the speaker in that context. The character of the sentence spoken by Natasha and Joey is a function whose value, for a context with a speaker x and addressee y , is the proposition that x is right and y is wrong. Natasha and Joey’s words have the same characters, but their utterances have different contents.

In the formal development of his theory, Kaplan equates content with the intensions of intensional semantics. (See “Semantics,” pp. 353ff.). He criticizes earlier attempts to provide a formal theory within this framework (See “Seman-

tics,” p. 355-356), for treating contexts on a part “circumstances of evaluation” (See (Kaplan, 1989), pp. 507ff.). The context determines which proposition is expressed by Joey’s utterance of “I am right and you are wrong”; the circumstance of evaluation determines whether or not the proposition is true. The necessity for such a distinction was seen by Kamp (1967).

[Kaplan notes that at the level of character it makes sense to talk about the logic of indexicals. “I am here now” is a truth in the logic of indexicals, because, given its character, this sentence will have a true content at each context. The content will be contingent, and can be expressed by a sentence that is not a logical truth.]

Kaplan’s concept of content corresponds to “what is said” by an utterance. I’ll call this “official” content. This is what someone who knows the meaning and the context grasps. Other philosophers have thought it important also to bring in the concept of *token-reflexive* or *diagonal* content. This is what someone who knows the meaning but does *not* know the context grasps (See “Semantics”, p. 356, and (Burks, 1949), (Stalnaker, 1981), (Perry, 1993)).

Consider an utterance **u** of “Je ne comprends pas Anglais” made by Erin during a cocktail party. Suppose that Natasha hears the words and understands French, but doesn’t see who said them. Joey hears the words, understands French and also sees that Erin said them. Based on her knowledge of French, Natasha can assign utterance-reflexive truth-conditions to *u*:

Natasha knows that **u** is true iff

- (1) the speaker of **u** does not understand English.

Joey, since he knows who is talking, can assign non-reflexive truth conditions to **u**:

Joey knows that **u** is true iff

- (2) Erin does not understand English.

Natasha knows what the world has to be like for **u** to be true, given the meaning of the words in **u**. Joey knows what the world has to be like, given the meaning of the words in **u** and the relevant facts about context. (2), what Joey knows, is the official content of Erin's remark. It is what we would ordinarily say Erin *said*. Erin didn't *say* (1); she didn't make a remark about her own utterance. Nevertheless, (1) corresponds to an important level of understanding that we must take account of to explain the cognitive significance of sentences containing indexicals. [When Erin said what she did, she probably wanted her listeners to grasp that the person in front of them, that they were looking at and perhaps trying to converse with in English, did not understand that language. This would be an easy inference from the proposition expressed by (1)—that the person who was producing the utterance they were hearing did not understand English. To understand Erin's plan, we seem to need the reflexive content of Erin's remark, and not only its official content.]

Suggestions for Further Reading

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