

Indexicality

Suppose that Abelard says to Eloise, “I am right and you are wrong.” Abelard’s utterance of “I” refers to Abelard, and his utterance of “you” refers to Eloise. The truth-conditions of his statement are that Abelard is right and Eloise is wrong.

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

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 Abelard’s words and of Eloise’s is the same. What differs is the objects that the particular expressions designate and the truth-conditions of the statements in which those expressions occur. I will call this aspect of utterances *content*. When we take expressions such as “I” and “you” and “here” and “now” seriously, we need to distinguish between meaning and content.

The crucial differences between the first and second utterances are the speakers and the addressees. Let us 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:

Meaning + context → content

When Eloise responded to Abelard, she used the same sentence, with the same meaning. But the content differed because of the difference in context—in this case in the identity of the speaker. If Eloise had agreed, by saying, “You are right and I am wrong,” she would have expressed the *same* content, by using a sentence with a different

meaning, in a different context. In that case the differences in content would stem from the differences in what the indexical terms “I” and “you” refer to.

The role of context in this case differs from that in a case of homonymity or ambiguity. With homonymity 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 Abelard/Eloise 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. These expressions we call *indexicals* in philosophy. Pretty much the same set of expressions are called *deictic* in linguistics.

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.

The following rules give the meanings of some simple and common indexicals, by saying to what object or aspect of things a use of them refers. Here an utterance is an intentional act of language use by a speaker at a time.

- An utterance *u* of “today” refers to the day on which *u* occurs.
- An utterance *u* of “yesterday” refers to the day before the day on which *u* occurs.
- An utterance *u* of “here” refers to the place at which *u* occurs.
- An utterance *u* of “I” refers to the speaker of *u*.

These indexicals work in a relatively straightforward way, so that the information needed to interpret them is limited to basic facts about the utterance, which we can call the *narrow* context: the speaker, the time, and the place. Other indexicals require more information to interpret facts that are part of the *wider* context. Take the term “yea,” which is common in some dialects of English. “The fish was yea long,” means that the fish was as long as the space between the speaker’s hands. So we need to know not only who the speaker of the utterance was but also how he held his hands as he spoke.

Sometimes the meaning and wider context do not suffice. We also have to know something about the intentions of the speaker. Suppose you point across the street, in a direction where several women are standing, and say “That woman is probably a philosopher.” Simply knowing the narrow context is not enough. But even knowing the wider context—seeing which women are standing in the direction you point—is not enough. I need to know to which of the women you intend to direct my attention. The context may also make clear which one. Perhaps one of the women is weighed down with books by Kant and Hegel. But this is still another use of context: facts about the utterance that serve as evidence for the speaker’s intentions.

Indexicals are important in philosophy for several reasons. First, they occur as essential elements in many philosophical arguments. For example, Descartes famous argument, in his *Meditations*, that he could not doubt his own existence, seems essentially to require the first person: *I* think there-

fore *I* am. As Elisabeth Anscombe pointed out, the force of the argument is lost if we replace “I” with “Descartes” (1975). Second, indexicals are the natural expression of philosophically important experiences. It is natural to express what we directly see with “this” and “that.” Bertrand Russell thought the most natural way to refer to our own sense-data was with “this” (1912).

Finally, for a long time philosophers of language tended to assume that indexicals were linguistic shortcuts, with no real importance to the structure of reality and thought about it. Since this view was largely abandoned, and the meaning/content distinction was appreciated—thanks to the work of Burks (1949), Castañeda (1966), Kaplan (1989), and others—our understanding of language has been considerably deepened.

Bibliography

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