“Fixed” vs. “shifting” words: linguistic and philosophical viewpoints

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What is all this about?

- Meaning and reference of indexicals
- Vagueness vs. determinacy
- Saussureanism and Functionalism vs. Analytic Philosophy of Language
Sense and Reference

- Originally devised by G. Frege in his attempt to analyze the propositions of Arithmetics:
  - *Sinn*: the mode of presentation of a denotatum
  - *Bedeutung*: the referent itself
# Meaning and Reference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sense (Sinn)</th>
<th>Search procedure</th>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Thought</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reference (Bedeutung)</td>
<td>Individual object</td>
<td>Set of objects</td>
<td>Truth value</td>
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<th>Singular term</th>
<th>Predicate</th>
<th>Sentence</th>
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- **Sense (Sinn)**: The meaning or sense of a singular term, a predicate, or a sentence.
- **Search procedure**: The process of determining the sense.
- **Concept**: The abstract thought or idea associated with a singular term or predicate.
- **Individual object**: A specific instance or entity.
- **Set of objects**: A collection or group of entities.
- **Truth value**: The logical outcome or validity of a sentence.
Singular terms

• One and the same referent can be described through **different senses**:

  - “Square root of 9”, “Sum of 1 and 2” → 3

  - “Evening star”, “Morning star” → **Venus**

• Note that **3** and **Venus** do not depend on context

  - Sense-to-reference linkage is **deterministic**
Proper names

- Normal **singular terms** depend on the World: they are not eternal, but only **contingent**
  
  - “The teacher of Alexander the Great” may or may not refer to Aristotle

- However, proper names are **rigid designators**: they necessarily refer to a determinate individual
  
  - “Aristotle” necessarily refers to Aristotle in every World
Main problem:

- When John says “I” he means himself
- When Sally says “I” she means herself

The reference of “I” shifts from one individual to another within the actual World

Contrariwise, within our World the reference of “Alexander’s teacher” is permanently Aristotle
Analytic approach

- D. Kaplan’s (1977) theory of indexicals

Kaplan suggests to analyze the sense of indexicals into content and character

- **character** is the defining rule of a context-sensitive word, like a pronoun

- **content** is what is effectively said, given the context; for a pronoun it is its referent
Analytic approach

- J. Perry’s (1997) theory of indexicals
- Indexicals’ *senses* are similar to *descriptions*
  - they are modes of presentation linked to the context of utterance
- Indexicals’ *referents* are like those of *proper names*
  - they are directly referenced
## Indexicals

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<th>Definite descriptions</th>
<th>Proper names</th>
<th>Indexicals</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sense of the type</strong></td>
<td>Denoting</td>
<td>Naming</td>
<td>Denoting</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reference of the token</strong></td>
<td>Describing</td>
<td>Referring</td>
<td>Referring</td>
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</table>
Wrap up: what is fixed

• In Kaplan’s terminology
  - singular terms have fixed character
  - Indexicals have shifting character

• «For an expression to be indexical, however, it must have a fixed sense and denotation, but a shifting reference» (Clark & Clark 1979)
Indexicalization drift

• Some philosophers *misinterpret* indexicality extending it too loosely

• Three premises:
  - Indexicals are *shifting* words
  - Indexicals are *context-sensitive* words
  - Indexicals are used to *indicate* something
Indexicalization drift. 1

• Whatever *shifts* is indexical

• Indexical meaning-components have been discovered in many words
  - *come, go, left, right* (Fillmore 1975)
  - *local* (Partee 1989)
• Whatever depends on context is [somewhat similar to an] indexical (Braun 2007):
  
  - Verbs of believing and knowing are indexical (Richard 1990)
  
  - Quantifiers are indexical (Stanley & Szabó 2000)
  
Indexicalization drift. 2

• Clark (1992): contextual expressions

• Raffman (2014): vague words
  
  – Such words as *tall* are interpreted depending on the context:

  • *John is tall.* [the term of comparison is a short man]

  • *John is not that tall.* [the term of comparison is a tall man]
Indexicalization drift. 3

• Whatever *indicates* something is indexical, cf. Silverstein (2003)

• Forms of *non-referential indexicality*
  
  - Japanese *honorifics*

• Forms of “second order” indexicality
  
  - Speaking *slang* “indicates” the social background
Some criticism

• True indexical words refer to individuals obligatorily present in the discourse

• “Contextual” words refer to things that are only contingently present in the discourse
  – Cf. also Bach (2000) on what does “context” mean

• 2nd-order indexicals are better explained as connotations
Two approaches

- Analytic Philosophy: studies language of science
  - formal languages describe some already known scientific facts

- General Linguistics: studies language of everyday communication
  - natural language communicates some new data

(despite Chomsky)
Two approaches

• Analytic Philosophy: «To understand a sentence in use means to know what is the case if it is true» (Wittgenstein TLP, 4.0.24)

• Linguists: «It is important to realize that whatever mechanisms underlie the process of fixing reference are not linguistic or even semantic in nature, but psychological» (Seuren 2009)
Two approaches

• Analytic approach deals with formal languages that speak about objective knowledge

• There is no subjectivity: 1st person does not belong here

• Formal languages describe, rather than communicate

• There is no indeterminacy
Two approaches

• General Linguistics describes the information flow in everyday communication

• Natural languages are located in the mind/brain and describe one’s own mental states

• Natural languages are essentially subjective

• How is the incommunicability avoided?
Linguistic approach

• First premise: the language is arbitrary
  - Arbitrariness of *sign*: signified vs. signifier
  - *Horizontal* arbitrariness: signified vs. signified
  - *Vertical* arbitrariness: meaning vs. reference
    → it implies *vagueness*
Linguistic approach

- Second premise: linguistic activity has two phases

- Abstract level: understanding
  - Saussure’s *langue*

- Use level: interpretation
  - Saussure’s *parole*
Linguistic approach

- Note that *langue* and *parole* ≠ *type* and *token*
  - Type is only a *class* of tokens
  - Tokens are exact *replicas* of their type

- «The meaning of an expression assigns the same content to each and every utterance of the expression» (Perry 1997)
Linguistic approach

• Note that many analytic philosophers recognize the “otherness” of the linguistic use vs. meaning
  
  – **utterer’s meaning** (Grice 1968)
  
  – **sentence non-literality** (Bach 1994)
  
  – **hidden indexicality** (Schiffer 1995)

• However, they still try to deal with it from a deterministic point of view
Linguistic approach

• Natural language: no identity is ensured between langue and parole

• A speaker/hearer performs two separate tasks:
  - understanding the abstract meaning
  - interpreting the sentence in a given context

• We don’t communicate the meanings but with the meanings
Vagueness

• Therefore all words are vague (not just some)

• Wittgenstein (PU, 510): «Try to do the following: say “It’s cold here”, and mean “It’s warm here”. Can you do it?»

• A linguist’s answer would be: yes!

• Notwithstanding vagueness, communication is still possible
Vagueness

• How do we get through the vagueness?

• Communication flows from what is less vague to what is more vague

• This is because language is incremental

• What is already interpreted improves the interpretation of what is not
Sources of determinacy

• Elements that are *necessarily present* in a dialogue:
  
  - *speaker* and *hearer*, *time* and *place*
  
  - situational *context*
  
  - conversational *co-text*
  
  - background *knowledge*
Sources of determinacy

• Linguistic expressions that are **immediately interpretable** in a dialogue:

  - speaker and hearer, time and place → **deixis**

  - situational **context** → **demonstratives**

  - conversational **co-text** → **anaphora**

  - background **knowledge** → **topic/given**
Sources of determinacy

• Usually words are non-deterministic:
  
  - We have the right of not being able to interpret *to run*, *guelder rose* or *freedom*

• Truly indexical words are deterministic:
  
  - We *must* be able to interpret *I* and *you*
  
  - We *are supposed* to be able to interpret *he, this, the*
Sources of determinacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indeterminate interpretation</th>
<th>Automatic interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the new professor of Linguistics</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the new guy</td>
<td>this guy here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a new guy who came today</td>
<td>he</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a professor</td>
<td>the professor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sources of determinacy

• Such truly indexical elements are hard-coded into language
  - no languages without 1st vs. 2nd persons distinction
  - no languages without tense (?)
  - no languages without anaphora (??)
  - no languages without topicalization (???)
What is fixed?

• In the Analytic school indexicals are shifting; other words are fixed

• In my proposal:
  
  – **true indexicals are fixed**: their referents are automatically determinable
  
  – **other words are all vague**, therefore their referents are indeterminate
What is fixed?

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<th>General Linguistics (my proposal)</th>
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<td>Indeterminate (Vague)</td>
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<td><strong>Indexicals</strong></td>
<td>Shifting</td>
<td>Automatically Determinable (Fixed)</td>
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Strengths of my theory

- Explores the function of indexicals
- Considers language in its natural form: dialogue
- Excludes vagueness and contextually from indexicals
- Arguably includes into the notion of indexicality some new phenomena
  - (such as anaphora, already in Récanati 2005)
Thank you!