How to Represent the Characters of Indexicals

1 The Issue

Indexicals are context dependent expressions; that is, their semantic value varies from context to context. This variation happens according to a rule (commonly called "character") associated with the indexical; for instance, "I" typically picks out the agent of the context, "today" picks out the day of the context, etc. Within the Kaplan tradition, characters are represented in a formal semantics by having the semantic value of the indexical delivered by a function defined on n-tuples, which in turn represent contexts, so that each place in the n-tuple is associated with a particular indexical expression. In this paper, I argue that the representation of the characters of indexicals requires semantics to place more restrictions on n-tuples than the one having to do with the categories that each member must belong to, lest we introduce arbitrary assignments in the wrong place.

Since the beginning of this tradition, most philosophers have imposed such substantial restrictions on assignments; I will call their theories "complicated theories". Kaplan (1989), for example, required that the speaker must exist at the space / time / possible world point.

But not everyone agrees: recently, Predelli (2013) has argued that we should allow no such restrictions; that we should allow any and all n-tuples in our semantics of indexicals. I will call such theories "simple theories".

The goal of this paper is to show that simple theories are incorrect. I will argue that the semantics of indexicals requires fairly strict restrictions on n-tuples, though the reasons that Kaplan (1989) offered are not quite sufficient for this conclusion. Along the way, we will also track one kind of consequence of complicated theories: they generate special, always-true sentences, variously called "logical truths" (Kaplan (1989)), or "truths in virtue of meaning" (Russell (2008)), or "truths in virtue

of character alone" (Predelli (2013)).

2 Why I Prefer a Complicated Theory

I will argue that simple theories leave out part of what they are supposed to do. The simplest way to see the problem is to look at the way a simple theory treats the first and second person singular pronouns. A simple theory represents the character of each pronoun as a function from an index to individuals. It thus distinguishes indexicals from, say, proper names, whose semantic value does not vary with the indices. But it does not, in any interesting way, distinguish between the first person and the second person. It treats them differently, to be sure: "I" gets its value from the first element of the n-tuple, not the second. So it captures the fact that the two pronouns are different, but, it does not capture anything about the difference between them.

So how can formal semantics capture the difference between 'refers to the speaker' and 'refers to the addressee'? The simple answer: through a complicated theory. Here is the picture. Start from a context of utterance c_u (we are not assuming that all contexts are contexts of utterance, but this is the simplest case). Someone is speaking to someone else. It is not a trivial task to spell out what exactly makes one person the speaker, and another the addressee. Speaking is not sufficient for the former: when I read aloud what Frege said, I do not count as the speaker in the sense relevant here (e.g. tokens of "I" do not refer to me). Simply being in the vicinity does not make one the addressee: there may be several people around, and only one addressee. But I assume that, whatever the fundamental facts may be, the semantically relevant fact is that, in our context, A is the speaker and B the addressee. Any theory, simple or complicated, allows an index i_u which corresponds to our context, at least inasmuch as A is the first member of i_u, B the second, etc.

A complicated theory does more. It spells out the relationships among the members of indices, as they reflect the relationships between the parts of contexts. It does not assign values arbitrarily: the first member of an index is there because that index represents a context where that index member is the speaker. But this richness comes at a cost. The challenge for complicated theories is to give a theory of contexts, i.e. to specify the features of possible worlds that provide context sensitive

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expressions their semantic values, and to account for the relations between these features. A theory of contexts will then serve to limit indices to proper ones, i.e. those representing contexts.

3   Predelli's Challenge

To begin, suppose that we collect kinds of indices into sets, depending on kinds of contexts that they represent (if any). Some of these sets are obviously semantically uninteresting, like the set of indices which have David Kaplan as the speaker. Other sets are more natural: indices representing contexts of telephone conversations, or contexts of letter writing and / or reading, etc. The most relevant for our purposes is the set of indices representing face-to-face conversations (call it F). Suppose that it is part of an account of the necessary and sufficient conditions for such conversations that the participants must be relatively close to each other. Then we get some special-relative-to-F sentences, such as "I am not very far from you", but these are clearly not semantically interesting sentences.

Many of Predelli's objections are about the particular examples that Kaplan chose. The interesting core of Predelli's challenge is that even if a sentence is special-relative-to-C, we need a story to justify counting certain sentences as special. Generalizing from features of some (or even all) contexts won't be enough. There is a general point here, and it is surely correct: seemings are not perfect guides to truth, in semantics or (almost) anywhere else. And the charge is fair against Kaplan, since he (mostly) appealed to intuitions about specialness. The story I have provided passes this test: unlike Kaplan, I am not starting from an intuition about the specialness of "I exist", or "I am here now". Rather, I started from thinking about the kinds of circumstances in which we assign the speaker role to a particular person, and argued that those conditions deserve to be reflected in the semantics of "I", and in the semantics of context-sensitive languages in general.

References

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