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Perspectival indexicality in fiction

Abstract: In everyday language use, the content of an indexical sentence is determined by the parameters of the context in which it occurs. In fictional discourse, however, indexical sentences seem to behave in a nonstandard way. This paper attempts to show that the difference can be best explained by using the concept of fictional perspective.

1. Indexicals in fiction

It is hard to imagine a contemporary debate about the semantic evaluation of indexical expressions without mentioning at least some of the main tenets of David Kaplan's formal system *Logic of Demonstratives* (LD). Perhaps the most often mentioned element of LD is the clear conceptual distinction between *context of use* and *circumstance of evaluation*.

Contexts of use are conceived of as minimal collections of parameters which are needed to determine the semantic contents of indexical expressions. Such collections could be represented by quintuples of the form $\langle a, t, l, w, g \rangle$, where a is an agent, t is a point of time, l is a location, w is a possible state of the world, and g is a (possibly partial) variable assignment function defined on the salient entities of w at t and l. According to this conception, the content of the formal counterpart of 'I' in context c at w is c_a, the agent of c.[1] The content of 'here' in c at w is c_l, the location of c. In other cases, for example 'now' and 'today', the evaluation proceeds in a similar way.

Circumstances of evaluation are identified in LD with world-time pairs $\langle w, t \rangle$, but if the complexity of the evaluated formal material requires this, they may also include further parameters. The number and kind of additional parameters do not influence substantially the role of circumstances. That role consists in assigning truth values to the content of sentences which contain one or more indexical expressions.

Kaplan's specific point in introducing the distinction between context and circumstance was to correct a serious mistake of earlier theories of indexical languages.[2] Earlier index theory applied a model in which the semantic values of sentences were computed by a one-step method. In that model, an indexical sentence A were interpreted with respect to its context of use c and the world w of that very context. But, as Kaplan pointed out, in some very simple cases of modal reasoning, the one-step method yields intuitively wrong results concerning validity and logical truth. Consider the following pair of sentences:

(1) I am here now.

(2) The author of this essay is here now.

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[1] From here on the reference to the assignment function g will be omitted for the sake of simplicity.

[2] See Kaplan 1989: 509–10; Perry & Israel 1996.

According to the one-step method, in cases where the agent of (1) is not at c_l and c_t at the world of c, (1) expresses a false proposition. This suggests that (1) has the same status with respect to truth and falsity as (2): if we alter the world parameter in an appropriate way, both sentences may come out as false. The parallelism may strike many as problematic, since (1) seems to express a logically true proposition, while what is expressed by (2) is a clear example of a contingent proposition.

A further problem is that the one-step method allows for modal generalizations. It says that if *A* is a logical truth, then *Necessarily, A* should also be regarded as logically true. But even if the logical truth of (1) would be admitted by one-step theorists, the validity of the generalization from (1) to (3) would remain doubtful:

(1) I am here now. Therefore

(3) Necessarily, I am here now.

Though the embedded sentence in the scope of the modal operator may be said to be logically true, (3) expresses a false proposition. Obviously enough, the agent of the sentence might be located at another place at the time of the utterance of (3).

Kaplan ended his analysis of these merely technical examples with a twofold conclusion. First, in order to save our intuition that (1) expresses a logically true proposition, the notion of context in LD must be restricted to proper contexts. A context c qualifies as proper context only if c_a is at c_l and c_t at the world of c. Proper contexts are not allowed to include counterfactual world parameters, this is exactly the reason why *I am here now* cannot express a falsehood in them. Second, it is also a reasonable requirement that (3) and kindred sentences be evaluated as false in LD. This requirement is easily met when (3) is evaluated at improper world-time pairs. If *Necessarily, I am here now* is evaluated with respect to a world, where the agent is not located at the place of the context of the uttered sentence, the expressed proposition becomes false.

These innovations renewed the standard evaluative procedures of index-based theories. Kaplan introduced into LD what we may call a two-step method. In this method, as a first step, indexical sentences are evaluated with respect to their content in proper contexts, then, as a second step, sentence contents are evaluated with respect to truth values in proper or improper world-time pairs.

Most philosophers and semanticists agree today that the separation of these steps on the basis of a clear distinction between the semantic role of context and circumstance was a great achievement. In spite of the agreement, some parts of LD were heavily criticized from very early on. Studies carried out in the nineties have attempted to prove, for example, that Kaplan's insights cannot be applied consistently to specific discourse situations.[3] In particular, answerphone messages and written notes were claimed to provide counterexamples to the Kaplanian thesis that the sentence *I am here now* cannot have true instances in improper contexts. Nowadays, this branch of the debate focuses primarily on the theoretical legitimacy of the proper/improper conceptual distinction. Some are of the opinion that restricting LD to proper contexts is nothing else than an *ad hoc* solution to the problem of logical truth in indexical languages.[4] Others maintain that the Kaplanian picture is correct in most of its details, and the anomalous behavior of *I am here now* should be explained rather by pragmatic factors.[5]

This is an interesting debate in its own right, but I think we can deepen our understanding of Kaplan's original motives, if we slightly change our point of view. A common feature of answerphone messages, written notes and similar examples is that in such situations the content of one or more indexical expressions is determined by a nonstandard parameter. In the framework of LD, operator controlled parameter shift is considered as impossible, but Kaplan does not take into consideration cases of free parameter-shifting.[6] So, the question arises whether LD is able to account for cases of language use where contextual parameters are shifted freely. In a sense, this is a different question from that of the legitimacy of the proper/improper distinction. Improper contexts resemble logically impossible worlds, thus Kaplan can persuasively argue against their semantic usefulness. In contrast, the existence of shifted contexts cannot be excluded on purely logical grounds. At least, it is easy to find "raw data" which seem to demonstrate the reality of their everyday existence.[7]

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[3] As far as I know, the debate was opened by Sidelle 1991.

[4] See, for example, Predelli 2005.

[5] Stevens 2009 and Vecsey 2010.

[6] Kaplan illustrates the impossibility of operator controlled parameter shift with the following example: (#) In some contexts it is true that I am tired now. Indeed, if the operator *In some contexts it is true that* would operate on the meaning of 'I', then (#) would be true when in some context an agent were tired at the time of that context. However, the proposition expressed by the embedded sentence has nothing to do with such an agent: as usual, the agent of the embedded sentence is the agent of the context of (#).

[7] As regards the role of data in linguistics in general, see Kertész & Rákosi 2012.

Fictional discourses provide perhaps the most straightforward instances of free parameter-shift. Let us take the case of an actor playing Hamlet. Consider the following utterance from Act III, Scene ii:

(4) I must be idle.

For the purposes of a formal analysis, one must, of course, disregard the contingent properties of an uttered sentence such as (4). What is interesting is instead the content-determining relation that holds between an abstract sequence of contextual parameters and the occurrence of the sentence type *I must be idle* in a context with that sequence. In this regard, it is important to realize that in the context of (4) the content of the first person pronoun is not determined by the agent of that context. If the context of the play, *c*, is depicted by $<a, t, l, w>$, then the agent of *c* should not be identified with c_a. That means, in other words, that the actor of the play should not be conceived as asserting a proposition according to which he himself must be idle. In order to arrive at an intuitively correct result, the agent parameter must then somehow be shifted from c_a to c_{a*}, so that the content of 'I' be determined by the relevant agent parameter of the play, c_{a*}, that is, by Hamlet.[8]

The example may be generalized to many other cases of first-person sentences occuring in written or spoken fictional discourse. All these cases involve a nonstandard agent parameter which has to take over the content-determining role of the default agent parameter. For those who accept the relevance of fictional discourse to the Kaplanian semantics, the main explanatory task is then to find a general rule or principle which is able to explain the underlying mechanism of parameter-shifting.

2. Two solutions to the problem of parameter shift

Eros Corazza and Mark Whitsey have recently offered a sophisticated explanation of parameter-shifting which is deliberately conservative with respect to LD.[9] According to the

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[8] One might object here that a shift of this sort cannot occur, because *Hamlet* denotes an abstract, fictional, or merely possible etc. object, and it would be fundamentally mistaken to represent such an object as an agent. I find this objection unpersuasive. It would be fatal for our semantic theorizing, if formal rules for indexical sentences were dependent on the ontological status of fictional characters. From a formal point of view, the proper name *Hamlet* denotes always an agent, no matter what kind of object is taken as its content.

[9] Corazza & Whitsey 2003.

view proposed by Corazza and Whitsey, indexical expressions behave in fictional discourses in accordance with the Kaplanian principles. Indexicals are directly referring singular terms, and as such they are immediately connected to the appropriate parameters of their actual context of use. One key difference is that in fictional discourses the content of indexicals is determined by empty parameters. Let us return for a moment to our earlier example from Hamlet, Act III, Scene ii:

(4) I must be idle.

Corazza and Whitsey would say that the actor playing Hamlet is not a likely candidate as a content-determining parameter for 'I' in (4), and thus an alternative parameter must be found. Obviously, the alternative parameter can only be Hamlet himself. On the basis of their anti-realist convictions, Corazza and Whitsey would also say that because Hamlet does not exist, the fictional name *Hamlet* should be regarded as an empty term.

Two consequences follow from the above remarks. Firstly, the first person pronoun 'I' in (4) acquires its content from a shifted agent parameter. This seems to be a superficial but correct observation. Secondly, the shifted parameter is an empty one, which induces a *context block*. In connection with this latter term, Corazza and Whitsey allude to a general feature of fictional discourses. They suggest, following Kendall Walton, that fictional contexts containing empty parameters are part of a language game that can be characterized by the mental act of pretending. Participiants of a fictional discourse pretend that in a blocked context indexical expressions behave in complete accordance with the conditions of their standard use. In uttering (4), for example, the actor pretends to be Hamlet, and the audience of the play participates in the pretence. Though the context is blocked because of the presence of an empty parameter, the first person pronoun 'I' is pretended to denote Hamlet.[10]

It deserves mentioning that Corazza and Whitsey are aware of a potential problem which may arise from the postulation of empty parameters. Let us suppose that (1) occurs in a fictional context:

(1) I am here now.

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[10] Jonathan Gorvett has recently proposed a very similar theory. See Gorvett 2005.

According to the view under discussion, the content of 'I', 'here', and 'now' must be evaluated in (1) with respect to an empty contextual parameter. More precisely, all three expressions are supposed to be connected to the one and the same empty parameter, and that is controversial. How can the content of different type of indexicals be determined by the same parameter? Corazza and Whitsey offer a solution to this problem by claiming that in fictional discourses indexicals contribute to the propositional content of sentences with more than the objects they denote. Their meanings are accompanied with a specific kind of information which could make their use cognitively significant. On this account, the cognitive significance of (1) can be traced back to the fact that the proposition expressed by it contains some piece of information about an agent, a location and a point of time. Such informations are sometimes identified with reflexive truth conditions.[11] In the case of (1), the satisfaction of these truth conditions requires merely that one understand the linguistic meaning of the sentence. At the level of reflexive truth conditions, (1) expresses (a), (b), and (c):

(a) There is an agent *a* of (1);
(b) *a* is located at the place of the context of (1);
(c) *a* is located at the time of the context of (1).

The distinctive feature of this reflexive content is that it is free from existential commitment. It may be said, then, that (a), (b), and (c) captures fully the cognitive significance of the sentence *I am here now*, despite the fact that 'I', 'here', and 'now' are determined by an empty parameter.

I think the expanation for parameter shift given by Corazza and Whitsey is very far from being conservative with respect to the Kaplanian semantics. Indexicals denote their objects directly in LD. As Kaplan has often stressed, these expressions contribute to the content of sentences in which they occur without the mediation of any other propositional component.[12] So the claim that indexicals are endowed with a certain kind of surplus semantic information seems wholly incompatible with Kaplan's original insight. This is, hovewer, only the first controversial aspect of the proposal. The second difficulty is that even if it were accepted that reflexive truth conditions have to be involved in the evaluation of indexical sentences, the proposal would not be able to say anything about the underlying principles of parameter-shifting. Corazza and Whitsey maintain that parameter shift is an inherent feature of fictional

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[11] See Perry 2001.
[12] See, for example, Kaplan 1989: 492–95, 520 & 568.

discourses, and as such requires no further explanation.[13] Quite the contrary. If nothing else, Corazza and Whitsey would have to provide an account of why fictional discourses have this special feature.

In an interesting paper, Stefano Predelli attempted to give a quite different approach to the phenomenon of parameter-shifting.[14] Predelli's overall account of indexicality is more closely related to LD than that of Corazza and Whitsey's. In particular, Predelli follows Kaplan's advice in that he applies the two-step method for the evaluation of indexical sentences. He agrees with Kaplan that propositional contents are determined on the basis of ordered pairs consisting of sentence types and contexts. He also adopts the Kaplanian thesis that truth values for propositions are calculated under different circumstances of evaluation. However, Predelli sees LD as an inappropriate framework for semantic theorizing when it comes to the analysis of paradigmatic examples of fictional discourse. Undoubtedly, LD yields a wrong result with respect to the evaluation of such a sentence as (5) from Hamlet, Act II, Scene ii:

(5) Denmark's a prison.

Predelli thinks the resources of LD as inadequate in this case, because (5) does not express the opinion of the actor who plays the role of Hamlet. A modification is required, so that (5) be evaluated with respect to the characters and the world of the story of the play. As we have seen, Corazza and Whitsey would claim that, as a part of the language game of fiction, the sentence *Denmark's a prison* is only pretended to be true in the mouth of the actor. Predelli proposes to consider a structurally similar conception. Let us suppose that fictional sentences are suitable for formal analysis only if they are supplied with a prefix in the following form:[15]

(5') It is true in the play of Hamlet that Denmark's a prison.

The essence of this conception is that the prefix in (5') works as an intensional operator and thus shifts the world and time parameter of the embedded sentence. This manoeuvre fits well with the methodology of LD. Kaplan remarked that intensional operators may operate on the parameters of the circumstance of evaluation, since not all features of worlds and times are build in into the content of sentences. Points of times, for example, may be shifted by

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[13] Corazza & Whitsey 2003: 131.
[14] Predelli 1997.
[15] The idea for this arises from Lewis 1978.

operators, because indexical sentences left the relation between the time of their content and the truth of their content often unmarked. In the cases of fictional sentences, however, there is a significant difference. Why should one think that the sentence type (5') may function as a formal counterpart of the sentence type (5)? The syntactic structure of (5) has nothing in common with the syntactic structure of (5'), and it is fairly unlikely that such a difference would not imply a corresponding difference in the semantic content of these sentences. Moreover, the presence of the truth predicate gives to (5') a metatheoretic flavor which is wholly absent in the other case. Predelli rightly complains that the sole motivation for attaching intensional operators to sentences like (5) seems to be to arrive at an intuitively correct semantic picture of fictional discourse.

Because of its ad hoc character, Predelli rejects the prefixing proposal as inadequate. In his view, the right solution to the problem arising from the phenomenon of parameter-shifting requires a less radical modification of LD. The point is that in the course of the evaluation process the original syntactic properties of fictional sentences should be kept fixed. Hence, such sentence types as *I must be idle* or *Denmark's a prison* have to be taken as appropriate objects for formal analysis. But, as Predelli points out, it is also important to recognize the explanatory limits of LD. According to the Kaplanian semantics, each context of use is associated with a privileged world. In normal cases of language use, contexts are usually associated with the actual world.[16] Consider again (4):

(4) I must be idle.

The privileged world of (4) seems to be the world of the performance of the play, since hat is the world in which the actor plays the role of Hamlet. But this cannot be correct. Predelli seeks a way out this semantic impasse in saying that the evaluation of (4) involves a new context, and the new context contains a shifted world parameter. The new context contains just this one shifted parameter, therefore the content of the proposition expressed by *I must be idle* remains intact. In turn, the shifted world parameter determines the world of the play as the circumstance of evaluation. So while LD selects the actual world as privileged for (4), Predelli thinks the world of Hamlet as privileged for (4).

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[16] This remark is true, of course, only with respect of non-modal contexts.

Unfortunately, Predelli's explanation remains essentially incomplete, because it is unable to shed light on the rules governing the mechanism of parameter shift.[17] It is not clear at all what sets off the process of parameter-shifting, and nothing is said about the semantic rules underlying this process.

3. Perspectival indexicality

Both views outlined above include a mysterious element. Parameter-shifting is recognized as a real semantic phenomenon, but no clear explication is given for its origin. In this last section, I want to sketch an account which may be hoped to be somewhat less mysterious.

It has been occasionally stated in the relevant literature that indexicals are perspectival expressions. Kaplan remarked, for example, that the content of indexical sentences is always dependent on the speaker's perspective.[18] Predelli also observed that when one talks about fictional characters or events, one talks, roughly speaking, from the perspective of the story.[19]

I think the notion of *perspective* may also help to understand better the nature of fictional discourse. For present purposes, very little turns on the details of the definition of this notiton. *Perspective* can be taken to mean, roughly, that our epistemic access to the world around us is limited in various ways. Everyone possesses a diverse set of concepts with a corresponding set of cognitive abilities. Hence the great variability in possible responses to a particular epistemic situation. Nonetheless, understanding some features of the world seems often to be connected to a specific epistemic perspective. This is especially characteristic of fictional discourse: the role of truth in fiction cannot be understood fully from a purely factual perspective. This may be regarded as a reason for including the notion of perspective in the stock of semantic primitives of LD. The idea promoted here is that perspective, seen as a primitive, can serve the function of a nonstandard contextual parameter.

Evidently, the meaning of indexical expressions cannot be compared with the meaning of, say, *come* and *go*. The meaning of verb phrases of this type are explicitly perspectival, while indexicals are perspectival only in the sense that they can be involved in sentences which are able to express perspectival propositions.

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[17] At several points in his later works, Predelli argues that parameter shift is governed by speaker's intentions. This is a more reasonable proposal, but it has its own obvious limitations. See, for example, Predelli 2002, 2005 and, for a critique, Stevens 2009.

[18] Kaplan 1989: 593.

[19] Predelli 1997: 71.

There arises immediately the question of why to posit an additional contextual parameter if nothing in the meaning rules of indexicals requires it. The most plausible answer is that though the perspectival element remains unarticulated linguistically, the effect it produces is directly accessible in an epistemically relevant sense for the consumers of fictions. Everyone who possesses the concept of *fiction* knows fairly well that fictional sentences cannot be treated as if they were factual utterances.

Kaplanian contexts can be conservatively enriched with a nonstandard perspective parameter in the following simple way. In fictional discourses, a standard collection of parameters $<a, t, l, w>$ takes the form of $<a{\to}a_f, t{\to}t_f, l{\to}l_f, w{=}w_f>$, where the subscript $_f$ denotes the perspective of the fiction F, and the symbol $\to$ represents an optional shift between a standard and a nonstandard parameter. $w{=}w_f$ means that the world parameter of the context is obligatorily shifted to the world parameter of the fiction. There is no need here to opt for fully obligatory shift, because in fictional settings indexicals are allowed to change their contribution to sentential content independently from each other. A shifted agent parameter, for example, does not necessarily imply a shifted location or time parameter.

Note that fictional perspective is conceived here as part of the content of indexical sentences. But, if sentence contents are already enriched with a perspectival element, then the system of LD requires no further revision: circumstances of evaluation can retain their standard $<w, t>$ structure in LD. It follows that the truthfulness of fictional sentence contents must be evaluated with respect to our actual world. With this background set in place, let us return to our earlier examples:

(4) I must be idle.

Two shifts may be supposed to occur in parallel in (4): $a{\to}a_f$ and $w{=}w_f$. The value of the shifted agent parameter a_f is the fictional character Hamlet, and the value of the shifted world parameter w_f is the fictional world of the play. Thus, enriched with the perspective of Hamlet, (4) expresses the proposition *that Hamlet must be idle*, which is obviously true when evaluated at our actual world. As I have already mentioned in an endnote, the proper ontological status of the object denoted by the fictional proper name *Hamlet* is of no particular importance for the formal system of LD. From the point of view of the semantics of interpreted languages, Hamlet belongs clearly to the category of objects whatever ontological status it may be said to possess. We can take it that this ontologically unspecified object is the one which occurs as constituent in the proposition *that Hamlet must be idle*.

Our slightly modified version of LD seems to deliver an intuitively correct result also in the indexical-free case:

(5) Denmark's a prison.

The world parameter of (5) can be considered as obligatorily shifted from w to w_f. The proposition the sentence type expresses in the context of the performance of the play is then the perspectival proposition *that Denmark's a prison*, which is true, again, at our actual world.

As it has already been stated above, perspective cannot be thought of as a standard contextual parameter since it is not a built-in element in the meaning rules of indexicals. Neither can it be thought of as a particular kind of semantic object. It should instead be conceived as a content shift indicator: whenever consumers of fictions recognize its presence, they can come to know that an interpretive task must be performed in order to arrive at an empirically adequate evaluation of a certain set of sentences. Recognizing the presence of a shift indicator is, in one sense of the word, an extra-semantic task.[20] One has to recognize by way of experience or inference that the standard contextual resources are unsatisfactory for understanding a given sentence. But the same requirement holds for any semantic system sufficiently similar to LD: formal systems also have to detect proper contextual determinants for the sentences they are applied to. I think that is the key point. If the content of indexical sentences in fictional discourse gets enriched and modified by perspectival parameters, then the system of LD should mirror this fact. We are then driven to the conclusion that what sets off the process of parameter-shifting within formal models of indexicality is the quest for semantic content, and in the end, the quest for truth.

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[20] The case of fictional perspective thus shows some resemblance with the case of irony. Irony can also not be recognized without mobilizing such extra-semantic skills as intention detection or implicature comprehension.

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