Utterance, Interpretation and the Logic of Indexicals

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Abstract: I argue that some utterances of sentences containing occurrences of indexical expressions should not be evaluated with respect to the context of utterance. I suggest that we distinguish between context of utterance and context of interpretation, and I employ this distinction in the analysis of recorded messages and other interesting linguistic phenomena. I then discuss the implications of my views on contexts with respect to the logic of indexicals. Against the traditional view, I argue that sentences such as ‘I am here now’ or ‘something exists’ should not be treated as logical truths.

1. Introduction

There appears to be widespread consensus among philosophers of language concerning certain fundamental assumptions in the semantics for indexical expressions. To begin with, we all agree that the semantic evaluation of sentences containing occurrences of indexical expressions must be relativized to a context. It is common wisdom that, for instance, the sentence ‘I am bored today’ may say something true with respect to a context in which I am uttering it on 20 June, but it may well say something false with respect to a context where Bill Clinton is talking on 21 June.¹ It is also customary to explain the relationship between indexical expressions and contexts by associating each indexical with a rule (its character), which searches for the relevant parameter in the context and which provides a semantic value for the expression with respect to that context. For example, we may think of the character for ‘I’ as the function that yields the agent of the context as the expression’s referent (see Kaplan, 1977). Given the appropriate characters for the indexicals in the language, we then proceed to evaluate pairs con-

¹ From a formal point of view, we may think of a context as represented by a sequence of elements. I refer to the items in a context as its coordinates, or parameters.
sisting of a sentence and a context, according to the traditional mechanisms of compositional semantics.

But how does this view help us with respect to the semantic evaluation of actual instances of language use? Here is a picture that often yields the correct outcome. Suppose that, on 20 June, I say

(1) I am bored today.

It is relatively unproblematic to extract a context from the situation in which my utterance has taken place. I refer to such a context as the context of utterance. In my example, it contains myself as the agent, and the 20th of June as the temporal coordinate. Suppose that we pair the sentence-type (1) and such a context, that we take into consideration the characters of ‘I’ and ‘today’, and that we employ an adequate recursive characterization of semantic values. We would then reach the (correct) conclusions that my utterance says of the author of this essay and of 20 June that the former is bored on the latter, and that my utterance is true just in case I was bored on that day. This point of view may be easily adapted to instances involving written messages. Suppose for instance that, on 15 March, in Los Angeles, I write

Now, the trees are blooming here

in a letter to a friend. My inscription occurs in a context which contains 15 March and Los Angeles as, respectively, its temporal and spatial parameters. If we apply the customary characters of ‘here’ and ‘now’ to such context, we obtain the (correct) results that my inscription says that the trees are blooming in Los Angeles on 15 March, and that my inscription is true iff that is indeed the case.2

The procedure sketched in the above paragraph is often implicitly assumed to be generalizable to all sorts of examples. I label as the Traditional View the claim that utterances (or inscriptions) of sentences containing indexical expressions are always correctly evaluated by taking into consideration the context of utterance (or inscription). More precisely, according to the Traditional View, an utterance (or inscription) u of a sentence S is true iff the pair consisting of S and of the context determined by u is assigned the truth value true by a satisfactory semantic theory. The Traditional View is the principal target of this essay. Against it, I shall present a variety of examples that cannot be handled correctly by evaluating the sentences at issue with respect to such context. I begin with cases involving written notes and recording devices, in section 2. I argue that these examples are naturally ana-

2 It is well known that ‘now’ may refer to temporal intervals that properly include the temporal parameter of the context. Analogous considerations hold, mutatis mutandis, for ‘here’. Thus, the sentence in my letter may be used to convey the information that, say, the trees are blooming in Southern California in early spring. This complication is however not directly relevant to the topic of this essay, and I shall ignore it in what follows.
lysed by distinguishing between the context of utterance and the semantically relevant context, and I criticize alternative analyses of recorded messages, which strive to be consistent with the Traditional View. In section 3, I argue that the conceptual tools I have employed in my explanation of recorded messages are also needed to account for a variety of other cases. In section 4, I discuss certain consequences of my results with respect to the logic of indexical languages.

2. Written and Recorded Messages

Let me begin my discussion with the anecdote of Jones, who, for reasons that need not concern us, suddenly decides to flee the country. Before leaving home at 8 in the morning he writes a note to his wife, who will be back from work at 5 in the evening:

(2) As you can see I am not at home now. If you hurry, you’ll catch the evening flight to Los Cabos. Meet me in six hours at the Hotel Cabo Real.

Clearly, the note does not convey the false content that Jones is not at home at the time the note was written, nor does it request that Mrs Jones be at the Cabo Real at 2 in the afternoon, i.e. six hours from the time of inscription. And suppose that you write in your office

(3) I am here

on a scrap of paper, and that, after having arrived home, you leave it on the kitchen table, with the intention of informing someone of your whereabouts. Of course, your note does not say (falsely) that you are at the location of inscription, i.e. in your office; it rather conveys the (correct) information that you are in the house.

The intuitively correct interpretation of Jones’s note, so I propose, may be obtained if we determine its content by applying the characters of the indexicals occurring in (2) to a context intended by the speaker as semantically relevant, and distinct from the context of utterance. In the case of (2), the context yielding the appropriate outcome contains as its temporal coordinate the expected time of Mrs Jones’s arrival (5 o’clock in the afternoon), rather than the time at which Jones wrote the note (8 in the morning). With respect to this context, ‘now’ and ‘in six hours’ succeed in picking up 5 pm and 11 pm according to their customary semantic characters. Analogously, in the case of (3), the intended relevant context contains your house as its spatial parameter, and not the place where you wrote the

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3 Hereafter, I often write ‘utterance’ as short for ‘utterance/inscription’.

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note. Since ‘here’ refers to the spatial parameter of the relevant context, your
inscription may be interpreted in the intuitively correct manner, i.e. as
imparting the information that you are in your house.

In more general terms, the hypothesis presented here is that utterances of
a sentence S in a context c may express the content which one obtains by
evaluating S (according to the ordinary characters of the expressions occur-
ing in S) with respect to a context c*, intended as relevant by the speaker,
and distinct from c.4 I refer to the context which provides the indexicals’
contents as the \textit{(intended) context of interpretation}. In my analyses of (2) and
(3), the contexts of interpretation differ from the contexts of utterance with
respect to the temporal and spatial coordinates. I will later argue that other
important phenomena may be explained by appealing to a context of
interpretation that differs from the context of utterance in other respects
as well.5

Although the foregoing analysis of (2) and (3) seems to me to have a great
deal of initial plausibility, it is by no means the standard account of recorded
and written messages. In the remainder of this section, I address and criticize
two alternative views on the subject. According to the first, examples similar
to those discussed above indicate that indexical expressions are \textit{ambiguous},
and that they are sometimes associated with a character which does not yield
the customary parameter of the relevant context. We find a premonition of
such a \textit{Many Characters View} in a suggestion that David Kaplan attributes to
Keith Donnellan in a footnote to Demonstratives. According to it, ‘our langu-
age might contain two forms of “now”: one for the time of production,
another for the time of audition’ (Kaplan, 1977, p. 491, fn. 12).6 Some years
later, a similar view is endorsed by Quentin Smith. Among other examples,
Smith discusses an utterance of ‘today is January 27’, recorded on the 26th
of January and broadcast the following day. He comments:

\footnote{My locution ‘utterances . . . in a context’ is a bit sloppy, given that I treat contexts as
abstract sequences of semantically relevant parameters. A more precise, but less read-
able statement of my view, goes as follows: for some utterance u of a sentence S, such
that u determines a context c (i.e. the agent of c is the utterer of u, the location of c is
the place where u takes place, etc.), u expresses the content assigned to the pair \langle S, c* \rangle by a satisfactory semantic theory, where c* is distinct from c and is intended as rel-
vant by the speaker.}

\footnote{There are \textit{prima facie} analogies between the view presented in this paragraph and Geoff-
rey Nunberg’s criticism of the ‘index-referent’ identity thesis (see Nunberg, 1993). But
note that, at least with respect to the examples I discuss, I have no qualms with the
claim that the semantic value of an indexical is the contextual element addressed by its
character. What I reject is rather the tenet that the context containing the appropriate
item is inevitably the context of utterance. My essay and Nunberg’s intriguing paper
address distinct phenomena (see for instance Nunberg’s footnotes 10 and 12, where he
explicitly puts aside examples that occupy centre stage in the present work), and my
conclusions may perhaps be accommodated within his framework.}

\footnote{But Donnellan presents this view only as a description of a possible language, one which
could be operative ‘if there were typically a significant lag between our production of
speech and its audition (for example, if sound travelled very very slowly)’ (Kaplan,
1977, p. 491, fn. 12).}
[The customary character of ‘today’] is inapplicable [in this case] and instead another rule is applicable, viz., that ‘today’ takes us to the day the reproductions of the utterance are heard by the audience. (Smith, 1989, p. 172)

This suggestion may be developed in the following manner. Let us represent the context for an utterance as including (at least) two temporal coordinates, the time when the utterance is produced, and the time when it is received by the audience. We may label these coordinates as, respectively, the encoding time and the decoding time. According to the Many Characters View, temporal indexicals are ambiguously anchored to either temporal coordinate, and we should distinguish between, say, ‘today$_{ET}$’, which yields the day containing the encoding time, and ‘today$_{DT}$’, which refers to the time of decoding. Jones’s note (2) is then allegedly disambiguated as

\[(2') \ldots \text{I am not at home } now_{DT} \ldots \text{ Meet me } [\text{in six hours}]_{DT} \text{ at the Hotel Cabo Real,}\]

where \([\text{in six hours}]_{DT}\) is roughly synonymous with ‘in six hours from now$_{DT}$’. If we extend the Many Characters View to spatial indexicals in an obvious way, we may obtain the intuitively correct interpretation of your note by disambiguating it as

\[(3') \text{ I am here}_{DL},\]

where here$_{DL}$ refers to the location of decoding.

Although I do not have knock-down arguments against the Many Characters View, I do not believe that it provides a satisfactory alternative to my explanation of recorded and written messages. The relationship between character and linguistic meaning is a delicate matter, but it is hardly controversial that if two expressions differ in character, they have different linguistic meanings. Thus, according to the Many Characters View, ‘now’ as it occurs in Jones’s note (2) is an expression whose meaning is distinct from that of ‘now’ in the sentence ‘now the trees are blooming here’, written in the letter described in section one. But this conclusion appears to be quite unpalatable, and it should not be embraced in the presence of alternative explanations of the puzzle under study. Moreover, in the remainder of this paper, I shall argue that my distinction between context of utterance and context of interpretation is essential to the explanation of a variety of examples, involving expressions other than temporal and spatial indexicals. If we decided to analyse all the linguistic data presented in this essay along the lines suggested by the Many Characters View, we would end up with a rather counter-intuitive multiplication of lexical entries, and with the uncomfortable con-
clusion that most English indexicals are associated to a number of distinct meanings.\footnote{Strictly speaking, according to Smith, an indexical expression is associated to a single ‘metacharacter’, i.e. to a function from ‘uses’ to ordinary characters. If this view is coupled with the thesis that metacharacters must be represented at the lexical level, one may escape my charge of a counterintuitive multiplication of lexical items. But in order to accommodate all of the examples I discuss in this essay, and a variety of similar cases, one ought to enrich metacharacters in an \textit{ad hoc} manner, thereby ending up with lists of characters no less unattractive than multiple lexical entries.}

But the \textit{Many Characters View} is not the only alternative to my analysis of recorded messages. According to what we may label the \textit{Remote Utterance View}, written notes and tape recorders are contraptions which allow us to perform utterances ‘at a distance’, i.e. they are devices which make it possible for a speaker to utter a sentence at a time $t$ and location $l$ without actually being in $l$ at $t$.\footnote{For a defence of the \textit{Remote Utterance View}, see Sidelle, 1991.} Given the possibility of remote utterances, so this view continues, it is not implausible to conclude that Jones ‘uttered’ (2) at 5 o’clock, when Mrs Jones read the note, and that you ‘uttered’ (3) in your house, where your message was decoded by your addressee. If this is correct, then the contexts of utterance for these examples contain, respectively, 5 o’clock and your home as the appropriate coordinates. It follows that the intuitively correct referents for the indexicals occurring in (2) and (3) may be obtained without abandoning the \textit{Traditional View}, and without concocting additional characters for ‘here’, ‘now’, and ‘in six hours’.

Imagine however that Mrs Jones is late, and that she reads (2) at 8 in the evening. Intuitively, Jones’s messages must be evaluated with respect to the expected time of decoding, namely 5 o’clock. Mrs Jones would misinterpret the sentence written on the note, were she to conclude that her husband will be waiting for her at the Cabo Real at 2 am, namely six hours from the actual decoding time. But the \textit{Remote Utterance View} is unable to yield the pre-theoretically desired outcome in this case. For, on any plausible understanding of the notion of a remote utterance, nothing is being uttered at 5 o’clock in the scenario I have described. Thus, the context of utterance, even when interpreted as in the \textit{Remote Utterance View}, is unable to provide the parameter which allows the expression ‘in six hours’ to pick up 11 pm, according to its customary character. The view I suggested some paragraphs ago, on the other hand, reaches the correct conclusion, because it focuses on the context intended as semantically relevant by Jones, the author of the message.

3. Beyond Recorded Messages

In section 2, I suggested that examples of written notes and recorded speech involving indexical expressions support the distinction between context of
utterance and context of interpretation. But, as I hinted above, recorded messages are by no means the only evidence for this distinction. In this section, I present a variety of examples, in which no ‘device for later broadcast’ is involved, that may not be treated in the intuitively correct fashion by the Traditional View.9

Consider first a passage from Wolfgang Hildesheimer’s book on Mozart, written around 1976:

(4) In the summer of 1829 Aloysia Lange, née Weber, visits Mary Novello in her hotel room in Vienna . . . Aloysia, the once celebrated singer, now an old lady of sixty-seven . . . gives Mary the impression of a broken woman lamenting her fate, not without tears. (Hildesheimer, 1982, p. 97)

Clearly, Hildesheimer is not making the patently false claim that Aloysia Lange is 67 in 1976, and that she is then giving Mary Novello the impression of a broken woman. If we insist that ‘now’ be associated to its customary character, we are naturally led to the conclusion that the above passage is to be interpreted with respect to a context which, unlike the context of inscription, contains 1829 as its temporal coordinate.10,11 And take the following passages from California, The Ultimate Guidebook (Riegert, 1990). In the chapter on Los Angeles, we read:

If an entire neighborhood could qualify as an outdoor museum, the Mount Washington district would probably charge admission. Here, just northwest of downtown, are several picture-book expressions of desert culture within a few blocks. (Riegert, 1990, p. 37; italics mine)

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9 For a discussion of other cases, see also Predelli, 1996.

10 One may complain that ‘now’ in (4) is within the influence of the operator ‘in the summer of 1829’, occurring at the beginning of the fragment under discussion. This complaint is misguided: indexical expressions continue to refer to the appropriate contextual item even when occurring in a sentence affected by operators on content (see Kaplan, 1977). I am also unconvinced by the objection that ‘now in (4) manages to pick up the appropriate time in virtue of an anaphoric link to the discourse-initial expression ‘in the summer of 1829’. In particular, one may easily construct analogous examples in which the required antecedent for the alleged anaphoric link is absent (against the anaphora solution, see Smith, 1989, p. 171).

11 Note that the verbs occurring in (4) are in the present tense. The phenomenon instantiated by this example is thus importantly different from the use of ‘now’ exemplified in narrative contexts by sentences such as ‘now she felt at home’. Kamp and Reyle have suggested that examples of this latter kind indicate that ‘now’ is anchored to what they call the ‘temporal perspective point’, rather than to the time of utterance (see Kamp and Reyle, 1993, pp. 595–6 and p. 612). But since in present-tensed examples such as (4) Kamp and Reyle’s temporal perspective point coincides with utterance-time (Kamp and Reyle, 1993, p. 596), I may safely ignore this distinction for the purpose of this essay.
Later, we find this description of the Coast Starlight train-route to Santa Barbara:

Picking up the baton in Los Angeles, the ‘Coast Starlight’ continues north and west to the Pacific, shuttling past stretches of open water populated with surfers and occasional fishermen. *Here* the tracks hone a fine line along sharp rockfaces. (Riegert, 1990, p. 238; italics mine)

We may safely presume that Ray Riegert, the author of our guidebook, wrote it in his house. But this assumption surely does not force us to interpret the above passages as asserting that expressions of desert culture occur in Riegert’s home, nor that train tracks hone a fine line along sharp rockfaces in his residence. The writer intends that his remarks be interpreted vis à vis contexts containing Mount Washington and the Southern California coastline as their locational parameters.  

Note incidentally that neither the *Many Characters View* nor the *Remote Utterance View* fare well here. In particular, the distinction between *now*<sub>UT</sub> and *now*<sub>ET</sub> and its analogue for spatial indexicals is clearly inapplicable to the foregoing examples. ‘Now’ in the passage on Aloysia refers neither to the time of encoding (when the book was written), nor to the time of decoding (when I read it), and ‘here’ in the excerpts on California picks up neither the author’s home nor the location of the reader. The *Many Characters View* could then take such instances into account only by associating the indexical expressions at issue with new characters, devised in an *ad hoc* fashion in order to obtain the desired interpretations.

My distinction between context of utterance and context of interpretation may be profitably applied to the analysis of examples involving indexical expressions which address coordinates other than the temporal and spatial parameters of the context. Suppose that, during a discussion of Milos Forman’s movie *Amadeus*, I say:

Mozart thought that the mysterious messenger was an otherworldly creature, but the actual commissioner of the *Requiem* was Salieri.

Of course, I am addressing the events as depicted in the movie. You would miss the point, were you to remind me that the *Requiem* was commissioned

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12 Note the entry for ‘here’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: ‘Here (…) 1. In this place; in the place . . . where the person speaking is, or places himself’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 235; italics mine).

13 For instance, according to Smith, the occurrence of ‘now’ in cases similar to (4) is ‘governed by the rule that it refers to the historical time the speaker wishes to emphasize and take as his chronological point of reference’ (Smith, 1989, p. 172).
by Count Walsegg, not by Antonio Salieri. The contextual coordinate addressed by the indexical expression ‘the actual commissioner’, as it occurs in my remark on the movie, is not the possible world in the context of utterance, but ‘the world of the fiction’.

There are also interesting examples involving the agent co-ordinate of the context. Consider for instance the case of a lecturer commenting on the *Nicomachean Ethics* in an introductory class. She says:

I argued at length that one lives the best life by exercising both moral and intellectual virtues. And now I am suddenly advocating a rather different position, namely that the good life must be devoted solely to theoretical activity. Do you see a way out of this apparent inconsistency?

The lecturer is not presenting her own *prima facie* incompatible opinions on human life. She is temporarily pretending to be in Aristotle’s shoes, and she employs the first person pronoun to refer to him, rather than to herself.

There is also a peculiar use of first-person indexicals which deserves our attention at this stage. Suppose that you have been bragging about your engineering skills, and that you have insisted on fixing my car’s carburettor. Faced with the disastrous results of your ineptitude, I cry in an exasperated tone:

(5) Sure, *I* can do it! *I* can fix anything! And now, look what you’ve done!

By uttering the first two sentences in (5), I am, in a sense, playing your part. The content that is thereby being expressed is that *you* can do the job. (Given the ironical tone of my utterance, the information pragmatically conveyed is, of course, that *you* cannot do it.) Analogously, the author of the above remark on the *Nicomachean Ethics* is, so to speak, playing the role of Aristotle. In both these examples, the correct content is obtained by applying the

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14 The movie *Amadeus*, directed by Milos Forman, narrates the life of the composer Antonio Salieri. In the movie, Salieri commissions Mozart’s *Requiem*. In fact, the *Requiem* was commissioned, anonymously, by Count Walsegg (see Robbins Landon, 1988).

15 Note that my discussion of the example about *Amadeus* assumes that ‘actual’ is indexically anchored to the context’s possible-world parameter; for a defence of this view, see Salmon, 1987. My analysis of cases such as my comment on *Amadeus* may be fruitfully applied to certain questions in the semantics of discourse about fiction (see Predelli, 1997).

16 My expression ‘the world of the fiction’ betrays a simplistic view of fiction, and bypasses important metaphysical questions. But I hope that more sophisticated views of fiction can be accommodated within a framework similar to the one I suggest.

17 For a sophisticated analysis of the pragmatic mechanisms governing irony in examples such as (5), see Sperber and Wilson’s discussion of *echoic* utterances, in Sperber and Wilson, 1995, pp. 237–43).
expressions’ characters to a context differing from the context of utterance as to the agent’s coordinate. 18

4. I Am Here Now

I have presented a variety of examples where the intuitively correct results may not be obtained by interpreting the sentences at issue with respect to the context of utterance. The desired readings are rather secured by applying the characters of the expressions occurring in the uttered sentences to what I have called the intended context of interpretation.

It may appear that the main thesis defended here is of a merely pre-semantic nature. Once the relevant context has been identified, so it may be alleged, one may then evaluate the uttered sentence at this context, according to the customary procedures of the semantics for indexicals. A traditional theory, for example the one presented in Kaplan (1977), appears then to be able to yield the appropriate truth-conditions for, say, Jones’s message, when it is applied to the sentences in that message and to the correct context of interpretation. For instance, the sentence ‘I am not at home now’ in (2) turns out to be true at all circumstances where the referent of ‘I’ in the context of interpretation, namely Jones, is not at home at the time of that context, 5 o’clock.

But these comments on the relationship between my views and the traditional semantics of indexicals conceal an important point. In this section, I explain why the suggestion put forth thus far does not only entail the rejection of the traditional identification of context of utterance and context of interpretation, but also affects a certain crucial feature of the traditional procedures of semantic evaluation. In particular, I shall argue that a semantic theory which distinguishes between the context of utterance and the context of interpretation produces a list of logical truths different from that yielded by the traditional semantics for indexicals.

As we have seen, the Traditional View assumes that the context of utterance always provides the semantically relevant elements. It follows from this assumption that, in the development of a formal theory for the evaluation of a sentence at a context, contexts are allowed to borrow certain characteristics typical of contexts of utterance. In particular, a crucial feature of contexts of utterance which traditional theorists are eager to represent in their formal counterparts has to do with the relationship between the coordinates of the context. In a context of utterance, the agent of the context is in the context’s location at the time (and world) of the context. Thus, for example,

18 Other interesting examples involve what Arnold Zwicky has called the ‘phony inclusive’ use of ‘we’, as in my ‘How are we today?’ said to a friend (see Zwicky, 1977, p. 716). What we have here is an (independently motivated) shift from singular to plural (perhaps a mock majestic plural?), and the intention that the semantically relevant context contain my addressee, rather than myself, in its agent coordinate.

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David Kaplan assumes that the set $C$ of contexts in a structure for his indexical language $LD$ may contain only quadruples $<w, x, p, t>$ ‘such that in the world $w$, $x$ is located at $p$ at the time $t$’ (Kaplan, 1977, p. 509; see also p. 544). Following Kaplan, I refer to quadruples of this kind as proper contexts.

It is easily seen that sentences such as ‘I am here now’ and ‘I exist’ are evaluated as true with respect to every proper context. Traditional theorists, who insist that the semantically relevant context is always the context of utterance, and who note that contexts of utterance are proper contexts, have concluded that

\[
\text{[t]he sentence ‘I am here’ has the peculiar property that whenever I utter it, it is bound to be true. (Blackburn, 1984, p. 334)}
\]

Indeed, a traditional theorist who accepts the definition of logical validity as truth in every context of every model, may not resist the conclusion that ‘I am here now’ and ‘I exist’ are logical truths.\(^\text{19}\) Thus, Kaplan claims that

\[
\text{[‘I am here now’] is deeply, and in some sense . . . universally, true. One need only understand the meaning of [it] to know that it cannot be uttered falsely. . . . [Our decision to accept only proper contexts] has the consequence that [‘I am here now’] comes out, correctly, to be logically true. (Kaplan 1977, p. 509)}
\]

So, in his Remarks on the formal system of Demonstratives, Kaplan lists the formal counterparts of ‘I am here now’ and ‘I exist’ (respectively ‘N(Located I, Here)’ and ‘Exist, I’) as logical truths (see Kaplan, 1977, p. 547).

In this essay, I have argued against the identification of context of utterance and context of interpretation. An important byproduct of my criticism of the traditional view consists in my acceptance of improper contexts as relevant for the semantic evaluation of certain utterances. For example, the correct context of interpretation for Jones’s note (2) contains Jones, Jones’s home, and the expected time of his wife’s arrival, 5 o’clock, as, respectively, the agent, the location, and the temporal coordinates of the context of interpretation. Yet, Jones is not at home at 5 o’clock, his absence being the very reason why he had to resort to written notes in order to communicate with his wife. Worse still, Jones might not even exist at five o’clock, were he to die, say, on his way to the airport. In this case, the context of interpretation for his note would contain an agent and a time, such that the former does not exist at the latter. Thus, my view entails the rejection of the traditional assumption that only proper contexts are semantically admissible,

\(^\text{19}\) For this definition of logical validity, see Kaplan, 1977, p. 547.
and consequently restricts the class of valid sentences. The most prominent victims are, of course, ‘I am here now’ and ‘I exist’.20

On the other hand, it should be pointed out that the admissibility of improper contexts leaves room for certain interesting validities, peculiar to the logic of indexicals. In particular, sentences of the form ‘(actually \(\varphi\)) if and only if \(\varphi\)’ are still recognized as valid. Given that ‘It is necessary that (actually \(\varphi\)) if and only if \(\varphi\)’ does not turn out to be a logical truth (and indeed should not turn out to be a logical truth), one of the most interesting results of the traditional semantics of indexicals, namely the failure of the Rule of Necessitation, still holds in the present framework (see Kaplan, 1977, p. 547).

So, the view presented above entails that we must distinguish between formulae which the traditional theory treated on a par, as examples of logical truths. In fact, the distinction I proposed has independent plausibility. A sketchy account of the traditional semantic evaluation of ‘actually \(\varphi\) if and only if \(\varphi\)’ and ‘I am here now’ may suffice to clarify this point.21 I abbreviate the locution ‘true in model \(M\) with respect to a context \(c\) of \(M\), and with respect to a time \(t\) and a possible world \(w\)’ as ‘true \((M, c, t, w)\)’ (I ignore assignments of values to variables for the sake of simplicity). I also refer to the agent, the location, the time, and the possible world parameters of a context \(c\) as, respectively, \(A_c, L_c, T_c,\) and \(W_c\). Now, the semantic contribution of the indexical expression ‘actually’ is typically represented along the following lines: for any model \(M\) and context \(c\) of \(M\),

\[(a) \quad \text{a sentence of the form ‘actually } \varphi \text{’ is true } (M, c, t, w) \text{ iff } \varphi \text{ is true } (M, c, t, W_c).\]

Thus, given any model \(M\) and any context \(c\) of \(M\),

\[(b) \quad ‘\text{actually } \varphi \text{’ is true } (M, c, T_c, W_c) \text{ iff } \varphi \text{ is true } (M, c, T_c, W_c).\]

So, by the definition of ‘if and only if’, for any model \(M\) and context \(c\) of \(M\),

\[(c) \quad \text{‘actually } \varphi \text{ if and only if } \varphi \text{’ is true } (M, c, T_c, W_c).\]

Since being true \((M, c, T_c, W_c)\) for all \(M\) and \(c\) is the requirement for validity in the logic of indexicals, it follows that sentences of the form ‘actually \(\varphi\) if

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20 The idea that ‘I am here now’ should not be accepted as a logical truth is not new (see for instance Vision, 1985). But looking at the issue from the point of the distinction between context of utterance and context of interpretation throws a new light on the issue. In particular, it provides an explanation of the traditional view’s mistaken fascination with proper contexts (they mimic contexts of utterance), and it gives a systematic explanation of true instances of ‘I am not here now’.

21 Hereafter, I omit the parenthesis in ‘(actually \(\varphi\)) if \(\varphi\)’ for readability’s sake. Note also that I employ single quotation marks instead of the more appropriate (but typographically cumbersome) corner-quotes.
and only if $\varphi'$ are valid. Notice that we reached the result in (c) by appealing solely to the clauses for ‘actually’ and ‘if and only if’. In particular, the only requirement on the structure of a context which is relevant for the reasoning to (c) is that contexts contain a possible world coordinate, i.e. that they be at least sufficiently rich to provide an evaluation for sentences involving ‘actually’. Thus, employing a well established locution, we may say that sentences of the form ‘actually $\varphi$ if and only if $\varphi$’ turn out to be true in every context of every model solely in virtue of the meaning of ‘actually’ and ‘if and only if’ (or, at least, in virtue of that portion of their meaning which is reflected in our semantic theory).

The case is importantly different with respect to ‘I am here now’. Given the customary characters for ‘I’, ‘here’, and ‘now’, and a sensible account for ‘am’ (in the sense of being located), we may reach the following conclusion:

(d) ‘I am here now’ is true ($M, c, t, w$) iff $A_c$ is in $L_c$ at $T_c$ in $w$.

So, for any model $M$ and context $c$ of $M$,

(e) ‘I am here now’ is true ($M, c, T_c, W_c$) iff $A_c$ is in $L_c$ at $T_c$ in $W_c$.

But this conclusion does not entail that ‘I am here now’ is valid, unless we stipulate that contexts be such that, for any $c$, $A_c$ is in $L_c$ at $T_c$ in $W_c$, i.e. unless we restrict the class of contexts to proper contexts.

Thus, although traditional theorists claim that both ‘I am here now’ and ‘actually $\varphi$ if and only if $\varphi$’ qualify as logical truths, they reach this result in two importantly different ways. In cases of the latter kind, our utterances are guaranteed to be successful in virtue of meaning alone. In the case of ‘I am here now’, the reason for our success would lie in the alleged fact that no utterance can take place in a context, whose agent is not in its location at its time. This contrast is of course dramatically brought to light by the view I presented above, which challenges the semanticist’s predilection for proper contexts, and thus allows for instances of false utterances of ‘I am here now’.

One final comment on the relationship between my views and the semantics of indexicals. Kaplan has argued that this semantics ‘brings a new perspective’ on indexical-free sentences such as ‘something exists’ (see Kaplan, 1977, p. 548). In Kaplan’s formalism, ‘something exists’ is rendered as $\exists x \text{Exist } x$. About this sentence, Kaplan remarks:

in [the Logic of Demonstratives] sentences as $\exists x \text{Exist } x$ . . . are valid, although they would not be so regarded in traditional logic. At least not in the neotraditional logic that countenances empty worlds. (Kaplan, 1977, p. 549).

Kaplan presents his conclusion that $\exists x \text{Exist } x$ is valid as an outcome of the fact that

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Kaplan’s reasoning may be summarized as follows. Every admissible context contains an agent. Therefore, there is something existing at the time and possible world of the context, namely the context’s agent. Thus, for any context \( c \) of any model \( M \), at least one individual inevitably exists in \( W_c \) at \( T_c \). Hence, ‘something exists’ is true \((M, c, T_c, W_c)\) for all \( M \) and \( c \) of \( M \), i.e. it is valid. But note how the traditional restriction of contexts to proper contexts is at work in the very first step of the foregoing argument. For the presence of an agent in a context does not by itself guarantee the existence of that individual at the time and possible world determined by that context. Thus, unless empty domains are excluded at the outset, ‘something exists’ must follow the fate of ‘I am here now’: both derive their privileged status in the traditional semantics for indexicals from the restriction of admissible contexts to proper contexts, a restriction which appears unjustified in the light of my comments in sections 2 and 3.

5. Conclusion

In this essay, I challenged the Traditional View, according to which every utterance must be semantically evaluated with respect to the context in which it takes place. In section 2, I argued that a natural explanation of occurrences of indexical expressions in written and recorded messages must appeal to a context distinct from the context of utterance (or inscription). In section 3, I pointed out that my distinction between context of utterance and context of interpretation is important also for the analysis of examples that do not involve written notes or tape recorders. In particular, I suggested a semantic account of certain interesting uses of ‘now’, ‘here’, ‘actual’, and ‘I’, which is at odds with the Traditional View. In section 4, I focused on an outcome of my view, the semantic admissibility of improper contexts. When improper contexts are taken into account, the class of sentences valid in the logic of indexicals is restricted, and examples such as ‘I am here now’, ‘I exist now’, and ‘something exists’ lose their privileged status.

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References


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