INDEXICALITY AND DEIXIS*

1. Introduction

Words like you, here, and tomorrow are different from other expressions in two ways. First, and by definition, they have different kinds of meanings, which are context-dependent in ways that the meanings of names and descriptions are not. Second, their meanings play a different kind of role in the interpretations of the utterances that contain them. For example, the meaning of you can be paraphrased by a description like "the addressee of the utterance." But an utterance of (1) doesn't say the same thing as an utterance of (2):

(1) Oh, it's you.

(2) ?Oh, it's the addressee of this utterance.

One can be surprised to learn that one's addressee is who he is, but not that one's addressee is one's addressee.

The immediate problem raised by an utterance like (1) is to describe its interpretation and to show how it arises from the interaction of the meaning of you and the context. A lot has been said about this, particularly by philosophers, since the analysis of expressions like you seems to bear on important philosophical questions. As a result, it can sometimes be a tricky matter to evaluate these accounts. Reading what writers have to say about I, for example, it isn't always easy to say where the doctrine of a word leaves off and theses about belief or personal identity take over. At the same time, most of these accounts rest on a common body of empirical assumptions, and this is how I will be considering them here. Taken from a narrowly linguistic point of view, these assumptions are incomplete, and fail to account for many ordinary uses of these words. In the first part of this paper, I will discuss some of these limitations, and I will go on to offer a more general account, based on a wider range of data, of which the standard story turns out to be only a special case.

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But the problems raised by examples like (1) and (2) aren’t exhausted when we have accounted for the interpretive differences between the utterances, say by associating the word *you* with a special kind of semantic rule. We also want to understand how the interpretive properties of these words are tied to the particular kinds of meanings they have: why should the meaning of *you* play a different role in interpretation from the meaning of the description *the addressee*? The standard assumption is that the interpretive peculiarities of these words follow directly from their status as an indexical expressions. But the connection is unexplained, and in fact the category of indexicals itself is more problematic than many people suppose. Indexicals are generally defined as expressions whose interpretation requires the identification of some element of the utterance context, as stipulated by their lexical meanings.\(^1\) As David Kaplan puts it: “What is common to [indexicals] is that the referent is dependent on the context of use and that the meaning of the word provides a rule which determines the referent in terms of certain aspects of the context” (1989, p 490).\(^2\) On this view, then, both indexicality and the interpretive process associated with it are features of particular lexical items. (For example, Recanati (1988) proposes that the entries for indexical expressions should include a feature REF, which “indicates that the satisfaction-condition of the utterance where it occurs is singular.”)

But a language like English has only a relatively small number of “dedicated” indexical terms — words like *I, tomorrow,* and the like.\(^3\) Most of the time, indexical reference is achieved using expressions that have

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1 Linguists sometimes use the word *deictic* in more-or-less the same way that philosophers use *indexical.* But for many people *deixis* has more of the flavor of an action nominal, and I will be taking advantage of this distinction later on when I use the term *deixis* in another, more specialized sense.

2 Indexicals are sometimes defined simply as expressions that change their reference from one context to the next — indeed, this definition is implicit in the label “shifter” (cf. French *embrayeur*), which is widely used in many traditions. But an expression can be context-dependent without having its interpretation change from one utterance to the next, provided the context doesn’t change with respect to the relevant feature. An extreme example, brought to my attention by Bill Poser, is the Japanese word *chin,* a now disused form of the first-person pronoun that could be used only by the Emperor. If you were set on defining indexicals as expressions that change their reference according to the context, you might have to wait eighty years or more to find out whether *chin* was an indexical or not (of course you would probably observe before then that nobody else referred to the Emperor as *chin,* but on this definition that fact would have no bearing on the status of the word).

3 The paradigmatic case of a dedicated indexical is the first-person singular pronoun, which in most languages can be controlled only by the utterance context. Of course even dedicated indexicals may have nonindexical uses. For example the words *tomorrow* and *me* are used nonindexically in phrases like “a brighter tomorrow” or in the title of a course offered at a Bay Area extension school, ‘The Struggle to be Me’, which allows a reading under which