

# Cognitive significance and reflexive content

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**Abstract** John Perry has urged that a semantic theory for natural languages ought to be concerned with the issue of cognitive significance—of how true identity statements containing different (utterances of) indexicals and proper names can be informative, held to be unaccountable by the referentialist view. The informativeness that he has in mind—one that has puzzled Frege, Kaplan and Wettstein—concerns knowledge about the world. In trying to solve this puzzle on referentialist terms, he comes up with the notion of cognitive significance as a special kind of a second-order content which should account for cognitive significance in the former sense. Focusing on his treatment of perceptual demonstratives, I argue that he fails to do so both on the level of second-order contents containing demonstrative utterances and on the level of second-order contents containing perceptual buffers as new notions associated with the perceptions and used to temporarily store ideas we gain from the perceptions, which he holds to be causally connected to each other.

**Keywords** Cognitive significance · Reflexive content · Perception · Perceptual buffers · Utterances · Beliefs

## 1 Referentialism and cognitive significance

According to the referentialist view, statements (i.e. utterances of declarative sentences) containing proper names and indexicals express Russellian propositions having as their constituents objects that these expressions refer to. Seemingly, it faces the co-reference problem concerning informative identities (as in Frege 1980) consisting in the fact that statements containing co-referential indexical expressions or proper names and expressing the same Russellian

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proposition may differ in cognitive significance, i.e. have different cognitive values. David Kaplan, one of the key proponents of the referentialist view, once thought that the bearer of the cognitive significance of such an expression was its character (*Demonstratives*, 1989a, XVII). It is the kind of meaning of an expression which is set by linguistic conventions, and determines the content of the expression as a Russellian proposition, i.e. what is said, in every context.<sup>1</sup> But, he noticed that characters are too coarse grained to capture the differences in cognitive significance (i.e. in psychological states) in the case in which different utterances of the same demonstrative are used to refer to the same perceptually given object but one does not believe, as it were, ‘That<sub>1</sub> = that<sub>2</sub>’. He still thought that the referentialist view could account for this kind of case in terms of speaker’s demonstrations which he took to be narrow psychological types. The form that the demonstration has is ‘[t]he individual that has appearance A from here now where an appearance is something like a picture with a little arrow pointing to the relevant subject’ (Kaplan 1989a, p. 526). However, it turns out that demonstrations are unfit for this role for similar reasons to those for which (linguistic) characters are. Think of a case in which the identity of the linguistic character and that of the demonstration are kept fixed while the relevant psychological states of the subject vary. An illusionist may come up with a trick creating the impression that an object sitting in one spot has been replaced with another one qualitatively identical with it, whereas this is not so. In the process, he may say: ‘This<sub>1</sub> is this<sub>2</sub>’, where both utterances of ‘this’ are consecutively taken to refer to the same object, while relying on demonstrations that are of the same type (as in keeping his arm fixed in one position while uttering the sentence). Similarly, under the same circumstances, one object may unnoticeably be replaced with another one in a flash such that it will be informative to the audience to be told ‘This<sub>1</sub> is not this<sub>2</sub>’. Later on, in his *Afterthoughts* (1989b), Kaplan comes to consider the speaker’s demonstration as a mere externalization of the speaker’s directing intention—the intention aimed at a perceived object which may or may not be the object the speaker has in mind. But, should such intentions be taken as types defined as narrow psychological states, the same kind of argument can be deployed to show that they cannot capture the differences in psychological states related to the co-reference problem (see Kaplan 1989b, 582 f.).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Perry’s notion of the role of an indexical as a rule taking us from an occasion of utterance to a certain object (1977) is similar to that of character. But, in his subsequent papers, notably 1988 and 1990, Perry moves from tying cognitive significance to the role of an indexical towards tying it to the reflexive contents of utterances discussed in this paper. Interestingly, in his 1997 he still relies on Kaplanian characters (though of beliefs rather than of linguistic expressions) in accounting for relevant action and behaviour, i.e. for the causal roles of belief states as ‘various combinations of factors that bring the state about, and the various combinations of factors it brings about in turn’ (p. 20). See Bozickovic (2005) for a criticism of this view.

<sup>2</sup> Kaplan is somewhat reluctant to see directing intentions as types (see 1989b, p. 586), but this need not concern us here. Unlike indexicals, he thinks that proper names are not parametric, i.e. that the same proper name does not vary in referent from context to context. Hence, the characters of two distinct proper names of the same individual are to be represented by the same constant functions, and thus, under the functional representation, co-referential names do not differ in character. Yet distinct proper names have distinct cognitive values, so cognitive values of proper names cannot be discriminated by character (see 1989b, pp. 597–598).

The inability of the referentialist view to account for the differences in cognitive significance has led Wettstein (1986, 2004), himself also a proponent of the referentialist view, to declare that it is thankfully not part of the business of semantics to deal with it. In response, Perry has rightly urged that it is part of its business primarily because the issue of cognitive significance, itself tied to the explanation of action and behaviour, figures in our semantic inquiries concerning the co-reference problem (Perry 1988, 2001a, pp. 8–9). He spells this out in terms of cognitive states, in particular the (first-order) beliefs, that are about the same individual, that might motivate the speaker to make one statement about it but not another, when, pointing to a dog's head sticking out from one side of a pillar he, for example, accepts an utterance of 'This dog is hungry' but not another utterance of it associated with his pointing to a dog's tail sticking out from the other side of the pillar. A similar point applies to the listener whose beliefs 'would show understanding of the one [statement] but not of the other' (Perry 2001a, p. 6). Then Perry introduces the concept of cognitive significance as a special kind of content created by an utterance. I will argue that in its own right such a content is incapable of explaining differences in behaviour-predicting psychological states concerning informative identities. This makes Perry's semantics unexplanatory of the subject's relevant action and behaviour, in spite of his insistence to the contrary.

## 2 Referential and reflexive contents

Perry has come to distinguish what is asserted or believed, i.e. the *referential* or official (Russellian) content (consisting solely of objects and properties or relations), from other kinds of content of our statements (i.e. utterances of declarative sentences) and beliefs. One of these contents, which he calls *reflexive*, accounts for cognitive significance. It is a proposition associated with an utterance of an indexical sentence in virtue of the meaning of the *type* of the sentence of which it is an utterance (2001a, p. 10). It in turn supplies an identifying condition for reference, the condition an object must satisfy in order to be the referent of an indexical expression, derived from its meaning, i.e. from the rules of language. The meaning of an indexical amounts to a rule associating it with such an utterance-reflexive identifying condition which is itself the reflexive content of an utterance of the indexical (2001a, p. 77f.).<sup>3</sup> The reflexive content of an utterance of 'I' is *the speaker of this utterance of 'I'*, while the reflexive content of an utterance of 'you' is *the addressee of this utterance of 'you'*. Similarly, the reflexive content of an utterance of 'that dog' is *the dog that the speaker of this utterance of 'that dog' is attending to*. The subject who believes a certain referential content expressed by an utterance of an indexical sentence will, on this view, also grasp (though not believe as the subject matter of the given utterance) its corresponding reflexive content supplying the identifying condition for reference as well as the *reflexive* truth conditions *on* the

<sup>3</sup> Note that Perry distinguishes between tokens and utterances. He uses 'utterance' for an act, a use of language, an instance of speaking, writing or signing, and 'token' for something produced by or at least used in such acts, such that the same token (as a written message) can be accompanied by different utterances (Perry 2001a, pp. 36–39).

utterance of the sentence. These are the truth conditions that furnish the reflexive content of an utterance. They differ from what Perry calls the traditional truth conditions which are incremental in that they are conditions *on* the *subject matter*: they are what else has to be true, given the linguistic and contextual facts about the utterance (Perry 2001a, p. 81).

Perry is careful to distinguish between reflexive contents of statements (i.e. utterances of declarative sentences) and those of beliefs expressed by them, but insists that there is a close link between the two. Hence, '[i]f [a] statement expresses a belief, the [reflexive] content of the statement, given its architectural connections to the belief, will be the same as the reflexive content of the belief' (Perry 2001a, p. 96). This he calls the connected reflexive content of a statement. He finds that statements containing utterances of perceptual demonstratives such as 'this' and 'that' have this kind of content in virtue of the underlying perception-based beliefs to which these statements are causally linked. The material that is predicatively associated with the uses of demonstratives depends on the ideas that are associated with the corresponding perceptual buffers. These are new notions associated with the perceptions and used to temporarily store ideas we gain from the perceptions until we can identify the object we are looking at (2001b, p. 121). They are tied to ways of perceiving and ways of acting (2001b, p. 158), i.e. to percepts as ways in which individual physical objects may appear (see, Bach 1987, p. 20, for this definition of percepts). The reason why Perry takes reflexive contents as explanatory of the subject's relevant action and behaviour lies in his following Frege (concerning the non-indexical case) in tying the notion of cognitive significance to that of meaning, in virtue of which it plays a dual role of both determining reference (in the context) and accounting for the cognitive state of the subject. The meaning-based reflexive content of an utterance of 'that dog'—*the dog that the speaker of this utterance of 'that dog' is attending to*—both, as it were, *denotes* the object attended to and accounts for the cognitively significant psychological state of the subject accepting the utterance. This link is, however, gratuitous. In virtue of identifying conditions that the conventions of language associate with them, indexical terms do indeed denote (in the context) but these conditions do not account for the (relevant) cognitive state that the subject having an indexical belief (i.e. attitude) is in, as I will now show.<sup>4</sup>

### 3 Reflexive contents of utterances

We saw that meaning-based Kaplanian characters and other supplementary cues cannot account for differences in cognitive significance arising in relation to Frege's puzzle of identity. But, Perry thinks that once we tie cognitive significance to an

<sup>4</sup> Here I follow Perry's distinction having to do with the 'mechanisms' of designation. According to it, a term denotes if the conventions of language associate it with an identifying condition, and the term designates whatever object meets that condition. By contrast, a term names if the conventions of language associate it with the object(s) it designates. Another distinction that Perry draws is one between describing and referring. Although indexicals are like definite descriptions in that they denote, they refer while descriptions describe. This is to say that, just like names, indexicals contribute to (official) propositional content the individual they designate while descriptions contribute to such a content the identifying condition their meaning associates with them (see Perry 2001a, pp. 30–32, 185–191).

utterance (and redefine the concept in the process) rather than to its linguistic meaning-type (or a demonstration, etc.) in the way he suggests, this puzzle can be readily accounted for. Perry does acknowledge that the key role is played here by the difference in the subject's perceptual buffers but thinks that it can be assigned to appropriate reflexive contents. I will show first that the reflexive contents of *utterances* are unfit for this role and then that the same holds for the reflexive contents of corresponding *beliefs*. From this it follows that Perry's semantic apparatus cannot account for the subject's relevant action and behaviour.

To see this, consider one of Perry's own examples. It concerns a picture in which a dog's head emerges from one side of a pillar and a dog's behind from the other side. Suppose Perry points first at its head and then at its tail and asks his audience "Do you think that dog is that dog?" He happens to be referring to the same dog, Stretch, twice and to be using the same demonstrative phrase twice. Yet, he reasonably expects these two acts of reference to have different cognitive effects on the listener in a position to see his utterance. In Perry's own words:

That is, I plan on him hearing two tokens of 'that dog', seeing two different utterances, having his attention directed towards two different parts of the scene or picture, having two different perceptions, and establishing two different buffers, at least temporarily, to keep track of what am I going to tell him and what he is going to observe about however many dogs there turn out to be (Perry 2001a, pp. 63–64).

This is in line with Perry's foregoing claim that the speaker's beliefs that are about the same individual might motivate him to make one statement about it but not another. They also might motivate him to, for example, try to convince the listener that, as it were, 'This dog is (not) this dog', and be the ultimate source of the desired cognitive effect on the listener. They are (first-order) perception-based beliefs furnished, respectively, by different perceptual buffers which are in Perry's view causally connected with the speaker's utterances and are also responsible for the fact that different cognitive effects might be exerted on the listener. For,

This is a quite different effect than saying something like "Do you think that dog is not self-identical" with only one demonstration, or "Do you think that dog is not the same as that one" with two exactly similar demonstrations to the head (Perry 2001a, p. 64).

True, the listener's grasp of the given reflexive content (containing two different utterance-reflexive identifying conditions) will, in the former, unlike in the latter case, direct his attention towards the two parts of the same dog, the perception of which will enable him to judge whether they do or do not belong the same dog. But this does not show that this content should account for the cognitive differences arising from his perceptions of the given dog via its two parts. All it shows is that the role of the reflexive content of an utterance is analogous to what Perry thinks is the role of the speaker's demonstration or of his directing intention which he describes as the intention to refer to an object *X* simply in virtue of the meanings of one's words and the context, both pre-existing and supplied by the speaker (Perry 2001a, p. 60). In his view, the role of the

speaker's demonstration and of his directing intention is just to create a cognitive path for the listener (2001a, pp. 63–65) which he defines as follows:

A skilled communicator will have some conception of a cognitive path that can lead from the way he thinks of the object about which he has information, to the way in which the listener must think about it, to act in the way that the speaker wants to bring about (2001a, p. 54).

Two different demonstrations will thus create two different cognitive paths. 'The demonstrations serve to start the paths off in different directions, to associate them with different perceptions, on the hearer's part, the perceptions of the [dog's] head and of the [dog's] tail' (2001a, p. 90).

Although Perry keeps the notion of a cognitive path separate from that of cognitive significance as the reflexive content of an utterance of a demonstrative (sentence), they both contain an identifying condition uniquely satisfied by the object being referred to. His shifting the bearers of cognitive significance from characters and demonstrations taken as types (and/or directing intentions) to reflexive contents of utterances is meant to enable him to account for the co-reference problem and to keep cognitive significance within semantics by keeping it linked with meaning. By being utterance-reflexive, the identifying condition that such a content contains is supposed to be relational rather than descriptive: for something to be its object, it must stand in a certain relation to the utterance itself (Perry 1990, p. 281). It is thus unlike the identifying condition associated with a demonstration which Kaplan (1989a, p. 514) likens to the (non-relational) Fregean sense of a definite description. Still, Perry thinks that in going from world to world what we are 'taking with us' is not the referent but the utterance of a demonstrative (2001a, p. 90). The same utterance of a demonstrative (phrase) may refer to different objects in different possible worlds. He also thinks that our perceptions of objects can be similarly taken from world to world (2001a, p. 92) in a way that allows the same utterance to (counterfactually) correspond to different perceptions, and hence to different perception-based psychological states of the subject, as in the case of Kaplan's characters.

In reply, it might be said that each utterance of such a demonstrative phrase that plays a part in expressing a belief is associated with one buffer (percept) only. For every statement (i.e. utterance of a declarative sentence) expressing a belief will, in Perry's view, have the same reflexive content as the (buffer-involving) belief it expresses. This seems to make the identifying condition supplied by such a statement fit to explain the difference in psychological states that we are after. The reflexive contents of the two utterances of 'that dog' in 'That dog is (not) that dog' are:

*That dog*<sub>1</sub>: the dog that the speaker of *that dog*<sub>1</sub> is attending to

*That dog*<sub>2</sub>: the dog that the speaker of *that dog*<sub>2</sub> is attending to

Perry thinks that 'this difference is enough to explain the difference in cognitive significance' (2001a, p. 89) not only in terms of the difference in the relevant reflexive contents but also in terms of the difference in the subject's psychological states, i.e. *beliefs*, related to the subject's different perceptions of the same dog and critical to his action and behaviour that Perry takes to be a matter of semantics. Unlike with the linguistic meanings of demonstratives and accompanying demonstrations (and other

cues) taken as types, there is no mismatch between these reflexive contents and the psychological states of the subject. True, they are second-order contents having these utterances as their subject matter but this does not rule out that ‘what the dog that the speaker of *that dog*<sub>1</sub> is attending to’ is known by the listener to be a particular perceptually salient dog that he is thinking of, and likewise for the utterance of *that dog*<sub>2</sub>. This is to say that the respective reflexive contents supply entry points into the buffers (percepts), the difference in which will explain the difference in the subject’s psychological states (i.e. cognitive significance) arising in relation to the co-reference problem. A competent listener will effortlessly grasp the reflexive contents of the two utterances of ‘that dog’ that the speaker is using to refer to Stretch and the respective identifying conditions they contain even if he is unable to perceptually single out Stretch. And, once he has singled it out, these contents will line up with his perception-based psychological states.

Still, what the subject is judging is whether the two dog parts that he perceives are parts of the same dog, not whether the referent of the utterance of *that dog*<sub>1</sub> and the referent of the utterance of *that dog*<sub>2</sub> are the same. This suggests that this case ought to be explained in terms of the first-order perception-based beliefs about Stretch and not by their second-order spin-offs. If so, Perry has failed to solve the co-reference problem which he sets out to solve, which is to say that his semantic apparatus is incapable of solving it, as are Kaplan’s and Wettstein’s.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4 Reflexive contents of beliefs

We can also reach this conclusion by a different route. Consider the corresponding reflexive contents of beliefs that in Perry’s view amount to those of the statements expressing them. The reflexive content of the belief associated with ‘That dog is the same as that dog’ in the foregoing example is

that buffers  $b_1$  and  $b_2$  are of the same object,

where these two buffers are notions associated, respectively, with two different perceptions (percepts) of Stretch. Hence, we obtain

*That dog*<sub>1</sub>: the dog that the speaker of *that dog*<sub>1</sub> is attending to using the buffer  $b_1$   
(percept  $p_1$ )

*That dog*<sub>2</sub>: the dog that the speaker of *that dog*<sub>2</sub> is attending to using the buffer  $b_2$   
(percept  $p_2$ )

<sup>5</sup> In discussing Perry’s view of cognitive significance concerning co-referring proper names, Reimer (2002) aptly remarks that in the opening paragraphs of his 1980 Frege makes it clear that genuine knowledge cannot be mere meta-linguistic knowledge. We saw that Perry wants to take differences in cognitive significance for what Frege, Kaplan and Wettstein take them to be, but thinks that they can be taken care of by appropriate reflexive contents. Reimer might be right in claiming, contra Perry, that the co-reference problem concerning proper names can only be solved if we individuate names by their modes of presentation which she takes to be descriptive rather than relational (at least in the examples she provides). I cannot deal with this issue here, leaving it open whether meta-linguistic reflexive contents of utterances of sentences containing proper names (including the empty ones) are fit to account for full-fledged cognitive significance.

This way we get buffers (percepts) fixed to utterances such that the same utterance corresponds to the same buffer across possible worlds. We also do justice to the fact that *it is* the difference in buffers that motivates the utterer to start the cognitive paths off in different directions and to associate them with different perceptions, on the hearer's part, the perceptions of the dog's head and of the dog's tail.

Yet, second-order reflexive contents once again cannot account for the relevant psychological states of the subject. Perry is right in claiming that buffers are tied to ways of acting, but the ways of acting of the subject who has, say, gained new information about Stretch by being told 'That dog is the same as that dog' cannot be accounted for in terms of the second-order reflexive content—that buffers  $b_1$  and  $b_2$  are of the same dog. This suggests that these buffers should rather be associated with first-order contents capturing the subject matter of our beliefs about the world, which is something that Perry seeks to avoid. For him, this kind of content, which he calls *referential* or official content, should consist solely of objects and properties or relations. This way, in a wide variety of cases we are in a position to predict correctly the conditions in which two people have said the same thing which would not be so if we were to incorporate identifying conditions—buffers included—into these contents, since they may vary from person to person (Perry 2001a, p. 5).

That buffers ought to be associated with first-order rather than second-order contents does not mean that they need to be a part of them. This is made possible by the fact that as new notions associated with the perceptions and used to temporarily store ideas we gain from the perceptions they are relational rather than descriptive: their objects stand in a certain relation to them. But, we can still assign a semantic role to them in that the correctness or incorrectness of propositional-attitude ascriptions needs to be sensitive to their identity and existence.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> More elaborate views of the individuation of (indexical) belief content such as Loar's (1981) and Evans's (1982, 1985) provide us with the content of a *that*-clause which does not have the subject's ways of thinking of objects *stated*, i.e. as part of *what* is believed. Still, they have the propositional attitude ascriptions, i.e. speech reports, sensitive to his ways of thinking of the object which conform to the cognitive constraint that one cannot at the same time rationally take different epistemic attitudes towards sentences (utterances) expressing the same content, a version of which is also accepted by Perry (2001a, pp. 8–9). This also enables us to predict correctly the conditions in which two people have said the same thing. (See also Richard (1990) who tackles this issue in terms of belief contents which contain both objects and properties—as in a Russellian proposition—as well as linguistic expressions in a language of thought called Russellian annotated matrices, or RAMs). However, Evans takes these contents to be object-dependent. Perry's reflexive contents, be they of utterances or beliefs, are not, since Perry thinks that in going from world to world what we are 'taking with us' is not a referent but the utterance as well as our perception, as remarked above. Whether the contents of our relevant psychological states are object-dependent does not concern us here, but it should be noted that if this is the case then a difference in perceptual buffers is only sufficient but not necessary for a difference in buffer-sensitive contents (thoughts). The fact that the same buffer can (counterfactually) correspond to different objects on this view entails that the contents (thoughts) are different. The same buffer may arguably also correspond to different contents (thoughts) even if they are about the same object, as when one takes different epistemic attitudes towards two different utterances of an indexical sentence such as 'It is nice to have dinner in this restaurant' which are about the same place under the same buffer (type) but which are uttered at different times. But, Recanati (1993, p. 82) has claimed that the same contents (thoughts) are involved on both occasions while one's taking different epistemic attitudes is explained away by appealing to the differing times of utterance and to a change that takes place in one's background beliefs.



This kind of a semantic role differs from the one that Perry assigns to the bearers of cognitive significance in the sense of utterance-reflexive identifying conditions, which are, as noted, tied to meaning and play a dual role of both determining reference (in the context) and of accounting for the cognitive state of the subject, in spite of being (taken to be) relational rather than descriptive. On a par with definite descriptions, Perry also wishes to keep them within the contents of statements. The content of a statement is a proposition that incorporates the conditions under which the statement is true (Perry 2001a, p. 17). In the case of definite descriptions (used attributively) the truth conditions are provided within the first-order content of a statement by the identifying condition that an object must uniquely satisfy if it is to be the object specified by the description. This kind of identifying condition, supplied by the meaning of the contained description, plays the given dual role and is part of the statement's subject matter (Perry 2001a, p. 26). In the indexical case, the truth conditions are, in Perry's view, also provided by the relevant identifying condition playing such a dual role, but within the second-order reflexive content, i.e. as the *reflexive* truth conditions on the utterance of the sentence.

Reflexive contents of *utterances* then belong with demonstrations and the speaker's directing intentions in forming cognitive paths supplied by the speaker even if a difference in them always matches a difference in the subject's psychological states. What about the reflexive contents of perception-based *beliefs*? Unlike the reflexive contents of utterances, they are buffer-dependent. They are tied to the same buffers for their identity and existence that the underlying first-order beliefs are tied to. Without having a perception-based belief that might be expressed by the statement 'That dog is the same as that dog', the subject would not be in a position to grasp its reflexive content—that buffers  $b_1$  and  $b_2$  are of the same object, i.e. Stretch, because there would be no such buffers. It is the speaker's first-order beliefs about the same individual, rather than their second-order spin-offs, which motivate him to start a cognitive path off for the hearer, something that even Perry has acknowledged.

I have argued then that Perry has failed to show that the referentialist view of appropriate demonstrative expressions can account for differences in cognitive significance concerning our first-order knowledge of the world, by showing that his notion of cognitive significance as a second-order reflexive content of utterances and beliefs is unfit for this role.

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