



ARE THERE ESSENTIAL INDEXICALS?

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1. I am pleased that the *The Belgrade Philosophical Annual* is devoting an issue to the question, “Are there Essential Indexicals?” In this paper I explain what I meant by “essential indexicals” in “The Problem of the Essential Indexical,” (1979) and two other essays I wrote about the same time,¹ and claim that, at least in this sense, there are some of them.

2. Hector-Neri Castañeda called ‘I’ and ‘now’ “essential indexicals” because they cannot be defined with other expressions. ‘Here’ doesn’t quite make the list; it’s where *I am now*. I borrowed the term for something a bit different. Sometimes when we use an indexical to refer to some object it conveys information about that object that other ways of referring to it would not. The indexical is essential (or at any rate very useful) for conveying that information. Consider Jane. She sits in her office a bit before noon on Wednesday. The Promotion Committee, of which she is a member, has a meeting starting at noon that day, in a room just down the hall. Jane plans to attend the meeting on time. With her is her office-mate Fred. Fred knows that Jane has a meeting that day which she plans to attend, although he doesn’t know when it starts. Neither Fred nor Jane has been paying much attention to the time. About a minute before noon, Fred asks Jane, “When does the Promotion Committee meeting start?” Jane responds,

(1) The Promotion Committee meeting starts at noon.

Then she glances at her watch, and sees, to her surprise, that it is just a few seconds until noon. Then she dashes off, telling Fred,

(2) The Promotion Committee meeting starts now.

Jane’s utterance (1) did not explain her dashing off. Her utterance (2) did. The difference was that she used “now” in (2). ‘Noon’ in (1) and ‘now’ in (2) both

¹ Perry, 1977, 1980.

refer to a certain time, 12 p.m. Wednesday. So (1) and (2) seem to express the same singular proposition, that that time has the property of being when the Promotion Committee meets. Jane's using "now" to refer to 12 p.m. Wednesday seems essential to (2)'s providing Fred with an explanation for her departure. In the terminology of my essay, it is an "essential indexical."

3. Is this puzzling? David Kaplan has given us a semantics and logic for indexicals we can use to see.² I summarize:

- i. *Characters* is David Kaplan's term for the meanings of the sort indexicals have. A *character* is a function from *contexts* to *contents*.
- ii. *Contexts* consist of *agents*, *locations*, *times*, and *circumstances*. Intuitively, these are the speaker, time, location and circumstances of an utterance.³
- iii. The *content* of an expression is the object it refers to.
- iv. The *content* of a sentence containing indexicals is a singular proposition about the referents of the indexicals.
- v. The characters of 'I', 'here', and 'now', respectively are functions from a context to the agent, location and time in it. The content of 'today' is the day of which the time of context is a part.
- vi. The characters of demonstratives like 'this' and 'that' and some indexicals like 'you' and 'we' are trickier, but Kaplan's theory gives us what we need to consider the alternatives

4. Back to (1) and (2).

1. The Promotion Committee meeting starts at noon.
2. The Promotion Committee meeting starts now.

I'll assume that "noon", as used here, is an indexical that refers to 12 p.m. of the day of an utterance of it occurs. So, from (1) Fred can reasonably infer Jane will head off to the meeting some time during the day. But from (2) he can reasonably infer that Jane will rush off at the time of her utterance. So, it seems that 'now' in (2) is an essential indexical, in the sense that if (2) had contained another expression or phrase with the same reference he could not have made that inference.

5. But what about Jane? A number of readers thought I meant that the indexical 'now' was essential to Jane's having the belief that motivated her to run off to the meeting, perhaps a sort of mental indexical, part of a "language of thought". But that's not what I claimed.

2 Kaplan, 1979a, 1979b, 1989.

3 Kaplan does not present his account as a theory of utterances. For the purposes of logic, it's better to have a theory of contexts, contents etc. that can be applied to utterances. A sentence can be true in a given context, even if there is no utterance of that sentence that context.

I did claim that Kaplan's concept of a character can help us understand belief-states and other mental states. When any animal perceives, it gets information about what is happening inside and outside of it at the time and place of perception. Episodes of vision, smell, and hearing provide information about the objects in its vicinity that it sees, smells and hears at the time of the episodes. Episodes of visceroreception and more generally interoception provide information about what's going on in the perceiver's body, and introspection provides information about what is going on in the agent's mind. But there need be nothing like an inner word or "indexical idea" involved. The contents of our most basic sorts of mental states, perceptual states of various sorts, are propositions about what is going on in and around the agent at the time of perceptions; no special indexical words or ideas are needed to mark this.

In general, external perceptions — vision, touch, hearing, smell etc., — are normally ways for an agent to know about other things, while interoception and introspection are ways for an agent to know about itself. But external perception is also self-informative. Sitting at a table in a bar, I see a waiter arrive and place a full mug of beer. I learn about the waiter, the table, and the mug. But I also learn something very important about myself: I have a full mug of beer in front of me. Then I will perform a "self-effecting" action. I'll extend my arm, grab the mug with my hand, bring it to my lips and drink from it and nourish myself, or inebriate myself, or both.

6. Our perceptions and our actions share an important similarity with indexicals, what Jon Barwise and I called "efficiency" (1983). Consider the type of action just described. It's not just a way for me to drink a beer in that particular bar. It's a way for anyone with arms and hands and lips to drink a beer in a circumstances like the one I was in. Similarly, indexicals allow different people at different times and places in similar circumstances to say different things with the same sentences. The structure of human beings and bars allows different people at different times and places to perform the same movements, with the results that different people are nourished by different mugs of beer. We all scratch our different backs in the same way, and relieve different itches. So Kaplan's concept of characters can be generalized from types of utterances to types of actions and thoughts. The action of putting one's arm behind one and rubbing yields a result in a certain context: the agent relieves the itching sensation that the agent has at that time and place. Mother Nature clearly appreciated efficiency; it allowed her to use the same design to create millions of creatures of a given species, each one of which had to know about and act productively in different places at different times. It is hard to imagine evolution, or education, or mass production of any sort getting by without efficient design.

7. Efficient sentences, using indexicals and other context-sensitive devices like tense, can be contrasted with *eternal sentences*, which express the same

propositions whenever they are used, and whoever uses them, and whatever the particular circumstances of the use. Frege thought that a “finished science” would consist of true eternal sentences, and that the principles of logic are clearest when we confine ourselves to them. Perhaps for this reason, the study of efficient language wasn’t really a main topic of interest to philosophers of language for the first part of the last century. Frege’s *Begriffsschrift (Concept Language)*⁴ was intended to be a perfect language. It did not contain indexicals, demonstratives or tense.

8. This all changed with David Kaplan’s work on indexicals and demonstratives. Sentences containing such context-sensitive expressions are typically efficient, as Kaplan’s theory explains and predicts. For me, uttering “I’m from Nebraska” is a way of expressing a true proposition, but for most speakers it expresses a false one — with some stellar exceptions like Marlon Brando, Henry Fonda, Richie Ashburn; Jeff Pelletier and Saul Kripke. Once a year, on December 31, uttering “It’s New Year’s Eve” is a way of saying something true, but not for the rest of the year.

Kaplan’s candidates for the characters of common indexicals were not exactly revolutionary. Once we have his system, it seems pretty obvious that the character of ‘I’ should deliver the speaker as referent, ‘now’ the time, and ‘here’ the place. In less obvious cases, like ‘this’ and ‘that’, his theory shows us where to locate the relevant issues. Is the referent the object the speaker is attending to, or the one to which he intends his audience to attend to, or something else? The revolution was not in the specific candidates for characters, but in the whole idea that languages with indexicals and demonstratives have a semantics and a logic, much less a semantics and logic important enough to intrigue a great logician and give philosophers a lot to think about.

9. I’ve tried to explain what I meant by “essential indexicals”. I think there are lots of essential indexicals in this sense, and don’t quite know why anyone would think otherwise.

But this doesn’t seem what most critics of my essays seem to have taken me to mean. I think the examples with which I began “The Problem of the Essential Indexical” — the messy shopper, the lost hiker and the tardy professor — were somehow so engaging that readers immediately felt they knew what I was getting at and what was wrong with it, without reading.⁵ Well, that’s philosophy, the profession I love. I have written a monograph, *The Essential Indexical Revisited* (2020) which goes into some detail criticizing some of these critics.

4 Frege, 1879, 1967

5 See, Millikan 1990, Cappelen & Dever, 2013.

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