

# Context and the Indexical ‘I’

Varol Akman

Bilkent University, Ankara

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# Context

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- ❑ A major topic to which Perry devotes considerable space in his books and papers
- ❑ A crucial feature of language and action
- ❑ Perry's "Indexicals and Demonstratives" was a major influence
- ❑ The indexical 'I' – the clearest (?) case of an indexical

# From the textbooks

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Kamp: It has been suggested that all a semantic theory needs to say about 'I' is that the word refers in all cases in which it is used (except those where it appears inside direct quotation) to the person who uses it; and that is all there is to it.

In a way this is clearly right.

## From the textbooks (cont.)

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- ❑ Lyons: The first-person pronoun, ‘I’ in English, refers (normally) to the actual speaker: i.e. to whoever is speaking at that moment.
- ❑ Gamut: “I live in Amsterdam” is true in a given context just in case the individual who is speaking in that context does in fact live in Amsterdam.

# Token-reflexivity

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- ❑ Higginbotham: For Reichenbach a token  $\tau$  of an indexical or demonstrative expression had for its reference an object  $f(\tau)$ , where  $f$  was determined by the meaning of the expression of which  $\tau$  was a token.
- ❑ A simple example is that of tokens of the first-person singular pronoun 'I'.

## Token-reflexivity (cont.)

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- ❑ “I have got through my root canal.”
- ❑ The semantics of that whole utterance delivers the meaning that the speaker of  $\tau$ , namely me, has got through his root canal, where  $\tau$  is the very token of the first-person pronoun that I uttered, the function *the speaker of* playing the role of *f*.

# Semantic relativism

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[?] Unger's well-known distinction between Contextualism vs. Invariantism

“That field is flat.”

[?] *Contextualist*: According to contextually relevant standards, that field is sufficiently close to being such that nothing could ever be flatter than it is.

[?] *Invariantist*: That field is perfectly flat.

# ‘What is said’

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- ❑ For the contextualist, ‘what is said’ is not itself a simple thing. (There is an implicit reference to a contextual standard.)
- ❑ For the invariantist, ‘what is said’ is more directly related to the sounds.
- ❑ Could ‘I’ be analyzed in the light of this important distinction? (This will be our guiding heuristics.)



# Narrow vs. wide

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- ❑ Does designation depend on narrow or wide context?
  - **NC**: facts about the utterance ( $a, t, l$ )
  - **WC**: narrow facts + stuff that is relevant
- ❑ Perry: The clearest case of an indexical that relies only on the narrow context is 'I', whose designation depends on the agent and nothing else.

# Automatic vs. intentional

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- ❑ Is designation automatic (given meaning and public contextual facts) or does it depend in part on the intentions of the speaker?
- ❑ An automatic designation uses no intentions (“yesterday” vs. “that field”).
- ❑ [Aside: What about the famous Beatles song?]

## Types of indexicals

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NARROW

WIDE

AUTOMATIC

I, now\*, here\* tomorrow, yea

INTENTIONAL

now, here

that, this man,  
there

# Pure indexicals

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- ❑ Perry: The indexicals ‘I’, ‘now’, and ‘here’ are often given an honored place as *pure* or *essential* indexicals.
- ❑ In the preceding table, this honored place is represented by the cell labeled ‘narrow’ and ‘automatic’. However, it is not clear that ‘now’ and ‘here’ deserve this status, hence the asterisks.

Privileged status OK?

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Does 'I' really deserve this privileged status?

I think not...

*Caveat*: It turns out that many people asked this question and came up with interesting answers.

# A scenario

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**[?]** Suppose you're a famous movie actor. Being a close friend I come to your place and we put one of your classic movies on the video player and start to watch. You are playing a private eye in the movie. There comes a hair-raising scene where the psycho killer is in a hotel room and you are about to nail him down.

## A scenario (cont.)

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❑ But I don't know that yet. There is knock on door of the room occupied by the killer. The psycho, gun in hand, approaches the door to open it. I'm very excited.

❑ I gasp, "Gee, who's knocking at the door?"

❑ You answer: "I am."

## A scenario (cont.)

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- ❑ Prior to my asking the question “Who’s knocking at the door?” you left the room temporarily to unleash the dog in the garden. You then wanted to join me but suddenly found the garden entrance locked by the wind.
- ❑ Meanwhile, I am watching the film, unaware of your absence.



## A scenario (cont.)

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- ❑ [After all, you were not watching the movie as closely as I was. Having watched it a dozen times you knew the whole thing like the back of your hand and, therefore, were attending to minor household chores.]
- ❑ The crucial moment arrives, and the window is open and you're able to hear me gasping. You go: "I am," once again.

# The DBA

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[?] It is time to remember the DBA which is a time-honored principle underlying almost all of our practical reasoning. Here's a terse formulation due to Kim:

[?] *The desire-belief action principle:*

[?] If a person desires that  $p$  and believes that by doing  $A$  she can secure  $p$ , she will do  $A$ .

# Defeasibility

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**[?]** Defeasibility of mental-behavioral entailments:

**[?]** If there is a plausible entailment of behavior  $B$  by mental states  $M[1], \dots, M[n]$ , there is always a further mental state  $M[n+1]$  such that  $M[1], \dots, M[n], M[n+1]$  together plausibly entail  $\neg B$  (viz. failure to produce behavior  $B$ ).

# Defeasibility (cont.)

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[?] *Defeasibility of contextual interpretations:*

[?] If there is a plausible interpretation  $K$  of a certain expression in the presence of contextual features  $C[1], \dots, C[n]$ , there is a further contextual feature  $C[n+1]$  such that  $C[1], \dots, C[n], C[n+1]$  together plausibly entail a different interpretation (e.g.,  $\neg K$ ).

# Other scenarios

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? Porter Jack

? The silver screen

? The phony inclusive

? Delegation

? *N.B. The well-known answering machine cases omitted (cf. Predelli).*

? Rebound

? The appropriate answer

? The bat people

? “I’m about to be attacked”

# Porter Jack

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On a trip to Edinburgh, we ended up with a hotel room with a faulty window. Everyday we would return to our room late in the evening to find the window opened by the room service and immediately call the reception to request someone to close it.

## Porter Jack (cont.)

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- ❑ In the numerous occasions we have done so, we were invariably sent a jovial Scotsman who would knock on our door and announce: “Hello, I’m your porter Jack.”
- ❑ We loved this routine. So now when one of us comes home late, we always answer the query “Who is it?” by saying “Hello, I’m your porter Jack.”

## Porter Jack (cont.)

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- ❑ Bianchi: Imagines a scenario where an intruder first watches a man (say, the husband) leave a house and then rings the doorbell. A woman (say, the wife) answers:
  - Who’s that?
  - Honey, it’s me. (Or “I’m back.”) [said by the intruder in a voice imitating the husband’s]
- ❑ This intruder abuses “Porter Jack”!



# The silver screen

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? Consider the following exchange on late night TV:

- *Jay (to actor John Doe who is sporting a pigtail):* I hear that in your upcoming movie you have a big surprise for your fans. Tell us about it!
- *John (smiling):* I am bald. [He is playing Yul Brynner.]

# The phony inclusive

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- ❑ Predelli: Mentions an example due to Zwicky that the latter has dubbed the *phony inclusive use of we*.
- ❑ When a waitress says “How are we today?” to a customer, we have here a display of intention to contain only the addressee, and not herself.

## The phony inclusive (cont.)

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- ❓ “How am I doing today?”, addressed by Yeltsin (in bed due to a heart ailment) to a *double* of his who’s just going out to meet with the North Korean delegation.
- ❓ This is more like “Are you ready to fool them?” [*Proof*: If there are several doubles, he might as well ask “How are we doing today?”]

# The phony inclusive (cont.)

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? Kaplan: ‘I’ is a pure indexical – something for which “*no associated demonstration is required, and any demonstration supplied is either for emphasis or is irrelevant*” (his italics).

- I have in mind such cases as pointing at oneself while saying ‘I’ (emphasis) or pointing at someone else while saying ‘I’ (irrelevance or madness or what?).

# The phony inclusive (cont.)

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- ❑ Now imagine a beat-up Yeltsin visiting the Madame Tussaud's London and admiring his shining waxwork.
- ❑ "I'm the most vigorous man here."  
(Pointing is not even necessary.)

# Word meaning

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- ❑ In all fairness, it must be pointed out that Kaplan clarifies his position very carefully.
- ❑ His semantical theory is a theory of *word meaning*, not *speaker's meaning*.
- ❑ This theory is based on linguistic rules known, explicitly or implicitly, by all competent users of the language.

# Word meaning (cont.)

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- ❑ The infamous semantics-pragmatics distinction?
- ❑ Stalnaker: Logicians/philosophers of a formalistic frame of mind ignore pragmatic problems or push them into semantics.
- ❑ Study the actual circumstances that make understanding possible by all competent users of the language.

# Delegation

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- ❑ Bezuidenhout: Suppose the heads of departments of a large organization are at a meeting, and are trying to decide which departments should take on which of the tasks on the chairperson's 'to do' list.
- ❑ The chair reads out the first item on the list and one of the heads of department says "I'll do that."



## Delegation (cont.)

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- ❑ Here it is understood that she is undertaking to do the task in her role as head of department. Presumably she will not carry out the task herself, but will delegate the work to one of her minions.
- ❑ On the other hand, if she sees a child struggling to lift a heavy object...

# Rebound

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- ❑ My wife always instructs our daughter to finish her homework as soon as our daughter returns from school. I used to try to lessen her agony by (seriously) telling my wife: “Oh, you are such a despot!”
- ❑ One day our daughter arrived and started to complain that she had a load of assignments for the next day.

## Rebound (cont.)

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- ❑ My wife was not yet back from work. But the school year was coming to a close and I was somewhat worried about a poor grade. So I led my daughter to her study.
- ❑ When my wife arrived, my daughter ran to her and lamented about my ruthlessness. My wife hugged her and retorted: “Oh, I’m such a despot!”

# The appropriate answer

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- ❑ Stalnaker: If O'Leary says "Are you going to the party?" and you answer, "Yes, I'm going," [this] is appropriate because the proposition you affirm is the one expressed in his question.
- ❑ On the simpler analysis, there is nothing to be the common content except a truth-value.

# The appropriate answer (cont.)

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- ❑ The propositions are expressed from different points of reference, and according to the simpler analysis, they are different propositions. A truth-value, of course, is not enough to be the common content.
- ❑ If [he] asks “Are you going to the party?” it would be inappropriate for you to answer, “Yes, snow is white.”

# The appropriate answer (cont.)

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- ❑ Now assume that O'Leary and you are watching a film in which you are starring as a private eye (basically the same set-up as the earlier scenario).
- ❑ As it happens, you have been invited to a party both in the film and in real life. Then confusion follows.

# The appropriate answer (cont.)

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- ❑ Maybe “the party” is not a very definite description and must be made more specific, e.g. “the party that the senator is giving.” Padding the scenario with enough boring details, such (more informative) descriptions can still be defeated.
- ❑ The source of the problem is not the description but rather the indexical ‘I’.

# The bat people

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? Partee et al.: The statement “I am Robin” is taken to be informative in two different ways:

- 1st, when it gives a hearer a new way of rigidly referring to the speaker when he is not present.
- 2nd, when the hearer already has information about someone called Robin, but is not acquainted with him from his own experience.



# The bat people (cont.)

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- ❑ In the 1st case, the information stabilizes the character, in the 2nd case it hooks up a stable content to the external context of use.
- ❑ You are attending to a costume party as Robin, the young partner of Batman. You see Batgirl in the bar. You approach her and say: “Hi, I’m Robin. May I buy you a drink?”

# “I’m about to be attacked”

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❑ [Inspired by Howard Wettstein]

❑ There has been an *unsuccessful* attack on Yeltsin’s life. The Russian secret service recorded the whole incident and he’s watching it.

❑ There’s a certain moment he utters: “I’m about to be attacked!”

## “I’m about to be attacked” (cont.)

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- ❓ There has been a *successful* attack on Yeltsin’s life.
- ❓ Fortunately, he was not in the car; his double was!
- ❓ Watching his ill-fated double stop breathing, Yeltsin utters: “Now I’m dead.”
- ❓ [☺Aside: “Death is not an event of life. Death is not lived through.” – LW]

# Strawson

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- ❑ Wittgenstein is reported to have held that the use of 'I' was utterly different in the case of "I have a toothache" from its use in the case of "I've got a bad tooth."
- ❑ LW thought that there were two uses of 'I', and that in one of them 'I' was replaceable by *this body*.

## Strawson (cont.)

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- ❑ But LW also said that in the other use (the use exemplified by “I have a toothache” as opposed to “I have a bad tooth”), the ‘I’ *does not denote a possessor*.
- ❑ LW referred with apparent approval to Lichtenberg’s dictum that, instead of saying “I think,” we ought to say “There is a thought.” – From *Individuals*

# Geach

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**[?]** Let us begin by reminding ourselves how ‘I’ is used in ordinary life with psychological verbs. If PTG says “I see a spider” or “I feel sick”, people will ordinarily think that the speaker who says this, PTG, sees a spider or feels sick. The word ‘I’, spoken by PTG, serves to draw people’s attention to PTG; and if it is not at once clear who is speaking, there is a genuine question “Who said that?” or “Who is ‘I’?”

# Geach (cont.)

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- ❑ Now consider Descartes saying: “I’m getting into an awful muddle – but who then is this ‘I’ who is getting into a muddle?” When “I’m getting into a muddle” is a soliloquy, ‘I’ certainly does not serve to direct Descartes’s attention to Descartes, or to show that it is Descartes, none other, who is getting into a muddle.
- ❑ We are not to argue, though, that since ‘I’ does not refer to the man René Descartes it has some other, more intangible, thing to refer to.

## Geach (cont.)

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- ❓ Rather, in this context the word ‘I’ is idle, superfluous; it is used only because RD is habituated to the use of ‘I’ in expressing his thoughts and feelings to other people.
- ❓ [RD could quite well have expressed himself without using the first-person pronoun at all; he could have said: “This is really a dreadful muddle!”, where ‘this’ would refer to back to his previous meditations.]



# Geach (cont.)

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- ❑ What is going to count as an answer to the question “What is this ‘I’?” or “Who then am I?”
- ❑ Clear questions in certain circumstances – e.g. if RD had lost his memory and wanted to know who he was (“Who am I?” “You are RD”), or if he knew that somebody had said “I’m in a muddle” but not that it was himself (“Who is this ‘I’? – who said he was in a muddle?” “You did”).

– From *Mental Acts*

# Conclusion

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☐ I believe that neither contextualism nor invariantism is a definite semantic position one would like to adopt.

☐ Once again, consider:

That field<sub>1</sub> is flat<sub>2</sub>

## Conclusion (Cont.)

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- ❑ It is probably wiser to take a more invariantist stance regarding the 1st part and a more contextualist stance regarding the 2nd.
- ❑ This is also what we should do for 'I', depending on its contexts of occurrence. So, does 'I' really deserve the honored place in the given table of Perry?

# Credits

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- ❑ Similar views were presented by – among others – Wettstein, Récanati, Predelli, Bianchi, and Corazza.
- ❑ Bianchi: The reference of ‘I’ is not a direct function of the context of utterance (the semantic context); its context of interpretation is fixed by recognising the [speaker’s] intentions.

## Credits (cont.)

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- ❑ Bianchi: The rule associated with ‘I’ seems to be
  - An occurrence of ‘I’ refers to the individual the producer of the utterance indicates as responsible for the utterance in the given context.
- ❑ We thus introduce an intentional factor in the very rule associated with ‘I’.

## Credits (cont.)

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? Corazza et al.: The context or setting of a linguistic interchange plays a [crucial] role. The agent of 'I', like the relevant contextual parameters (e.g. *t* and *l*), is best understood to be the *conventionally determined* agent, and the agent determined by convention may well be distinct from either the utterer or the producer of the token of 'I'.