Specificity, Automatic Designation, and 'I'

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1 Specificity

In its most common linguistic use, *specificity* refers to a kind of definiteness. This is expressed by the grammatical marking on an NP, showing that the speaker knows the identity of the referent. Thus, a police chief has (presumably) a particular Colombian in mind when he utters "My agents cannot wait to interrogate the Colombian."

While the above explanation seems straightforward, specificity has come to be known as a subtle notion. There have been a variety of suggestions as to its meaning – thanks to the considerable output produced in the seventies and early eighties in the semantics of specificity – but a uniform definition of the term has not been agreed upon.[1]

Similarly, the relation between specificity and definiteness is one that is discernible though what exactly this relation consists of has been a topic of controversy. A common practice is to describe this elusive relation on a scale based on identifiability by speaker and hearer, as illustrated in Table 1. Attributed to Talmy Givón, the table originally omitted a definite non-specific interpretation (which we have added as the second column).[2]

This paper studies the context-dependence of the first-person indexical 'I,' while attempting to make the identifiability criteria for specificity and

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[1] Thus, Jørgensen (2000: 146) notes that the term has been used to draw at least four different distinctions: (i) whether the speaker believes the referent to be unique; (ii) whether the speaker knows the identity of the referent; (iii) whether the speaker wants to express a generalization, and (iv) whether the speaker believes the identity of the referent to be important. It is known that several allegedly sound descriptions of specificity mentioned in the literature fail to be adequate on their own in covering all conditions of the notion. A prolific author contributing to recent literature on specificity, von Heusinger (2002: 2) explicates assorted characterizations of this notion. (See *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 19, no. 3, for a special issue on specificity, guest-edited by him and

identified by	def spec	def non-spec	indef spec	indef non-spec
speaker	+	−	+	−
hearer	+	+	−	−

Table 1: The 'identifiability' criteria for definiteness and specificity (*Legend:* def $\rightsquigarrow$ definite, spec $\rightsquigarrow$ specific)

definiteness clearer for this important indexical. Having been influenced by John Perry's work on indexicals, we'll show that this (seemingly) clearest case of an indexical poses a difficulty.

Let's start off the discussion with an account of contextualism vs. invariantism. According to Unger (1984), when a man says (pointing in the direction of a baseball field) "That field is flat," he might mean something like the following:

> According to contextually relevant standards, that field is sufficiently close to being such that nothing could ever be flatter than it is.

This is the contextualist stance. In other words, for a *contextualist*, there is an implicit reference to a contextual standard; 'what is said' is not itself a simple thing.

On the other hand, for an *invariantist*, no additional content about contextually relevant standards is needed. Thus, the above statement would mean that the field is perfectly (absolutely) flat. In this view, 'what is said' is more simply related to the man's sounds.

2   Automatic designation

Now, with respect to contexts for indexicals, Perry emphasizes two distinctions. These together give rise to the four categories shown in Table 2.

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[2]Here's a brief explanation of Table 1. Definite NPs are employed if both the speaker and hearer can identify the referent. Specific indefinite NPs indicate that the speaker, but not the hearer can identify the referent. Non-specific definite NPs denote that the hearer, but not the speaker can identify the referent (e.g., talking in your sleep). Finally, non-specific indefinites show that neither of them can identify the referent. On a related note, while von Heusinger (2002) argues forcefully against this traditional account, our work in this paper is not influenced by his critique.

1. (Narrow vs. Wide) Does designation depend on narrow or wide context?

2. (Automatic vs. Intentional) Is designation automatic (given meaning and public contextual facts) or does it depend in part on the intentions of the speaker?

Perry envisions *narrow context* as consisting of constitutive facts about the utterance, e.g., the agent, time, and location. He then claims: "The clearest case of an indexical that relies only on the narrow context is 'I,' whose designation depends on the agent and *nothing else*." (our italics)

Perry characterizes *wide context* as consisting of the narrow facts plus anything else that might be relevant, according to the workings of a particular indexical. For example, when one says "It is yea big," one usually has his hands outstretched to a certain distance and this distance is a contextual factor for the indexical 'yea.'

By *automatic*, Perry means a designation which uses no intentions. An utterance of 'yesterday' is a good example. He claims that such an utterance would designate the day before the utterance occurs, no matter what the speaker intends.

Table 2: Types of indexicals[†]		
	Narrow	*Wide*
Automatic	I, now*, here*	tomorrow, yea
Intentional	now, here	that, this man, there

[†] [adapted from (Perry, 1997)]

The designation of an utterance of 'that field,' on the other hand, is not automatic. The man's intention is relevant. There may be two fields in the vicinity when he says, "That field is flat." Which of them he refers to depends on his intention.

Here's a crucial passage from (Perry, 1997):

> The indexicals 'I', 'now', and 'here' are often given an honored place as "pure" or "essential" indexicals. [...] In Table [2], 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*. With 'here' there is the question of how large an area is to count, and with 'now' the

> question of how large a stretch of time. [...] It seems then that
> these indexicals really have an intentional element. (our italics)

Now the question is: Does 'I' really deserve its privileged status? We think that the following scenarios imply a negative reply.

SCENARIO 1. Predelli (1998: 409, fn. 18) mentions an example due to Arnold Zwicky that the latter has dubbed *the phony inclusive use of we*. When a waitress says "How are we today?" to a customer, what we have here is a display of intention to contain only the addressee (customer), and not the waitress herself.

Inspired by this example, consider the sentence "How am I doing today?" uttered by Yeltsin (in bed due to a terrible heart ailment) to a *double* of his who's just going out to meet with the North Korean delegation. The intention of Yeltsin is to question the ability and preparedness of the double to play Yeltsin's part convincingly in the meeting. Thus, his intention is more like "Are you ready to fool them?" (If there are several doubles, he might instead utter, "How are we doing today?" and the situation is similar to Zwicky's example.)

SCENARIO 2. Kaplan says in "Demonstratives" (1989: 491) that he considers 'I' as a *pure* indexical, viz. something for which "*no associated demonstration is required, and any demonstration supplied is either for emphasis or is irrelevant*" (his italics). He then adds (ibid., fn. 11): "I have in mind such cases as point at oneself while saying 'I' (emphasis) or pointing at someone else while saying 'I' (irrelevance or madness or what?)."

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

To continue with our scenario, suppose there has been an unsuccessful attack on Yeltsin's life. The KGB recorded the whole incident and he's watching it. There's a certain moment he utters: "I'm about to be attacked!"

Alternatively, there has been a successful attack on Yeltsin's life. But he was not in the car; his double was. Watching his unfortunate double stop breathing, he utters: "Now, I'm dead."

3 An explanation

What do the counter-examples of the preceding section show? We'll now try to hypothesize an explanation.

First remember a principle underlying almost all of our practical reasoning (Kim, 1996):

> [*Defeasibility of mental-behavioral entailments*] If there is a plausible entailment of behavior B by mental states $M_1, \ldots, M_n$, there is always a further mental state M_{n+1} such that $M_1, \ldots, M_n, M_{n+1}$ together plausibly entail $\neg B$ [failure to produce behavior B].

Let's introduce *contextual feature* as a term of profession. Now, the following parallel principle can be stated:

> [*Defeasibility of contextual interpretations*] If there is a plausible interpretation K of a certain expression in the presence of contextual features $C_1, \ldots, C_n$, there is (always?) a further contextual feature C_{n+1} such that $C_1, \ldots, C_n, C_{n+1}$ together plausibly entail a different interpretation $\neg K$.

In a nutshell, this is exactly what's happening with 'I' in the examples above: a further contextual feature is being brought into play to render the interpretation of 'I' nontrivial.

Like Unger, we believe that neither contextualism nor invariantism is a definite semantic position one would like to adopt. Once again, when a man says "That field$_1$ is flat$_2$," it may be wiser to take an invariantist stance regarding the first part and a contextualist stance regarding the second. This is also what we should do for 'I' too, depending on its contexts of occurrence.[3]

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[3]Similar views were presented by several philosophers. Thus Bianchi(2001: 84): "The reference of 'I' is not a direct function of the context of utterance (the semantic context); its context of interpretation is fixed by recognizing the utterance producer's intentions, hence by relying on pragmatic considerations. The rule associated with 'I' seems now 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.' "

And Corazza et al. (2002): "The context or setting of a linguistic interchange plays a role in determining how the agent is determined. The agent of 'I,' like the relevant

4   References

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4. Kaplan, David, 1989, "Demonstratives: An essay on the semantics, logic, metaphysics, and epistemology of demonstratives and other indexicals," pp. 481–563 in *Themes from Kaplan*, Joseph Almog, John Perry, and Howard Wettstein (eds.), New York: Oxford University Press.

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8. Unger, Peter, 1984, *Philosophical Relativity*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

9. von Heusinger, Klaus, 2002, "Specificity and definiteness in sentence and discourse structure," *Journal of Semantics* 19: 245–274.

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contextual parameters such as the time and place, 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.' "