Recording Speech Acts

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ABSTRACT
Indexicality is at the core of many major philosophical problems.[1] In the last years, recorded messages and written notes have become a significant test and an intriguing puzzle for the semantics of indexical expressions.[2] In this paper, I argue that a parallel may be drawn between the determination of the reference of the indexical expressions in recorded messages or written texts, and the determination of the *illocutionary force* of recorded or written utterances. To this aim, I will endorse the intention-based approach proposed by Stefano Predelli - and in particular his distinction between context of utterance and context of interpretation.

1. *Indexicals and demonstratives*

As it is well known, indexicals are referential expressions having a reference only given a context of utterance: different occurrences of the same indexical as a type can have different referents. Independently of any context whatsoever, the conventional meaning of an indexical sentence like

(1) I am drunk,

cannot determine the truth-conditions of the sentence: to evaluate (1), the referent of "I" must be identified. The truth-conditions of an indexical sentence are thus indirectly determined, as a function of the context of utterance of the sentence, and in particular as a function of the values of the indexicals. According to David Kaplan and John Perry, a function is assigned

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[1] As John Perry remarks, "such words as 'I', 'now', and 'this' play crucial roles in arguments and paradoxes about such philosophically rich subjects as the self, the nature of time, and the nature of perception": Perry 1997, p. 586.

[2] See Bianchi 2001, Corazza et al. 2002, Perry 2001, Predelli 1996, 1998a, 1998b, 2002, 2005, Romdenh-Romluc 2002, and Smith 1989. In a recent paper, Jennifer Saul suggests a rather surprising application of the current investigation on indexicals. Saul draws on the literature on indexicals and recorded messages in order to criticise Rae Langton's claim that works of pornography can be understood as illocutionary acts – in particular acts of subordinating women or acts of silencing women: cf. Langton 1993, Hornsby 1993, Hornsby and Langton 1998, Saul 2006. In Bianchi 2008, I argue that Saul's analysis doesn't undermine Langton's thesis.

to each indexical expression as a type: the *character*, in Kaplan's terminology, or the *role*, in Perry's terminology. Given a context, the character determines the *content* of the occurrence – which is a function from circumstances of evaluation (possible world and time) to truth-values. The semantic value of an indexical is thus determined by a conventional rule and by a contextual parameter of the context of utterance. The character of an indexical encodes the specific contextual co-ordinate that is relevant for the determination of its semantic value: for "I" the relevant parameter is the speaker of the utterance, for "here" the place of the utterance, for "now", the time of the utterance, and so on. The designation is then automatic, "given meaning and public contextual facts".[3]

Furthermore, Kaplan and Perry introduce the distinction between pure indexicals and demonstratives. The meaning of a demonstrative, like "she" in the sentence

(2) She is drunk,

doesn't give an automatic rule individuating, once a context is given, the referent of the expression. In "Afterthoughts" Kaplan claims that every occurrence of a demonstrative as a type has to be associated with a *directing intention*.[4] In a similar vein, Perry draws the distinction between automatic and intentional indexicals. According to Perry, the speaker's intentions play no role in the determination of the reference of "I", "here", or "now": Perry calls those expressions *automatic* indexicals. Conversely, as far as a demonstrative is concerned, the determination of the reference is not automatic and the speaker's intentions become relevant: in this sense demonstratives are *intentional*.

2. *Written notes and contexts*

Serious objections to the distinction between pure indexicals and demonstratives have been raised. In particular, many scholars underline that, in some cases, the referents of utterances of "here" and "now" are not obtained by applying their characters to the context of utterance. As I said, recorded messages and written notes are a significant test for the semantics of indexical expressions: examples involving the message of an answering machine or a written note cannot be evaluated with respect to the context of utterance or inscription. Let examine some of them.

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[3] Perry 1997, p. 595.
[4] Kaplan 1989, p. 588: "The directing intention is the element that differentiates the 'meaning' of one syntactic occurrence of a demonstrative from another, creating the *potential* for distinct referents, and creating the actuality of equivocation".

Consider the message of an answering machine like

(3) I'm not here now.

According to the view sketched in § 1, the message has a paradoxical content: the speaker of the utterance is not at the place of the utterance at the time of the utterance. Yet, intuitively, an utterance of (3) may well be true. Or imagine that John, while in his office, writes a note reading:

(4) I am here,

and then, arrived home, leaves it in the kitchen, to let his wife Mary know that he is back from work: the note is not informing Mary that John is in his office (the place of utterance or inscription), but rather that he is at home.

In order to determine the reference of the indexical expressions in (3) and (4), we must fix the relevant context. Apparently, we have two candidates:

a) the context in which the utterance is recorded or produced - *encoded*;
b) the context in which it is heard or read - *decoded*.

There are two possible alternatives, allowing to remain in a traditional framework and, in particular allowing to maintain the distinction between pure indexicals – semantically complete, automatic, functional – and demonstratives – semantically incomplete, intentional, pragmatic. The two alternatives are the *Many Characters View* and the *Remote Utterance View*.

• According to the *Many Characters View*, there are two characters associated with the indexical "now", one for the time of production of the utterance containing "now" (the coding time) and one for the time the utterance is heard or read (the decoding time).

But associating two characters with "now" or "here" amounts to multiplying meanings unnecessarily, and to accepting the unpleasant and counterintuitive conclusion that indexicals have more than one meaning.

• According to the *Remote Utterance View*, written notes and recorded messages allow a speaker to utter sentences "at a distance", so to speak; in other terms they allow to utter sentences at time *t* and location *l* without being in *l* at *t*. In this line of thought, the owner of the answering machine "uttered" (3) when someone phoned, and John "uttered" (4) at home, when his wife read his note.

Let's examine the Remote Utterance View, by focusing on an example adapted from Predelli.[5] Suppose that, before leaving home at 8 'o clock in the

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[5] Cf. Predelli 1998a and 1998b.

morning, Ridge writes a note to Brooke, who will be back from work at 5 'o clock in the evening:

(5) As you can see, I'm not here now. Meet me in two hours at "Le Café Russe".

Intuitively, the note does not convey the (false) content that Ridge is not at home at the time of utterance (the coding time) of the note, nor does it ask Brooke to be at "Le Café Russe" at 10 'o clock in the morning – namely two hours after he wrote the note. Therefore, the Remote Utterance View would conclude that a) must be ruled out: the relevant context is b), the context in which the note is read, or decoded. Ridge "uttered" (5) at 5 p.m., when Brooke came home from work.

3. *Speech acts and contexts*

A parallel may be drawn between the determination of the reference of the indexical expressions in recorded messages or written texts, and the determination of the illocutionary force of recorded utterances. Written texts (but also recorded radio or TV programs, films, and images) may be seen as *recordings* that can be used in many different contexts – exactly like an answering machine message. Let examine the example of a sign reading

(6) I do

created by Brooke as a multi-purpose sign and used by her in different contexts to get married, to agree to return her books in time in a library or to confess to a murder.[6] The question is to establish which context determines the speech act performed by an agent using a recording:

   a) the context in which the sentence is recorded or produced;
   b) the context in which the sentence is heard or read.

According to a version of the Remote Utterance View for speech acts, the different speech acts performed by Brooke depend on features of the contexts in which Brooke *used* the sign (choice b)), and not on features of the context in which she made it (choice a)).[7] She may use (6) in a church, to get married, or

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[6] I adapt Saul's example in Saul 2006.

[7] Saul endorses such a conclusion; cf. Saul 2006, p. 237. "Which speech act was performed, intuitively, hinges on some combination of Ethel's intentions in using her sign, the audiences' interpretations of her utterances, and the fulfillment of necessary felicity

in a library, to agree to return her books in time, or in a police station, to confess to a murder: it is the context in which the sentence is used that determines the illocutionary force of the speech act performed by the agent.

4. *Indexicals and intended context*

However, we may find some powerful arguments against b). Let's go back to indexical sentences like (5). Predelli imagines that Brooke comes home late, and reads (5) at 10 p.m. Intuitively, Ridge is not inviting her for dinner at midnight: she must interpret the message not in relation to her actual time of arrival but to her *expected* time of arrival (the expected decoding time) – an intuition the Remote Utterance View cannot account for.

In order to account for examples (3) – (5), Predelli suggests that we distinguish between the context of utterance (or inscription) and a context the speaker considers semantically relevant, that is the (intended) *context of interpretation*.[8] The character of "now" in (5) does not apply either to the context of utterance/inscription, or to the decoding context. In (5), the context giving the correct interpretation contains, as the temporal co-ordinate, Brooke's expected time of arrival (5 p.m.) and not the moment Ridge wrote the note (8 a.m.) or the moment Brooke came home (10 p.m.): this intended context provides the correct values for "now and "in two hours", i.e. 5 p.m. and 7 p.m., while keeping the usual characters for the two expressions.

5. *Speech acts and intended context*

Let's now turn to (6). According to the version of the Remote Utterance View for speech acts, in order to determine the illocutionary force of the different speech acts performed by Brooke, we must focus on the different *decodings* of (6) (hearings or viewings: choice b)). Different viewings of a written utterance or different hearings of a recorded message, it may be argued, could have different illocutionary forces. It is the context in which an utterance is actually heard or seen (and not the context in which it is recorded) which determines the speech act accomplished by a recording.

If the parallel between indexical expressions and speech acts holds, however, we have a compelling argument against the choice of b) as the context relevant to determine the illocutionary force of a speech act in

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conditions. These are all features of the contexts in which Ethel's sign was used (rather than features of the context in which it was made)".
[8] Predelli 1998a, p. 403 and Predelli 1998b, p. 112.

general, and of a recorded utterance in particular. Just imagine that Brooke has created (6) in order to get married: she is standing in the church, holding her sign in front of her fiancé Ridge and the priest. A police officer investigating for the savage murder of Ridge's first wife Taylor is in the audience. Struck by an intuition, suddenly the officer stands up and asks Brooke "Do you confess you murdered Taylor?". He sees Brooke's sign reading (6), interprets it as a confession and arrests her for murder. Nevertheless, intuitively Brooke is not pleading guilty for Taylor's murder: the police officer must interpret the sign not in relation to the actual viewing but to the *expected* viewing – an intuition the Remote Utterance View for speech acts cannot account for.

Following Predelli's suggestion, I claim that to fix the illocutionary force of a speech act, the addressee should not consider (at least, not directly) either the context of production of the utterance, or the context of actual decoding of the utterance. She should instead consider an "intended" context, taken as semantically relevant by the speaker, and *available as such to the addressee*: this context will be the relevant context of interpretation. What especially matters are the intentions the speaker makes available to the addressee: if they are transparent, publicly accessible and manifest, these intentions determine which particular speech act has been performed. The speaker's intentions direct the addressee to this intended context - which is identified and sorted out by pragmatic means (knowledge of the world, of the speaker's desires and beliefs, of social practices, and so on). If an utterance is intended as an illocutionary act of getting married, and if this intention is made available to the addressee, no accidental viewing may change the illocutionary force of the utterance. It is not the *actual* viewing that fixes the illocutionary force of the utterance, but the *expected* viewing.

6. *Conclusion*

I have argued that a parallel may be drawn between the determination of the reference of the indexical expressions in recorded messages or written texts, and the determination of the illocutionary force of recorded or written utterances. To this aim, I have endorsed the intention-based approach proposed by Predelli - and in particular his distinction between context of utterance and context of interpretation. It is not the context in which an utterance is heard or seen that determines the speech act performed by the utterance. What matters is the *intended context*: the illocutionary force of a speech act is fixed only once the intended context is fixed - a determination involving encyclopaedic knowledge of the world and of the speaker's desires, beliefs and intentions.

In closing, let me stress again this very point.[9] An intention, to be semantically relevant, must be made available or communicated to the addressee[10], and for that purpose the speaker can exploit any feature of the context, words, gestures, relevance in the context of utterance; nevertheless, this exploitation of the context has only the role of *manifesting* the intention, of externalising it – a role of pragmatic aid to communication.[11] Even Ridge can't recognise every bizarre intention that Brooke could have, such as, for example, the intention – holding in the church the sign saying (6) - of agreeing to return her books in time, if no evidence of her intention was made available to him. A communicative intention must be something that an addressee in normal circumstances is able to work out using external facts (where, when and by whom the utterance is produced), linguistic co-text (what has been said so far), and background knowledge (knowledge about weddings, libraries, or murder investigations).[12] No arbitrary or unreasonable intention the author of a speech act could have plays a role in fixing the illocutionary force of her speech act – if the author hasn't done enough to make her intention available to the addressee.[13]

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[9] In order to avoid criticisms of providing a Humpty-Dumpty image of language and communication: cf. Corazza et al. 2002, p. 9, and Predelli 2002, p. 314.

[10] But, in my opinion, not to *any* competent speaker, as Garcia Carpintero proposes; cf. Garcia-Carpintero 1998, p. 537: "I will take demonstrations to be sets of *deictical intentions* manifested in features of the context of utterance available as such to any competent user". On this point, see Bianchi 2001, Ch. X.

[11] Cf. Kaplan 1989, p. 582: "I am now inclined… to regard the demonstration as a mere externalization of this inner intention. The externalization is an aid to communication, like speaking more slowly and loudly, but is of no semantic significance".

[12] On communicative intentions and their availability, see Bianchi 2006.

[13] I wish to thank Nicla Vassallo, for her comments on previous versions of this paper.

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