

Demonstratives are free variables

Ethan Nowak–UC Berkeley

1 A familiar semantic picture

- *The explanatory task:*

(1) That is the southernmost peak in the Cascade Range.

- People have intuitions about the way the truth conditions associated with (1) vary over hypothetical contexts of utterance.
- On reasonable assumptions, those intuitions seem to support claims about what the extension of the demonstrative would be in the contexts in question.

- *A straightforward solution:*

- The obvious way of explaining the intuitions (1) evokes is to say ‘that’ is semantically sensitive to the context.
- The standard treatment derives from Kaplan (1977):

$$(2) \llbracket \text{dthat (the } F \rrbracket^{c,w} = \llbracket \text{the } F \rrbracket^{c,w_c}$$

$$(3) \llbracket \text{That is a fish} \rrbracket^{c,w} \\ = \llbracket \text{dthat (the object pointed at by the speaker of } c \rrbracket^{c,w} (\llbracket \text{is a fish} \rrbracket) \\ = \llbracket \text{the object pointed at by the speaker of } c \rrbracket^{c,w_c} (\llbracket \text{is a fish} \rrbracket)$$

- Most people, including Kaplan (1989), have allowed that pointing is less important than intending:

$$(4) \llbracket \text{That is a fish} \rrbracket^{c,w} \\ = \llbracket \text{dthat (the object intended by the speaker of } c \rrbracket^{c,w} (\llbracket \text{is a fish} \rrbracket) \\ = \llbracket \text{the object intended by the speaker of } c \rrbracket^{c,w_c} (\llbracket \text{is a fish} \rrbracket)$$

- It is not difficult to see how this treatment will issue in the right intuitive predictions about standard cases.

2 A semantics without context

- Recall the Kripke test (1977):

I propose the following test for any alleged counterexample to a linguistic proposal: if someone alleges that a certain linguistic phenomenon in English is a counterexample to a given analysis, consider a hypothetical language which (as much as possible) is like English except that the analysis is stipulated to be correct. Imagine such a hypothetical language introduced into a community and spoken by it. If the phenomenon in question would still arise in a community that spoke such a hypothetical language (which may not be English), then the fact that it arises in English cannot disprove the hypothesis that the analysis is correct for English.

- Consider a hypothetical language, English*, with a very simple semantics for demonstratives:

$$(5) \llbracket \text{that}_i \rrbracket^g = g(i)$$

- Apply the Kripke test to English*:

- Imagine two people standing somewhere by Lake Shasta. One utters (1, repeated):
 - (1) That is the southernmost peak in the Cascade Range.
(= x_{28} is the southernmost peak in the Cascade Range.)
- What will the interpreter make of this utterance?
 - * Semantic knowledge tells her ‘that’ supplies a variable over individuals and ‘is the southernmost. . .’ a function of type $\langle e, t \rangle$.
 - * To get a truth-condition, the interpreter needs to choose a variable assignment.
 - * She can rely on her general pragmatic competence to choose one.
 - If she’s awake and paying attention, she’ll see who is speaking.
 - If she’s trying to understand the speaker, she’ll wonder which object is at-issue.
 - If she’s cognitively normal, she’ll use clues (pointings, glances, salience, etc.) to form a hypothesis.
- Result: speakers of English* would have the same intuitions as English speakers about the truth conditions of sentences involving demonstratives.

3 Variablism is better

We should prefer variablism to any context-sensitive theory—English* is just English.

- *Compositional semantics*

- No one who cares about the compositional details will want to say that simple demonstratives are formed from an operator and a covert definite description.
- What about a simpler context-sensitive theory? Compare:
 - (6) $\llbracket \text{that} \rrbracket^{c,w}$ = the object intended by the speaker of c
 - * This is certainly better than ‘dthat’.
 - * But it is still ad hoc and too restrictive; it won’t extend well to complex demonstratives or to anaphora.

- *Pragmatics*

- If demonstratives are free variables, the work that goes into using and understanding them is primarily pragmatic work. Does this mean we have just pushed down on a bulge in the carpet?
- No! The pragmatic faculties the variabilist relies on are faculties we have to have around for all sorts of reasons.
 - * For example, suppose I say:
 - (7) My friend Janna has been at the bank all day.
 - * I can use (7) to say something about money, and I can use it to say something about fishing.
 - * We could explain this by saying that ‘bank’ is context-sensitive, and picks out either the property of being a financial institution or the property of being a fishing spot, depending on the intentions of the speaker of c .
 - * But this would be silly. For you to interpret me, you’d have to think about which interpretation would make the most sense, on the basis of what you know about my interests, the history of the conversation, etc. So, canonizing the requirement that ‘bank’ pick out the meaning intended by the speaker would amount to double-counting.
 - * It’d be simpler to postulate a lexical ambiguity and say interpreters resolve it pragmatically.

- Parallel considerations apply in the case of demonstratives.
 - * When real-life speakers encounter demonstratives, they are not provided with descriptions of the context.
 - * So, they cannot simply apply a context-sensitive rule to the context they're in and get an extension for a demonstrative.
 - * The best they can do is to make educated guesses about which context that is.
 - * Contextualist semantic theories try and guide interpreters, by telling them how to proceed. The lexical semantics offers instructions like:
 - Step 1: figure out who the speaker is.
 - Step 2: figure out which object they have in mind.
 - * This is lousy guidance.
 - Compare the following instructions for toasting bread:
Step 1: Get bread.
Step 2: Toast it.
(Step 3: PROFIT!)
 - * The interpretive task already gives you these constraints, so there is no reason to write them into the lexicon.
 - * Furthermore, the tools you'd use to meet them are exactly the tools the variablist relies on; both cases involve the same kind of coordination problem.
- *Ontology*
 - For Kaplan, the compositional semantic value of a demonstrative was supposed to be its contribution to assertoric content, too.
 - * Rabern (2012), Yalcin (2014) and others have given reasons for thinking compositional semantic values should not (cannot) be identified with assertoric contents.
 - Let's hold those issues in abeyance for a moment, though, and suppose the simple contextualist picture is right:
 - * character + context of utterance = THE proposition expressed.
 - * What does this proposition explain? Not clear.
 - Not required to explain communication.
 - Not required as a source of normativity.
 - Good practice to end with a pithy Lewis (1980) quote:

The foremost thing we do with words is to impart information, and this is how we do it. Suppose (1) that you do not know whether *A* or *B* or ...; and (2) that I do know; and (3) that I want you to know; and (4) that no extraneous reasons much constrain my choice of words; and (5) that we both know that the conditions (1)-(5) obtain. Then I will be truthful and you will be trusting and thereby you will come to share my knowledge. **I will find something to say that depends for its truth on whether *A* or *B* or ... and that I take to be true. I will say it and you will hear it. You, trusting me to be willing and able to tell the truth, will then be in a position to infer whether *A* or *B* or**
 - Do we really need to say something that depends for its truth on whether *A*?
 - * Why not whether *A* w.r.t *g*?

4 References

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