

Demonstratives have no character

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1 Content, character, and cognitive significance

- *Content:*
 - Content is supposed to capture “**what an expression was used to say**” on an occasion of use.
 - The content of a sentence is a **Russellian structured proposition**, while the content of a sub-sentential expression is its propositional contribution (e.g., an individual, property, or relation).
 - The content of an **assertion**, for Kaplan, is the content of the corresponding **belief**.
- *Character:*
 - Character is supposed to correspond to the “**standing linguistic meaning**” of an expression.
 - The character of an expression is represented as a **function from contexts to contents**.
 - Character plays **two explanatory roles** for Kaplan:
 - * Explains variation in **extension** w.r.t. different contexts of utterance.
 - * Explains putative facts about **cognitive significance**.
- Kaplan thinks cognitive significance is a ‘**freebie**’:

“I tried to get at cognitive value through the notion of character. When the twins, Castor and Pollux, each sincerely say ‘My brother was born before me’, they are said to be in the same cognitive state but to believe different things. Though the utterances of the twins have the same cognitive value (same character), they do not bear the same truth-value (nor have the same content). I found it attractive to follow Frege in using a strictly semantical concept (character), **needed for other semantical purposes**, to try to capture his idea of cognitive value.” (1989, pg. 597, emphasis added)

2 Indexicals and their character

- Indexicals show clearly what character has to do with **extension**:
 - (1) I am David Hume.
 - *Explananda:*
 - * In Hume’s mouth, (1) is true.
 - * in Heimson’s, mouth, (1) is false.
 - *Explanans:*
 - * The character of ‘I’ is a function from a context, *c*, to the agent of *c*.
 - * Hume \neq Heimson.
- Indexicals also show how character might help with **cognitive significance**:
 - (2) I am just standing here, not being attacked by a bear.
 - (3) But *you* are being attacked by a bear!
 - *Explanandum:*
 - * If I see a bear-attack in a mirror, but don’t (yet) recognize that I’m involved, I might sincerely assert (believe) both (2) and (3) without exposing myself to rational censure.¹
 - *Explanans:*
 - * The character of ‘I’ is different from the character of ‘you’.

¹Compare Perry (1977).

3 Demonstratives and their character

- We might try to capture the **extensional** facts about demonstratives using a similar strategy:

(4) That is Mount Shasta

– *Explananda*:

- * Uttered by someone pointing at Shasta, (4) is true.
- * Uttered by someone pointing at Lassen, (4) is false.

– *Explanans*:

- * The character of ‘that’ is a function from a context, c , to the object pointed at by the agent of c .
- * Shasta \neq Lassen.

- But this **simple story** about demonstratives fails as an explanation of their **cognitive significance**:²

(5) That is the *Enterprise*.

(6) That is not the *Enterprise*.

– *Explanandum*:

- * If I am standing by an aircraft carrier shrouded in fog, I might point at the stern, where ‘Enterprise’ is painted, and sincerely assert (believe) (5), and then point at the bow, where ‘CVN-65’ is painted, and sincerely assert (believe) (6), without exposing myself to rational censure.³

– *Explanans*:

- * ~~The character of ‘that’ is different from the character of ‘that’.~~
- * Both sentences involve ‘that’, so the difference can’t be chalked up to a variation in character.

- Kaplan’s solution is to claim that the character of ‘that’ **itself varies** across contexts.

– He says the character of ‘that’ is **incomplete** and requires an accompanying **demonstration**, which contributes a **description-type** character.

- * This comes out clearly in his formalism, based on the operator *dthat*:

$$(7) \quad \llbracket \text{that } F \rrbracket^{c,a,w,t} = \llbracket \text{dthat (the } F) \rrbracket^{c,a,w,t} = \llbracket \text{the } F \rrbracket^{c,a,w_c,t_c}$$

– The character of a demonstration is (roughly) equivalent to the character of: “the object that has the appearance had by the object demonstrated by the agent of the the context.”

- * If I point at the foggy stern of the *Enterprise*, my pointing contributes the character of ‘the object that has the appearance of a giant foggy ship’s stern with the word ‘Enterprise’ on it’.
- * If I point at the foggy bow of the *Enterprise*, my pointing contributes the character of ‘the object that has the appearance of a giant foggy ship’s bow with the marking ‘CVN-65’ on it’.
- * So, the character of ‘**that** (**bow**)’ is **different from** the character of ‘**that** (**stern**)’.

- Explaining these putative epistemic data turns out to be a **design aim** of Kaplan’s semantics.

– We can make the right predictions about the **extensions** of certain expressions if we treat them as having **non-constant Kaplanian characters**. If such an analysis could explain some epistemic intuitions produced by the expressions, that would be a **secondary benefit**.

– In the case of **demonstratives**, however, the direction of explanation is reversed. Kaplan’s claim about what the character of a demonstrative should be is **guided by** his goal of explaining the putative epistemic data.

²Compare Wettstein (1984).

³Compare Perry (1977).

4 Variablism

- If our goal is to tell a **compositionally-plausible** story about how sentences involving demonstratives come to have the **relativized truth conditions** they have, using **resources we need anyway**, we should cut out all the **baroque descriptive machinery** and just treat demonstratives as **free variables**.
 - So, sentence (4, repeated) should be represented as per (8):
 - (4) That is Mount Shasta.
 - (8) x_1 is Mount Shasta.
 - * If we want the referent of ‘that’ to be Shasta, we interpret (8) with regard to an assignment that maps ‘1’ to Shasta, if we want the reference of ‘that’ to be Lassen, we interpret (8) with regard to an assignment that maps ‘1’ to Lassen, and so on.
- On this way of setting things up, the extension of a demonstrative depends on the **assignment parameter** instead of the context. This means **demonstratives have no character**.
- It does not necessarily mean that there are **no constraints** on the reference of demonstratives.
 - If we embed this semantic proposal in a broader psycho-linguistic theory, we can use facts about:
 - * Speakers’ and listeners’ attention
 - * Speakers’ and listeners’ perceptual abilities and states
 - * The history of the conversation
 - * The history of the societies the speakers and listeners hail fromas potential constraints on which **assignments are appropriate** in a given context.
- If we still want to explain Frege’s Puzzle, we can model cognitive significance using these constraints.
 - (9) That is the *Enterprise*. ($=x_1$ is the *Enterprise*)
 - (10) That is not the *Enterprise*. ($=x_2$ is not the *Enterprise*)
 - On a **cloudy day**, when it is **not clear** that we are looking at two pieces of the **same ship**, we have the intuition that someone could accept both (9) and (10).
 - * We can model this by saying that the range of assignments that speakers/listeners will consider acceptable in such a context includes **assignments that differ** with regard to the objects to which they map ‘1’ and ‘2’.
 - On a **sunny day**, when it is **clear** that we are looking at **one ship**, we have the intuition that no one could accept both (9) and (10).
 - * We can model this by saying that speakers/listeners will only accept **assignments that are the same** with regard to the objects to which they map ‘1’ and ‘2’.

5 References

- [1] David Kaplan. Demonstratives. In J. Almong, J. Perry, and H. Wettstein, editors, *Themes from Kaplan*, pages 481–563. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 1977/1989.
- [2] David Kaplan. Afterthoughts. In J. Almong, J. Perry, and H. Wettstein, editors, *Themes from Kaplan*, pages 565–614. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 1989.
- [3] John Perry. Frege on demonstratives. *Philosophical Review*, 86(4):474–497, 1977.
- [4] Howard K. Wettstein. How to bridge the gap between meaning and reference. *Synthese*, 58(1):63 – 84, 1984.