

“Fixed” vs. “shifting”  
words: linguistic and  
philosophical viewpoints

Artemij Keidan, Sapienza University of Rome

# What is all this about?

- Meaning and reference of **indexicals**
- **Vagueness** vs. determinacy
- **Saussureanism** and Functionalism vs. **Analytic**  
Philosophy of Language

# Sense and Reference

- Originally devised by G. Frege in his attempt to analyze the propositions of Arithmetics:
  - *Sinn*: the mode of presentation of a denotatum
  - *Bedeutung*: the referent itself

# Meaning and Reference

	Singular term	Predicate	Sentence
Sense ( <i>Sinn</i> )	Search procedure	Concept	Thought
Reference ( <i>Bedeutung</i> )	Individual object	Set of objects	Truth value

# Singular terms

- One and the same referent can be described through **different senses**:
  - “Square root of 9”, “Sum of 1 and 2” → **3**
  - “Evening star”, “Morning star” → **Venus**
- Note that **3** and **Venus** do not depend on context
  - Sense-to-reference linkage is **deterministic**

# Proper names

- Normal **singular terms** depend on the World: they are not eternal, but only **contingent**
  - “**The teacher of Alexander the Great**” may or may not refer to **Aristotle**
- However, proper names are ***rigid designators***: they necessarily refer to a determinate individual
  - “**Aristotle**” necessarily refers to **Aristotle** in every World

# Indexicals

- Main problem:
  - When John says “I” he means **himself**
  - When Sally says “I” she means **herself**
- The reference of “I” **shifts** from one individual to another **within** the actual World
- Contrariwise, within our World the reference of “Alexander’s teacher” is **permanently** Aristotle

# Analytic approach

- D. **Kaplan's** (1977) theory of indexicals
- Kaplan suggests to analyze the sense of indexicals into **content** and **character**
  - **character** is the **defining rule** of a context-sensitive word, like a pronoun
  - **content** is what is effectively **said**, given the context; for a pronoun it is its referent



# Analytic approach

- J. **Perry**'s (1997) theory of indexicals
- Indexicals' **senses** are similar to **descriptions**
  - they are modes of presentation linked to the context of utterance
- Indexicals' **referents** are like those of **proper names**
  - they are directly referenced

# Indexicals

	Definite descriptions	Proper names	Indexicals
Sense of the type	Denoting	Naming	Denoting
Reference of the token	Describing	Referring	Referring

# Wrap up: what is fixed

- In Kaplan's terminology
  - singular terms have **fixed** character
  - Indexicals have **shifting** character
- «For an expression to be indexical, however, it must have a fixed sense and denotation, but a shifting reference» (Clark & Clark 1979)

# Indexicalization drift

- Some philosophers **misinterpret** indexicality extending it too loosely
- Three premises:
  - Indexicals are **shifting** words
  - Indexicals are **context-sensitive** words
  - Indexicals are used to **indicate** something

# Indexicalization drift. 1

- Whatever **shifts** is indexical
- Indexical meaning-components have been discovered in many words
  - *come, go, left, right* (Fillmore 1975)
  - *local* (Partee 1989)

# Indexicalization drift. 2

- Whatever depends on **context** is [somewhat similar to an] indexical (Braun 2007):
  - Verbs of **believing** and **knowing** are indexical (Richard 1990)
  - **Quantifiers** are indexical (Stanley & Szabó 2000)
  - “**Hidden-indexical**” theory by Schiffer (1995)

# Indexicalization drift. 2

- Clark (1992): **contextual expressions**
- Raffman (2014): **vague** words
  - Such words as *tall* are interpreted depending on the context:
    - *John is tall.* [the term of comparison is a short man]
    - *John is not that tall.* [the term of comparison is a tall man]

# Indexicalization drift. 3

- Whatever **indicates** something is indexical, cf. Silverstein (2003)
- Forms of **non-referential indexicality**
  - Japanese **honorifics**
- Forms of “**second order**” indexicality
  - Speaking **slang** “indicates” the social background



# Some criticism

- True indexical words refer to individuals **obligatorily present** in the discourse
- “Contextual” words refer to things that are only **contingently present** in the discourse
  - Cf. also Bach (2000) on what does “context” mean
- 2nd-order indexicals are better explained as connotations

# Two approaches

- Analytic Philosophy: studies language of science
  - formal languages **describe** some already known scientific facts
- General Linguistics: studies language of everyday communication
  - natural language **communicates** some new data

(despite Chomsky)

# Two approaches

- Analytic Philosophy: «To understand a sentence in use means to know what is the case if it is true» (Wittgenstein TLP, 4.0.24)
- Linguists: «It is important to realize that whatever mechanisms underlie the process of fixing reference are not linguistic or even semantic in nature, but psychological» (Seuren 2009)

# Two approaches

- Analytic approach deals with formal languages that speak about **objective knowledge**
- There is **no subjectivity**: 1st person does not belong here
- Formal languages **describe**, rather than **communicate**
- There is no indeterminacy

# Two approaches

- General Linguistics describes the **information flow** in **everyday** communication
- Natural languages are located in the mind/brain and describe one's own **mental states**
- Natural languages are **essentially subjective**
- How is the incommunicability avoided?

# Linguistic approach

- First premise: the language is **arbitrary**
  - Arbitrariness of **sign**: signified vs. signifier
  - **Horizontal** arbitrariness: signified vs. signified
  - **Vertical** arbitrariness: meaning vs. reference
    - it implies **vagueness**

# Linguistic approach

- Second premise: linguistic activity has two phases
- Abstract level: **understanding**
  - Saussure's *langue*
- Use level: **interpretation**
  - Saussure's *parole*

# Linguistic approach

- Note that *langue* and *parole* ≠ **type** and **token**
  - Type is only a **class** of tokens
  - Tokens are exact **replicas** of their type
- «The meaning of an expression assigns the same content to each and every utterance of the expression» (Perry 1997)



# Linguistic approach

- Note that many analytic philosophers recognize the “otherness” of the linguistic use vs. meaning
  - **utterer’s meaning** (Grice 1968)
  - **sentence non-literality** (Bach 1994)
  - **hidden indexicality** (Schiffer 1995)
- However, they still try to deal with it from a deterministic point of view

# Linguistic approach

- Natural language: **no identity** is ensured between *langue* and *parole*
- A speaker/hearer performs two separate tasks:
  - **understanding** the abstract meaning
  - **interpreting** the sentence in a given context
- We don't communicate **the** meanings but **with** the meanings

# Vagueness

- Therefore **all words** are vague (not just some)
- Wittgenstein (PU, 510): «Try to do the following: say “It’s cold here”, and mean “It’s warm here”. Can you do it?»
- A linguist’s answer would be: **yes!**
- Notwithstanding vagueness, communication is still possible

# Vagueness

- How do we **get through** the vagueness?
- Communication flows from what is **less vague** to what is **more vague**
- This is because language is **incremental**
- What is already interpreted improves the interpretation of what is not

# Sources of determinacy

- Elements that are **necessarily present** in a dialogue:
  - **speaker** and **hearer**, **time** and **place**
  - situational **context**
  - conversational **co-text**
  - background **knowledge**

# Sources of determinacy

- Linguistic expressions that are **immediately interpretable** in a dialogue:
  - **speaker** and **hearer**, **time** and **place** → **deixis**
  - situational **context** → **demonstratives**
  - conversational **co-text** → **anaphora**
  - background **knowledge** → **topic/given**

# Sources of determinacy

- Usually words are non-deterministic:
  - We have the right of not being able to interpret *to run, guelder rose* or *freedom*
- Truly indexical words are deterministic:
  - We **must** be able to interpret *I* and *you*
  - We **are supposed** to be able to interpret *he, this, the*

# Sources of determinacy

Indeterminate interpretation	Automatic interpretation
the new professor of Linguistics	I
the new guy	this guy here
a new guy who came today	he
a professor	the professor



# Sources of determinacy

- Such truly indexical elements are **hard-coded** into language
  - no languages without 1st vs. 2nd **persons** distinction
  - no languages without **tense** (?)
  - no languages without **anaphora** (??)
  - no languages without **topicalization** (???)

# What is fixed?

- In the Analytic school indexicals are shifting; other words are fixed
- In my proposal:
  - **true indexicals are fixed**: their referents are automatically determinable
  - **other words are all vague**, therefore their referents are indeterminate

# What is fixed?

	Analytic Philosophy	General Linguistics (my proposal)
Singular terms	Fixed	Indeterminate (Vague)
Indexicals	Shifting	Automatically Determinable (Fixed)

# Strengths of my theory

- Explores the **function** of indexicals
- Considers language in its natural form: **dialogue**
- **Excludes** vagueness and contextually from indexicals
- Arguably **includes** into the notion of indexicality some new phenomena
  - (such as anaphora, already in Récanati 2005)

Thank you!