

Indexicals and the Mind

Indexicals are some small words in our language, such as “I”, “here” and “now,” which we use all the time, but which are still not properly understood. These words are currently engaging some of the best philosophical minds. At least one highly respected philosopher, David Kaplan, has devoted most of his life to understanding them.

Why should one devote so much thought and energy to these words? We use them daily and do not experience them as problematic. However, questions about indexicals are like Augustine’s questions about time: “What then is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I wish to explain it to one who asks, I know not.” It took a while before philosophers started to notice that the indexicals are problematic. Only when they had developed fairly systematic approaches to how language functions in communication and how language



Professor emeritus
Dagfinn Føllesdal,
Department of Philosophy,
University of Oslo.
CAS Fellow 2003/04.

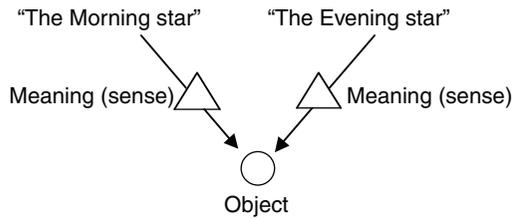
relates to the world did they discover that the indexicals were recalcitrant. Peirce, Frege and Husserl were early explorers of the indexicals. Russell, Reichenbach and many others followed. Decisive leaps forward were made by David Kaplan and John Perry who is a member of our group, *Towards a New Understanding of the Mental*.

What then are these problems? I have already indicated that one does not notice the problems until one starts thinking systematically about language. This is one of the difficulties with philosophical problems in general, the same difficulty that Augustine experienced: To explain a philosophical problem is often just as hard as to propose a solution. In order to get at the problems raised by indexicals we first have to take a look at the traditional views on language and see how they apparently give us a good way of understanding how language works – until we get to indexicals.

Gottlob Frege (1848–1925), who created modern logic, saw that in order to get a satisfactory understanding of logic he had to know how language functions in communication and how it relates to the world. In particular, he needed to figure out how we can understand the relation of identity. He did so in a famous article, “On sense and reference” in 1892. Here he worked out with great precision a view that comes fairly naturally and had cropped up several times earlier in the history of philosophy: in the stoics, in many medieval philosophers and especially clearly in Bolzano 60 years before Frege. The idea is that each sentence and word in our language has a meaning, or sense, which determines what the expression refers to. An example Frege uses is “The Morning star” and “The Evening star”. Each of these expressions refers to the same object, which is also referred to as “The planet Venus”. However, it took a while before the old Babylonians discovered that these expressions refer to the same

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object. The expressions express different meanings, or senses, the first of them that of a star prominent in the morning, the second that of a star conspicuous in the evening. When astronomers discovered that they were the same star, they discovered that the two expressions, although they have different meanings, still refer to the same object:



Frege held that the meaning of an expression determines its reference. A basic principle in his view on meaning is this:

If two expressions have the same meaning, then they have the same reference.

But not conversely, we just saw how two expressions with different meanings, “The Morning star” and “The Evening star”, can relate to the same object. The meaning could be compared to a set of features that an object has to have in order to be the reference of this expression. Frege also compared the meaning of an expression to an aspect of the object. “The Morning star” and “The Evening star” express two aspects of one and the same star: the first that it is dominant in the morning, the second that it dominates in the evening.

Frege also used this trichotomy of expression, meaning and reference to explain how we communicate with one another. Briefly, a speaker or writer communicates by uttering or writing an expression whose meaning is grasped by the listener or reader.

This all works well until we get to the indexicals. Let us now see what happens. Let us start with the word “I”. When I say “I”, I refer to myself. But when you say “I”, you refer to yourself. How can that be? According to Frege’s basic principle, which was stated above, this implies that the word “I” has different meanings when it is used by different persons. This seems somewhat disturbing, but Frege was willing to bite the bullet. For reasons that we shall not discuss here, he even went so far as to contend that the word “I” expresses a special sense for each person that cannot be grasped by anybody else. This creates quite a problem for Frege’s theory of communication, since a main purpose of the notion of sense for Frege is that we communicate by using words whose sense is the same for the speaker and the listener. Yet our awareness of ourselves is such an elusive notion that we may easily nod approvingly when Frege writes: “Now everyone is presented to himself in a particular and primitive way, in which he is presented to no-one else.”

Let us now, however, consider the word “now”. On different occasions when I say “now” I am referring to different times. However, does “now” change its meaning from one occasion of use to the next? The same with “here”, “today”, “yesterday” and so on. We cannot allege that what these words refer to is elusive, as Frege did in the case of the self. The view that indexicals change their meaning all the time seems utterly implausible.

So what shall we do? Three groups of approaches to the problem have been proposed, and we shall now briefly consider them one by one:

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<p>1. Classical theory of meaning (sense)</p> <p>Frege (<i>sui generis</i> sense sense of "I")</p> <p>Problem: Communication = grasping same sense</p>	<p>2. Hybrid expressions</p> <p>Frege</p> <p>Problem: Reference to the object is still via sense</p>	<p>3. Hybrid sense (Object is part of proposition) or: causal impingements</p> <p>a) Singular propositions b) Husserl c) Perry</p>
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The first of these approaches is the one we have discussed. Nobody accepts this as satisfactory. Also Frege saw that it would not do. However, there are some hints in his later writings, for example the following:

... the mere wording, as it can be preserved in writing, is not the complete expression of the thought; the knowledge of certain conditions accompanying the utterance, which are used as means of expressing the thought, is needed for us to grasp the thought correctly. Pointing the finger, hand gestures, glances may belong here, too.

The basic idea, which is explicit in the passages I have underlined, is that the expression, which expresses the meaning, consists not just of words, but also includes other items, such as pointing the finger, etc. In another passage Frege states that also "the time of utterance is part of the expression of the thought." This interpretation of Frege was proposed in 1977 and it was worked out in detail in 1982 and later years by the German philosopher Wolfgang Kühne, who aptly called this the *hybrid* view: what expresses meaning is not just ordinary linguistic expressions, but in many cases a hybrid complex consisting of a mixture of words, physical objects and movements and even times and places.

This is an interesting view, but again it leads to difficulties. We shall not go into these difficulties here, but only note that they indicate that the basic idea of the classical theory of meaning does not work: reference is not determined by meaning, not even by the meaning of hybrid expressions. The difficulties seem to indicate that the notion of meaning that is so central in the classical theory cannot do the job alone, not even the rich meaning expressed by hybrid expressions. The objects themselves that we are referring to must be brought in, and in a different way from the way they were brought in as parts of hybrid expressions. One proposal has been that the meanings themselves, and not just the expressions, are hybrid, they contain objects of various kinds as their parts. Two philosophers who have contributed greatly to clarifying the situation are David Kaplan, whom I mentioned earlier, and John Perry.

Lately it has been discovered that the Czech-German philosopher Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, has a highly interesting discussion of indexicals in a manuscript from 1911. Long before Frege developed his hybrid expression view on indexicals Husserl was aware of problems that show that a more radical approach is needed. He gives the following example which is a devastating stumbling block for any attempt to save the classical theory of meaning:

But how is it, if on two heavenly bodies two people in completely similar appearances of the surroundings are considering "the same" objects and make "the same" judgments about them? Does not the "this" then in these two cases have a different meaning?

Sixty-four years later, in an article “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’ “ (1975) Hilary Putnam proposed a very similar example, the Twin-Earth thought experiment, which like Husserl’s was intended to show that there is something fundamentally wrong with the classical theory of meaning and reference. However, Husserl had very advanced and interesting ideas of how the problems could be solved within his phenomenological framework. At the core of phenomenology lies a broad notion of meaning that applies both to linguistic expressions and to our actions and activities of various kinds, including perception. According to this broad theory what we refer to by our words depends not only on their meaning, but also on things in our surroundings and how our body is affected by and located relative to them. Thus, for example, in the twin worlds, words with the same linguistic meaning refer to different objects by virtue of the fact that our body is related to different objects in the two worlds. So the reference of our words is determined not just by their meanings but also by our body and its relations to the world and the objects in it.

There are many striking similarities, but also important differences between Husserl’s view on indexicals and that of Perry. There will not be time here to go into these here. However, let me conclude with a few words on how the study of indexicals is related to the theme of our group “Towards a New Understanding of the Mental”: A proper treatment of the indexicals requires us to revise our conception of the mental and its relation to the world. The mental does not relate to the world through a purely mental connection, as envisaged by the classical conception of meaning, but through a complicated interplay where our body and the impingements of physical objects and events on our body play an important part.