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Speech acts in context

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Indexicality is at the core of many major philosophical problems. In recent years, recorded messages and written notes have become a significant test and an intriguing puzzle for the semantics of indexical expressions. 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.

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: examples involving the message of an answering machine or a written note cannot be evaluated with respect to the context of utterance or inscription. Consider the message of an answering machine like

(1) I'm not here now

The message seems to have 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 (1) may well be true. Or imagine that John, while in his office, writes a note reading:

(2) 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 (1) and (2), 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 which allow us to remain within a traditional semantic framework. 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 the utterance of 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" (1) when someone phoned, and John "uttered" (2) at home, when his wife read his note.

Let's examine the Remote Utterance View by focusing on an example adapted from Stefano Predelli. Suppose that, before leaving home at 8 'o'clock in the morning, Ridge writes a note to Brooke, who will be back from work at 5 o'clock in the evening:

- (3) 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 Ridge 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" (3) at 5 p.m., when Brooke came home from work.

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 us examine the example of a sign reading

(4) 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 to a library or to confess to a murder. 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 (endorsed by Jennifer Saul, among others), 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)). She may use (4) in a church to get married, in a library to agree to return her books on 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.

However, we may find some powerful arguments against b). Let's go back to indexical

sentences like (3). Predelli imagines that Brooke comes home late, and reads (3) 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 (1) – (3), 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*. The character of "now" in (3) applies neither to the context of utterance/inscription, nor to the decoding context. In (3), the context giving the correct interpretation contains, as the temporal coordinate, 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.

Let's now turn to speech acts. 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 (4) (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 general, and of a recorded utterance in particular. 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. 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.

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